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Mexican Transnational Criminal Organizations and U.S. Drug Policy

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Transnational Drug Trade and Drug War on the U.S.-Mexico border

Under the Nixon administration, the U.S. government began using the metaphor of declared war for its drug control policy, but the supposed war has born few of the markings of a real war. However, since the election of Felipe Calderon to the presidency of Mexico in 2006, a veritable war on drugs has erupted in Mexico. Calderon began a crackdown aimed at ridding the country of organized crime. The result has been incredible violence. An estimated 46,000 Mexicans have lost their lives in this internal conflict, creating wide concern for the scale of human rights abuses on the Mexican people.

While it is almost entirely an internal conflict, with little of the “spillover violence” that has become a primary concern of politicians and pundits in the U.S., the Mexican war on drugs is in almost every way connected to U.S. policy and consumer demands. The United States is the largest consumer of drugs in the world. Mexican-based transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) dominate the supply and wholesale distribution of most illicit drugs in the United States. Approximately 70% of all illicit drugs consumed in the United States are trafficked through Mexico, and the U.S. Department of Justice expects that Mexican-based TCOs will continue to solidify their dominance of the wholesale drug trade in the United States for years to come.

The United States, through the Merida Initiative, has helped to fund this crackdown on the major Mexican DTOs. Yet the



A woman and her granddaughter lie dead on the floor after being shot by gunman in March, 2011

incredible violence that has resulted has done little to stem the flow of illicit drugs into the U.S. or to diminish the power of the Mexican DTOs. In August of 2011, Jorge Carrillo Olea, a former government official and founder of Mexico’s leading civilian intelligence center, claimed that the Mexican government had lost territorial control of 50% of its land area. Corruption of the government, municipal and federal police, and the military is rampant. Political leaders are routinely threatened or kidnapped in many parts of the country. In November, 2011, Human Rights Watch issued a report on the human rights abuses taking place in Mexico in the name of the war on drugs. Evidence of torture and disappearances by the military is widespread.

Charles Bowden, author of several books on the border and reporter of the drug war, said in an interview in 2010 that in the drug war had revealed a great deal

about the current state of Mexico. “[Calderon] ripped the mask off Mexico, [which] revealed what’s really going on in Mexico: mass poverty and social disintegration.” In 1995, the DEA estimated the income of the Vicente Carrillo-Fuentes organization at \$12 billion, more than the payroll for all the factories in the city. The drug industry brings in tens of billions of dollars a year, by some measures the second largest sector of the Mexican economy, after oil. Ciudad Juarez was once the poster-child for NAFTA, but its promise appears long-gone. Ciudad Juarez earned the name “Murder City” by having the highest recorded murder rate of any city in the world. “There’s [sic] parts of the edges of Juarez that are running 1600 [murders] per 100,000, which is the kill rate of an actual war,” said Bowden.

According to Rodolfo

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From Mexico to Main Street: The Journey of Illicit Drugs

According to the *National Drug Threat Assessment 2011*, Mexican-based TCOs control distribution of most of the heroin, marijuana, and methamphetamine available in the United States. In her recent book *Cartel*, researcher Sylvia Longmire traces one of the many possible routes that

illicit drugs take to enter the U.S. market. The story begins with a small farm in the state of Guerrero, whose owner grows poppies to earn a living. After all the work harvesting and preparing the raw opium gum, it is sold to representatives of a drug trafficking organization. In Longmire's narrative, the raw gum is bought by representatives of the Vicente Carrillo Fuentes Organization, also known as the Juarez cartel, one of two dominant TCOs operating in the Ciudad Juarez-El Paso corridor. The gum is then processed in a refinery; first it is boiled and filtered to produce morphine, after which it undergoes a series of complex chemical processes to become heroin. Mexican heroin production has increased six-fold since 2007, making it the second largest heroin producer in the world, after Afghanistan. Mexican black tar or brown powder heroin can increasingly be found throughout the United States. The refined heroin is transported to a warehouse where it is "cut," a process in which other substances, such as caffeine, lactose, and painkillers, are added to the heroin



Paso del Norte International Bridge border crossing in El Paso, Texas.

in order to increase the overall sellable volume.

