

The Opioid Crisis in America and Mexico

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American demand for heroin is seemingly insatiable – and it is triggering profound changes across the western hemisphere. The extent of the opioid epidemic in the United States is staggering: between 2010 and 2014, deaths from heroin overdoses more than tripled, with early estimates showing that overdoses took the lives of almost 59,000 Americans in 2016.^{i,ii,iii} Drug overdoses are now the leading cause of death for Americans under age 50.^{iv} At the same time, abuse rates of synthetic opioids like fentanyl have also risen, increasing 72.2 percent from 2014 to 2015.^v Though used legally as a powerful pain medication, illegal Fentanyl is deadly because of its high potency; around 100 times more powerful than morphine.^{vi} Countless Americans have lost loved ones to opioid overdoses, with little hope for a swift end to this epidemic. Gone unmentioned, however, is how this relatively recent boom in opioid use has fundamentally changed how the U.S. gets its heroin.

Mexico now supplies the U.S. with the vast majority of the heroin American consumers demand, with some estimates reaching as high as 94 percent.^{vii,viii} Seizures of heroin along the U.S. border with Mexico amounted to 2,524 kilograms in 2015, rising 352 percent in the last seven years, suggesting a drastic surge in Mexican heroin smuggling even if some of this increase could be attributed to better border enforcement.^{ix} Yet it hasn't always been this way. The vast majority of the world's heroin (about 90 percent) comes from Afghanistan, where impoverished farmers grow opium poppies as one of the only means to make a living in their war-torn country.^x Until recently, this Afghan heroin, and to a lesser extent Colombian heroin, supplied much of the U.S. market. Users in the U.S. preferred this Afghan-made white and powdered variety of the drug to the dark brown “Mexican Tar” heroin smuggled in from Mexico.^{xi} But in recent years, Mexican cartels learned how to make this white powdered variety of heroin themselves.^{xii,xiii} This has allowed them to increase their market share at the expense of Asian producers, who now only supply about 1 percent of the American market.^{xiv} By selling their new product cheaply, sometimes even below its production cost, Mexican criminal organizations like the Sinaloa, Juárez, and Gulf cartels managed to take over the U.S. market for heroin. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) reports confirm this claim, stating that Mexican criminal groups are currently the “most prominent wholesale-level heroin traffickers” in Chicago, New Jersey, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC, and New York City.^{xv} With prices per kilo \$5,000 to \$10,000 cheaper than Asian or Colombian heroin (a kilo of

heroin can retail for around \$130,000 although prices differ state by state), and purity levels of over 74 percent, double that of its competitors, heroin from Mexico has come to dominate the U.S. opioid market.^{xvi,xvii}

In the U.S., these violent criminal enterprises try to stay under the radar of federal authorities by basing their operations out of suburbs and quiet rural areas.^{xviii} This is part of an attempt to keep the violence associated with narco-trafficking contained south of the U.S.-Mexico border, so as not to attract attention from U.S. law enforcement. While this may be welcome news for Americans, it has been a disaster for Mexicans, who have suffered because of the poorly led “War on Drugs” by successive National Action Party (Partido Acción Nacional, PAN) governments. Mexican authorities responded to the violence associated with drug trafficking by hunting down the leaders of drug cartels. However, rather than stop the violence, this strategy led these criminal organizations to fragment and continually slaughter one another for control of territory and drug routes. Mexicans have since experienced appalling levels of violence compared to other Latin American countries. This situation has only gotten worse, due to many factors which include the booming opium poppy industry. The Mexican state of Guerrero is now the country’s largest producer of heroin and Mexico’s most violent state.^{xix, xx} In Guerrero, heroin production has increased in the last few years, leading to violent turf wars between the rival Rojos and Arillos cartels. The sheer scale of the heroin boom across Mexico, especially in Guerrero, is surprising, with the DEA estimating that about 28,000 hectares of opium poppies were grown in 2015. With this amount of land under production, growers have the potential to export about 70 metric tons of heroin to the U.S. As little as two years before, this potential total was only 26 tons, meaning that Mexican opium-poppy production increased by 169 percent from 2013 to 2015.^{xxi} While by no means the only cause of the violence and corruption facing Guerrero, and Mexico in general, heroin has contributed significantly to recent instability. Possessing tremendous amounts of illicit drug money, and in control of the lucrative U.S. heroin market, the cartels have expanded their production and distribution networks, and have violently confronted each other for territory. Caught up in this heroin frenzy are the people of Mexico, who live with unacceptable levels of violence. This is both a consequence of the unchecked power of criminal organizations, and of American opioid addiction.

