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## **Violent Reverberations of The American War on Drugs in Latin America: A Comprehensive Policy Analysis**

**Abstract:** Invasive American drug policies in Latin America have increased mass incarceration rates and drug deaths and proliferated widespread, drug-inspired violence throughout the region. This long-lasting, multifaceted issue originates in colonial-era foreign policy, but has persisted in modern American presidential administrations, independence revolutions, civil wars and human rights campaigns in Latin America, and is still generating consequences today. The United States has spent trillions of dollars in military-assisted intervention abroad under the banner of protecting, maintaining and advancing its strategic interests, including anti-narcotics initiatives in Latin America. However, citizens in Latin American countries suffer the consequences of insistent American force and policy interference. A comparative analysis of individual social, political and economic institutional consequences in the Latin American region, such as in Bolivia, Perú, Colombia, México, Honduras and Guatemala, emphasizes the unfortunate, violent implications which the War on Drugs has perpetuated in the region, and prompts urgent social, political and economic change. **Reform is needed.** I recommend divestment in counter-narcotics initiatives, including military-assisted operations, and holistic investment in educational and rehabilitation programs, including prison reform. If American foreign aid continues into Latin America, I recommend that expenditure in these programs be prioritized before military and counter-narcotics initiatives, due to vast evidence that supports both the harm and failure of military and counter-narcotics initiatives, and the success of educational and rehabilitation programs, which I will explain in further detail in this paper.

## Introduction

Since the Monroe Doctrine was articulated in 1823, United States foreign policy has maintained an imperialist and expansionist philosophy. From Manifest Destiny to the Gulf Wars, the United States military has intervened in foreign countries for diplomatic or other purposes on hundreds of occasions between 1798 and today (“Instances of Use of Armed Forces Abroad, 1798-2023” 2023). For example, the American interest-facing War on Drugs, spearheaded by the Nixon Administration in the early seventies, was also carried out via international organizations and vast military expenditure in Latin American countries, including Bolivia, Perú, Colombia, México, Honduras and Guatemala. Decades later, poverty, political violence and militarized mass incarceration have resulted from United States drug enforcement efforts in dozens of these same countries. These policies have been regarded as failures, both domestically and abroad, after resulting in significant increased mass incarceration rates and drug deaths in each respective country of implementation (Youngers and Correa 2015). Over ten percent of the world’s prisoners live in Latin America—over 1.3 million people—and this number continues to grow exponentially (Brookings Institute). Another indicator, the Human Development Index, shows that Latin American countries consistently rank low on well-being measures and have experienced serious social and economic inequality in the years following these initiatives—with progress being categorized as “unequal, slow, and incomplete” (United Nations Development Programme 2024). In addition, three of the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) biggest debtors in 2022 were Latin American—Argentina, Ecuador and Colombia (International Monetary Fund), and Colombia, México and Perú were among the top countries receiving United States aid (Haines 2024). This paper describes counter-narcotics initiatives in the past century in the Andean Region—Colombia, Bolivia and Perú—México, and Honduras and Guatemala, as well as the social, political and economic fallout in the decades following implementation. For example, I examine when Latin American countries have experienced the corruption, economic devastation, and loss of life resulting from American policy implementation abroad, by way of international intervention, and I then analyze drug use—specifically narcotics—drug trade, mass incarceration rates and American interventionism in Latin America to propose widespread policy reform, both domestically and abroad, to help end the costly, ineffective War on Drugs. I use the term “Latin America” throughout this paper because these aforementioned countries encompass the regions of North, Central and South America, all of which make up the region of Latin America.

Millions of people in the region and their civil rights are suffering and foreign assistance to the region of over half a billion people (Worldometer) is not prioritized domestically. Today, the world is witnessing Latin America’s contemporary wave of democratic revolutions, from political coups d’états to record-breaking election turnout to economic redemption, in defiance of the decades of the War on Drugs. After dozens of American-led government interventionism operations in Latin America in the past half-decade and the simultaneous, domestic War on Drugs campaign, policy implementation and proliferation throughout the continent became a subsequent foreign policy contingency pattern on behalf of the State Department. Between 1950 and 2000, a latter portion of these instances “in situations of military conflict or potential conflict or for other than normal peacetime... [not including] covert operations, domestic disaster relief, and routine alliance stationing and training exercises purposes”, included drug policy initiatives (“Instances of Use of Armed Forces Abroad, 1798-2023” 2023). The detrimental effects of these American drug policies on Latin American economies and societies necessitate urgent reform.

## **Historical Context: United States Foreign Policy (1823-Today)**

The Monroe Doctrine, first introduced to United States Congress in 1823 under the Monroe administration, was initially politically symbolic, declaring a new ‘state of interest’ of the United States–imperialism, under the guise of diplomacy. While stating that neighbors of the United States in the Western hemisphere were subject to foreign intervention, due to “the new political order developing in the rest of the Americas and the role of Europe in the Western Hemisphere... [It] also desired to increase United States influence and trading ties throughout the region to their south” (“Monroe Doctrine, 1823”, n.d.). Under the first Roosevelt administration, however, “the Roosevelt Corollary of December 1904 stated that the United States would intervene as a last resort to ensure that other nations in the Western Hemisphere fulfilled their obligations to international creditors, and did not violate the rights of the United States or invite “foreign aggression to the detriment of the entire body of American nations” (“Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, 1904”, n.d.). This marked the end of colonial-era foreign policy and the beginning of the emerging political order that would take its place and priority as foreign policy: American imperialism. The State Department stated in 1904 that “as the corollary worked out in practice, the United States increasingly used military force to restore internal stability to nations in the region... the corollary had little to do with relations between the Western Hemisphere and Europe, but it did serve as justification for United States intervention in Cuba, Nicaragua, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic” (“Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, 1904”, n.d.). Following World War II and growing anti-communist fears, McCarthyism also manifested, with the help of American military, in many Latin American countries throughout dozens of instances of political unrest and civil instability in the region (Foreign Relations Of The United States, 1952–1954, General: Economic And Political Matters, Volume I, Part 2 1953). Thus, this pattern of American interventionism during independence revolutions and civil wars in Latin America following the Monroe Doctrine and existing colonial-era legacies fostered not only expansionism and imperialism into Latin America, but also increasing general sentiment of anti-Americanism in Latin America–much of which also harmed independent Latin American economies, by factors such as trade embargos with the United States, but that paradigm is beyond the scope of this paper (de Galíndez 1995). Increased institutional support for these intervention endeavors also manifested, such as the foundation of the C.I.A. in 1947, and increased expenditure in foreign military operations. Today, the United States State Department describes “Illegal drug trafficking and crime” as a pillar issue with which diplomacy can successfully deal (“Diplomacy: The U.S. Department of State at Work” 2008), though, as I will outline in this paper, many of these ‘diplomatic’ efforts and invasive policies have been regarded as failures, both domestically and abroad, after resulting in significant increased mass incarceration rates and drug usage in almost each respective country of implementation (“Diplomacy: The U.S. Department of State at Work” 2008; Youngers and Correa 2015).

### **The War on Drugs**

The initially-domestic War on Drugs, spearheaded by the Nixon Administration in the early seventies, reflected this imperialistic model as American drug policies–enacted via international organizations and vast military expenditure–seeped South. Nixon declared the War on Drugs in 1971, promising to classify narcotics, criminalize drug possession and use and incarcerate those with a criminal conviction. Prison Policy Initiative found that, “in 2020, there

were 1,155,610 drug arrests in the United States, the vast majority of which (86.7%) were for drug possession or use rather than for sale or manufacturing... [and] drug offenses [accounted] for the incarceration of over 360,000 people” (Sawyer and Wagner 2024). These numbers have stayed relatively, proportionally consistent since 1971, following the beginning of the War on Drugs—increasing from “300,000 to more than 2 million [within less than 30 years], with drug convictions accounting for the majority of the increase” (Alexander 2010, 4); and it is estimated that over USD\$1 trillion in taxpayer money have been spent domestically on drug-inspired incarceration (Pearl 2018). The increase in incarceration happened at an exponential rate, 500%, from 1970 to 2020, as depicted in Figure 1 (Perry 2019). This expenditure and increased mass incarceration venture into what contemporary abolitionist group Critical Resistance, amongst others, call the “Prison Industrial Complex”: “overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems” (“What is the PIC? What is Abolition? – Critical Resistance”, n.d.). The Prison Industrial Complex is a socio-political mechanism that reinforces the racist and discriminatory origins of both the War on Drugs and the United States Constitution. Michelle Alexander rebrands the War on Drugs as “the New Jim Crow” (referencing “the segregation and disenfranchisement laws known as “Jim Crow”[, representing] a formal, codified system of racial apartheid that dominated the American South... beginning in the 1890s” (“Jim Crow Laws | American Experience | Official Site”, n.d.) and highlights these racist undertones in her book:

