



Mexican soldiers burn drugs seized during military operations, Tijuana, December 2011.  
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# When Business Gets Bloody

## STATE POLICY AND DRUG VIOLENCE

# 2

### INTRODUCTION

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The term ‘drug violence’ can evoke a variety of images and contexts—from interpersonal aggression by addicts and turf wars among corner dealers in retail settings to full-blown militarized confrontations among powerful, heavily armed cartels. While Latin America is home to the full spectrum of drug violence, a number of countries in the region suffer acute, destabilizing armed violence featuring large, well-armed drug trafficking operations in conflict with one another and state forces.

Mexico is the extreme case. Since President Felipe Calderón called in the army to wage an all-out war on the country’s drug cartels in December 2006, more than 47,000 lives have been lost in a maelstrom of violence (Cave, 2012). While the government’s crackdown has fragmented the cartels into smaller organizations, many splinter groups have proven just as violent as their predecessors. In fact, cartel violence has only grown in intensity, lethality, and brazenness since the crackdown. In addition to spiralling violence inside the country, the fragmentation of the Mexican cartels now threatens to alter the dynamics of the drug trade landscape in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

Rio de Janeiro presents another facet of the drug violence landscape. In this city, where prison-based drug syndicates have held territorial control over the favelas (shantytowns) for more than two decades, state security forces began a new programme in 2008 to retake and then occupy favelas with long-term community-oriented police forces. In contrast to previous approaches in Rio and elsewhere in Latin America, the programme prioritizes the most violent of syndicates and aims not to eradicate the illicit drug trade but to reduce the worst of drug-related violence and re-establish state authority.

This chapter reviews recent empirical trends and theoretical explanations of drug violence in Latin America, with a focus on armed violence between organized actors—particularly cartels and prison-based syndicates—and state forces in Mexico, the Northern Triangle of Central America, and Brazil. Among the chapter’s findings:

- The onset and intensity of systemic drug violence on the scale seen in Mexico and Rio de Janeiro are highly variable and sensitive not only to drug trafficking and market structure, but also to state anti-narcotics policy and enforcement.
- In Mexico, a blanket crackdown has led to numerous arrests and fragmented some of the larger cartels; however, violence both among cartels and between cartels and the state has risen dramatically and continuously since President Calderón brought in the Mexican army to combat drug trafficking in late 2006.
- Mexican cartels—responding in part to the crackdown in Mexico—are establishing footholds in Central America, especially Guatemala and Honduras, destabilizing local relations among ‘native’ organized crime groups and threatening to overrun weak police and armed forces.
- In Rio de Janeiro, the state has regained control over more than 20 favelas, including some of the city’s largest, from the prison-based drug trafficking syndicates that previously controlled them. These syndicates appear to be

shifting from strategies of armed dominion and confrontation to non-violent low-level dealing. But it is too early to tell if this systematic ‘pacification’ programme will result in sustained reductions in armed violence.

The chapter is divided into four main sections. The first presents an overview of the actors, state policies, and types of violence associated with the drug trade. The second section focuses on Mexico and the complex factors that are driving the escalation of violence there. The third section turns to Central America, especially the ‘Northern Triangle’ countries (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras), where Mexican drug-trafficking organizations seem to be making important inroads, with potentially disastrous implications for security in the region. The fourth section examines the state’s systematic ‘pacification’ of drug syndicate-controlled slums in Rio de Janeiro. The chapter ends with some concluding reflections.

## DRUG VIOLENCE IN THE AMERICAS: ACTORS, VIOLENCE, AND STATE RESPONSES

The so-called ‘drugs–violence nexus’ has been a topic of active research and debate for decades, especially in high-consumption countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom.<sup>1</sup> The focus of much of this research is on violence related to drug use, as well as on the dynamics of retail drug markets. Such violence can be immensely costly to society, but it seems qualitatively different from the sort of organized armed attacks being carried out, for example, by Mexico’s drug cartels. While Latin America is certainly not free from drug consumption and related types of violence, it has witnessed episodes of extreme internecine fighting among large, powerful trafficking organizations, and, at times, brazen anti-state violence that evokes comparisons to civil war. Latin America is also unique in the sense that the production and transshipment of drugs (towards retail markets in the United States, Europe, and other wealthy destinations) often outstrip retail and consumption as the most important drug-related economic activities. This section examines the various actors who populate different drug market sectors and how they produce numerous types of violence; it then surveys policy responses by states and how these may curtail or aggravate violence.

Latin America has witnessed episodes of brazen anti-state violence that evoke comparisons to civil war.

### Actors

The international drug trade involves a host of different actors engaged in numerous illicit activities. One basic distinction can be made between consumers and traffickers; as detailed below, violence stemming from consumption and state responses to it are qualitatively different from that arising from the dynamics of drug dealing. Yet drug trafficking operations also vary significantly in size, type, and degree of organization. Categories are slippery; the term ‘gangs’ can mean anything from street-corner outfits with a handful of members to powerful prison-based networks such as Rio de Janeiro’s Comando Vermelho, Central America’s *maras*, and Southern California’s Mexican Mafia (Skarbek, 2011; Lessing, 2010). Larger organizations run the gamut from business-oriented, organized crime operations—such as Colombia’s Cali Cartel in the 1990s and the traditional organized crime families of Central America—to more violent but non-ideological groups such as Pablo Escobar’s Medellín Cartel or Mexico’s Los Zetas, to revolutionary and ideological insurgencies that have parleyed their control of drug-plant cultivation areas into a permanent source of revenue, such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) or Afghanistan’s Taliban.

One useful criterion for categorization is the identification of a market sector within which organizations operate; although groups may be active in more than one sector—or even diversify into and from other criminal or insurgent activities—their market sector offers a rough guide to their size, tactical capacity, and incentives.

## Producers

Most illicit drugs begin as plants and so require cultivation over significant land areas. Typically, peasant or indigenous populations carry out plantation and harvest, under the protection or duress of armed groups, which extract a large proportion of the rents. The comparative advantage for this sector is territorial control over rural areas, rather than trafficking expertise or contacts, so production is a common point of entry into the drug trade for armed insurgencies and paramilitary groups. Thus, in Colombia, the once strongly ideological FARC is now deeply involved in coca leaf production, and in Afghanistan the Taliban have shifted away from a *fatwa* against poppy cultivation to offering protection to growers (Labrousse, 2005; Felbab-Brown, 2005). In Mexico, where rural insurgency has had far less success, ‘pure’ wholesaling trafficking organizations, such as the Sinaloa cartel, directly control some marijuana- and poppy-growing regions. Where production is legal or decriminalized, such as in Bolivia (coca) or California (marijuana), there is less need for armed protection from state forces, so producers can operate as small businesses or collectives.

## Transshipment and smugglers

This category comprises groups that process and move large quantities of drugs towards retail markets. Many of the largest and most infamous drug-trafficking organizations belong in this category, including the powerful ‘cartels’ of Colombia and Mexico. While never quite living up to the textbook definition of a cartel, they do represent networks of dealers who join forces to increase profits, and their history is often one of tentative pacts pockmarked with periods of infighting. International smugglers occupy the most lucrative position in the supply chain, buying coca or opium at farm-gate prices and transporting the drugs towards and across the US border at a total mark-up on the order of 2,000 per cent (Reuter and Greenfield, 2001, p. 167). The trade is specialized, requiring contacts with suppliers as well as distributors or retailers in the destination market; it also frequently involves high-level corruption of border and customs officials in multiple countries. These factors help make this one of the most concentrated sectors of the drug trade, while the sheer profitability gives these few organizations immense resources. Within destination countries, wholesale markets appear less concentrated and more like a shifting panorama of autonomous dealers (Reuter and Haaga, 1989).

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## Retailers

Retail drug trafficking is a highly risky enterprise. It involves a large number of illegal transactions, and dealers must be accessible to consumers without drawing police attention. At the same time, it is highly profitable; once heroin and cocaine have entered the United States, the price per pure gram grows roughly tenfold between wholesale and the final street purchase (Reuter and Greenfield, 2001, p. 166). The result is a competitive and unstable market structure. There may be incentives to expand or even ‘corner’ entire markets, yet as retailing organizations grow, they become easier and more appealing targets for state repression and predation by rivals and can easily fragment when a leader is arrested or killed. The overall result is that retail sectors tend to be characterized by small trafficking operations—frequently street gangs with local ties to the neighbourhood or slum in which they operate (Dorn, Murji, and South, 1992; Hagedorn, 1994).

While it is difficult for any one retail organization to grow and remain dominant over a large region, a different model of agglomeration involving prison gangs has arisen in some places, with the potential to alter retail markets fundamentally. By consolidating control over inmate life and propagating through entire prison systems, these gangs can project power outward, onto members of street gangs who anticipate future imprisonment (Lessing, 2010). This

coercive power can be used to organize local retailers into broader, regional syndicates. For example, the powerful Mexican Mafia prison gang wields a kind of ‘governance’ over the Latino street gangs of Southern California, defining turf and setting limits on internecine conflict (Skarbek, 2011). In Rio de Janeiro, the Comando Vermelho prison gang successfully dominated the regional retail market by imposing a system of mutual aid among affiliated local retail outfits (Amorim, 1993). The prison-based governance mechanism has proven resilient to state repression, allowing Rio’s retailers to amass man- and firepower on the scale of large, wholesaling ‘cartels’ (Lessing, 2008).

## Violence

Goldstein’s classic tripartite typology of drug violence usefully distinguishes ‘systemic’ violence, associated with the machinations of the drug trade itself, from ‘economic–compulsive’ violence—which users commit during property crimes to obtain funds to purchase drugs—and ‘psychopharmacological’ violence, accidental or ‘irrational’ violence due to the effect of the drugs themselves (Goldstein, 1985). This typology was developed in the context of research on US drug markets. Not surprisingly, it thus has a strong focus on consumption as opposed to production and smuggling; the latter two types of violence are, by definition, exclusive to consumers.<sup>2</sup> Goldstein himself found economic–compulsive violence to be very rare and the majority of psychopharmacological violence to be alcohol-related and non-lethal (Goldstein, 1997, pp. 116–17). Later studies also found systemic violence to be of greater importance in generating armed violence, even in wealthy countries (MacCoun, Kilmer, and Reuter, 2003, pp. 68, 72).

At the global level, it is clearly drug traffickers—not users—who are responsible for the bulk of the violence, in particular the kind of militarized conflict seen in Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico. It is thus useful to update this typology by further distinguishing among subtypes of systemic violence. As Reuter (2009) notes, such subdividing can take many forms; the approach taken here is to attempt to identify underlying mechanisms and, where applicable, to ‘cross-tabulate’ them with the market sector.

For example, one prime cause of systemic violence is the fact that drug-trafficking organizations, as illegal operations, have no recourse to the legal system to resolve disputes or enforce contracts; violence often fills this gap (Reuter, 2009, p. 275). In retail sectors, this can provoke violence by dealers



Police investigators work at a crime scene where the bodies of seven men were found alongside three banners threatening rival gangs, Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, November 2008. © Alejandro Bringas/Reuters

against users who fail to pay their debts; a retailer may need to make an example of a delinquent debtor in order to recover a payment or maintain a credible threat over other users. In the production and transshipment sectors, this type of violence can be directed at other trafficking organizations in the supply chain—as well as civilian populations in areas under their ‘control’—to prevent the police from being informed (Akerlof and Yellen, 1994). Larger organizations may even use violence against their own members to punish disobedience or skimming (Reuter, 2009, p. 175).

