

The Relationship between Illegal Drugs and Violence: Is There a Cause and Effect?

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THE RECENT DRUG-ASSOCIATED VIOLENCE on the Mexico side of the Mexico-U.S. border, the “narco-terrorism” in Colombia during the late 1980s and 1990s, and the tales of the prohibition era in the United States are all examples of

criminal organizations that fight either against each other or against the state and cause an inordinate amount of cruelty, violence, and death. These and other episodes have led most people to conclude that “drugs cause violence” and therefore “to end violence on the Mexican border we have to eliminate illegal drugs.” These assertions imply that drugs and violence are intimately linked. But, is it true?

The Relationship of Drugs and Drug-Related Violence

Drugs and drug-related violence do not overlap in either time or space: “Even without the protection of the state and courts, illegal drug markets are generally peaceable. However, occasionally specific markets exhibit high levels of violence” (Reuter 2009: 275). Mexico for example, has had drug trafficking for a century, and while there were individual cases of murder associated with drugs, the illegal drug industry was relatively peaceful. Only in the last decade has it become extremely violent. Until the late 1990s, the share of the illegal drug sector in the Gross National Product (GDP) was significantly higher in Bolivia and Peru than in Colombia, but drug-associated violence was very high in the latter and very low in the former two (Thoumi 2003). During the last decade, illegal drug income has accounted for about one-third of Afghanistan’s GDP, but drug-associated violence has been remarkably low.

The empirical evidence shows clearly that there is no direct “cause and effect” relationship between drugs and violence. In other words, when there are very large, easy to obtain illegal drug profits, it is not “natural” that people kill each other for them.

In both Colombia and Mexico, one frequently hears claims such as: “Drug legalization is the only solution” because “when there is demand, there will always be a supply.” There is no doubt that if there were no demand, there would be no supply, but if demand would be the determining factor for production, then every country where coca and poppy could grow would be growing them, and every country

where cocaine and heroin could be refined and trafficked would be doing so. The map of illegal drugs shows a very high concentration in production. All coca and cocaine are produced in only three countries: Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia. Three countries produce 95 percent of opium poppy and heroin: Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Laos, and if Mexico and Colombia are thrown in, it becomes 99 percent.

There is no market theory that can explain this extreme concentration. Why does Colombia face much more competition in the international coffee markets than in cocaine, and why does Mexico have more competition in clothing manufacture than in heroin? In Mexico many argue that the country’s location halfway between Colombia and the United States is the reason for its involvement in drug trafficking. This is reminiscent of similar explanations in Colombia in the 1980s: the country was halfway between Bolivia and Peru to the south and the United States to the north. Location matters, of course, but being a transit country does not imply that the nationals of that country should dominate the trafficking networks.

The concentration shown by the maps of drugs and violence forces the observer to seek domestic explanations, for example, what do Colombia and Mexico have that has resulted in their dominance of some international drug markets, and why in those markets is there or has there been so much violence?

Factors Promoting Crime and Illegal Drugs

When looking at domestic factors that encourage the development of criminal organizations and illegal drugs, people normally attribute causality to poverty, income and wealth inequality, economic crises, frustrated expectations, corruption, and the like. These factors may play important roles, but they are not causes in the sense that once they occur, crime and drugs also occur. Indeed, most poor people in very unequal societies or facing economic crises do not become criminals. On the other hand, some members of the upper classes have been involved in illegal drugs and crime. Corruption may encourage crime, but crime itself is a principal supporter of corruption. These are contributing factors to crime and illegal drugs, but none of them is either necessary or sufficient for criminality and drugs to appear.

In order to have illegal drugs, it is necessary to have an illegal demand and an illegal supply. This is why “legalization” is so appealing: it eliminates a necessary factor. For many reasons not discussed here, the world will not legalize the cocaine and heroin markets. So, for the sake of countries like Colombia and Mexico, it is imperative to ask: what are the necessary conditions for supply to develop? Illicit drug industries require the performance of several industry-specific tasks that are not required by legal activities: the growing of illegal crops, the development of illegal distribution networks, etc. “Successful performance of these tasks requires special ‘illegal skills’ used to develop illegal business organizations, social support networks to protect the industry from law enforcement efforts, and contract enforcement and conflict resolution systems within the criminal organizations, to have the will to break economic laws and regulations and to use violence if necessary” (Thoumi 2003: 56). To achieve this, there have to be people willing to break some laws and a support network of people who consider such illegal activities appropriate.