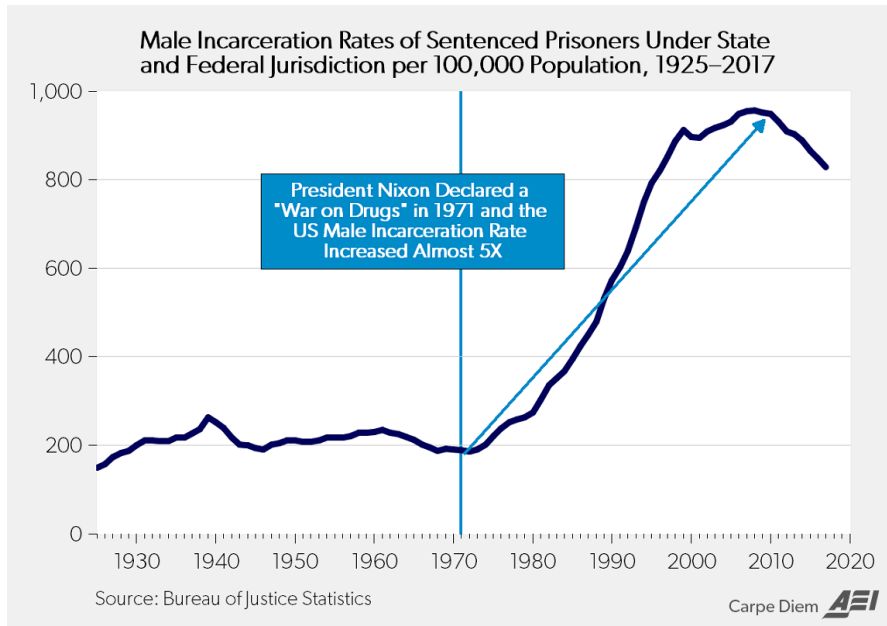
“There is no truth to the notion that the War on Drugs was launched in response to crack cocaine. President Ronald Reagan officially announced the current drug war in 1982, before crack became an issue in the media or a crisis in poor black neighborhoods. A few years after the drug war was declared, crack... later emerged in cities across the country. The Reagan administration hired staff to publicize the emergence of crack cocaine in 1985 as part of a strategic effort to build public and legislative support for the war. The media campaign was an extraordinary success... The timing of the crack crisis helped to fuel conspiracy theories and general speculation in poor black communities that the War on Drugs was part of a genocidal plan by the government to destroy black people in the United States” (Alexander 2010, 3).

This ‘genocide’ that Alexander describes is still statistically accurate: From 2007 to 2019 data from the US National Center for Health Statistics revealed that “cocaine/opioid mortality increased 575% among Black people versus 184% in White people” (Townsend et al. 2022).

The War on Drugs was thus successful in implementing racist policing in the United States. It gained institutional momentum, along with other outdated policies like the Monroe Doctrine-era and McCarthyist foreign policy tactics, which subsequently proliferated in Latin America in the late twentieth century. Between 1950 and 2000, the United States backed dozens of military operations in Central and South American countries “in situations of military conflict or potential conflict or for other than normal peacetime... [not including] covert operations, domestic disaster relief, and routine alliance stationing and training exercises purposes,” (“Instances of Use of Armed Forces Abroad, 1798-2023” 2023). Most of these military interventions were focused on counter-narcotics initiatives and preventing drug use internally. Many Latin American countries, upon either self-adaptation or American military-assisted adaptation of American-modeled drug policies, also witnessed a significant increase in incarceration rates in in the late twentieth century (and continues to increase exponentially) following the declaration of the War on Drugs, as the United States did, as depicted in Figure 2 (Nunovero 2019). In the following case study analysis, I will examine a few manifestations of

these effects, such as in violence in drug cartels in the Andean Region–Colombia, Bolivia and Perú– México and Honduras and Guatemala.

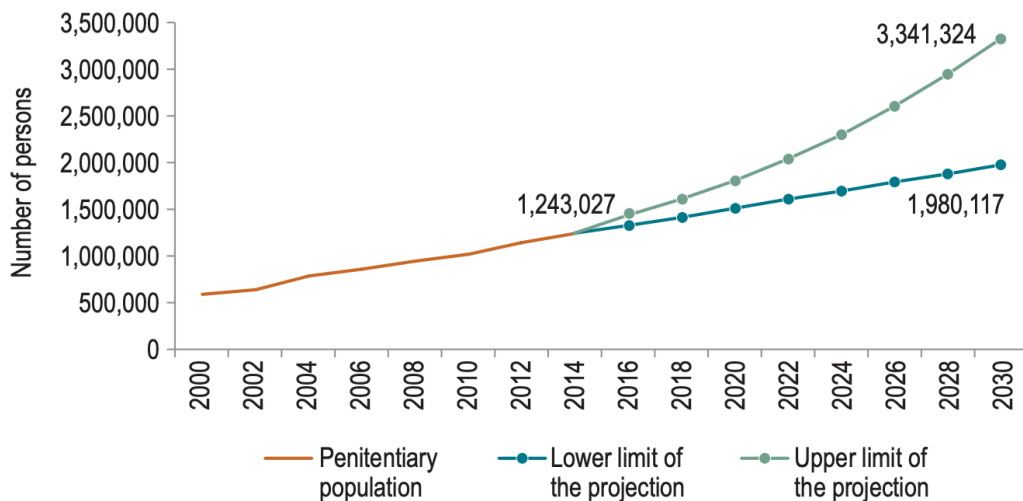
**Figure 1**



(Perry 2019)

**Figure 2**

**Figure 7.30 Projected Growth of the Prison Population in Latin America and the Caribbean**



(Eguizábal et al. 2015)

Nixon's War on Drug campaign tactics, while preceding the crack cocaine epidemic, still maintained domestic civil status throughout the end of the epidemic and the subsequent Reagan

Administration. Even throughout the painkiller and opioid epidemic of the 2000s, it only began to be politically reconsidered at the legislative level more recently. In the past thirty years, drug decriminalization in certain parts of the United States and other countries, including an increasing amount in Latin America, has led to lower incarceration rates (Hughes 2010) and higher economic stimulation and tax revenue (Biltucci 2022); approximately USD\$100 billion were projected in 1990 to be earned annually solely upon recreational marijuana legalization (Dennis 1990). Additionally, “higher medical and recreational storefront dispensary counts are associated with reduced opioid related death rates” (Hsu and Kovács 2020). So, if drug criminalization and War on Drugs policy is statistically unsuccessful, and decriminalization and/or legalization is economically and socially favorable, why has it not been universally adopted, either domestically or abroad? I will analyze specific examples of social, political and economic fallout in the decades following implementation and interventionist drug policy in Latin America, and provide policy reform suggestions in the following sections of this paper.

### **Latin American Case Studies: Examining Specific Instances of American Drug Policy Impact**

This paper examines the following cases of United States Military-assisted implementations of War on Drugs policy in Latin America: The Andean Initiative in Colombia, Bolivia and Perú, the Mérida Initiative in México and McCarthyist-inspired contra wars in Honduras and Guatemala. While each of these countries is unique, they have faced similar negative and expensive effects from American-backed drug enforcement interventions. I conduct a comparative analysis of individual social, political and economic consequences for each of these sovereignties. A comparative analysis of individual social, political and economic institutional consequences, such as political turmoil and staggering drug-inspired violence within these sovereignties, emphasizes the unfortunate and expensive implications which the War on Drugs has perpetuated in the region and prompts urgent social, political and economic change.