Once the cutting agents have been added to the heroin, it is packaged for transportation across the border. Mexican-based TCOs generally smuggle smaller shipments of cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamines in non-commercial vehicles most likely to blend in with general cross-border traffic. Marijuana, on the other hand, is generally transported in larger quantities in commercial or non-commercial vehicles. The National Drug Intelligence Center reports that Mexican TCOs enlist the services of independent transportation brokers to facilitate the trafficking of drugs across the border into and through west Texas. Such compartmentalization insulates the TCO from law enforcement. In Longmire's example, ten men are enlisted through a transportation broker to carry 50 bricks of heroin in their personal vehicles through the four points of entry into El Paso. More than 100,000 people cross the border every day from Mexico into El Paso. Once in El Paso, the drugs are brought to a staging area and

further repackaged for wholesale distribution. Another independent transporter, perhaps knowing little or nothing of the particular organization for which he is working, transports a shipment in his personal vehicle to a drop-off point in Chicago. According to the *National Drug Threat Assessment 2010*, Chicago is one of 270 cities in the U.S. in which Mexican-based TCOs have a major presence. Some of the drugs will be set aside for local distribution, some will be sent on to other major drug markets, and some will be sold in wholesale quantities to street gangs like the Latin Kings.

The example provided by Longmire is one possible journey of a shipment of illicit drugs from Mexico to the United States. Nearly 70% of all drugs consumed in the United States are trafficked through Mexico, and production, transportation, and distribution varies by drug and by organization. What is clear is that the reach of drugs trafficked from Mexico reaches across the entire country, from Chicago to South Bend to New York City.

Terminology

Cartel: The label *cartel* is often applied incorrectly to Mexican drug trafficking organizations. A cartel is an association of manufacturers or suppliers that maintains prices at a high level and restricts competition. While drug-trafficking organizations at times exhibit the characteristics of cartels, the term fails to adequately describe their overall operations, which are better described by

the term *drug trafficking organization* or *transnational criminal organization*. In general I will prefer these two terms; however, some Mexican DTOs are known almost universally as cartels, like the Juarez cartel and the Sinaloa cartel. In such cases I will use the term *cartel* to refer to particular DTOs while using *DTO* or *TCO* to refer to that type of criminal organization that facilitates the production and distribution of illicit drugs across international borders.



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Rubio Salas, a professor at the Juarez City campus of the Colegio de la Frontera Norte, between 30,000 and 50,000 people have fled Juarez to the United States since 2008 due to the high levels of drug-related violence. Instead of economic forces, which have traditionally driven the migration of the people of Chihuahua to the U.S., the extreme violence is driving current migration. Bars and nightclubs that once lined Avenida Juarez, the main street from the bridge to El Paso into the heart of Ciudad Juarez, are boarded up. Many have been transplanted just a few blocks north in El Paso, the second-safest city in the country.

Bowden has seen the social unrest in Juarez coming for a long time. “We’ve created with a foreign policy, meaning our free trade treaty, slave factories all over the country where nobody can live on the wages, two generations at least of feral kids on the street, fifty percent of the kids you’d call high school kids in Juarez neither go to school nor have jobs. They did a recent university study there and they found out forty percent of kids in Chihuahua, young males, wanted to become *sicarios*, professional killers. [...] We’ve created something so bleak that crime and murder is actually a rational way to live.”

In his ethnography of the drug culture in El Paso and Ciudad Juarez, Howard Campbell describes a former border patrol officer, Terry Nelson, who, through his experience over decades in



Photo by David McNew/Getty Images

A recently constructed segment of the U.S.-Mexico border fence near Yuma, Arizona.

U.S. law enforcement, “came to the conclusion that the war on drugs needed to be replaced with a more realistic, more practical, and more effective approach to the perennial issues of drug use, abuse and trafficking” (Campbell: 259). After he began to work in anti-drug enforcement in Mexico and South America, Nelson came to the realization that prohibition would not work. In his ethnography, Campbell describes many such law-enforcement personnel who express deep skepticism about the policies it is their duty to carry out.

The transnational economic forces of free trade are not the only forces driving immigration in the age of Mexico’s

drug war. Violence and social instability are driving away thousands. Yet in reality, the same transnational economic currents that have led to the great migration northward are the same as those that drive an intensely violent trade in narcotics. It is U.S. policy in both cases that punish the Mexican people. NAFTA liberalized flows of capital and commodities, but not labor. The institutionalized war on drugs has criminalized what is more properly seen as a public health issue. These two aspects of the U.S.-Mexico relationship—drugs control and labor migration restriction—are two clear examples of the United States’ imposition from its place of power.