The logic of turf wars is somewhat different. In this case, trafficking organizations use violence to appropriate territory, clientele, routes, or other assets from rivals. This type of violence is more likely to occur between drug-trafficking organizations in the same market sector; examples include battles among street gangs over corners in US urban areas, the internecine conflict among Mexican cartels over smuggling routes, and drug syndicates’ invasions of rival favela territory in Rio de Janeiro. That said, actors from one sector may try to ‘invade’ another sector; in particular, the profitability of retail operations can lead smugglers and wholesalers to attempt takeovers of retail markets.

These two types of violence—extra-legal justice and turf war—are, in a sense, endemic to the drug trade, though they vary depending on the ability of trafficking groups to resolve disputes peacefully and strike stable truces. Anti-state violence by drug-trafficking groups, by contrast, is relatively rare, and not at all a ‘fact of life’ of the drug trade.

In the United States, for instance, it is extremely rare for traffickers to kill police officers. Even smugglers and whole-

salers generally avoid attacking security agents for fear of triggering retaliatory repression by the state. As cases such as Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico show, however, when powerful trafficking organizations do adopt a confrontational strategy, the ensuing conflict can be long-lived and the consequences dire.

The mechanisms underlying cartel–state conflict are not well studied or well understood. In ongoing work, Lessing (2011) identifies several plausible channels. One key logic is the use of violence in the negotiation of bribes, as captured by Pablo Escobar’s infamous, repeated offer to Colombian officials: *‘plata o plomo’* (silver or lead—that is, bribe money or the assassin’s bullet). In retail markets this type of violence is exceptional (since killing police officers is likely to draw enormous scrutiny and repression), but when it does occur, it tends to be limited to street police who are already corrupt. The practice can be much more widespread in the producer and transshipment sectors, where drug-trafficking organizations



may not only be negotiating bribes with higher-level officials such as judges, investigators, commanding police and army officers, and politicians, but also often have sufficient ‘reach’ to attempt to corrupt or intimidate state actors who are not ‘on the take’.<sup>3</sup>

*Plata o plomo*-style violence is aimed primarily at state enforcers—security forces and judicial personnel—in an attempt to keep them from enforcing state policies. A slightly different form of anti-state violence occurs when large drug-trafficking organizations attempt to force state leaders themselves to change a piece of formal drug policy; examples are extradition in Colombia, the deployment of federal troops in Mexico, and prison conditions in Rio de Janeiro (Snyder and Durán Martínez, 2009, pp. 81–82; *Reforma*, 2010a; Penglase, 2005). Since traffickers seek to influence decision-makers rather than enforcers in such cases, they are likely to resort to acts of violence that foment a sense of crisis and generate political costs. During the Escobar period in Colombia (1984–1993), this took the form of terror tactics such as car bombs and elite kidnappings; in Rio de Janeiro, common tactics include bus burnings and forced closure of business districts. In Mexico, some controversy exists over what, if any, incidents truly qualify as terrorism, but certain actions seem to fit this logic, including the Familia Michoacana cartel’s massive, probably coerced, street protests against federal troops by residents in 2010 and a coordinated attack on federal agents, coupled with a call for direct talks with President Calderón, in 2009 (*Reforma*, 2010a; Gómez, 2009; *El Universal*, 2009b).

Once cartels opt for anti-state aggression, the motive to limit inter-cartel violence is weakened.

A crucial interaction is that between turf war and anti-state violence. Most researchers agree that Mexico’s violence began as inter-cartel fighting; indeed, it was the upsurge in this violence that Calderón sought to address by calling in the army in late 2006. By that point, Mexico’s cartels had amassed significant arsenals and in some cases semi-privatized standing armies.<sup>4</sup> It is plausible that such an accumulation of firepower contributed to the cartels’ decisions to take an aggressive stance against state forces.

Yet the onset of cartel–state conflict might in turn escalate inter-cartel fighting. Retail outfits rely on anonymity and invisibility; they thus have strong incentives to keep internecine violence ‘hidden’ and at a low intensity, but even larger smuggling operations have strong motives to avoid drawing unwanted attention from authorities. Once the latter opt for anti-state aggression, however, the motive to limit the intensity of inter-cartel violence is severely weakened. Potential examples of this effect include the brutal bombing campaign carried out by the usually restrained Cali cartel against Pablo Escobar in the wake of his frontal attack on the state in the late 1980s, as well as the accelerating pace of gruesome murders and mutilations in Mexico since 2006.

This points to the danger of systemic violence in producer and transshipment countries with powerful and resource-rich smuggling cartels—and in places like Rio de Janeiro, where retail markets are dominated by powerful prison-based drug syndicates with cartel-sized arsenals. These large, powerful drug-trafficking organizations can afford to engage in prolonged campaigns of aggression against rivals, state forces, and civilian groups; even if they do not literally threaten the viability of the national state, they can induce levels of violence and insecurity bordering on civil war.

A second channel of interaction can occur if the state ‘maxes out’ its repressive capacity, especially if it is trying to fight all groups at once. As state forces get stretched thin, the chance that any one criminal group will be effectively suppressed falls. This situation can actually induce new groups to form, or to diversify into other criminal activities in which armed violence was previously seen as too risky. Such diversification may be occurring in Mexico, where new forms of armed criminality are on the rise. For example, in April 2010, an unidentified ‘commando unit’ of at least 30 gunmen and a dozen vehicles blocked off an entire section of downtown Monterrey and systematically kidnapped targets who were staying in two expensive hotels (*El Universal*, 2010); in June of that year, another commando unit took over a state-owned oil well, where it held workers hostage for weeks (*Reforma*, 2010b; 2010c).

## State policy and response

While the drug trade—including the violence associated with it—is often cast as a problem for states to ‘deal with’ or respond to, it is important to recognize that states play a key role in defining the rules of the game. The legal status of drug consumption, sale, and trafficking; official policies on sentencing, surveillance, and extradition; the institutional structure and capacity of police and other state forces; and operational decisions such as where and when to apply repressive force all fundamentally shape the incentives and, ultimately, the actions of drug traffickers. The existence of coffee shops in the Netherlands, where adults may legally purchase marijuana and hashish, as well as cannabis dispensaries in California, are reminders of how drug markets are fundamentally shaped by state policy. In production and transshipment markets, this point is sometimes overlooked. When epidemics of drug use and violence arise, governments may be called on to respond, but that response hardly occurs in a vacuum; rather, it is a shift in policy by what is by any measure the most important actor in the drug trade.

This section looks at policy and responses in the Latin American context, with a focus on violence rather than drug use. Systemic violence is likely to be particularly responsive to state repressive policy—that is, decisions about how and when to apply repressive force against drug traffickers. Whereas psychopharmacological violence is accidental or ‘irrational’ and is likely to rise and fall with drug use (Blumstein, 1995), systemic violence is organized and strategic, arising when traffickers find it more profitable or otherwise advantageous to use violence than not. Such strategic decisions depend on complex interactions among drug-trafficking organizations and state enforcers; they are not a simple function of the size or profitability of the drug trade (see Box 2.1). This is particularly true of the large-scale violence—including anti-state violence—that shook Colombia in the Escobar era and is currently afflicting Mexico.

The starting point for many Latin American countries—blessed with low drug addiction rates and cursed with other, more serious security problems—has been a *laissez-faire* approach to drug trafficking. For much of the late 1970s and early 1980s, for example, the Colombian government more or less turned a blind eye to cocaine trafficking. It was during this period that the large ‘cartels’ formed and Pablo Escobar rose to public prominence as a wealthy benefactor and, eventually, an elected congressman. Central American governments also allowed international smugglers to operate free from significant interference for years, and although Brazil has waged a militarized war against syndicates in its urban areas, these retail markets represent only a fraction of the total flow of cocaine that wholesalers have for decades moved through the country towards European markets—with relatively little fanfare (Dowdney, 2003, pp. 41–42).

A variation on the *laissez-faire* approach is a government-negotiated pact. Although no official would call it that, such arrangements were common in Mexico through the 1990s, under the rule of the then hegemonic Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolution Party, PRI). The PRI dominated Mexican society and politics by dividing up territory, markets, and benefits among friendly groups, which then became dependent supporters of the PRI; Mexico’s cartels were no exception. Such an arrangement has the benefit of giving the state some leverage over cartels but may also involve deep and high-level corruption.

These approaches can be appealing, at least in the short run, to governments of transshipment countries, since smuggling itself does not cause immediate, observable damage to the countries where it takes place; indeed, it generates employment and immense profits. But over time it tends to corrupt police, bureaucrats, and even elected officials, potentially generating diplomatic and economic pressure from consumer countries, particularly from the United States, to increase state repression of the drug trade. Such factors can lead to a policy of active repression of the drug trade—a crackdown—which often involves the creation or expansion and deployment of specialized police or armed forces, as well as new legal and judicial instruments such as seizure or extradition laws.

**States play a key role in defining the rules of the game.**

### Box 2.1 Policy v. profits: what drives large-scale drug conflict?

The relationship between the size and profitability of the drug market on the one hand and violence on the other is unclear, both theoretically and empirically. In the case of large-scale conflict, both among large drug cartels and between cartels and the state, however, it seems unlikely that an increase (or decrease) in the flow of drugs is driving the violence.

While the true size of drug markets is difficult to measure, even the imperfect estimates of price and production have told a relatively straightforward story over the past 30 years. They document a steadily expanding supply and falling prices—probably in response to growing demand—from the mid-1980s throughout the 1990s, followed by a long period of relatively stable prices and production levels, despite massive eradication efforts throughout the Andean region. These trends stand in contrast to the abrupt onset of intense anti-state violence in Colombia during the ‘narco-terror’ period (roughly 1984–93), when Pablo Escobar, powerful head of the Medellín cartel, waged an all-out war of intimidatory violence against the Colombian state (see Figure 2.1).

While it is true that the market for cocaine was expanding during Colombia’s narco-violence decade, the onset of cartel-state violence is more plausibly linked to Escobar’s expulsion from Congress by then attorney general Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, whom Escobar promptly murdered, than to shifts in drug demand or supply. Similarly, the abrupt end of open conflict between drug cartels in 1993 was surely more a product of Escobar’s death at the hands of US-aided police forces and the subsequent fragmenting of Colombia’s two mega-cartels into myriad successors than a sudden change in supply and demand. In fact, Colombia only became a major producer of cocaine in the period immediately following Escobar’s death, when cartels had splintered and essentially abandoned confrontation strategies in favour of anonymity and cooptation (Lessing, 2011).

