

## Commentary

August 2, 2010

### *The US Demand for Illegal Drugs Is Fueling Mexican Violence*

Violence and terrorism are deeply rooted in modern globalized drug trafficking. Mexican drug-related violence spills over the United States-Mexico border and fills the media news virtually every day. Reducing drug-related violence is a leading argument for the legalization of marijuana, particularly in California. Drug-related violence undermines public safety and destabilizes civil law in the US and in countries around the world.

#### **A Focus on Mexico**

The ongoing drug-related violence in Mexico has put a much needed spotlight on the seemingly insatiable demand for illegal drugs in the US. Money from American illegal drug users fuels drug trafficking from Mexico and plays a large role in the creation of drug-related violence. Each year Americans are estimated to spend an astounding \$60 billion for illegal drugs.<sup>i</sup> While the US is home to about 5% of the world's population, it accounts for about one fifth of the world's illegal drug users.<sup>i ii iii</sup>

In comparison, the US gross domestic product (GDP) is about 24% of the world GDP.<sup>iv</sup> In terms of energy, the US uses about 25% of the world's energy supply.<sup>v</sup> In proportion to its population, the US demand for illegal drugs is economically similar. While these numbers show that illegal drug users in the US are a significant factor in the global drug demand, they are far from its only source.

The drug-related violence in Mexico has fed renewed interest in marijuana legalization in the US. However, drug-related violence is not restricted to Mexico. American drug users' money is a major factor in drug trafficking around the world. Marijuana accounts for about half of the value of drugs coming to the US from Mexico.<sup>vi</sup> Changes in US law specific to marijuana would not eliminate the incentive to illegally traffic in other drugs from Mexico. While Mexico is the largest foreign supplier of marijuana in the US,<sup>vii viii</sup> the majority of heroin consumed in the US also comes from Latin America and Mexico.<sup>ix</sup> Though the majority of cocaine used in the US comes from Colombia, an estimated 90% of cocaine entering the US crosses the US-Mexico border.<sup>x</sup> Due to stricter US controls on chemicals, the manufacturing of methamphetamine also has moved from the US to Mexico, which now supplies the bulk of methamphetamine to the US.<sup>xi</sup> Clearly, drug trafficking to the US from Mexico involves far more than marijuana. No

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers calculated from past year global illegal drug use estimates from United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime World Report 2010 and United States past year illegal drug use from the 2008 National Survey on Drug Abuse and Health.

estimates of marijuana domestically grown in the US are available, though this crop now is being grown illegally in places as disparate as US national parks and in private homes purchased solely for this use.<sup>xii</sup>

### **Why Legalization of Marijuana Would Not Reduce Drug-Related Violence**

It has been proposed that the legalization of marijuana in the US would solve the problem of drug-related violence, both in the US and around the world. There are two fallacies to this argument. First, legalizing marijuana in the US would not eliminate the demand for illegal Mexican marijuana. There is a parallel with legalized gambling which actually increases illegal gambling.<sup>xiii xiv</sup> If marijuana were legal, it would be regulated and taxed as is legal gambling. But illegal marijuana would not be regulated or taxed, just as illegal gambling is not. In fact, legalizing gambling has built the market for illegal gambling. Legal marijuana would build the market for illegal marijuana.

Second, most of the costs created by marijuana in the US are not those caused by marijuana prohibition but those caused by marijuana use. Legal marijuana would dramatically increase marijuana use and dramatically increase costs from its use including costs of treatment. Contrary to common beliefs, increasing marijuana use is not associated with lower rates of other illegal drug use or alcohol and tobacco use. Marijuana use is associated with higher rates of other illegal drug use, and early exposure to marijuana increases the likelihood of subsequent drug problems.<sup>xv</sup>

### **Medical Marijuana is a Pernicious Distraction**

Medical marijuana increases access to the drug, often is diverted into the illegal black market, and decreases social disapproval of marijuana use. Smoked marijuana is not a medicine. Calling it “medicine” normalizes its use which contributes to increased illegal use and increases social costs, including addiction, school dropout rates, mental illness, drug-related crime, and to violent crime across and at the border with Mexico. States need to reevaluate their legislative strategies, particularly the 14 states<sup>xvi</sup> which have passed medical marijuana legislation. Increasing access to marijuana, the single most abused illegal drug,<sup>xvii</sup> for medical or general purposes, is not an effective demand reduction strategy. These states have bypassed the role of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) which regulates and approves drugs as safe for use to permit medical marijuana. Medicines should not be approved through legislative actions but rather evaluated through scientific research and held to the established standards of safety and effectiveness to protect the public.