Drug Trafficking in South Bend

“Fort Wayne and South Bend Police Departments and the Allen and Marion County Sheriff’s Departments report that Mexican DTOs are the primary cocaine transporters in Indiana.”

-Indiana Drug Threat Assessment 2001

“Two people were arrested in South Bend after law enforcement officials found a duffel bag that contained 18 kilograms of marijuana in the bed of their truck. Investigators suspect the marijuana was part of a larger shipment being transported north from Texas”

-Indiana Drug Threat Assessment 2001

According to the *National Gang Threat Assessment 2009*, there are approximately between 500 and 2500 gang members in St. Joseph County. Members of Chicago-based gangs like the Latin Kings, Vice Lords, Black P. Stones and Gangster Disciples dominate retail level drug distribution throughout the Great Lakes region, and are supplied by drug routes directly from Mexico. The South Bend Police Department confirms that report, claiming that local gangs are the primary retailer of illicit drugs.

The South Bend Police department reported in 2002 that Mexican DTOs were the primary transporters of powdered cocaine in Indiana. At this time the FBI noted that the presence of Mexican DTOs were increasing all across the state. The expansion of Mexican DTOs into distribution in Indiana was further signaled by large-scale law enforcement investigations. In 1999, the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force conducted five investigations of Mexican DTOs transporting cocaine from the southwest border region to Indiana. In the early 2000s, the Vincente Carrillo-Fuentes organization was the primary supplier of cocaine to the Great Lakes region. The organization, also known as the Juarez cartel, makes use of extensive land and air networks to smuggle large quantities of cocaine from South and Central America

into the United States. Cocaine is also trafficked by independent Caucasian groups, street gangs, and outlaw motorcycle gangs. The case of a South Bend man in the early 2000s provides

one example of drug trafficking to the region. The man transported bulk quantities of cocaine in his tractor-trailer from McAllen, Texas, mere miles from the Mexican border, to La Porte County.

In addition to cocaine, Mexican DTOs are recognized as the primary wholesalers of methamphetamine in Indiana. Mexican-made methamphetamine is generally cheaper than that locally produced methamphetamine, and has become prevalent in Elkhart County, among others.

Methamphetamine in South Bend, at least at the compiling of the *Indiana Drug Threat Assessment 2001*, was still primarily sourced from independent Caucasian dealers. Although independent dealers are largely responsible for marijuana cultivation in the South Bend area, the South Bend Police Department has also reported that Mexican criminal groups are responsible for some cultivation in the area. In terms of wholesale



transportation and distribution, however, Mexican criminal groups are primarily responsible for marijuana trafficking. Law enforcement officials have broken up numerous smuggling rings transporting marijuana from Texas to South Bend.

Mexican black tar and brown powder heroin are the prevailing types available in Northern Indiana. Indiana has historically not had a large incidence of heroin use, but rates of use are increasing in many cities across the state, including South Bend.

The South Bend Police Department reports drugs entering the city from Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, Brownsville, and Florida. Drugs are trafficked to the area through a myriad of routes by a myriad of criminal organizations. What they have in common is that the majority of them were trafficked into the country by Mexican transnational criminal organizations.

Mexican Youth Gang Participation in South Bend

Law enforcement officials identify Chicago-based gangs like the Latin Kings and Gangster Disciples as the primary retail-level distributors of illicit drugs in northern Indiana. The South Bend Police Department confirms that street gangs in South Bend are largely responsible for local distribution of illicit drugs. To what extent are Mexican youth gang members involved in the distribution and use of illicit drugs? In an interview with Rebecca Ruvalcaba, executive director of *La Casa de Amistad*, a Hispanic community center on South Bend's Southwest side, we discussed the current state of Mexican youth participation in gangs and how gang culture has changed. Youths are sometimes

referred by their parents to *La Casa de Amistad* after becoming involved in gang activity. Ruvalcaba said that while she has seen youths become involved with drugs through gang activity, she has not seen any cases of youths involved in the distribution of illicit drugs. Ruvalcaba then went on to discuss her

perceptions of the pressures that Mexican youth have to join gangs.