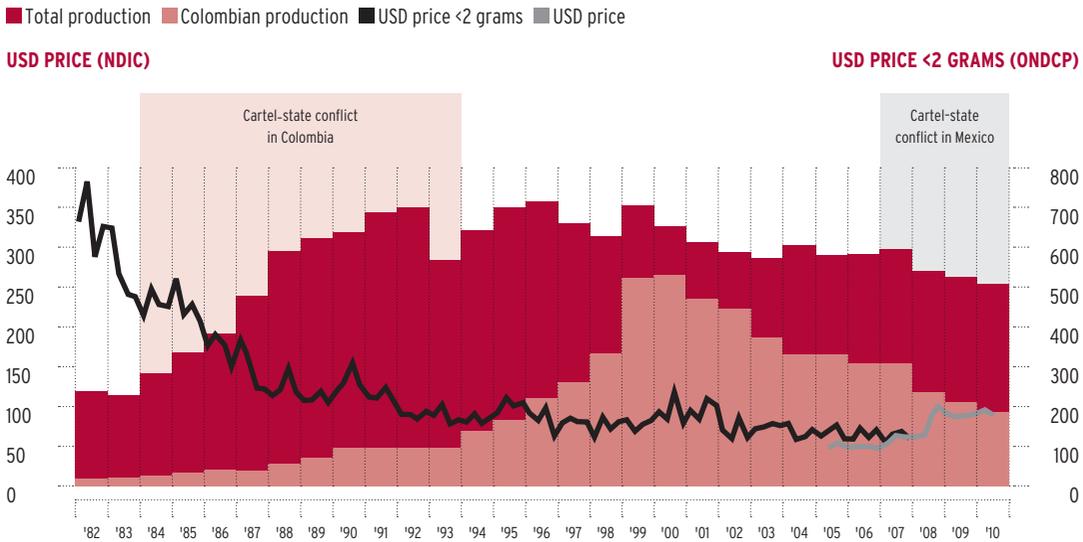
More recently, around the time of the onset of cartel-state conflict in Mexico, US cocaine prices began to rise. As Figure 2.2 shows, however, the relationship between market conditions and violence is subtle and inconstant, and the causality is unclear. During the onset of violence, from 2007 to 2008, US prices rose in startlingly tight correlation with both the official Mexican drug-related homicide count (0.95 correlation) and the tally kept by *Milenio*, a national newspaper (0.92 correlation). Thereafter, prices remained flat, while homicides continued to increase sharply, yielding extremely weak correlations (0.20 and 0.18, respectively).<sup>5</sup>

One plausible explanation for this stark shift is that in the short run, the Mexican crackdown and attendant violence created uncertainty, shortages, and perhaps even hoarding or speculation in US retail drug markets, but that, as dealers adapted to a more fluid and redundant supply chain, prices levelled off.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, some analysts attribute price spikes in the 1980s to the onset of the narco-violence period in Colombia, noting that these were ephemeral and did not affect the overall downward trend (Caulkins and Reuter, 1996, p. 7).

Whatever the factors involved, it is hard to make a convincing case that profitability is driving drug violence when there is not even a stable correlation between violence and prices. Of course, if there were no demand for drugs, and hence no retail market, there would be no powerful drug cartels in Mexico to fight a drug war. So drug demand and drug flows can be thought of as a necessary precondition for drug violence. Similarly, other factors often cited as drivers of drug violence in Mexico—such as socioeconomic and demographic conditions, institutional weakness, culture, and geographic location—are simply too static or slow-moving to explain the pace of the violence epidemic, though they may have contributed as intensifying factors.

What did change in 2006 was the Mexican government’s antinarcotics policy: President Felipe Calderón called in the army to combat the drug cartels, and the cartels responded with violence. Yet even the relationship between government crackdowns and drug violence is not clear-cut. In Mexico, the big increase in repression occurred during the initial rollout of the army, in late 2006 and early 2007, but the sharpest increase in violence, including direct attacks on the army itself, took place in 2010 (see Figure 2.3).

Figure 2.1 The cocaine market v. periods of cartel-state conflict, 1982-2010



Notes: Production values for 1982-85 and 2010 are estimates. The US Office of National Drug Control Policy (Fries et al., 2008) has produced a long time series of USD price per pure gram data for US purchases for various weight categories; the <2 grams captures typical retail purchases. More recent data is only available from NDIC (2009; 2010; 2011), which is not disaggregated by weight.

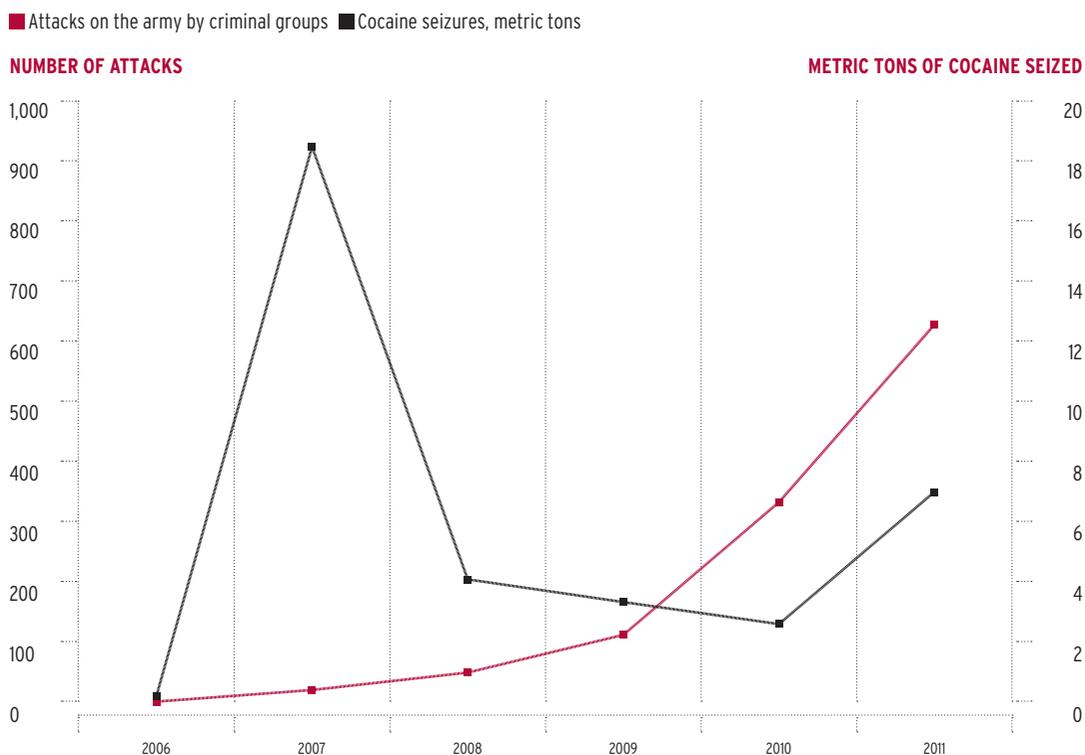
Sources: NDIC (2009; 2010; 2011); ODCCP (1999; 2000a; 2000b); UNODC (2003; 2010); Fries et al. (2008)

Figure 2.2 Drug-related homicides in Mexico v. US street price of cocaine, 2007-10



Sources: Milenio (2010a; 2010b; 2011); NDIC (2011); SNSP (2011)

Figure 2.3 Mexico: crackdowns v. anti-state attacks, December 2006–2011\*



Notes: The figure for attacks in 2011 is a yearly estimate based on official data for the period 1 January–14 June. The figure for metric tons seized reflects official data for all of 2011.

Sources: SEDENA (2011); Aranda (2011)

Frequently, such crackdowns are rhetorically cast as declarations of war, with leaders demonizing traffickers and characterizing any form of negotiation or quarter as a form of surrender. But a critical question is whether the state applies the same amount of repressive force to all drug-trafficking organizations, irrespective of their behaviour—what this chapter refers to as a *blanket crackdown*—or whether the state metes out repression in proportion to the amount and severity of violence employed by traffickers—referred to here as *proportional response*. While policy-makers rarely make this distinction, recent research has emphasized the fact that blanket crackdowns fail to generate disincentives for violence and may in fact spur drug-trafficking organizations on to greater violence (Kleiman, 2011; Guerrero-Gutiérrez, 2011, p. 71; Lessing, 2011).

Proportional response necessarily implies directing less repressive force against less violent traffickers, which many traditional policy-makers deride as unacceptably ‘tolerating’ criminal activity. Critics identify it with the government-negotiated pact approach or focus on the apparent absence of social sanction. Its advocates portray proportional response as the application of *harm reduction* principles to problems of public security.<sup>7</sup> Originating in the public health realm, harm reduction aims to minimize the negative health and social effects of drug use, rather than reducing consumption itself. The no-questions-asked needle exchange is the paradigmatic harm reduction programme, now widely implemented as a means of reducing HIV/AIDS transmission and other transmissible diseases, even in countries with traditionally hard-line stances on drugs.

Harm reduction has taken hold as an approach to limiting ill effects flowing from the consumption of drugs, and policing strategies focused on the most violent drug retailers appear to have been successfully implemented in US cities such as Boston and New York (Kennedy et al., 2001; Zimring, 2011). Nevertheless, allowing drug producers, smugglers, and retailers to operate as long as they avoid the most harmful activities—armed violence—remains a hard sell. Classic harm-reduction advocacy views addicted drug users as victims rather than criminals, a case that cannot easily be made about drug dealers, particularly large-scale trafficking organizations with militarized arsenals. But some governments, driven to find new approaches to drug violence in the face of massive human costs, are shifting the primary objective of policing away from the total eradication and interdiction of drugs towards the minimization of associated violence. As discussed below, Rio de Janeiro’s ‘pacification’ approach stands out as a clear case of explicitly proportional response.

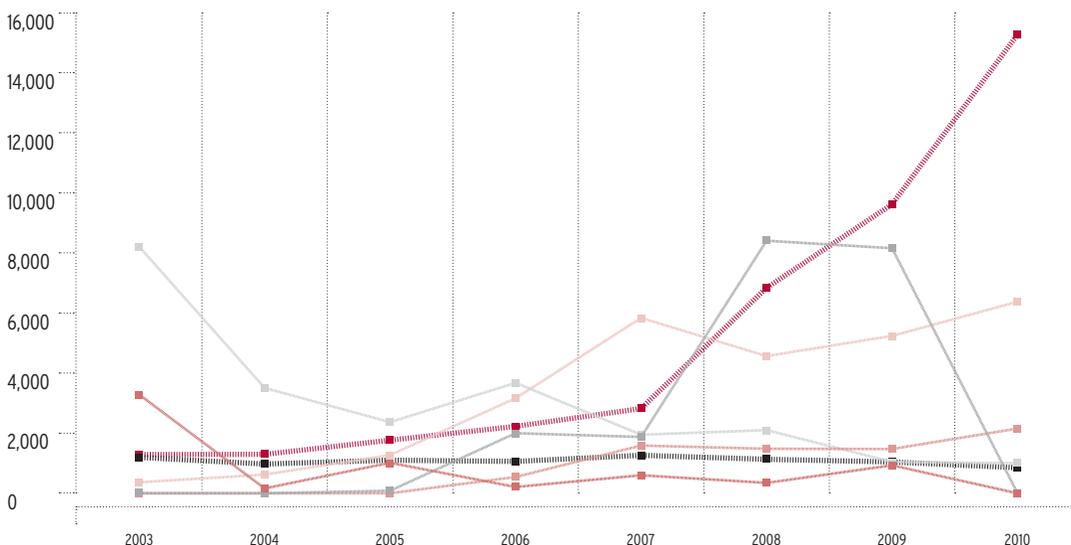
## MEXICO

By some measure, Mexico’s drug war is now the most violent sub-national conflict of the century, even compared with civil wars (see Figure 2.4).<sup>8</sup> To many observers, the violence in Mexico is unsurprising given the underlying conditions: enormous profit margins, organized cartels angling for primacy, a ready supply of weapons from the United States, widespread police corruption, weak institutions (especially in border areas), and few legitimate economic opportunities that might keep youths from entering the drug trade. While these ingredients do seem like a natural recipe for violence, they have all been characteristics of Mexico for years, if not decades. The violence, on the other hand, has been

Figure 2.4 **Deaths in civil wars and drug conflicts, 2003-10**

■ Mexico (drug trade-related homicides) ■ Rio de Janeiro (police killing of civilians)  
 ■ Afghanistan ■ Iraq ■ Somalia ■ Sri Lanka ■ Sudan

**BATTLE DEATHS (UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED)**



Source: UCDP (2011); ISP (2012); SSP-Rio (2003); Reforma data cited in Rios and Shirk (2011)

remarkably precipitous, with annual drug-related homicides now eight times higher than they were in 2005. As Figure 2.4 shows, the explosion of violence in Mexico has been just that: an abrupt break with the past.