#### **The Andean Region: The Andean Initiative and Plan Colombia in Colombia, Bolivia and Perú**

In 1989, American President George H.W. Bush “announced that military and law enforcement assistance would be sent to help the Andean nations of Colombia, Bolivia, and Perú combat illicit drug producers and traffickers... [Within two weeks,] there were 50-100 U.S. military advisers in Colombia in connection with transport and training in the use of military equipment, plus seven Special Forces teams of 2-12 persons to train troops in the three countries” (“Instances of Use of Armed Forces Abroad, 1798-2023” 2023); the Andean Initiative, as it was, came to be one of the first widespread implementation of the War on Drugs in Latin America. Over a period of five years, USD\$2.2 billion were spent in the three countries—“contingent on their acceptance of military aid”—on military, infrastructure and counter-narcotics intelligence (Gamarra 1990). Under the Andean Initiative, “smaller [drug trafficking organizations] surfaced and insurgents became involved in drug trafficking” (Vorobyeva, 2015, p. 51) and the amount of coca and poppy (the plant component of opium) under cultivation and production significantly increased (Isacson and Vaicius 2003). This was shortly followed by Plan Colombia in 1999, inaugurated under then-Colombian President Andrés Pastrana in collaboration with the Clinton Administration, which served “purposes of drug interdiction and democracy development in Colombia”, and resulted in increased militarization, and continued into the second Bush Administration (Vorobyeva 2015, 53). Following the

domestic terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, Plan Colombia's strategy was further shifted from counter-drug *aid* efforts to “narco-guerrilla” and “narco-terrorism” efforts (Vorobyeva 2015, 54). This policy shift may be observed throughout the rest of the United States Military-assisted implementations of War on Drugs policy in Latin America I review, in addition to the instances I do not include.

At the same time, Communist guerilla rebel forces, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, ruled the country's rural politics, infrastructure and majority of cocaine manufacturing and production, transforming the country into a ‘Narcos State’ (Raisbeck and Vásquez 2022). Part of the economic aid provided in Plan Colombia was towards combating FARC and disincentivizing political corruption relating to the group, though most often manifested in counter-narcotics operatives. Often, in collaboration with partnering with violent, authoritative paramilitary organizations—by whom over five thousand people were murdered or went missing between 1984 and 2016 (Griffin 2022)—American Military fumigated toxic chemicals, including glyphosate, onto agricultural communities, as a form of bio-force (Acosta and Griffin 2020). This practice was discontinued in Colombia in 2015, and later introduced in 2020 under the Trump Administration, though Daniel Raisbeck and Ian Vásquez opine that a more cost-effective approach of contaminant paramilitary fumigation in often-indigenous communities would be “if the federal government simply bought each kilo from the narco-traffickers outright”; the retail price of cocaine is actually less than the cost of glyphosate (Raisbeck and Vásquez 2022). Fernando Esquivel-Suárez even goes further with this rhetoric to opine that “the cocaine trade does not appear as a force against — or even parallel — to the capitalist system but an integral part of it”—the very economic system used in the United States and much of the Western world (Esquivel-Suárez 2018). In turn, after being forced from their farms in Colombia, many of the coca producers moved to Perú to continue production (Raisbeck and Vásquez 2022). The FARC reached a peace agreement with the Colombian Government in 2016, yet more American troops were deployed to Colombia to “fight against drug trafficking” as recently as 2020 (US Embassy Bogotá 2020). Though total violence and crime levels in Colombia have decreased since the disbandment of FARC, this recent militarization and paramilitarization since 2008 has indeed produced a significant increase in murder rates and violence in rural Colombia, including torture, massacres, and dismemberment (Esquivel-Suárez 2018).

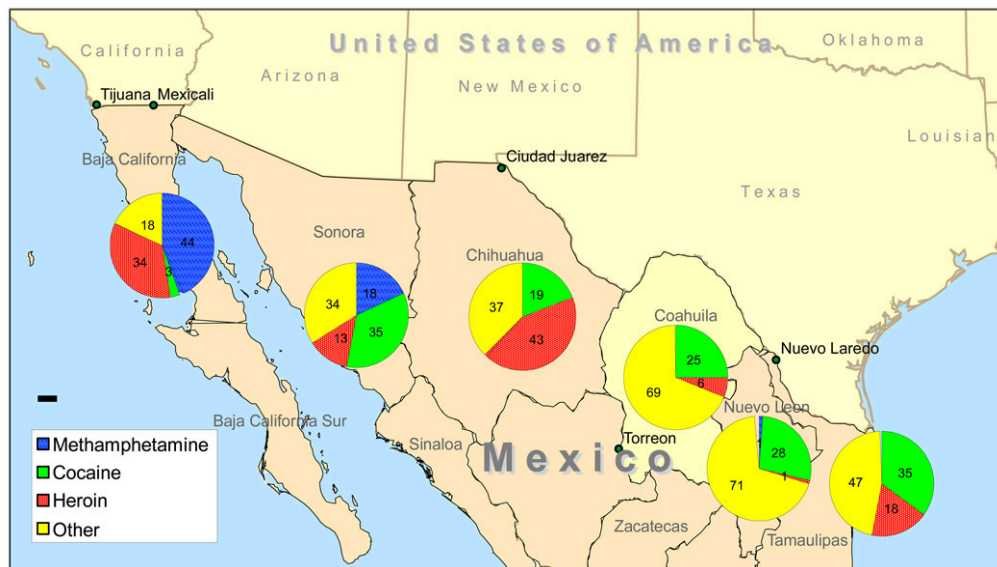
### **México: The Mérida Initiative, Drug Cartels and State Violence**

México's geographic and political situation in North America is unique in that it is an ally to neighboring superpower United States, who led the War on Drugs, and lies between the United States and the rest of Central and Latin America, and also that its narcotics usage is distinctive from the rest of Latin American countries. In 2009, the majority of incarceration rates and drug-based violence that came from México were cocaine or heroin-related, and over two thirds—“an estimated 70%—of U.S. cocaine originating in South America passes through the Central America-Mexico corridor” (Brouwer et al. 2009). The majority of drug user treatment admissions by primary drug used in Mexican states bordering the United States are for drugs in the “other category [including] marijuana, inhalants, alcohol, tobacco, and a variety of veterinary products”, as seen in Figure 3 (Brouwer et al. 2009). Most of México's drug-based violence and incarceration rates, though, have stemmed from cocaine or heroin production and narco-trafficking (Brouwer et al. 2009). The Mérida Initiative, implemented and signed under the most

recent Bush Administration and then-Mexican President Felipe Calderón, in 2007, is also the most recent instance of United States-led interventionist drug policy in México. The initiative resulted in an over USD\$3 billion program expenditure (Vorobyeva and Berg 2021) and increased anti-American sentiment including manifestations of violence, like an attack on the United States Consulate in Juárez in 2010 (“Assessing The Merida Initiative: A Report From The Government Accountability Office (GAO)” 2010). Though “increasing drug law enforcement is unlikely to reduce drug market violence” (Werb et al. 2011), the United States State Department has invested in, beyond just the Mérida Initiative, decades of militarized drug law enforcement via foreign policy and strategy, troops abroad and counternarcotics infrastructure in México and other Latin American countries (Breuer, Hoover, and Placido 2009). Additionally, as the Department of Justice notes: many of these “investigations and prosecutions, [pursued by the Department of Homeland Security,] related to the trafficking of guns and the smuggling of cash and contraband for drug-making facilities from the United States into Mexico. Much of the violence and corruption in Mexico is fueled by these resources that come from our side of the border” (Breuer, Hoover, and Placido 2009). This may be catalyzed by the fact that México is the United States’ second-largest trading partner (“Mexico Country Profile for 2003: Drug Intelligence Report” 2003). This phenomenon is not endogenous to the Mérida Initiative, either: Colombian and Mexican drug trafficking organizations are currently estimated to send up to \$39 billion annually from the interior of the United States, with “billions of U.S. dollars [being] sent back to Mexico” (Perkins and Placido 2010).