In Joey Leary and Sophia Cortez's 2008 research brief, *Mexican Gangs in South Bend*, the authors examine the factors that lead Mexican youth to join gangs. The authors cite anthropologist Robert Smith, who writes, "pandillas [gangs] provide a social structure if belonging that youth

"I think it really comes down to, right now, so many of our families are without work. And so we see a lot of the youth really kind of going out, not necessarily trying to help the family, but trying to get what they want."

want and need, but that their parents cannot readily give them." Ruvalcaba said that the main reason Mexican youth join gangs is pressure from friends or close relatives who are already involved in gang activities. Ruvalcaba added that the economy has led to a recent increase in youth gang participation. Many of the families in the Mexican community in South Bend are currently facing joblessness, she said. This has a negative impact on the children in a variety of ways. "I think it really comes down to, right now, so many of our families are without work. And so we see a lot of the youth really kind of going out, not necessarily trying to help the family, but trying to get what they want." Such youth see participation in gang activity as a means of getting what they want at a

time when many of these struggling families cannot provide for their children beyond their basic needs.

A native of South Bend's Southwest side, Ruvalcaba explains how gang culture was different when she was growing up. Gangs, she said, were not as tough. Ruvalcaba would not say

that gangs are a big problem for the community, but she did say they are a growing problem.

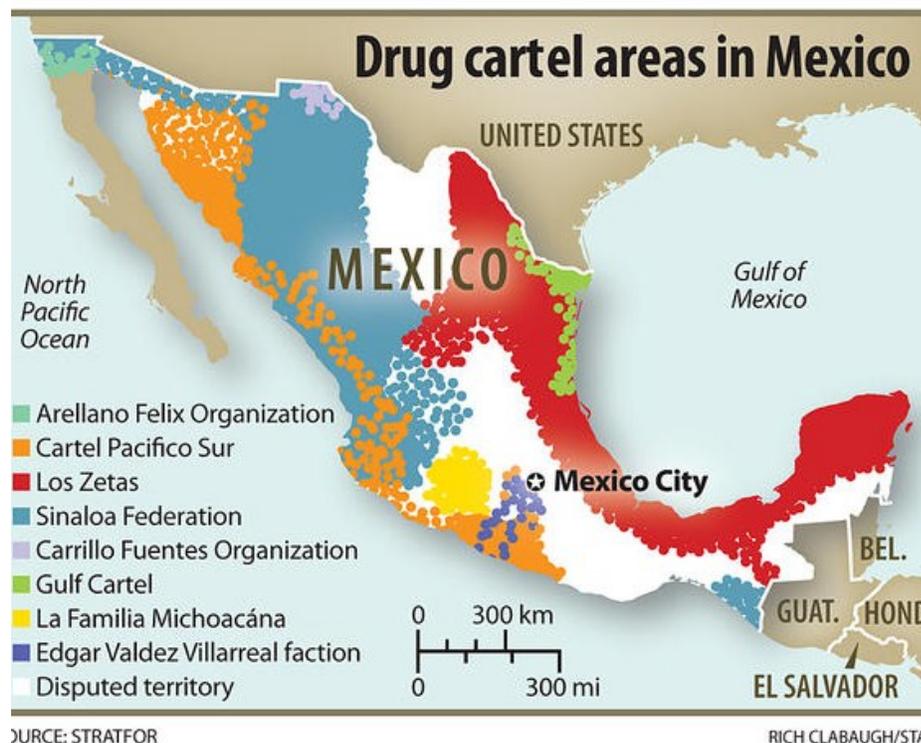


An Open Letter from an Artist to a Mexican Crime Cartel Boss

On November 14, 2011, Mexican-born artist Guillermo Gomez-Pena wrote an open letter to the Mexican cartels. He now resides in California. Below is an excerpt from his letter:

I do understand the problem of inequality and poverty; the immense, ever growing distance between poor and rich and why, when faced with a future of joblessness and despair, people are left with two equally dramatic options: to migrate north to a country that hates them or to join you and work for you, to aspire to be like you. When you have no job, access to education and decent housing for your loved ones, it seems much easier to join organized crime than to remain unemployed or sub-employed, working against all odds for almost nothing. On the day of his apprehension, a young hit man told a journalist: “Hey culeros! What’s the pinche difference between dying from starvation or dying from a bullet in your heart?”

This is not hard to understand: It’s globalization-gone-wrong; the story of a dysfunctional nation/state on the verge of losing control against the backdrop of a trans-national pop culture that has swept our historical memory and humanity, tearing down even more the already ruptured social fabric and turning the youth into consumers of extreme desires and seekers of instant success. All this has made it easier for people like you to exist.



Source: Christian Science Monitor

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