### Background

Drug trafficking in Mexico has deep roots; marijuana and opium production in the state of Sinaloa began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, while the army's involvement in anti-narcotics dates back to the 1940s (CNN México, 2011; Astorga, 1999). Through the late 1980s, however, drug trafficking was largely limited to production and export of marijuana and, to a lesser extent, opiates to the United States; the army only intermittently engaged in eradication of plantations in areas of difficult access. Since then, two key changes have taken place. First, US law enforcement cracked down heavily on the Colombian cartels' Caribbean trafficking routes, inducing them to rely increasingly on Mexican trafficking organizations that could transport shipments overland at US border crossings such as Juárez, Laredo, and Tijuana (Meiners, 2009). As an increased share of the cocaine trade shifted to Mexico, the value of these border crossings increased, as did the size and firepower of the Mexican cartels that controlled them.

Second, Mexico's political system underwent a sea change, as the ruling PRI slowly lost its grip on power, first losing local and state elections, then control of Congress, and, finally, in 2000, the presidency, for the first time in 70 years (Magaloni, 2005). The PRI's penetration into and control over virtually all aspects of Mexican social and economic life seem to have extended to the drug trade,



Soldiers carry the coffins of six members of Mexico's Army, who were found decapitated in Chilpancingo, Mexico. © Claudio Cruz/AP Photo



and probably contributed to the relatively stable and non-violent relationship among cartels (Snyder and Durán Martínez, 2009, p. 73).

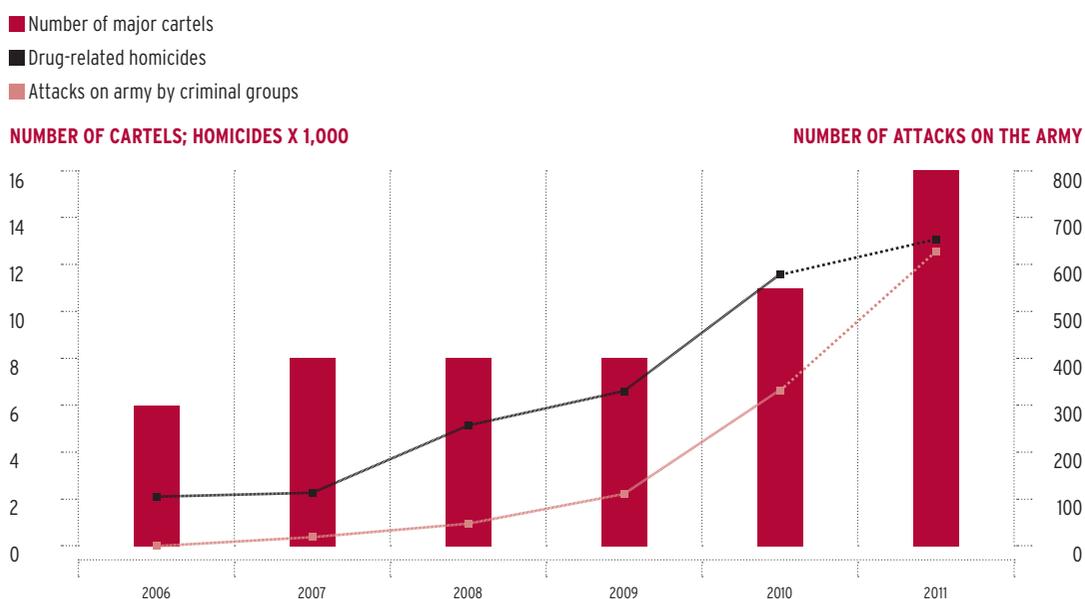
From the late 1990s through the first non-PRI presidency, that of Vicente Fox (2000–06), an inter-cartel turf war slowly arose. Cartels began to invest in armament and build private armies; a particularly ominous development was the Gulf cartel's corrupting and subcontracting of a US-trained special forces unit, the Grupo Aeromóvil de Fuerzas Especiales, as the cartel's private militia. The group came to be known as Los Zetas and later broke with the Gulf cartel to become an autonomous, and extremely violent, cartel. Although drug-related violence in this period looks extremely mild in retrospect, the number of homicides did double over the course of the Fox administration. Soon after a narrow and violently contested election victory, President Calderón (2006–present) declared 'war' on the drug trade, ordering the army to crack down on cartels in urban areas and along major land routes. When the cartels reacted with increased levels of armed violence, including attacks on state forces, the government essentially doubled down, arguing that by capturing and killing cartel leaders it would eventually break up the organizations into fragments too small to fight the state (Guerrero-Gutiérrez, 2011).

### Recent trends

To date, the Calderón government's 'headhunting' strategy has yielded the arrest or death of some 28 major traffickers, which in turn has succeeded in fragmenting the Mexican drug trade. By one count, the number of principal cartels has grown from six to 16 (Guerrero-Gutiérrez, 2011, pp. 11, 64). Rather than abating, however, the violence has not only increased but also *accelerated* (see Figure 2.5).

Moreover, the trend is not limited to inter-cartel violence; a similar rate of increase can be seen in attacks on army soldiers. Between December 2006 and September 2011, 174 public officials were killed, including more than 30 mayors

Figure 2.5 **Cartel fragmentation and drug-related violence, 2006-11**



Note: The 2011 figures for homicides and attacks are yearly estimates based on data for the period January-June.

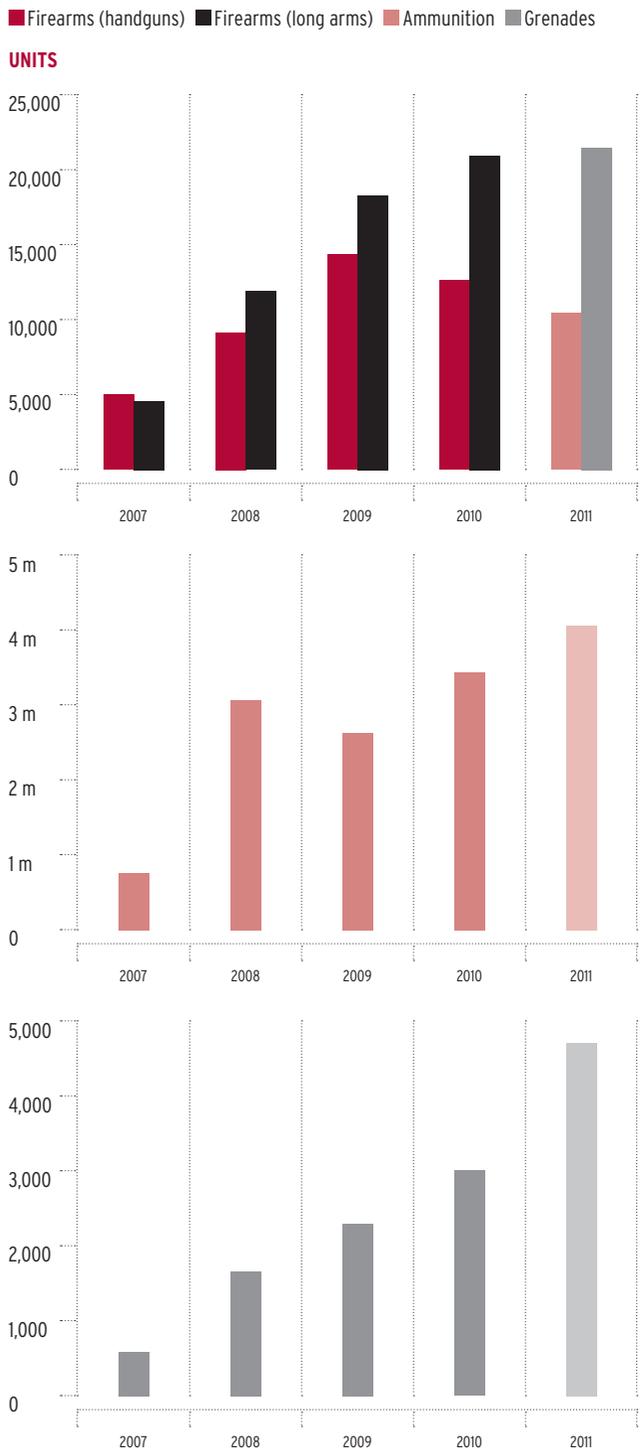
Sources: Reforma data cited in Guerrero-Gutiérrez (2011, p. 45); Aranda (2011); Ríos and Shirk (2011)

(Guerrero-Gutiérrez, 2011, p. 45). In short, splintering has not made cartels less willing or able to attack the state. This is also reflected in the rising number of seizures of small arms; particularly troubling is what appears to be an increasing cartel preference for military-style firearms and hand grenades over handguns (US Embassy in Mexico, 2009; see Figure 2.6). Such a preference for military-type weapons—which are costly to acquire, in both monetary and logistical terms—is an indication of the strong incentives cartels face to engage in brazen forms of armed violence.

Violence has also spread out from the border and hotspots in drug-trafficking regions such as Sinaloa and Michoacán to more central locales such as Acapulco, Cuernavaca, and Monterrey. Moreover, Los Zetas, now an autonomous cartel, along with other armed criminal groups with limited or unclear ties to the principal drug cartels, have increasingly expanded into other criminal activities such as human trafficking, kidnapping, mass extortion, and theft of petroleum from the state-owned firm PEMEX (Guerrero-Gutiérrez, 2011, pp. 32–34). As the number of cartels has grown, so has their variety. Table 2.1 presents a four-way typology of cartel types.

In the face of the sharp spike and spread of violence, the Calderón administration has dug in, consistently defending its blanket approach and seeking to ‘lock in’ the policy beyond the end of Calderón’s term in 2012 (Archibold, Cave, and Malkin, 2011). In practice, however, the policy may be moving towards a more focused, proportional response. A recent study shows that the majority of arrests from 2006 to 2010 were

Figure 2.6 Seizures of illegal firearms, ammunition, and grenades



Note: The 2011 figures are estimates based on data for January–June 2011.