**Figure 3**

Map of drug user treatment admissions in Mexican states bordering the U.S (2009)



\*“other category [including] marijuana, inhalants, alcohol, tobacco, and a variety of veterinary products”  
(Brouwer et al. 2009)

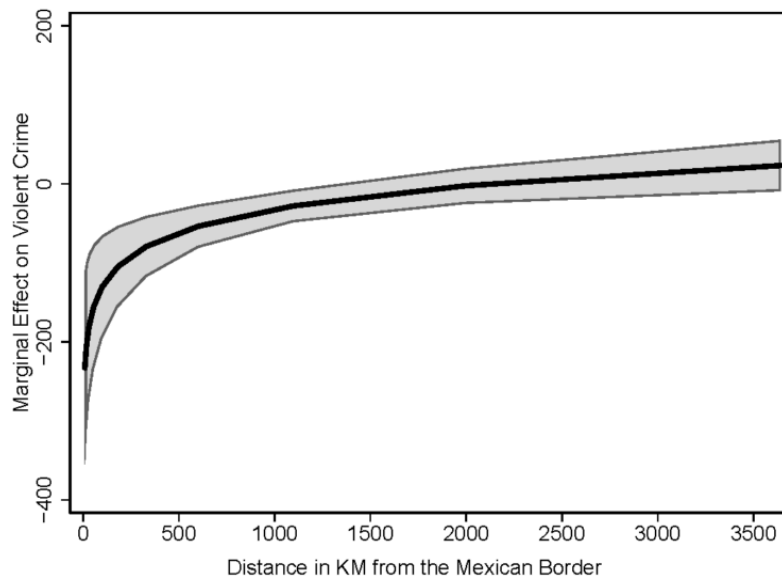
Opioids, for the most part, have not been misused in México to the extent that they have in the United States—less than 1% of respondents from a national survey in 2017 reported misuse



(“Encuesta Nacional de Consumo de Drogas, Alcohol y Tabaco, ENCODAT 2016-2017” 2017). When considering decriminalization domestically, then, México would be an appropriate candidate to consider alongside other countries who have done so where opioid usage is not as inherent as it is domestically (with the exception of heroin). In fact, México’s decriminalization of recreational cannabis in 2021 was followed by reduced cannabis seizure rates and reduced incarceration rates (Hughes 2010)—meaning lower profits for illegal drug cartels—and increased economic stimulation and tax revenue (Biltucci 2022). México was only the third country in the world to decriminalize recreational cannabis, after Uruguay and Canada, which have also experienced these effects at the national level (Felbab-Brown 2021). As more countries decriminalize and/or legalize at the national level, these positive effects are projected to increase in those respective countries, similar to at the state level in the United States, like in Colorado (Felbab-Brown 2021 (2)). Because of the lower opioid usage rates in México, criminalization alternatives, such as rehabilitation programs, would not have to consider relapse or fatality rates so seriously, for example when dealing with less-addictive marijuana or cocaine (Arendt, Munk-Jørgensen, and Jensen 2011; Lindsay et al. 2013). México has, however, also seen a significant increase in violence in the past two decades due to cartel crime and narco-corruption: over ten thousand cartel-directed armed gunmen defended the United States-México border in 2012, and one single cartel group near the border had claimed more than 55 thousand lives in a five-year period (Díaz 2012). The number of Mexican cartels operating in American cities increased twenty-five-fold between 2006 and 2010 (McLaughlin 2012). In the years following cannabis legalization, however, these numbers are projected to decrease again—one study from 2019 demonstrated that “reduction in the profitability in the marijuana market results in a drop in drug-related violent crime”, as depicted in Figure 4 and Figure 5 (Gavrilova, Zoutman, and Kamada 2019).

**Figure 4**

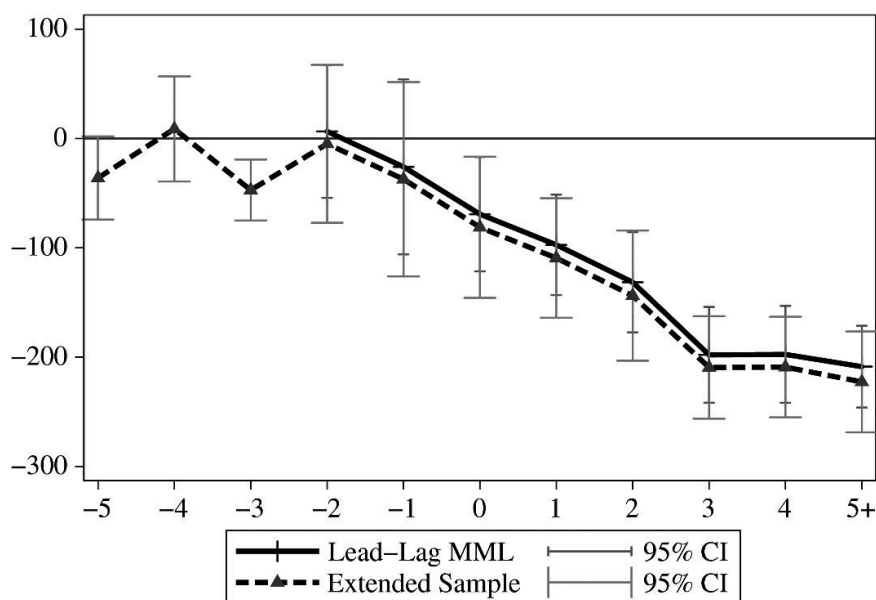
The Effect of Medical Marijuana Laws (MMLs) on Violent Crime by Distance from the Mexican Border



(Gavrilova, Zoutman, and Kamada 2019)

**Figure 5**

Lead Lag Analysis of Violent Crime and Medical Marijuana Laws (MMLs)



(Gavrilova, Zoutman, and Kamada 2019)

### **Honduras and Guatemala: McCarthyist Contras, Corruption and Proxy Wars**

The United States military was involved in Honduras and Guatemala over a dozen times in the twentieth century, and many of these instances included implementation of drug policy initiatives (“Instances of Use of Armed Forces Abroad, 1798-2023” 2023). Many of these instances did not have endogenous incentives, but instead were considered “in situations of military conflict or potential conflict or for other than normal peacetime... [not including] covert operations, domestic disaster relief, and routine alliance stationing and training exercises purposes” (“Instances of Use of Armed Forces Abroad, 1798-2023” 2023). Their repercussions were widespread and long-lasting; both Honduras and Guatemala are currently considered among the most dangerous countries in the world by NGO Human Rights Watch (“World Report 2024: Honduras” 2024; “World Report 2024: Guatemala” 2024). During the height of the Cold War and interventionist McCarthyist American military operations, the Reagan Administration took Nixon-era counter-narcotics policies abroad in response to perceived communist threats, in many cases, such as in Honduras and Guatemala. United States Military under the Reagan Administration conducted three official interventions and was accused of human rights violations by many during these interventions (“Instances of Use of Armed Forces Abroad, 1798-2023” 2023; Goldschein 2012).

The American Central Intelligence Agency (C.I.A.) intervened in a military coup in Guatemala in 1954, ousting democratically-elected Jacobo Árbenz, a feared communist, and instating Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas, who had previously established his rebel, or “Contra”, army with the help and money of American intelligence (“CIA-Contra-Crack Cocaine Controversy”, n.d.). Funding the Contras in Honduras and Guatemala in 1954 was what initially influenced the Reagan campaign to sell American arms to Iran, in an effort to collect to proceeds to be used towards right-wing Contras—many of whom were also involved in transnational

narcotics business—in support of revolutionary, anti-communist government in Nicaragua in 1986 and 1987 (“CIA-Contra-Crack Cocaine Controversy”, n.d.). This came to be known as the Iran-Contra Affair, which was followed by a significant spike in crack-cocaine in American cities, under the Reagan Administration, with widespread “allegations of the [American] government's complicity in cocaine deals within black communities” by way of the Contras—the same sequence that Michelle Alexander described in her book (“CIA-Contra-Crack Cocaine Controversy”, n.d.). The C.I.A. admitted to these military interventions during congressional hearings under the Reagan Administration, which led to further investigations of human rights violations during the operations, which were inconclusive (Esquivel-Suárez 2018). This series of American intervention and regime change in both of the neighboring Central American countries has undoubtedly led to regional instability which may also account for regional economic instability. However, even after the Contra Wars led to a civil war that left over 200,000 dead, Guatemala still turned to seek American Military assistance in continuation of fighting the drug war in 2012, a political move questioned and criticized by many (Goldschein 2012). The Guatemalan president at the time, Otto Perez Molina, had publicly considered “legalizing drugs... saying that the U.S.-backed the war on drugs had not diminished drug trafficking in the area... signed a treaty allowing the U.S. military to” intervene in the area again (Kelley 2012). More recently, in 2019, the brother of the president of Honduras, Juan Antonio Hernández, was found guilty of transnational narcotics trafficking (Malkin and Palmer 2019). In 2022, the Honduran president himself, Juan Orlando Hernández Alvarado, was arrested, extradited to the United States on drug-trafficking and firearms charges in 2022 (“Juan Orlando Hernandez, Former President Of Honduras, Extradited To The United States On Drug-Trafficking And Firearms Charges” 2022), went on trial and was found guilty of “drug trafficking conspiracy by a U.S. jury” in 2024 (Cohen 2024). These are only three examples among many more of evident corruption in the region, consequently following military intervention and counter-narcotics policy in the region. This all begs a unique question of whether Latin American countries experiencing fallout are economically self-sustainable, and, if they are not—if they continue to request American economic aid—should such aid be reprioritized from military and counter-narcotics expenditure to something else? I consider one solution to this question in my policy suggestion: holistic investment in education and rehabilitation programs, including prison reform.

