

# Drugs, International Crime And National Security

## The Case of the Northern Border Area

Simone Lucatello\*



Germaín Romero / Cuartoscuro

At the beginning of this millennium, the threat of drugs and the transnational crime associated with them has reached a magnitude such that we need to rethink the traditional ways of understanding the problem. This article will review the relationship between drugs and national security, with particular attention to the current situation in Mexico's northern border area.

Currently, the drug problem goes way beyond addiction and organized crime: in recent years the issue has involved more than law enforcement and traditional health sectors, such as prevention, treatment and rehabilitation, and has entailed a much broader political and socio-economic sphere including everything from national security to the very development of the nation. According to UN Office on Drugs and Crime figures, in the year 2000, the world's drug industry was worth about U.S.\$800 billion,<sup>1</sup> while for the same year total official aid for development came to U.S.\$52 billion.<sup>2</sup> In many developing countries, drugs are already a means—sometimes the only means—for economic survival.

In Mexico and many other Latin American countries, the transition to democracy brings with it problems linked to the nature of a political system in which some institutional practices foreign to the new democracy continue to be important and perpet-

uate a kind of “tacit coexistence” with criminal and illegal activities that seriously damages state legitimacy.<sup>3</sup> Simultaneously with the transition, the last few years have seen the emergence of new, influential transnational actors who carry out illegal activities and have an important effect in some regions of the world. Transnational drug mafias, for example, are a grave threat to every nation's international and domestic security. In the case of Mexico, the main consequence of the strength of these illegal transnational actors is the state's inability to effectively control their actions in its sovereign territory,

other, a noticeable, growing presence of agents who threaten domestic stability, carry out illegal activities and have sufficient transnational power to cause instability in the system of security and governability. In addition, specifically with regard to drugs, the trend in recent years has been that not only are they produced in great quantities for industrialized countries—Mexico is the world's foremost producer of marijuana—but domestic consumption has also increased, creating a dual dependency, both physical and economic, with fatal consequences for the nation's sustainable human development.

The trend in recent years has been that drugs are not only produced in great quantities for industrialized countries—Mexico is the world's foremost producer of marijuana—but domestic consumption has increased.

with the resulting risk of instability and even ungovernability.

Today, in this country, there is a juxtaposition between functional actors of modernization and democratization, on the one hand, and on the

According to recent figures, in Mexico, 3.5 million people between the ages of 12 and 65 have consumed drugs at least once, not counting tobacco and alcohol. The North is the most affected, with a 7.45 percent

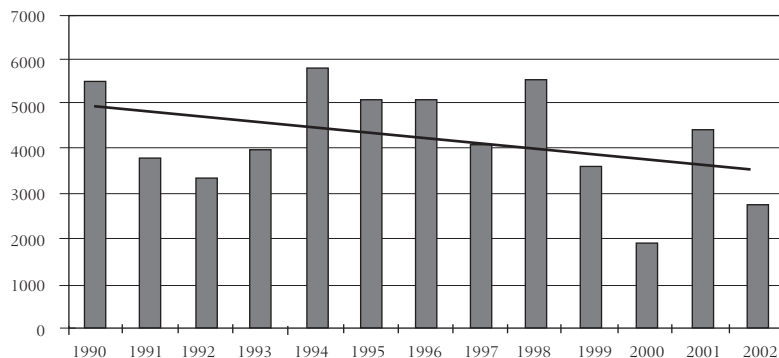
\* Visiting professor of the International Cooperation for Development Master's Program at the José María Luis Mora Institute.

**TABLE 1**  
**POPPY CULTIVATION AND OPIUM PRODUCTION, MEXICO (1990-2002)**

Substance	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Opium Poppies (hectares)	5450	3765	3310	3960	579	5050	5100	4000	5500	360	1900	4400	2700
Opium (tons)	62	41	40	49	6	53	54	46	60	4	21	71	47

**Source:** United Nations Office on Drug and Crime (UNODC), *Global Illicit Drug Trends*, Vienna, 2003.

**GRAPH 1**  
**TENDENCY OF OPIUM POPPY CULTIVATION, MEXICO (1990-2002)**  
**(HECTARES)**



Source: United Nations Office on Drug and Crime (UNODC), *Global Illicit Drug Trends*, Vienna, 2003.

In Mexico, 3.5 million people between the ages of 12 and 65 have consumed drugs at least once, not counting tobacco and alcohol. The North is the most affected, with a 7.45 percent consumption rate.

consumption rate, much higher than the national average rate of 5.27 percent. The cities with higher rates than the national average are Tijuana, Mexicali and Ciudad Juárez. The North has the highest rate for both marijuana and cocaine consumption.<sup>4</sup>

The northern border has become the obligatory route for thousands of men and women workers and their families trying to get into the United States in search of the promise of higher wages and a new life. However, many stay on the Mexican side of the border waiting, sometimes for months, for the opportunity to cross; during their waiting period they lack basic social services.

A study of children and adolescents from 100 Mexican cities also showed that the states with the highest risk of drug consumption were those along

the northern border; once again, Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez had the highest rates.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, it is important to note that payment in kind (in drugs) among drug traffickers has brought with it the transformation of areas traditionally considered transit zones, like the border region, into “high consumption” areas, with the corresponding rise in the number of drug addicts in these communities and a clear drop in the age of first consumption.