Source: PGR (2011, p. 278)

**Table 2.1 Typology of Mexican cartels**

Category	Description	Organizations
National cartels	Operate throughout the country, including at entry and exit points; they seek to expand and diversify into activities such as human trafficking and oil theft.	Sinaloa, Los Zetas, and Gulf cartels
'Toll collector' cartels	Control border crossings and charge other cartels fees to pass through; they are largely confined to border areas and have difficulty diversifying.	Tijuana and Juárez cartels
Regional cartels	Operate within fixed areas; they exercise limited control over routes passing through their territory.	Los Caballeros Templarios and Pacífico Sur cartels
Local organizations	Splinters of larger cartels that frequently diversify into other illicit activity to make up for lost drug turf.	La Resistencia, La Mano con Ojos, Los Incorregibles, La Empresa, La Nueva Administración, La Nueva Federación para Vivir Mejor, and Cártel Independiente de Acapulco, among others

Source: Guerrero-Gutiérrez (2011, pp. 28, 31-37)

of members of the Gulf and Zeta cartels (then only recently split); US officials attributed this to Los Zetas' more brazen behaviour (Burnett, Peñaloza, and Benincasa, 2010). In 2011, the apparent focus on Los Zetas intensified, with a dedicated military operation ('Northern Lynx') and several high-level arrests and busts (Gómora, 2011; Corchado, 2011). The government, however, continues to publicly reject any departure from a blanket approach, equating proportional response with corrupt pacting, and collusion with the Sinaloa cartel in particular. In the words of then national security spokesman Alejandro Poiré, on the president's blog:

*The federal government does not favour any criminal organization; it weakens them all systematically without distinction. To benefit any criminal group [. . .] is to validate the outdated argument that crime can be 'managed' (Poiré Romero, 2011).<sup>9</sup>*

### **The other traffic: US arms into Mexico**

To what extent do Mexican cartels use US firearms against one another and the state? Separating facts from rhetoric and misinformation has sometimes proven difficult.

A number of preliminary points can be made. First, Mexican gun control laws are among the strictest in the world. There is only one retail gun outlet in the entire country, run by the National Defense Secretariat, where citizens who have passed a rigorous screening and licensing process may purchase a single low-calibre handgun and a box of ammunition each; since 2006, the store has sold about 6,500 guns per year (Booth, 2010). In comparison, the history, culture, and political system of the United States have produced far more permissive firearm laws. In the United States, civilians can readily obtain firearms—including, in some states, assault weapons—on large retail and secondary markets. Non-existent or partial state-level owner licensing and gun registration regulations in many states frequently make purchases difficult to trace.

Second, tens of thousands of ‘crime guns’ seized in Mexico have been traced back to US manufacture or points of sale (Goodman, 2011); nevertheless, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact share of cartels’ weapons that originated in the United States (Stewart, 2011).

Third, as discussed below, there is evidence that the expiration of the US Assault Weapons Ban (AWB) in 2004 led to an increase in (not necessarily drug-related) gun violence in Mexican municipalities near the US border, apparently by increasing the supply of the previously banned weapon types (Dube, Dube, and García-Ponce, 2011; Chicoine, 2011). At the same time, it is not clear what effect a new AWB or stricter US gun laws in general would have on the current violence in Mexico, as cartels have access to other sources of firearms, especially the arsenals of Central America (Stewart, 2011).

### **US federal gun regulations: the AWB and background checks**

In 1994, Congress passed and US president Bill Clinton signed the federal Assault Weapons Ban. The AWB prohibited civilian sales of so-called ‘semi-automatic assault weapons’, defined in the law to include 19 named firearms and copies of those firearms, plus other weapons with at least two specified physical characteristics from a list of features (Dube, Dube, and García-Ponce, 2011, pp. 5–6). The law also banned the sale and possession of magazines with a capacity of more than ten rounds of ammunition. The AWB featured a sunset clause, providing for its expiration after ten years.

Two new studies find that the expiration of the ban in 2004 led to an increase in violence in Mexico. Chicoine (2011) estimates that the expiration accounts for at least 16.4 per cent of the increase in homicide rates in Mexico between 2004 and 2008. Dube, Dube, and García-Ponce (2011), cautious not to conflate the potential effects of firearms supply on armed violence with the complex dynamics of cartel-related conflict in the Calderón period, focus exclusively on the 2004–06 period. To isolate the effect of the expiration of the AWB, they make use of the fact that California retained a state ban on the weapons while Texas and Arizona did not. They find that Mexican municipalities along the Texas and Arizona borders experienced an additional 40 per cent increase in homicides relative to those along the California border; they estimate that at least 158 additional deaths per year were attributable to the AWB expiration.

On the other hand, it is unclear to what extent the AWB restricted access to automatic weapons. Because of the law’s reliance on a list of specific characteristics, largely cosmetic in nature, gun producers found ways around the ban by manufacturing ‘post-ban’ sports versions. As a 2001 review in *Gun World* magazine notes: ‘In spite of assault rifle bans [ . . . ] the Kalashnikov, in various forms and guises, has flourished [...] with more models, accessories and parts to choose from than ever before’ (VPC, 2003). The reality seems to be that incomplete bans such as the AWB make obtaining weapons only marginally more difficult for the highly motivated; unfortunately, this group may include actors with criminal intent.

### **Controversies: the 90 per cent and Operation Fast and Furious**

In 2008, a top official of the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) testified before Congress that more than 90 per cent of firearms seized in or on their way to Mexico originated in the United States (ATF, 2008). A subsequent US Government Accountability Office report based on ATF data puts this figure at 87 per cent (US GAO, 2009, p. 15). The 90 per cent figure was widely circulated and discussed, and Mexican government officials incorporated it into their talking points as a crucial reason for the violence. However, this estimate was based on a small sample of the 30,000 firearms seized from criminals in Mexico in 2008. Of the 7,200 (24 per cent) guns that Mexican authorities submitted to the ATF for tracing, only about 4,000 (13 per cent) were successfully traced. Of these 4,000, 87 per cent had US origins (Stewart, 2011).

Two new studies find that the 2004 expiration of the AWB led to an increase in violence in Mexico.



Mexican President Calderón glances behind after unveiling a banner reading 'No More Weapons' in the border city of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, February 2012.  
© Alfredo Guerrero/Mexico Presidency/Reuters



The relatively small number of traced guns is due to the difficulty of tracing weapons for which buyer and registration information is missing, or which have changed hands multiple times. But a sampling bias also prevents the drawing of broad conclusions based on the trace data. The guns submitted to the ATF for tracing would normally have carried some indication of US origin (such as markings denoting US manufacture or import into the United States). Ultimately, the fact that US origins were confirmed for 3,480 of the 30,000 firearms seized by Mexican authorities reveals little about the true relative contribution of US guns to Mexican crime.

Another controversy concerns an ATF ‘gunwalking’ operation that deliberately—and without the Mexican government’s knowledge—permitted illegal purchases and transfers to Mexico by ‘straw purchasers’<sup>10</sup> of some 2,500 firearms, including hundreds of assault weapons, between 2009 and 2011. The rationale of the operation—known as ‘Fast and Furious’—was to trace illicit weapon flows to higher-ups in drug cartels. It was later discovered that ‘walked guns’ had been used in violent crimes, including the December 2010 murder of a US Border Patrol agent. The resulting scandal damaged US–Mexican relations and led to the reassignment or replacement of most of the top ATF officials who were directly involved, with Congressional investigations continuing into 2012 (Attkisson, 2011a; 2011b; 2011c).

The role of Fast and Furious firearms in Mexican cartel violence is not well understood. Individual cases have come to light, however, such as a May 2011 cartel attack

that forced a government helicopter into an emergency landing. The operation has yielded indictments for some 20 alleged arms traffickers, but overall it has been a major setback for the ATF and its wider Project Gunrunner programme, which is designed to stop US-sourced gun flows to Mexican cartels and to improve tracing practices (Attkisson, 2011a; 2011b; 2011c).

### **The US gun market in perspective**

The ease of access among Mexican (not to mention US) cartels to firearms, particularly high-powered rifles, is extremely troubling and has prompted the Mexican government and civil society to call for better controls. At the same time, analysts and policy-makers should not exaggerate the importance of supply-side US gun control measures on Mexican cartel violence. The US gun market existed for decades before the current explosion of violence; it was thus probably not the primary trigger. Nor would limiting US inflows alone necessarily reduce the violence by any meaningful degree. The cases of Brazil and Colombia suggest that when traffickers demand firearms, supply arises from somewhere to fill it.

The explosion of Mexican drug violence is generating intense demand for firearms by groups with enormous cash flows and close contact with corrupt officials in Mexico and suppliers of illicit small arms in Central America and overseas. This suggests that a key component of any successful violence-reduction strategy must aim to reduce cartels' incentives to employ armed violence, thus minimizing demand for firearms (Atwood, Glatz, and Muggah, 2006).

## **CENTRAL AMERICA'S NORTHERN TRIANGLE**

The countries of Central America's Northern Triangle—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—are not strangers to armed violence and drug trafficking. While the region has largely put the spectre of civil war behind it, crime and murder rates have been among the highest in the world for some time. The US deportation of more than 45,000 convicts to Central America between 1998 and 2005 contributed to the transformation of the region's numerous street gangs into *mara* gang networks involved in multiple criminal enterprises, and especially extortion rackets (Jütersonke, Muggah, and Rodgers, 2009, p. 308; Cruz, 2010; LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN). The region suffers not only from perennial challenges to economic development, but also what has been called a 'Hobbesian trap'—a concentrated economic elite that prefers to rely on private security than to shore up weak state institutions through taxes (*Economist*, 2011). Against this backdrop, the prospect of an 'invasion' by Mexico's powerful cartels—partially in response to the official crackdown—and their potential collusion with the region's *maras* have arisen as major security concerns. These issues have spurred regional summits and led the United States to appropriate USD 248 million in funding for the region between 2008 and 2010, as part of its Mérida Initiative and a new Central America Regional Security Initiative (Seelke, 2010, p.1).

A soldier stands next to a message written in blood following the massacre of 27 people by members of Los Zetas at a ranch in Petén, Guatemala, May 2011.

© Moises Castillo/ AP Photo



## Background

Central America's history, like much of Latin America's, is characterized by clashes between countervailing forces of reform—of both society and the state, sometimes classically liberal, sometimes radical—and the conservatism of traditional, highly concentrated elites. An exacerbating factor is the political fragmentation of the region, which may have been useful to colonial rulers and elites but contributed to a legacy of small national states with perennially low capacity, high levels of corruption, and severe vulnerability to foreign influence and intervention (Mahoney, 2001, pp. 11–45).

These antecedents contributed to the region's descent into civil war and political violence during the cold war. In Guatemala, a US-backed coup in 1954 replaced a democratically elected leftist government with a military regime, eventually leading to a 36-year civil war (1960–96) that left more than 200,000 dead. El Salvador also fought a bloody civil war (1980–92) that killed some 75,000 and sent hundreds of thousands of refugees to the United States, among other places. Honduras did not experience a civil war but suffered under a repressive regime in the 1980s and served as a staging area for raids by US-backed Contra rebels into neighbouring Nicaragua (USAID, 2006).