### **Literature Review**

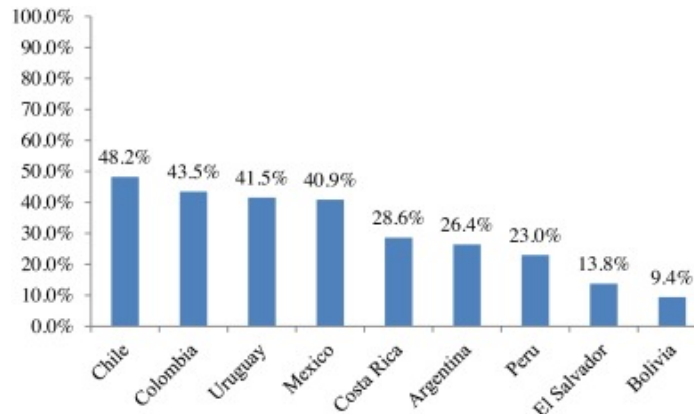
To use relevant, quantifiable evidence to corroborate the thesis and expand on the existing information I have provided, I will analyze two comparative documents that discuss the effects of drug policy in Latin America. Both documents suggest United States drug policy failure in Latin America. *Attitudes towards drug policies in Latin America: Results from a Latin-American Survey*, by Andrés Mendiburo-Seguel et. al. is secondary scientific research surrounding Latin American public opinion on Latin American drug policies. The data is drawn from The 2014 Annual Survey of the Observatory of Drug Policies and Public Opinion and other secondary sources. *The United States War on Drugs in Latin America: What is the Method to the Madness?*, by Kendall Parker, is an academic, analytical timeline of American drug policy and intervention in Latin America. Parker proposes the paradigm of American hegemonic maintenance *in addition to* counter-narcotics initiatives in Latin America (Parker 2018). Both of these academic publications respectively highlight the rejection of “traditional prohibitionist paradigm of drug policy” and “its failure to reduce either consumption or trafficking

(Mendiburo-Seguel et. al. 2017). The publications also consider the detrimental effects regarding drug policy in Latin America that have stemmed from American intervention policy and emerging policy reform suggestions and trends.

Mendiburo-Seguel et. al. take data from a Latin American survey on drug policy attitudes and compile the data from nine Latin American countries and organize it into three perspectives: most conservative countries on drug policy and perceptions of risks of cannabis use; middle ground between these extremes; and more likely to support drug policy reform (Mendiburo-Seguel et. al. 2017). The countries considered in the survey, México, Colombia, Perú, Bolivia, Uruguay, Chile, Argentina, Costa Rica and El Salvador, are organized as follows: “Peru, Bolivia and El Salvador are the most conservative countries on drug policy and perceptions of risks of cannabis use... Chile and Uruguay are more likely to support drug policy reform... [and] Argentina, Colombia, Mexico and [Costa Rica] tend to occupy the middle ground between these extremes” (Mendiburo-Seguel et. al. 2017). Data from this survey are depicted, along with population and incarceration statistics in each of these respective countries, in Figure 11. This study is relevant to a greater analysis of American War on Drugs policy in Latin America because it provides a basis of need for reform in many of these countries in addition to evidence that, in some cases, reform is already underway. Andrés Mendiburo-Seguel et. al. note that “since 2000 there have been signs of a progressive shift away from this negative view of cannabis, and from the view that prohibition and tough enforcement is the solution to trafficking and consumption” (Mendiburo-Seguel et. al. 2017). Mendiburo-Seguel et. al. make the suggestion that “there is a significant heterogeneity in attitudes towards drug policies in Latin American countries, which suggests that people are questioning the policies that set the norm in Latin America without achieving any consensus regarding future measures for each country” (Mendiburo-Seguel, Andrés et. al. 2017). This may imply, then, that, if these Latin American countries with this attitude heterogeneity act on policy reform and lean toward decriminalization and/or legalization, the aforementioned effects, amongst others, of decriminalization and/or legalization, may also start to increase in these countries. This heterogeneous attitude is depicted in Figure 6. They conclude the publication of the survey with a commentary considering the relationship between public opinion and policy reform, though beyond the scope of their research: “in all probability there is likely to be a dynamic interaction between the two” (Mendiburo-Seguel, Andrés et. al. 2017).

### **Figure 6**

“Percentage of respondents “agreeing” or “strongly agreeing” with the statement “Cannabis should be legal””



(Mendiburo-Seguel et. al. 2017)

Mendiburo-Seguel et. al. also make note of the fact that Bolivia, El Salvador and Perú, the countries considered to have the most “conservative” drug policies out of the surveyed countries, also have the lowest HDI indexes (Andrés Mendiburo-Seguel et. al. 2017). Though not established by Mendiburo-Seguel et. al., this perhaps constitutes a relationship to be extrapolated between American interventionism in these countries, and these subsequent, consistent low rankings.

Kendall Parker suggests that American military intervention, specifically in Latin America throughout the War on Drugs, is a manifestation of hegemonic maintenance *in addition to* counter-narcotics initiatives in her publication, *The United States War on Drugs in Latin America: What is the Method to the Madness?*. In a comprehensive, chronological analysis of various American anti-drug initiatives in Latin America, she suggests three respective original hypotheses: bureaucratic inertia has driven the continuation of a supply-side focus of the war on drugs; voter preference influences policy decisions regarding anti-drug laws; and U.S. supply-side policies in Latin America have been continued as a mechanism through which to maintain regional hegemony, as well as attempting to curb the supply of illicit drugs (Parker 2018). Parker defines bureaucratic inertia as “the school of thought that possesses the most explanatory power, at least for the majority of the time since the start of the drug war”, and hegemony, for the purpose of highlighting her first hypothesis, “as a leading or dominant role in maintaining international order” (Parker 2018). Regarding bureaucratic inertia, she opines that it “can be a negative side effect of an illicit drug problem. Perhaps, recent changes in some United States state laws concerning the legalization of marijuana could provide a way to disrupt the inertial nature of the federal drug control strategy based on prohibition” (Parker 2018).

Parker then implies, in her second hypothesis, that public opinion may impact policy, and that policy may impact public opinion, specifically regarding drug policies, and specifically pertaining to instances of domestic (United States) politics and public opinion. In this theory avenue, which Mendiburo-Seguel et. al. did not further explore, Parker finds that “voter preference influences anti-drug policy decisions” (Parker 2018). The third and final hypothesis from the publication is that War on Drugs initiatives in Latin America originated from political interests *in addition to* counter-narcotics initiatives. Thus, the two hypotheses about hegemonic maintenance and bureaucratic inertia are essentially linear. In order to disrupt bureaucratic inertia, decriminalization and/or legalization may be considered. If bureaucratic inertia is disrupted, hegemonic status may be endangered. Parker discusses Plan Colombia, the Mérida

Initiative and “possibly” the Andean Initiative as distinctive manifestations of hegemonic endeavors in the War on Drugs in Latin America, stating that “the cases of Mexico and Colombia support hegemonic status as a partial motivating factor in United States foreign counter-drug policies. However, the case of Peru is inconclusive” (Parker 2018). External evidence to support Parker’s third hypothesis, which is not cited in the publication, can be found at the federal legislative level. In 2018, members of both American Congress chambers essentially supported this hypothesis, suggesting in respective foreign operations bills that: “the magnitude of the reductions proposed for United States diplomatic and development operations and programs... would be counterproductive to the economic and security interests of the nation and would undermine our relationships with key partners and allies”; and that “proposed reduction to the International Affairs budget... reinforces the perception that the United States is retreating from its preeminent role as the world's superpower” (Rogers 2018, Graham 2018). Both of these statements, in effect, support Parker’s hypothesis of the United States’s prioritization of hegemonic status. Instead of prioritizing reconsideration of investment in foreign aid, to Latin America or otherwise, the issue that United States Congress seemed to be most concerned with in these hearings was political order. To redress the question of whether economic self-sustainability in Latin American countries is likely—with the help of American support—aid reprioritization from military and counter-narcotics expenditure to something else must first be addressed and seriously considered.