Less is known about Fentanyl distribution and production networks, since they are smaller and do not require large scale poppy cultivation to function, but DEA reports claim that most of the illegal fentanyl entering the U.S. is produced in China.^{xxii} While Mexico may not be the largest producer, the DEA still believes significant quantities of the drug are smuggled in across the Southern U.S. border. Dealing with illegal Fentanyl use means addressing heroin, since these two opioids are normally used together. Small quantities of Fentanyl are often mixed into heroin by dealers, resulting in a better high for drug users.^{xxiii} However, its extremely high potency means that shipments of Fentanyl are miniscule and can be sent through the mail or across the border with Mexico very easily.^{xxiv} Because Fentanyl use is intrinsically tied to heroin, the U.S. must tackle the broader opioid crisis if illegal Fentanyl use is to be reduced.

Dealing with Demand, Not Just Production

In spite of rampant violence and narco-trafficking, which endangers lives on both sides of the border, the Trump administration has yet to produce a comprehensive response. Seismic shifts in the opioid supply chain warrant appropriate and mutually agreed upon action by both the U.S. and Mexican governments. However, the U.S. government, armed with far more resources than Mexico with which to address drug producers and the opioid epidemic that funds them, has done little. Furthermore, any attempt to stop the opioid crisis in the U.S. by simply cracking down on drug cartels in Mexico ignores the failed history of the U.S. “War on Drugs”. As Plan Colombia demonstrated in the 2000s, military crackdowns on drug producers simply make them move to another country, a phenomenon called the ‘balloon effect’ by analysts.^{xxv} Just as squeezing a balloon pushes air to the other side, cracking down in one country forces cartels to relocate, not disband. As long as demand for heroin persists, cartels will supply the drugs, and the current administration must recognize this fact as it crafts a response. To his credit, the President has set up a commission to fight opioid addiction, chaired by the unpopular New Jersey governor Chris Christie.^{xxvi} This commission includes experts like Bertha Madras, who was formerly the deputy director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy. And although Christie, Madras, and the rest of the commission may very well produce what could be an effective plan to control the opioid epidemic, Trump’s statements and actions directly contradict what this commission will likely advise him to do. At the first meeting on June 16, representatives of the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence and the National Council on Behavioral Health advocated for an expansion of health care coverage to provide much needed treatment for addicts.^{xxvii} Yet the current administration’s proposed healthcare budget includes \$627 billion less for Medicaid, in addition to the \$839 billion that would be automatically cut in the Obamacare repeal bill under consideration in the Senate.^{xxviii} Under no circumstances does \$1.4 trillion in cuts entail the expansion of healthcare for addicts. Based on their actions, the President and Congress expect opioid addicts to pay for expensive long-term treatment out of their own pockets.