Such armed conflicts leave varied, long-lasting scars. One important legacy that scholars are only recently beginning to explore systematically is how civil conflict can foster the growth of corruption, organized crime, and armed violence associated with the drug trade. Though peace came to Central America in the 1990s, the region retained an enormous stock of war-making capital, both physical—weapons and military equipment—and human; in El Salvador



**Table 2.2 Mexican cartel activity in Central America**

Dates	Event
March 2008	Los Zetas cartel attacks one of Guatemala's largest drug gangs, killing 11.
November 2008	A battle between a local ally of the Sinaloa cartel and Los Zetas in Huehuetenango, Guatemala, leaves as many as 60 dead.
March 2009	After threatening the national head of police, Los Zetas threaten to kill Guatemalan president Álvaro Colom.
December 2009	The Honduran drug czar, Col. Julian Aristides González, is assassinated days after publicly disclosing the discovery of clandestine airstrips in the drug-trafficking region of Olancho.
February 2010	Honduran police find an encrypted note from leaders of the Barrio 18 gang, indicating that Los Zetas have paid for the assassination of Security Minister Oscar Álvarez.
December 2010 & February 2011	The Guatemalan government declares and renews a state of siege in the Alta Verapaz department in response to cartel-related violence.
May 2011	Los Zetas massacre 27 people at a ranch in Petén, Guatemala, leaving an admonition literally written with blood for a leading Guatemalan drug trafficker. In response, the government declares another state of siege and deploys the army to the region.

Sources: Dudley (2011, pp. 31–32); El Universal (2009a); IC6 (2011, pp. 2–3)

alone, some 45,000 combatants were demobilized (USAID, 2006, p. 50). Combined with poor economic conditions and weak state institutions (two other legacies of civil war), these factors have contributed to historically high rates of violence in the region. But they also constitute valuable ‘resources’ for the international drug trade, in particular the Mexican cartels, whose turf war and ongoing conflict with the state have led them to seek out both man- and firepower.

Guatemala’s *Kaibiles* are a case in point. Created by the military government in the 1970s, this elite special forces battalion suffered extreme, brutal training and went on to commit atrocities against civilians during the civil war (USBCIS, 2000). While attempts were made at reform in the wake of the reconciliation process, deserters from the group have increasingly been found working as hired guns for Mexican cartels. Indeed, they are thought to be training Mexican soldiers who have deserted the army to join the cartels’ ranks (Stratfor, 2006).

Further important factors in the region are ingrained corruption and endemic low state capacity. State budgets cannot compare in size to potential drug profits; indeed, the conservative estimate of USD 20 billion for the share of drug revenues controlled by Mexican cartels dwarfs Honduras’ USD 12 billion gross domestic product (Meiners, 2009). At the same time, officials who refuse to cooperate with traffickers have little in the way of protection, as the recent murder of the Honduran drug czar illustrates (see Table 2.2). Such imbalances make the *plata o plomo* approach—a combination of generous bribes and violent threats—a very effective way to intimidate state officials. This not only facilitates the trafficking of drugs, but also allows cartels illicit access to the region’s poorly guarded arms stocks; the US Embassy in Mexico estimates that 90 per cent of military-origin seized weapons in that country came from Central American military stocks (US Embassy in Mexico, 2009).

**Mexican cartels’  
estimated drug  
revenues (USD 20  
billion) dwarfs  
Honduras’ entire  
GDP (USD 12 billion).**

### Violence and crime

According to the UN Development Programme, ‘Central America is the most violent region of the world, with the exception of those regions where some countries are at war or are experiencing severe *political* violence’ (UNDP, 2009, p. 10). Even this qualification may no longer be necessary; a new estimate based on data covering 2004–09 puts Central America ahead of Southern Africa as the region with the highest violent death rate (29.0 v. 27.4 per 100,000), almost four times the global average of 7.9 per 100,000. This violence is heavily concentrated in the Northern Triangle region. El Salvador has the highest violent death rate of any country in the world (61.9), while Honduras and Guatemala rank fourth and seventh, respectively (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011, pp. 51–60). Trends in homicide rates show a similar pattern, with the Northern Triangle countries suffering from rates two to three times that of Panama, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica—and Belize occupying a middle position (LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN).

Interestingly, rates of property crime and overall victimization are not particularly high in the region, but rather at or below the average for Latin America (World Bank, 2011, p. 2). This is consistent with the idea that much of the violence is ‘systemic’, associated with the workings of the drug trade, as opposed to related to more atomistic and economic factors affecting overall crime. The World Bank’s study of violence in the region cites an unpublished econometric study that finds that ‘controlling for other factors, drug-trafficking hotspots have murder rates more than double those in areas of low trafficking intensity’ (World Bank, 2011, p. 21). Other typical risk factors, such as a high population of young men, also correlate with higher levels of violence. Of course, correlation is not causation; it is possible that drug traffickers are drawn to violent or poorly policed regions. Indeed, the report notes that the region as a whole has suffered from high murder rates since at least the 1960s, prior to the expansion of the drug trade and much of the region’s civil war violence (World Bank, 2011, p. 22). What is clear is that the region suffers from a confluence of high overall homicide rates and particularly acute violence in zones where drug-trafficking and youth gangs are common.

## Spillover and balloon effects

Central America has, for decades, served as a stopover for illicit drug flows making their way from the Andean countries to the United States. In this respect, the region is attractive both geographically, with access to the Caribbean, the Pacific, and the land route through Mexico, and institutionally, for its generally weak law enforcement and criminal justice institutions and imperfect state control over national territory. From the beginning of the cocaine boom in the late 1970s through the mid-1990s, Central American organized crime families—and, for a time in Panama, military governor Manuel Noriega—provided transportation and logistical services for large Colombian and Mexican cartels (Dudley, 2011, pp. 25–28). Yet the region's role was limited during the period, as most shipments went through the Caribbean directly to the United States. The mid-1990s crackdown that blocked these routes and fomented the rise of Mexico's cartels raised the profile of Central America as well, but direct aerial and maritime routes from Colombia to Mexico still predominated well into the 2000s.

In yet another example of the 'balloon effect'—in which repression in one area displaces cartels and violence to another—the onset of the recent cartel–state conflict in Mexico seems to be leading cartels to develop land routes that pass directly through Central America (Meiners, 2009). Today, an estimated 90 per cent of cocaine that enters the United States passes through Central America (World Bank, 2011, p. 12). At the same time, the intensity of the fighting in Mexico and the diversification of its cartels into arms and human trafficking have created increased demand for weapons, soldiers, sources of revenue, and border territory. This spillover or contagion effect has made the Northern Triangle, and particularly Mexico's southern border with Guatemala and Belize, an important locus for armed criminal activity.

The onset of cartel–state conflict in Mexico may be leading cartels to develop land routes through Central America.

While the presence of Mexican cartels in Central America dates back at least to the early 1990s, when Sinaloa cartel leader Joaquín 'El Chapo' Guzmán was arrested in Guatemala, it is only in the last few years that they have begun to establish significant operational footholds in the region (Dudley, 2011, p. 28). This process appears to be bringing them into direct competition with traditional, domestic criminal organizations, as well as state forces, both corrupt and honest. Most of the recent serious violent events have taken place in Guatemala and, to a lesser extent, in Honduras.

Thus far, three interrelated trends can be perceived in Central America. First, Mexican cartels are directly attacking traditional organized crime syndicates for turf, upsetting what appears to have been relatively peaceful relations among the latter. Second, Mexican cartels are battling each other for supremacy in key trafficking regions, particularly near the Mexican border. Third, cartels are engaging in limited anti-state intimidation and violence linked to attempts to corrupt officials (Dudley, 2011; Meiners, 2009). A crucial trend for analysts to monitor is whether anti-state violence intensifies into the kind of open clashes and unilateral attacks on state forces seen in Mexico. This requires tracking not only total levels of violence, but distinguishing among modalities, tactics, and groups involved.

## Gangs

Gangs have an enormous presence in the Northern Triangle, with roughly 70,000 members from more than 900 gangs (World Bank, 2011, p. ii). Over the past two decades, partially in response to mass deportation of Central American gang members from the United States, these small, traditional, local gangs have become increasingly consolidated as 'cliques' of larger *maras*, fluid criminal networks largely controlled from within the prison system. Relying on the ability to coordinate outside activity, some of these prison-based *maras* now operate large-scale extortion and protection rackets (Lessing, 2010, p. 164); in El Salvador, they apparently control a lucrative market for crack cocaine in low-income neighbourhoods (Dudley, 2011, p. 44). To date, however, gangs account for only a small share of violence,

in the range of 15 per cent of homicides (World Bank, 2011). No clear pattern of systematic partnership with or integration into the Mexican cartels now operating in Central America has yet emerged.

One reason may be that whereas El Salvador is in many ways the ‘heart’ of *mara* culture, Mexican cartel activity has focused on Guatemala and Honduras. It may also be that *maras* make unattractive partners for large cartels (Dudley, 2011, p. 42). Whereas domestic organized crime families may have experience in the drug trade or access to corrupt officials, and the Guatemalan *kaibiles* have extensive military training and discipline, *mara* members—typically poor, local youths who lack training and experience—may seem unreliable and relatively unskilled. It is certainly the case that Los Zetas tend to recruit from the ranks of current and former soldiers, reflecting their military background. However, the Sinaloa cartel, like many of the traditional drug cartels of Mexico, has often relied on street gangs, ‘subcontracting’ out acts of armed violence and intimidation (Guerrero-Gutiérrez, 2010). Moreover, the linkages between *mara* leaders in Central America and affiliated cliques operating in the United States could be of great interest to Mexican cartels seeking greater control over retail markets. Clearly, this issue merits continued scrutiny.

## Implications

**Sending outmanned security forces into combat with powerful cartels could produce desertions, corruption, and cartel-state clashes.**

The drug trade in Central America and especially the Northern Triangle is in flux—and the twin problems of violence and corruption have the potential to worsen considerably in the coming years. While it is important to shore up weak institutions and attempt to establish basic human security in the region, sending outmanned security forces into combat with powerful cartels could produce Mexico-like results, leading to desertions, corruption, and brazen cartel–state clashes.

Recent developments in Central America appear to be the most recent example of the ‘balloon effect’, in which repression in one geographic area pushes drug trafficking activity onto an alternate route. As drug flows increase along that new route, official corruption inevitably grows, with illicit rents making their way into state enforcers’ pockets. Worse, armed violence can erupt, not only among cartels but also against state forces, especially when governments try to crack down. While Mexico would be relieved to have its cartels shift the bulk of their activities to Central America, such a shift would not solve anything at the regional level.

US aid and expertise in law enforcement, justice, and intelligence operations in the region might bring some improvements in the institutional effectiveness of these countries, but this input is unlikely to eliminate drug trafficking in the region and could even push cartels into the relatively low-violence countries of south Central America. US policy-makers often argue that the war on drugs cannot be abandoned lest cartels run wild, sowing violence and corruption. But state anti-trafficking policies also influence the extent and modalities of violence and corruption. Moreover, repressive crackdowns and violent cartel ‘blowback’ in upstream markets appear to have only marginal and temporary effects on drug flows into the United States. What Central America needs is a regional approach that attempts to channel drug flows in a way that does a minimum of harm to institutionally weak states and developing economies, while creating incentives for cartels to minimize armed violence.

## RIO DE JANEIRO

### Background

Whereas most retail drug markets are competitive and fragmented, including in most of Brazil’s other large cities, a handful of powerful, prison-based trafficking syndicates have dominated Rio de Janeiro’s retail drug trade, and the favelas out of which it operates, for more than 25 years (Lessing, 2008). These groups, born as prison gangs, expanded

outward in the 1980s to take control of most of the city's nearly 1,000 favelas, holding off police invasions with militarized force, and inevitably retaking communities once police had left. This stalemate seemed intractable, a 'worst-of-all-worlds' equilibrium, in which police corruption was thoroughgoing, police operations were incredibly lethal but strategically ineffective, and nearly one million favela residents continued to live under the control of non-state actors. The situation was so grim that when police-linked paramilitary groups known as *milícias* began to seize control of outlying favelas to establish their own exploitive rule, Rio's then mayor publicly declared them to be the lesser of two evils (Bottari and Ramalho, 2006).