Both Mendiburo-Seguel et. al. and Parker’s publications provide sufficient evidence and significant statistics of need-based drug reform in Latin America, though with different observations and bases for reform. Where Mendiburo-Seguel et. al. highlight attitudes about drug policies throughout a representative population of Latin America, Parker suggests that these changing attitudes may shape policy change and reform. Mendiburo-Seguel et. al. do not explicitly suggest reform, as they maintain that more research should be conducted within the scope of evidence-based policy reform regarding drug policy. Parker, in her conclusion, cites that “annual incremental bureaucratic budgeting... for drug control policies [is] continuously funded without major assessment of their effectiveness”; Parker also does not provide an explicit policy recommendation, instead implying that this methodology is outdated, and recommending that “further research should be conducted to determine how to keep ineffective counterdrug policies from becoming so easily entrenched in the bureaucratic process” (Parker 2018). In the following sections, data analysis and policy suggestion, I will illustrate and draw relevance to some of this existing evidence that may disrupt the “ingrained in the national policymaking process” bureaucratic inertia that Parker condemns (Parker 2018).

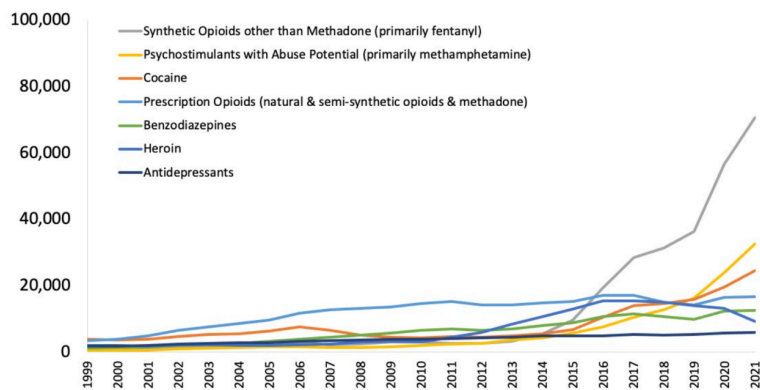
### **Data Analysis: Drug-Based Crime and Violence, Incarceration Rates and Anti-Narcotics Expenditure in Latin America**

Additional evidence of the economic and social effects of American policy failure in Latin America can be found in demographic data, such as drug deaths, drug economy, crime and violence rates, incarceration rates and policy approaches throughout Latin America. Each country that Andrés Mendiburo-Seguel et. al. analyzed in the literature review—Mexico, Colombia, Perú, Bolivia, Uruguay, Chile, Argentina, Costa Rica and El Salvador—may have varying statistics in each of these metrics, so finding similarities in outcomes is worth examining for the purpose of supporting the thesis. As stated in the introduction and depicted in Figure 2, Latin America is still experiencing exponential growth in both crime and incarceration rates,

many of them due to drug-related charges (Eguizábal et al. 2015, Eguizábal et al. 2015). In an opinion-based survey study conducted by the Peruvian government in 2010, criminalization and “preventative activity” regarding drugs was not found to reduce drug use, either; the published survey findings depict that “increment in preventative activity and of the results or preventative actions, like we have seen, has not been effective in the reduction of illegal substance consumption, above all marijuana, PBC and cocaine” (“Informe Ejecutivo Encuesta Nacional sobre Consumo de Drogas en la Población General del Perú 2010” 2012). Actual drug-related deaths—most notably due to opioids—have also increased since the War on Drugs began, as seen in in Figure 7, but public opinion regarding both drug usage and drug policy continue to evolve, as demonstrated in the literature review and data from national surveys (“National Drug-Involved Overdose Deaths by Specific Category—Number Among All Ages, 1999-2021.” 2021, Mendiburo-Seguel, Andrés et al. 2017).

**Figure 7**

**Figure 2. National Drug-Involved Overdose Deaths\*, Number Among All Ages, 1999-2021**



\*Includes deaths with underlying causes of unintentional drug poisoning (X40-X44), suicide drug poisoning (X60-X64), homicide drug poisoning (X85), or drug poisoning of undetermined intent (Y10-Y14), as coded in the International Classification of Diseases, 10th Revision. Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Multiple Cause of Death 1999-2021 on CDC WONDER Online Database, released 1/2023.

(CDC Wonder 2021)

Domestically, during the Obama administration, new foreign policy and counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism initiatives were enacted, such as the Central America Regional Security Initiative, or CARSI, and the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative, or CBSI. Both initiatives are still active, managed by U.S.A.I.D., and regionally-focused, where CARSI, launched in 2008, prioritizes Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama, and CBSI, launched in 2010, partners with Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, Barbados, Dominica, the Dominican Republic, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Saint Lucia, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago. CARSI had spent over USD\$500 million in taxpayer money within the first three years of implementation, and CBSI has spent more than USD\$832 million to date (“The Central America Regional Security Initiative:” 2011, “Caribbean Basin Security Initiative - United States Department of State” 2022). In fiscal year 2022 (under the current Biden administration), over USD\$2.1 billion were spent in total foreign aid to Latin America in 2022, from U.S.A.I.D. and the Department of State

(foreignassistance.gov). Almost USD\$246 million of this expenditure was spent on military. Colombia, México and Perú were among the top countries receiving United States aid (Haines 2024): Colombia received USD\$680 million, with USD\$41.5 million of this on military, and \$41.1 million on counter-narcotics; México received USD\$230 million, with USD\$1.3 million of this on military, and USD\$4.7 million on counter-narcotics; and Perú received USD\$250 million, with USD\$6.8 million of this on military, and USD\$12.5 million on counter-narcotics. So, if considering the current state of elevated crime, lack of funding in prisons and alternatives to military or counter-narcotics initiatives in many of these countries, these initiatives may be considered failures, when accounting for the elapsed time and expenditure after implementation (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Victims of intentional homicide, 1990-2022, (n.d.). The Wilson Center concludes, in their extensive 2015 report on United States policy response to crime and violence in Central America, about these and other Latin American counter-narcotics initiatives, that they are “simply a series of initiatives and programs with funding but not an effective strategy... By focusing too narrowly on counter-narcotics, the United States and host countries become bogged down in a traditional approach to drug law enforcement that prioritizes arrests over community based approaches to reducing crime and violence” (Eguizábal et al. 2015). When considering policy reform, then, and the aforementioned question of whether economic self-sustainability in Latin American countries is likely, with or without the help of American support, these metrics indicate that these billions of dollars in annual aid should and can be reprioritized. In the next paragraph, I will demonstrate the urge for either reprioritized investment in prison systems in Latin America, or the need for decrease in total incarceration rates.

Crime in Latin America, often related to drug use and/or drug cartels or gangs, has also increased since the declaration of the War on Drugs (Eguizábal et al. 2015). When drugs are criminalized, drug cartels often end up making more money from illegal trafficking, as well as gaining social and often political control in a region (Biltucci 2022, Loewenstein 2019). In Latin America, total prison population has increased exponentially—with a 76% increase from 2010 to 2020, though total population has only increased by 10% in the same time (Nicas 2024). Today, over ten percent of the world’s prisoners live in Latin America—over 1.3 million people (Brookings Institute). A large portion of people incarcerated in this period were detained due to non-violent drug offenses (Scartascini 2020). The majority of these prisons are overcrowded—as depicted in Figure 8—and underfunded, and ones with higher gang member density are often violent and gang-controlled (World Prison Brief 2024, Nicas 2024).