Drug use not only brings with it physical and/or mental problems, but also changes the socio-cultural surroundings of the user because of his/her addictive behavior. On the other hand, generalized high consumption levels also leads to high-risk behavior patterns for other associated problems such as

violence or the transmission of highly contagious diseases like HIV/AIDS.

Some cities along the northern border also have a higher rate of violence toward children. Schooling levels have not increased; only five out of every 10 children complete their basic education and this drop-out rate is linked to the growth in drug use among this age group in cities where drug trafficking and a lack of public safety are world famous.

For example, in Ciudad Juárez, “drug trafficking, organized crime and gangs have grown in recent years. This has propitiated an increase in the use of drugs, firearms and insecurity for border city residents.”<sup>6</sup> Ciudad Juárez is the Mexican city with the highest rates of child abuse and family violence. The weak social security system, the lack of preventive programs and family violence levels indicate a system of family and gender relations with exacerbated asymmetries and exclusions. It is a society that is increasingly fragmented.

Multiple unsolved sexual crimes (rape) and serial murders have taken the lives of more than 300 women in this city over the last decade. In these murders, linked to drug trafficking and organized crime, 56 percent of the victims were under 19 years of age.<sup>7</sup> In addition, sexual violence toward children and among children is growing exponentially. The result has been the gradual creation of a culture of impunity and socialization of violence.

Both antisocial behavior linked to violence and drug abuse are closely related since both have their origins in the growing socio-cultural fragmentation of the affected areas. Equally, these same risk factors cause a rapid expansion of infectious diseases like HIV/AIDS, and the use of addictive substances

leads to the irresponsible practice of high-risk sex.

The first case of AIDS in Mexico was reported in 1983. By September 2001, slightly more than 40,000 cases had been reported, with a ratio of six men for every woman. The first case was associated with intravenous drug use and homosexual relations, while the first case associated exclusively with intravenous drug use was reported in 1986. Currently, the country has 466 cases of AIDS associated with intravenous drug use, most along the northern border. There, HIV rates are lower among men who have sexual relations

solves short-term liquidity problems, but in the long term increases poverty and establishes a system of dependence that can only be controlled with great difficulty.

- Environmental security: the eradication of drug crops through fumigation, deforestation and other destruction techniques has devastating effects on the ecosystem and soil erosion.
- Community security: corruption and drug-linked crime can lead to conflicts in the community itself, with consequences for migration and, in the long run, the slow disintegration of the community.

Payment in kind (in drugs) among drug traffickers  
has brought with it the transformation of areas  
traditionally considered transit zones, like the border region,  
into "high consumption" areas.

with men than in the rest of the country, but almost 20 times higher than in the general population and five times higher than among sex workers.<sup>8</sup>

Uncontrolled drug production, trafficking and abuse are threats to security, not only of individuals, but for the sustainable development of the nation as a whole. We can state some general conclusions about the impact of drugs on national security, which particularly affects some of our country's strategic areas:

- The economy: Government failure to control production and trafficking has a negative effect on the national gross domestic product and strengthens the non-formal economy. Agricultural production of marijuana and opium poppies and other drugs re-

- Direct effects on border security: drug traffickers' border crossings and attempts to maintain their own security through high-caliber weapons connects drug sales, arms trafficking and the influence of para-military groups, which are very difficult for a weak government to deal with.

That is, the production, unwarranted use and trafficking of drugs are activities that can affect the security not only of the nation and individuals but also of concrete communities. As we have seen, drugs, combined with other variables like AIDS, for example, make communities vulnerable and can even lead to the generation of social conflicts and a crisis of governability.

Although Mexico has made the important decision of signing and ratify-

ing the Convention of Palermo, the UN accord against transnational organized crime that will come into effect on September 29 this year, as long as urgent reforms are not made to strengthen state institutions and make law enforcement effective, the growth of organized crime and drug abuse will continue to be a grave threat to the state. **MM**

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> UNODC, Introduction, *United Nations World Drug Report* (Vienna: UNODC, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> UN Development Program, *Informe sobre el Desarrollo Humano 2002*. [www.undp.org.mx/desarrollohumano](http://www.undp.org.mx/desarrollohumano)

<sup>3</sup> John Bailey and Roy Godson, eds., *Organized Crime & Democratic Governability: Mexico and the U.S.-Mexican Borderlands* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), p. 135.

<sup>4</sup> Consejo Nacional contra las Adicciones (Conadic), *Resumen Ejecutivo, Encuesta Nacional de Adicciones México* (Mexico City: Conadic, 2002), p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> DIF/ONUDD/UNICEF, "Yo también cuento! Estudio de niñas, niños y adolescentes trabajadores en 100 ciudades" (Mexico City: Servicio Fototipográfico, S.A., 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Amnistía Internacional, "Muertes intolerables; México. Diez años de desapariciones y asesinatos de mujeres en Ciudad Juárez," Proyecto AMR 41/027/2003 (Mexico City), 11 August 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Many Mexican NGOs put the number of women who have disappeared at 400. The fact is that in a significant number of cases in the state of Chihuahua, young women and teenagers—one case involved an 11-year-old girl—disappear and are found dead days or even years later. According to Amnesty International figures, in 10 years, about 370 women have been murdered, of whom at least 137 were the victims of sexual violence. Seventy-five bodies still have not been identified, some of whom may be those of women reported missing, although the lack of conclusive proof of their identities makes it impossible to confirm this hypothesis.

<sup>8</sup> Secretaría de Salud, *Informe SIDA* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Salud, 2001).