Regarding the dangerous situation in Mexico, the Trump administration has presented an even less feasible response. In April, Trump told an Associated Press reporter that “the wall will stop the drugs”, an absurd claim considering that San Diego, a region which already has a wall, is by far the most popular entrance point for drugs, based on the quantities of opioids found by border agents.^{xxix} This is because much of the heroin and fentanyl entering the U.S. is brought in by tractor trailer, hidden in or among legal goods that cross the border at an official checkpoint.^{xxx} Only a thorough search of every single car and truck crossing the border would find these hidden drugs, an impossible task considering the many thousands of vehicles that cross between the U.S. and Mexico each day. Even if U.S. border control could somehow screen every vehicle entering the country, cartels would simply change their supply chains to rely on drones or submarines, as they have already done in some situations.^{xxxi,xxxii} Yet in spite of evidence suggesting its futility, building a wall is the only government action Trump has discussed to reduce the flow of drugs from Mexico. Aside from recent calls for increased border enforcement, another

U.S. program, called the Mérida Initiative, also merits scrutiny. This aid program began in 2008 under the Obama administration and has provided more than \$2.5 billion in military equipment and training to Mexican law enforcement and military units. However, according to U.S. embassy officials in Mexico, “cartel infiltration of federal security forces remains an ongoing problem.”^{xxxiii} Corruption exists at all levels of Mexico’s armed forces, yet the U.S. continues to arm and train state security units that have known connections to cartels like the Zetas.^{xxxiv} Equally troubling are connections between Mexican army units and massacres like the notorious 2014 Guerrero student kidnapping, during which 43 teaching students disappeared in a presumed mass murder. Mexican news sources have produced evidence suggesting that federal and state authorities knew the massacre was occurring, but did nothing to protect the students, instead choosing to try and cover up the massacre.^{xxxv} As this slaughter suggests, Mexican authorities are also partially to blame for the violence engulfing much of Mexico. Though the U.S. may have provided the arms and funding, multiple Mexican administrations have chosen to wage an unsuccessful war against the cartels, splintering them and leading to further violence. In all, the Mérida Initiative and the Mexican crackdown it funded have not stabilized Mexico or stopped the flow of drugs into the U.S. Just like Trump’s border wall, this ineffective strategy needs to be reconsidered.

Despite these setbacks, there are still effective steps the U.S. government can take to fight the opioid crisis, stanch the flow of drugs into the U.S., and protect American and Mexican lives. The first priority should be to reduce the demand for opioids, like heroin and fentanyl, by guaranteeing addiction treatment for those who need it. Treatment, though expensive, works to reduce heroin usage, as demonstrated by the success of Portugal’s decision to decriminalize drugs and use the resources allocated for law enforcement to fund adequate healthcare for addicts. The Portuguese government established mandatory medical treatment rules, which require anyone caught with drugs to go through addiction treatment rather than the criminal justice system. As a result, Portuguese rates of heroin use have plummeted since the 1990s, when more than 1 percent of the population used the drug.^{xxxvi}

Aside from the admittedly difficult goal of ensuring treatment for the many thousands of opioid addicts, there are simpler steps the current administration could take immediately to prevent overdose deaths. Further extension of Good Samaritan laws, which encourage overdose witnesses to find medical help by guaranteeing that they will not be charged for minor drug law violations, would be another step in the right direction. The federal government should also ensure that law enforcement and the general public have access to Naloxone, a drug that reverses overdoses.^{xxxvii} More stringent regulations for prescription opioids like OxyContin may also be useful, since many heroin users become addicted to legal painkillers before they try heroin. Lastly, the Trump administration should reach out to the Mexican government and offer to collaborate without enabling corrupt Mexican security forces. It is in the best interests of both countries to reduce drug-related violence, stop the trafficking of opioids, and rein in the power of cartels. Instead of spending billions arming corrupt and dangerous Mexican units or building an ineffective wall, the U.S. should invest in Mexican economic development to help solve the underlying issues that lead Mexicans to join cartels, like a lack of employment

opportunities in many regions of rural Mexico. Hopefully, with a more reasonable and educated view of the opioid epidemic- both in the U.S. and Mexico- the U.S. government will decide to pursue a course of action that provides adequate treatment for addicts, appropriate support for Mexico, and leads to fewer needless deaths.

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