### **Figure 8**



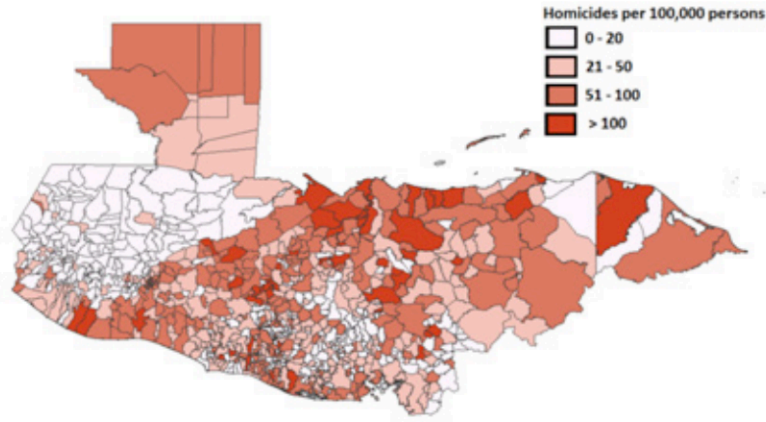


(World Prison Brief 2024)

Recent crime and violence increase in Latin America has, in turn, arguably catalyzed a portion of this increase in mass incarceration, for example most recently in Ecuador and El Salvador (Nicas 2024). Both Latin American countries, in recent, national counter-narcotics initiatives in an effort to lower these rates, have arrested hundreds of thousands in the past year, through both national officials and often-violent private paramilitaries, adding to their already-overwhelmed prison systems (Nicas 2024). Like in Colombia, these paramilitaries allegedly have accounted for thousands of disappearances, human rights violations and likely arrests of innocent people (Nicas 2024). As a publication from Global South Studies writes about paramilitaries and the War on Drugs, “the WoD finances paramilitary structures whose purpose is to disenfranchise workers and communities to foster a favorable environment for the investment of capital... the outcomes of these anti-drug policies are measured in the violence that makes possible low-cost labor and emptied lands for extracting industries” (Esquivel-Suárez 2018). This dichotomy may explain the two percent of Salvadorans are incarcerated, the highest proportion of any country in the world, according to the World Prison Brief, in addition to the homicide rates in the region are also higher than anywhere else in the world, as seen in Figure 9 and Figure 10 (Eguizábal et al. 2015). In many of the countries, in Latin America or elsewhere, that have decriminalized and/or legalized drugs, incarceration rates, drug deaths and counter-narcotics expenditures have decreased (Youngers and Correa 2015, Joshi et al. 2023). Though Colombia issued an official emergency due to prison violence in 2024, total national crime rates have decreased significantly—as México’s are predicted to, as previously stated—since both medical marijuana legalization and the disbandment of FARC (Nicas 2024, Muggah and Aguirre 2017).

**Figure 9**

**Figure 2:** Homicide Rates in Northern Triangle Countries (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador), 2013

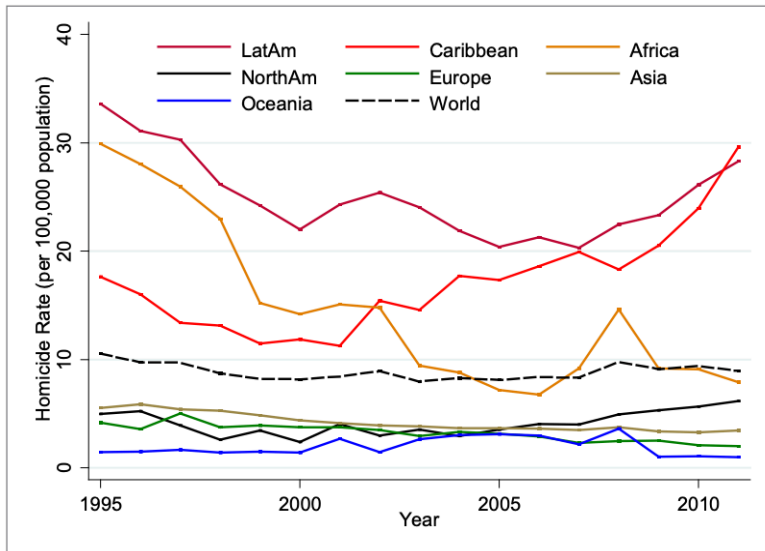


Source: Created by Carlos Mendoza and team, with data from Policia Nacional Civil (PNC), Guatemala; Policia Nacional, Honduras; and Fiscalia General de la Republica (FGR) and Policia Nacional Civil (PNC), El Salvador.

(Eguizábal et al. 2015)

**Figure 10**

**Figure 1:** Homicide Rates Across World Regions, 1995-2011



Source: UNODC

(Eguizábal et al. 2015)

The social, economic and political implications of the American War on Drugs in Latin America are undeniable. In the next and final section of this paper, I will review and suggest policy alternatives and reform to the current military and anti-narcotics prioritization of the American War on Drugs, both domestically and in Latin America, to help end the costly, ineffective War on Drugs.

**Figure 11**  
**Cross-Tabulation Data Analysis: Attitudes towards drug policies in Latin America (2017)**

Country	Policy Approach			Population (World Bank)	People incarcerated (World Prison Brief)	Incarcerated Percentage of Population	Drug-related deaths: Rate per million aged 15-64 (2016 or later) (UNODC)
	most conservative countries on drug policy and perceptions of risks of cannabis use	middle ground between these extremes	more likely to support drug policy reform				
<b>México</b>	perspective based on harm reduction and on the need for liberalization of cannabis legislation			122.8 million	207,928	.16%	6.06
<b>Colombia</b>	Drug possession is a criminal offense			48.35 million	118,523	.24%	No data
<b>Perú</b>	Statute that specifies volume thresholds below which possession of a single type of drug is decriminalised			31.61 million	83,820	.26%	2.18
<b>Bolivia</b>	Drug possession is a criminal offense			11.44 million	17,203	.15%	No data
<b>Uruguay</b>	Legalised cultivation, distribution and use of cannabis, accompanied by a firm – but only partially implemented – regime of state regulation			3.422 million	10,400	.3%	119.93
<b>Chile</b>	legalised cultivation, distribution and use of cannabis, accompanied by a firm – but only partially implemented – regime of state regulation			18.37 million	42,000	.22%	No data
<b>Argentina</b>	relevant legislation was declared unconstitutional in 2009			44.04 million	90,000	.2%	10.31
<b>Costa Rica</b>	decriminalised possession for personal use of small amounts of cannabis			4.994 million	18,809	.37%	6.80
<b>El Salvador</b>	Drug possession is a criminal offense			6.267 million	<a href="#">25,849 convicted inmates and 12,851 inmates in pretrial detention</a> (State Department)	.61%	No data

## **Policy Suggestion: Recommendations for Reforming American Drug Policies and Subsequent Implementation Abroad**

Acknowledgment of the many violent and expensive repercussions of the American War on Drugs in Latin America highlighted throughout this paper, such as political unrest and civil instability, is necessary to appropriately suggest policy reform. Indicators of urgency of policy reconsideration and/or reform are as follows: **evidence of poor implementation and prioritization in existing policies and their repercussions, evolving public opinion, trends of American foreign aid to the region, and, finally, successful models and avenues of reform that may be considered and implemented in the region.** As the Wilson Center asserts, existing American drug policies in Latin America “have, with a few exceptions, lacked adequate evaluations. Current evaluations tend to focus on measuring inputs... and not on the impact and outcome of the project” (Eguizábal et al. 2015). Latin America should consider successful global models, then, of counter-narcotics policy reform, in order to reduce the crime, violence and incarceration rates that have resulted from these outdated existing policies. To revisit the question of whether economic self-sustainability in Latin American countries is likely, regardless of American support, policy consideration that contradicts existing policy and status quo must be considered.

As already examined in further detail in this paper, the American War on Drugs in Latin America has increased drug deaths, mass incarceration rates and counter-narcotics and military expenditure in the region. While noted, though beyond the scope of this paper, increasing general sentiment of anti-Americanism in Latin America that followed American imperialistic trends in the region has also harmed independent Latin American economies, by factors such as trade embargos with the United States (de Galíndez 1995). Finally, the significant expenditure of USD\$2.1 billion spent in total foreign aid to Latin America in 2022 and three of the IMF’s biggest debtor countries being Latin American indicates economic necessity in the region, regardless of whether it comes from the United States. I recommend divestment in counter-narcotics initiatives, including military-assisted operations, and holistic investment in educational and rehabilitation programs, including prison reform. If American foreign aid continues into Latin America, I suggest that expenditure in these programs be prioritized before military and counter-narcotics initiatives, due to vast evidence that supports both the harm and failure of military and counter-narcotics initiatives.