When the rule of law prevails, crime is limited to that committed by a few “bad apples” and common law enforcement efforts can keep crime levels low. When a significant group does not accept the formal rules as legitimate, if breaking laws is justified because they are or appear to be enacted by particular groups that benefit from them, then the society becomes vulnerable to the development of organized crime. There are other necessary factors related to cocaine and heroin production such as having the knowledge to refine cocaine or heroin and having the appropriate environmental conditions to grow coca or poppy. The labor skills needed are abundant in almost every country today and can easily be bought.

Interestingly, there are no sufficient factors for the development of illegal crops or illegal drug trafficking. “Some factors are necessary to develop coca and poppy plantings and cocaine and heroin production and exports. To do so *countries must have the full set of necessary factors*. There is also a wide spectrum of potential contributing factors. These might trigger the development of the illegal industry *only if all the necessary conditions are present*” (Thoumi 2009).

“*The lack of a sufficient factor makes it possible to have a society with all the conditions for the development of the illegal industry and which has, however, not developed it. Such a society, however, would be very vulnerable and could develop the illegal industry.* The appearance of a new contributing factor, for example, could trigger it. Criminal activities develop as a result of evolutionary processes, not Newtonian ones with well defined causality of the type ‘Y=f(X)’ that is ‘if X, then Y happens.’ This is why some societies that have all the necessary conditions for the development of the industry do not currently have it” (Thoumi, 2009).

The existence of strong criminal organizations does not necessarily indicate high levels of violence. Criminal organizations control the use of violence to avoid the government focus on them. Needless to say, a very wealthy drug trafficker cannot enjoy his money in the cemetery. It is only when those controls weaken because the structure of the organization changes or when the organization itself decides to fight the state that violence erupts. These eruptions are particularly bloody and savage if the perpetrators are willing to use violence without regard to the consequences for society, or when they simply want to “hit where it hurts the most,” that is, family members, children, etc.

Why Do Policies Fail? Why Is Violence So Difficult to Control?

The repressive anti-drug policies implemented during the last forty years of the “war on drugs” have not eliminated illegal drugs and will not do so for a simple reason: they attack some of the contributing factors to illicit drug development, but almost never deal with the necessary conditions for sustaining an illegal industry. The development of organized crime and the illegal drug industry is due to issues related to governance and the rule of law. Repressive policies are based on a police model focused on eliminating “bad apples” that does not deal with the underlying factors that encourage such developments in the society.

Not surprisingly, the illegal drug industry has adapted in response to government policies. In Colombia, the industry was controlled by two large cartels in the 1980s, which were destroyed by the mid-1990s. Left-wing guerrillas and right-wing paramilitary groups then controlled the coca plantings, cocaine refining, and trafficking. During recent years, both guerrillas and paramilitaries have been weakened, and the drug industry in Colombia is now controlled by an unknown number of smaller trafficking bands. The industry’s control went from “drug lords” to “warlords” to “gang lords.”

In the late 1980s, the U.S. attacked the Caribbean routes, and Colombian traffickers sought new routes through Mexico. As the Colombian cartels weakened, Mexican groups gained market share in the U.S., and when the PRI lost political control of many Mexican states, the Mexican trafficking organizations ended up competing for domestic drug markets and for dominance of the American market. This has been a very bloody period in many areas of Mexico, and today it is well known that Mexico is a victim of a very high level of violence. Ironically, during this period the homicide rate in Mexico in reality has been falling! This shows that the drug violence is confined to small areas, and while there are some innocent civilian victims, the violence tends to be limited to intergang and gang-state encounters.

The challenge that organized crime presents for the state is how to impose the rule of law. One option is to co-opt and control criminal organizations, allowing them to operate within some “reasonable” limits. This might have worked in the past, but it is unlikely to work now. The other option is to impose the rule of law, not just by a strong arm of the state but by having it internalized by the citizenry, by making them full modern citizens with a sense of belonging to the state so that the socially accepted norms coincide with the formal legal requirements. This is, of course, a huge challenge. The question is whether countries like Colombia and Mexico are ready to respond to it.

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