Rio State Governor Sérgio Cabral began his first term in 2007 with a traditional hard-line stance that led to an increase in lethal confrontations between police and the syndicates; this approach fit into a longer pattern of oscillation in state policy between periods of benign neglect and lethal crackdowns (see Figure 2.7).<sup>11</sup> A June 2007 joint operation by police and federal armed forces in the Complexo do Alemão favela, the stronghold of Rio's largest and oldest trafficking syndicate, the Comando Vermelho (CV), was significant. While more than 1,300 troops and officers laid siege to the favela for a month, 'traffickers circulated, carrying assault rifles and pistols [ . . . ] and impudently pointed them at federal soldiers, challenging them to a confrontation in the favela' (Costa, 2007).<sup>12</sup> Finally, troops invaded the area, leaving 19 civilians dead (all allegedly drug traffickers) and yielding some arms seizures but no arrests. Though the operation—which officials then touted as the largest ever in Brazil's history—drew severe criticism from human rights organizations and even the United Nations for its use of excessive lethal force (Alston, 2007), it nonetheless left the favela under the dominion of the CV (Costa et al., 2007).



A fireman hoses down a truck set on fire by members of the Comando Vermelho, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, November 2010. © Buda Mendes/Getty Images

Figure 2.7 **Rio de Janeiro: civilians killed by police in alleged 'self-defence'**<sup>13</sup>**NUMBER OF POLICE KILLINGS**

Note: Figures are for the state of Rio de Janeiro.

Source: author's calculations based on SSP-RJ (2003) and ISP (2012)

Following the 2007 invasion, however, the state introduced a new public security approach centred on the use of *unidades de polícia pacificadora* ('pacification' police units, or UPPs). One by one, police special forces teams cleared favelas of drug traffickers and handed them over to the community-oriented UPP battalion that was specially recruited and trained for permanent deployment in that favela. As discussed below, the UPP programme represents a clear departure from Rio's traditionally violent and repressive approach to policing the favelas. One crucial aspect of this approach is that the UPPs' stated mission is not to eliminate drug trafficking itself, but rather to bring an end to the presence of armed drug traffickers through targeted response and subsequent occupation of favelas.

As the state prepared to invade Alemão in 2010, there were reasons for both hope and fear. The UPP programme had thus far been a success; by announcing ahead of time which favelas were to be occupied, the state had given traffickers time to clear out, and there had been no major confrontations. At the same time, traffickers expelled from cleared favelas had been regrouping in Alemão; if the CV was going to make a stand, it would surely be there. In the end, the invasion generated fewer casualties than expected, and, more importantly, it left Alemão firmly in the hands of the state for the first time in more than a generation, ending what Rio's Public Security Secretary and architect of the UPP programme José Beltrame called the 'belief in the invincibility' of Alemão (Carneiro, 2010). The event marks a turning point in the history of Rio's drug war.

This section explores the UPP programme in more detail, discusses recent trends in drug-related violence, and considers some of the side effects and threats to the long-term success of the new approach in Rio.

### The UPP approach

The UPP strategy consists of four steps.<sup>14</sup> First, the state announces the next community to be cleared of drug syndicates. While an exact date is not given, announcements come far enough in advance to give traffickers a chance to flee. Second, law enforcement floods the favela with overwhelming force, usually by the elite Batalhão de Operações

Policiais Especiais (Special Police Operations Battalion, BOPE), yet sometimes with additional support from the military, especially armoured vehicles. Third, the favela community is cleared and the UPP installed. For a month or so after the occupation, the BOPE remains in the community, conducting searches for arms and drugs and preventing attempts by trafficking syndicates to retake the community. In the transition, a UPP proximity policing unit is installed, usually in a new building built to purpose. Fourth, the BOPE and army withdraw, leaving the UPP in charge (Stahlberg, 2011).

Rio's conventional ostensive police force, the *polícia militar* (military police), has long been structured and trained to use primarily repressive tactics. The UPPs, on the other hand, are drawn from fresh recruits who have received training in human rights, preventive policing, and community relations. A large proportion of UPP officers are women, and all of them receive bonuses, intended to raise the profile of work that traditional, hard-line officers have tended to view as 'soft'. In some communities, the process of trust-building is reinforced with a 'Social UPP' component—a range of social programmes aimed at residents, some of them administered by or with UPP officers, others simply appropriating the UPP 'brand'. At the time of writing, 19 UPP battalions had been installed in communities cleared of drug syndicates and *milícias*, with plans to pacify a total of 40 favelas by the 2014 World Cup (de Aquino, 2011).

Few of the ideas underlying the UPP programme are new. The concept draws on basic community- and proximity-policing practices and lessons learned from the experiences of Medellín and Bogotá, Colombia (Stahlberg, 2011, p. 7).<sup>15</sup> Yet much of the programme's core approach was directly adapted from earlier alternative policing projects in Rio. Key among these was the pioneering 1999 Mutirão pela Paz (Mobilization for Peace) project, which combined police occupation of a target favela with community outreach and a raft of new social programmes (Soares, 2000, pp. 280–84). Another such project was the innovative successor programme Grupamento de Policiamento em Áreas Especiais (Policing in Special Areas Unit), installed on a pilot basis in a group of favelas in 2001 (Huguet, 2009); the idea was to establish a permanent police base in the favelas that would not attempt to eradicate the drug trade itself, but rather its armed presence.<sup>16</sup>

This stance is central to the UPP strategy. As asserted by the UPP programme's public face, Secretary of Public Security José Beltrame, 'We cannot guarantee that we will put an end to drug trafficking nor do we have the pretension of doing so' (Phillips, 2010). When confronted by journalists with footage of drugs being sold in a UPP-occupied favela, Beltrame did not apologize for the UPP's central harm-reduction approach:

*The basic mission was to disarm the drug dealers and bring peace to the residents. The footage doesn't appear to show anyone armed. [ . . . ] I can't guarantee there is no drug dealing going on, in some dark corner, in a place as large as City of God. . . . That positive outcome is worth infinitely more than the sale of a half dozen packets [of cocaine] (Araújo, 2010).<sup>17</sup>*

Similarly, Beltrame openly defends the UPP policy of letting traffickers flee prior to pacifications in order to avoid confrontations:

*What difference does the arrest of a drug lord make to the life of people who live in a given community? [ . . . ] Will it reduce crime rates? Arresting drug lords is important, but it isn't the most important thing. Without territory, they are much less 'lords' than they were before' (Bastos, 2011a).<sup>18</sup>*

The idea was not to eradicate the drug trade itself, but rather its armed presence.

Three factors set the UPP programme apart from previous interventions: its city-wide scale; its systematic approach of pacifying one favela at a time and announcing future operations in advance; and the unusually strong support it is receiving, not only from a rare political alignment that spans the municipal, state, and federal levels of government, but also from business elites and the media giant *Globo*. These factors have allowed the UPP programme, perhaps the first large-scale attempt to address drug trafficking and violence using a proportional response and harm-reduction approach, to remain politically tenable—an important development in its own right.

### Assessing the results

The pacification effort and the attendant social investment projects in many of the pacified favelas have changed the face of Rio de Janeiro. Most recently and saliently, state forces retook Rocinha, the largest of Rio's favelas and in many ways the most prominent, abutting the single wealthiest neighbourhood in the city. After more than a generation of dominion by armed traffickers, the state was able to reclaim the enormous area in only two hours, and without firing a shot (Briso and Cerqueira, 2011). The entire South Zone—home to most of the city's tourist attractions and wealthy residents—is now essentially free of trafficking-dominated favelas, and large-scale public projects are bringing residents into the fabric of formal city life.

There are strong indications that Rio's syndicates, particularly the CV, have shifted from confrontation to strategic retreat and non-violent trafficking. The most prominent



Policemen patrol the Rocinha favela as part of an operation to install a UPP, Rio de Janeiro, November 2011. © Sergio Moraes/Reuters



is the taking of Complexo do Alemão with a minimum of fighting in 2010, after the bloody and failed attempt in 2007. Perhaps even more surprising to observers of Rio's drug war was the wholly bloodless pacification of Rocinha and its neighbour Vidigal, once the stronghold of one the CV's principal rivals. In fact, drug traffickers seem to be disarming in anticipation of pacifications. This occurred in São Carlos favela, site of the first post-Alemão UPP installation (Costa, Moura, and Daflon, 2011); it also seems to be happening in Maré, a very large complex of favelas that is not even scheduled to be pacified.<sup>19</sup>

Despite these qualitative changes, the effect of the UPP programme on crime and violence has not been rigorously quantified for a number of reasons. Because UPPs are not assigned randomly to favelas, and because the installation of a UPP in one favela could have an effect on other non-UPP favelas, comparisons of crime rates between UPP and non-UPP communities are hard to interpret.<sup>20</sup> Access to crime data is also a problem. Recently, Rio's Public Security Secretary began releasing crime data for the first 13 favelas to receive UPPs, touting falling crime numbers and the fact that in the first half of 2011, all but two UPP favelas reported no homicides (Cândida and Ramalho, 2011). While these certainly seem like strong results, there is no comparable data available for non-UPP favelas, nor does the published data cover periods prior to pacification, making a meaningful comparison impossible. Longer time series are available for administrative areas that include multiple favelas and surrounding neighbourhoods, but these inevitably group together both UPP and non-UPP favelas.

While state-wide data shows a 28.7 per cent decline in homicides between 2006 and 2009, these figures have recently been called into question. A rigorous econometric examination of mortality data from the federal Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada (Institute for Applied Economic Research) shows that over this same period, 'deaths of unknown motive' have been rapidly increasing in Rio but not elsewhere in Brazil, suggesting that some homicides have been 'hidden' in this reporting category (Cerqueira, 2011). The study's 'corrected count' estimate increases the number of homicides in 2009 alone by some 3,100 (more than 60 per cent of the total) and suggests that the 'true' homicide rate has fallen by only 3.6 per cent over the period (Roman, 2011). The study and its strong implications of deliberate manipulation of homicide data have put the government on the defensive (Bottari and Leite, 2011), further complicating efforts to assess the effectiveness of the UPP project.

The UPP programme has apparently induced a shift in traffickers' strategies from fighting to hiding.

Ultimately, reducing rates of crime and violence is one of the primary goals of the pacification project, and achieving this aim will be crucial to winning the acceptance and approval of residents. To date, no such reductions have been clearly demonstrated. In fact, as discussed below, the state may initially be less effective than the long-entrenched drug lords at providing local security. However, by re-establishing a monopoly on the use of force and by apparently inducing a shift in traffickers' strategies from fighting to hiding, the programme has greatly reduced its own future cost. São Carlos was, in a sense, already pacified when the troops arrived, and Maré appears to have 'pacified itself' before an official operation was ever announced. The more smoothly these operations go, the more credibility the leadership has to openly defend and promote proportional response. Yet this progressive and innovative approach has a number of risks associated with it, as discussed below.