Like I have stated in multiple instances throughout this paper, countries and states within the United States which have decriminalized and/or legalized recreational marijuana have experienced reduced seizure rates and reduced incarceration rates (Hughes 2010)—meaning lower profits for illegal drug cartels—and increased economic stimulation and tax revenue (Biltucci 2022). Because public perception of recreational marijuana continues to evolve (Geiger 2016) and it is typically not perceived as such a dangerous drug as it once was (Felson, Adamczyk, and Thomas 2018), it has been the most commonly decriminalized and/or legalized drug worldwide (Eastwood, Fox, and Rosmarin 2016). In pre-decriminalization México, marijuana was the most commonly used drug, and a national government survey from 2016 recommended evidence-based successful policy reform, including a “re evaluation of risk perception”, which ultimately led to decriminalization in 2021 (“Encuesta Nacional de Consumo de Drogas, Alcohol y Tabaco, ENCODAT 2016-2017” 2017). Marijuana is also the most commonly used drug worldwide, which prompts a reasonable basis for its decriminalization and/or legalization,

especially when considering the aforementioned economic stimulation opportunities decriminalization and/or legalization often bring to countries—developed and developing alike (“World Drug Report 2010” 2010). Portugal decriminalized all drugs, including cocaine and heroin, in 2001, drug-usage rates in Portugal are consistent with many other European states that have maintained a more severe approach, and in some cases, its usage rates have dropped (Raisbeck and Vásquez 2022). Instead of incarceration upon discovery of possession or use of drugs, individuals in Portugal are assessed by a Portuguese Commission for the Dissuasion of Drug Addiction (“International models” 2023). The director of the commission, João Castel-Branco Goulão, said of the implementation in Portugal: “If you decriminalize and do nothing else, things will get worse. The most important part was making treatment available to everybody who needed it for free. This was our first goal” (“International models” 2023). The Netherlands demonstrates another successful model of decriminalization and subsequent implementation, where heroin users and addicts are treated in rehabilitation centers before being imprisoned, which has resulted in a decrease in national heroin addiction registry and lower HIV rates in drug users nationally (Chand 2007). Failure to prepare and materialize ‘back-up’ alternatives, then, after decriminalization and/or legalization thus pose a significant additional threshold before implementation of an alternative program to drug criminalization. So, when considering total or near-total decriminalization and/or legalization of recreational drugs, countries like Portugal and The Netherlands are often cited as models for successful decriminalization.’

Experts advise, as the Portuguese model follows, that drug decriminalization and/or legalization models, in response to narco-crime, should emphasize community and human rights, rather than criminalization (Eguizábal et al. 2015). One manifestation of community support would be investment in non-invasive children and youth services like public education or youth drug prevention programs. Another is agricultural support and environmental protection; as Global South Studies asserted that “the WoD finances paramilitary structures whose purpose is to disenfranchise workers and communities to foster a favorable environment for the investment of capital... the outcomes of these anti-drug policies are measured in the violence that makes possible low-cost labor and emptied lands for extracting industries” (Esquivel-Suárez 2018), one counter to this in a larger context of War on Drugs policy reform would be to invest in environmental sustainability efforts and independent agricultural entrepreneurship. The current Biden Administration has contributed to an instance of this recently in Colombia, where foreign aid priority in counter-narcotics initiatives has shifted to environmental protection and community development by “expanding access to evidence-based prevention, treatment, harm reduction, and recovery support services”, *in addition to* reducing the supply of illicit drugs (“The White House Releases Details of the New, Holistic U.S.-Colombia Counternarcotics Strategy | ONDCP” 2021).

Regarding foreign policy reform and American intervention in Latin America or elsewhere, I recommend—after divestment in military initiatives abroad—that the United States partake in collaborative approaches towards holistic, community-based foreign aid and cooperation upon request from other countries, so as not to continue previous imperialistic habits. The Wilson Center suggests that the “long term sustainability... and, thus... ability to reach... stated goals” of previous American War on Drugs implementation in Latin America is “in doubt where U.S. priorities are not shared by host countries. Countries are generally enthusiastic recipients of traditional security assistance including equipment, specialized law

enforcement training, and participation in coordinated law enforcement operations; but much less so when it comes to implementing broader institutional reforms, undertaking anti-corruption measures, expanding violence prevention programs, and making significant financial contributions of their own” (Eguizábal et al. 2015). Thus, if the United States is to continue with foreign aid, it may consider cooperative partnerships with local governments, communities and nonprofit organizations. Many NGOs which deal with drug policy reform and diplomacy—such as Global Commission on Drug Policy, founded in 2011 and based in Switzerland, and COPOLAD, or Cooperation Program between Latin America, the Caribbean and the European Union on drug policy, founded in 2021 and based in Italy—suggest similar partnership initiatives and foreign policy approaches in their research and methodology. Their numerous publications have also demonstrated a shift in public opinion and perception over time, inclining towards harm reduction priorities and decriminalization before prohibitive measures.

Another alternative to American military and counter-narcotics expenditure in Latin America is investment in education. The RAND corporation found, in a major 2013 study, that “receiving correctional education while incarcerated reduces an individual's risk of recidivating... had improved odds of obtaining employment after release”, and that for every USD\$1 spent on prison, educational programs saved between USD\$4 and USD\$5 (Davis et al. 2013). Investment in education and higher educational levels were also associated with lower crime rates within prisons, and lower recidivism rates following release (Davis et al. 2013). The study concludes with the recommendation that “a study registry of correctional education evaluations would help develop the evidence base in the field, to inform policy and programmatic decisionmaking”, therefore supporting the thesis of evidence-based policy reform (Davis et al. 2013). This investment is economically realistic, both domestically, upon contingency of reprioritization in expenditure. For example, Harvard University economist Jeffrey Miron predicted in 2005 that marijuana decriminalization would generate USD\$7.7 billion per year in government expenditure on enforcement (Miron 2005). Legalization, he predicted, would generate an additional USD\$2.4-6 billion annually, depending on tax policy, summing around USD\$10 billion annually after legalization domestically, not adjusted for inflation (Miron 2005). Finally, in terms of economic revenue, USD\$100 billion were projected in 1990 to be earned annually upon marijuana legalization (Dennis 1990). NGO Center for Progress claims that this positive economic margin would allow for over half a million Americans to attend public universities each year—an investment in education that is statistically likely to increase earnings over time (Pearl 2018, “Education pays : U.S” 2023).

Finally, one alternative to military and counter-narcotics expenditure—especially when considering increased economic opportunity for implementation—is prison reform. As previously stated, prisons in Latin America are dangerous and overcrowded. Near 41% of people in Latin American prisons have not been sentenced, or have access to fair trials (Serrano-Berthet, 2018, 32). Investments into increased infrastructure, higher standards of living conditions and improved healthcare and education within prisons would likely have more benefits than continued investments in drug criminalization efforts and enforcement. In Latin America, Jamaica and Uruguay have managed to uphold these implementations themselves, upon decriminalization of marijuana in 2015 and 2013, respectively, resulting in lower incarceration rates in both countries (Spencer and Strobl 2020, Felbab-Brown 2021). When considering drug dependence, evidence supports that rehabilitation programs and disorder treatment are more beneficial to individuals than incarceration without these services, like the model that Portugal

uses (Ransing et al. 2022). Drug Treatment Courts, or DTCs, are one example of an alternative to prison, which send drug offenders for treatment, instead of directly to prison (Serrano-Berthet, 2018, 41). DTCs also reduce criminal recidivism by eight to twelve percent and prove a “social return of \$2.84 for each dollar invested”, which establishes an additional benefit to lowering incarceration rates via prison reform (Serrano-Berthet, 2018, 41). Thus, economic reprioritization within prison reform itself likely would benefit victims of the War on Drugs, both domestically and abroad. Emphasis on human rights, like access to fair trial, during this implementation should be seriously considered as well.

### **Conclusion**

Upon consideration of the dozens of instances of implementation of the American War on Drugs in Latin America, policy failure and economic burden is evident, both domestically and in Latin America. The War on Drugs has perpetuated violence, mass incarceration, and economic inequality throughout the region, resulting in increased drug deaths, incarceration rates, and social unrest. Possible avenues of reform in the region are realistic, statistically successful, and economically feasible, with or without American help. As Latin American countries experience surges and historic highs in violence and human rights violations, the history of United States military involvement in the region may prompt moral or economic obligation to support community-focused, evidence-based alternatives to counter-narcotics and military intervention initiatives moving forward. These initiatives should increase and prioritize focus on holistic investment in education, rehabilitation programs, prison reform and human rights.

The policy of the War On Drugs is outdated, ineffective, and expensive. After the trillions of dollars in American taxpayer expenditure on military invasion and narco-terrorism eradication efforts in the region, the people of Latin America deserve a fresh start. This paper advocates for divestment in counter-narcotics and military-assisted initiatives and a shift towards investment in educational and rehabilitation programs, prioritizing humane approaches over punitive measures. If they can implement my suggested policy reforms without American help, they should do so. If not, American economic aid is currently being wasted on ineffective measures, and should be reprioritized to finally put an end to the War on Drugs.

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