## Potential threats and looming problems

### **Milícias: Rio's home-grown paramilitaries**

The CV and its rival prison-based syndicates are not the only armed groups plaguing Rio. The so-called *milícias*, paramilitary groups comprised largely of rogue police officers, have established armed control over hundreds of favelas and outlying areas, taken over illicit markets and extortion rackets, terrorized the communities they control, and infiltrated the political system through armed clientelism and electioneering (Freixo et al., 2008; Cano, 2008; Hidalgo and Lessing, 2009). The *milícias*, weakening the state from within its own security apparatus, and with far more political power and coercive reach than favela-bound traffickers, are, according to Beltrame, a graver threat today than drug syndicates (de Aquino, 2011). Recent examples include the brutal murder by *milícia*-linked police of corruption-fighting judge Patricia Acioli (Nogueira, 2011); meanwhile, a flurry of death threats led Rio State Assemblyman Marcelo Freixo—who has spearheaded efforts to investigate the *milícias*—to flee the country at the invitation of Amnesty International (Loureiro, 2011).

The UPP programme seems to be aimed more at retaking territory from syndicates than from *milícias*. Of the more than 20 favelas pacified to date, only one was controlled by *milícias* prior to its pacification, which was itself an unplanned response to the widely publicized torture of journalists by the local *milícia* group (de Freitas, 2009).<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the steady progress of the pacification process and the severe blow dealt to the CV with the invasion of Alemão seems to have benefitted the *milícias*, who now control more favelas than the CV (Paes Manso, 2010). *Milícia* power is also extending inward, into the state's security forces; a study by the Rio Police internal affairs office finds that in every one of the 18 police battalions located in the city of Rio, as well as special forces such as the BOPE, at least one officer was involved with a *milícia* group (Monken, 2009). There have been denunciations of extortion and other *milícia*-like activities by UPP troops, and Beltrame has admitted that UPP penetration by the *milícias* is to be feared (Bastos, 2011a).

The danger of *milícia* infiltration within the highly trained BOPE corps is particularly troubling, especially in view of the case of Mexico's Grupo Aeromóvil de Fuerzas Especiales. That elite, US-trained anti-drug force deserted en masse, becoming Los Zetas, today the most violent cartel in Mexico (Manwaring, 2009, p. 19). Unless carefully overseen and managed, elite corps like the BOPE can quickly be transformed from an asset into a highly destabilizing and destructive force.

### Balloon effects

Another important issue is the so-called 'balloon effect', the suggestion that by forcing traffickers out of Rio proper, the UPP programme is merely pushing them to migrate to new areas, in effect moving crime and violence around from one region to another. This is a particularly acute concern given the UPP violence-reducing policy of allowing traffickers to flee rather than cornering them. For example, it was widely suspected that many traffickers from the first-pacified favelas had migrated to the CV's headquarters of Vila Cruzeiro and Alemão, and the flight of dozens of armed traffickers from those two favelas was actually filmed by news helicopters. Consequently, many residents and authorities now fear 'crime migration'—the invasion by Rio's drug traffickers of other municipalities and even states. Federal highway police, for example, stepped up patrols in neighbouring states the day after Alemão was retaken (Gomes and Cymrot, 2011).

Just as determining the actual benefits of the UPPs on the communities that received them is difficult, it is virtually impossible to know with certainty whether and where balloon effects have actually occurred. However, some crime migration is consistent with early observations. One analysis—which compares the first trimesters of 2009 (when only two UPPs had been installed) and 2011 (by which time 16 UPPs had been installed)—finds that in four of Rio's largest neighbouring municipalities, arrest rates rose two to four times faster than in Rio itself (Bastos, 2011b). Another study reveals that, in the wake of the retaking of Cruzeiro and Alemão, seasonal robbery rates fell in the area surrounding these favelas, but rose sharply in the region of Mangueira, where the fleeing traffickers are believed to have first regrouped (R7, 2011). News stories from remote towns in the interior of Rio de Janeiro State make clear that both residents and authorities attribute increases in certain local crime rates to migrating traffickers from UPP favelas in Rio, but the causal link remains conjectural. Further research is needed to clarify the relationship between crime levels in adjacent areas (Werneck, 2010).<sup>22</sup> The government, meanwhile, acknowledges that the balloon effect may occur but has argued that it is not a major concern because only the top drug lords are able to migrate, leaving the foot soldiers behind. Other experts argue that denying the existence of the balloon effect would be to 'deny the obvious' (Bastos, 2011b).

### Intra-community destabilization and long-term financing

Another concern relates to the intra-community effects of the UPP programme and its long-term prospects. Most favelas have been under the armed dominion of drug traffickers for decades; syndicates frequently come to provide public goods for the communities they dominate. In particular, they establish a rough social order in which transgression is likely to be discovered and harshly punished (Leeds, 1996). When that source of parallel power is removed, it can leave a vacuum in the daily life of favelas. This vacuum is particularly acute in communities that have not yet received UPP units, since the BOPE and army soldiers who occupy the community in the medium term are not trained to play the kind of mediation roles that traffickers once did and lack the information structures necessary to administer street-level social order. This can lead to increases not only in reported property crime, but also in domestic violence, both of which tended to be very effectively prohibited, or at least hushed up, by traffickers (*Povo do Rio*, 2012).<sup>23</sup> An additional concern, especially for favela residents, is that the government will not be able to maintain the funding necessary to administer or expand the UPP programme once the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games have passed.

One concern is funding for the UPP programme once the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympics have passed.

In a sense, both of these concerns reflect the same underlying problem: for decades, the state outsourced the monopoly on the use of force and the provision of social order to non-state actors willing to work for free, or even to pay bribes to corrupt police for the privilege (Werneck, 2011). Taking over those functions, even in just a handful of the city's 1,000 favelas, will be a long, slow, costly task.

## CONCLUSION

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'Systemic' drug violence—associated with drug traffickers and cartels as opposed to consumers—is a complex phenomenon influenced by the structure of illicit markets as well as state policies and institutions. Violence involving small drug-retailing outfits such as street gangs can be common, lethal, and hard to reduce, but it is also limited by the size and resources of such groups, and by their desire to maintain anonymity. In particular, retail drug organizations rarely attack state forces. Far more troubling, if rarer, is violence involving the large, articulated trafficking syndicates and cartels. Such drug-trafficking organizations have directly engaged state forces, as well as rivals, in brazen armed conflict, leading to extensive 'drug wars'—armed conflicts with destructive consequences similar to civil wars, but of a very different nature.

Although quantitative data is scarce, the case studies reviewed in this chapter illuminate the challenges, effects, and potential unintended consequences of state efforts to contain and reduce drug cartel violence in Latin America. In Mexico, President Calderón's 2006 crackdown, designed to fall on all cartels roughly equally, appears to have instead triggered a rapid explosion of violence. The effects of cartel fragmentation are being felt throughout the country and in Central America. Six years into an exhausting and brutal conflict with tens of thousands of casualties, the blanket response approach may be giving way to a more proportional focus on the most deadly Mexican cartels. Even sharper shifts in policy are likely if, as many predict, the PRI regains the presidency in the 2012 election.

In Rio de Janeiro, a proportional-response approach aimed at curbing the most violent drug-trafficking activity has returned control of many favelas to the state after more than 20 years. But it is not yet clear whether this is translating into a reduction in overall violence, nor whether criminal networks are simply relocating. Maintaining control is also a long-term, complex, and costly proposition, and is as much about state service provision as violence prevention. It remains to be seen whether state and federal authorities are prepared to stay the course. Yet the shift in approach seems to have altered the logic of cartel–state conflict that was in effect for decades; as such, it merits sustained scrutiny to better assess its true effectiveness and possible application to other settings. ■

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

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ATF	Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives
AWB	Assault Weapons Ban
BOPE	Batalhão de Operações Policiais Especiais (Special Police Operations Battalion)
CV	Comando Vermelho
FARC	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia)
PRI	Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolution Party)
UPP	<i>Unidade de polícia pacificadora</i> ('pacification' police unit)

## ENDNOTES

- 1 See, for example, Dorn, Murji, and South (1992); Goldstein (1985); and MacCoun, Kilmer, and Reuter (2003).
- 2 Traffickers could, of course, commit this kind of violence, but they would do so as consumers.
- 3 Author interview with a retired Colombian justice official, Cartagena, Colombia, 27 December 2010.
- 4 Los Zetas were originally a kind of private security brigade employed by the Gulf cartel.
- 5 All correlation coefficients are based on the author's calculations.
- 6 Author communication with Peter Reuter, 25 September 2011.
- 7 See, for example, Global Commission on Drug Policy (2011, p. 14).
- 8 The most violent armed conflict of the 21st century has been the Eritrea-Ethiopia border war, with between 70,000 and 100,000 battle deaths from May 1998 to May 2000.
- 9 Author's translation.
- 10 Straw purchasers are individuals who are authorized to buy firearms for personal use but who unlawfully buy them with intent to transfer them to drug-trafficking organizations or other criminals.
- 11 In Brazil, formal responsibility for policing and public security policy rests almost entirely with governors and state legislatures. The federal government can provide key support, whether financial, political, or logistical (such as assistance from the armed forces) but can also remain largely disengaged. Since municipalities generally lack their own police forces, mayors have little direct power to affect policing policy; still, their support or opposition can have an important impact on the success of state-level policies.
- 12 Author's translation.
- 13 When police killings of civilians in the course of patrols or operations are reported, they are automatically placed in this category—*auto de resistência*, or 'act of resistance'. While the majority of these incidents probably occur during armed confrontations, they do not reflect a judicial determination and there is ample evidence that at least some of these killings represent summary executions by police against subdued, fleeing, or unarmed opponents. See, for example, Cano (1997).
- 14 Stahlberg (2011) provides a detailed overview of the UPP programme.
- 15 For more on the municipal measures implemented in Colombia, see Chapter 1 on Latin America and the Caribbean in this volume.
- 16 The programme's designer and commanding officer describe these rules as 'don't walk around openly armed, don't sell drugs near schools, and don't employ children'. Author interview with Maj. Antonio Carballo Blanco, Rio de Janeiro, June 2003.
- 17 Author's translation.
- 18 Author's translation.
- 19 Author interviews with the director of a Maré-based social service NGO, Rio de Janeiro, 14 January 2012, and with a Maré-based field researcher, Rio de Janeiro, 22 December 2011.
- 20 In statistical terms, there might be selection bias or contamination. If favelas are selected for receiving UPPs even partly on the basis of crime and violence rates, then observed differences between UPP and non-UPP favelas could be due to the selection process rather than the 'treatment' of receiving a UPP. 'Contamination'—pacification in one favela driving changes in crime elsewhere—could happen directly, because traffickers migrate from a pacified favela to a neighbouring, non-UPP favela, or indirectly, because the UPP programme is lowering crime rates everywhere. Either channel would violate the so-called stable-unit treatment value assumption (SUTVA).
- 21 As of this writing, there were 19 UPPs in place and one scheduled for inauguration in April 2012, serving some 27 communities. In some cases, multiple smaller favelas were pacified in a single operation and are served by a single UPP. In addition, Vila Cruzeiro and the Alemão complex of favelas were pacified in 2011; they are currently patrolled by army and non-UPP police troops, with no date for UPP implantation set.
- 22 The main obstacle to assessing the balloon effect is accurately documenting where traffickers flee.
- 23 Author interview with a community activist, Complex do Alemão, 29 March 2011.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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