### **The Way Forward**

New ideas to reduce the demand for illegal drugs in the US are needed now not only to reduce the flow of American dollars to Mexico to buy drugs, but to also to reduce the terrible toll taken by illegal drug use in the US. These efforts must be balanced to include supply reduction focused on law enforcement. The only way to respond to the violence of drug traffickers in Mexico in the short-run is to deal effectively with them as the organized and predatory criminals they are with vigorous law enforcement strategies. This is the way the US and Colombia successfully teamed

to reduce Colombian drug trafficking during the past two decades. In these law enforcement efforts, the US and the entire international community can assist Mexico.

Effective drug US demand reduction holds the promise of reducing the Mexican drug business and the violence it perpetuates on both sides of the border, in addition to improving public health and public safety. The bonus from these efforts will be the reduced toll drug use takes in the US providing a model to the rest of the world for how to combat drug use more effectively.

The focus on the tragedy of drug-related violence in Mexico is appropriate and positive if it leads to more vigorous and effective efforts to arrest and prosecute the criminals involved in drug trafficking on both sides of the border and if it leads to more effective demand reduction in both countries. These efforts, however, need to be seen in global context because the problems created by drug demand are not limited to the US and the problem of drug supply is not limited to Mexico. Both supply reduction and demand reduction are priorities in every nation in the world to deal more effectively with the modern drug abuse epidemic.

For more information on IBH and its priorities to reduce illegal drug use, visit [www.ibhinc.org](http://www.ibhinc.org).

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/03/26/AR2010032602226.html>

<sup>ii</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2010). World Drug Report 2010. New York: United Nations. Retrieved June 29, 2010 from [http://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/WDR\\_2010/World\\_Drug\\_Report\\_2010\\_lo-res.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/WDR_2010/World_Drug_Report_2010_lo-res.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2009). *Results from the 2008 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National Findings* (Office of Applied Studies, NSDUH Series H-36, HHS Publication No. SMA 09-4434). Rockville, MD.

<sup>iv</sup> Gross Domestic Product. World Bank, World Development Indicators. Retrieved July 2, 2010 from [http://www.google.com/publicdata?ds=wb-wdi&met=ny\\_gdp\\_mktp\\_cd&idim=country:USA&dl=en&hl=en&q=gdp#met=ny\\_gdp\\_mktp\\_cd&idim=country:USA&tdim=true](http://www.google.com/publicdata?ds=wb-wdi&met=ny_gdp_mktp_cd&idim=country:USA&dl=en&hl=en&q=gdp#met=ny_gdp_mktp_cd&idim=country:USA&tdim=true)

<sup>v</sup> USGS Energy Resources Program U.S. Department of the Interior. Retrieved July 1, 2010 from [http://certmapper.cr.usgs.gov/rooms/we/index.jsp?thePage=include\\_about.jsp](http://certmapper.cr.usgs.gov/rooms/we/index.jsp?thePage=include_about.jsp)

<sup>vi</sup> Conferencia de prensa del Procurador General de la República, Eduardo Medina Mora Icaza. (2009, July 13). Procuraduría General de la República, Bulletin 190 709. Retrieved July 28, 2010 from <http://www.pgr.gob.mx/prensa/2007/bol09/Jul/b190709.shtm>

<sup>vii</sup> Placido, A.P. (2005, June 14). Threat convergence along the border: How does drug trafficking impact our borders? Remarks by Anthony P. Placido before the House Committee on Government Reform Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy & Human Resources. Drug Enforcement Administration. Retrieved July 6, 2010 from <http://www.justice.gov/dea/pubs/cngrtest/ct061205.html>

<sup>viii</sup> Placido, A.P. (2009, March 17). Statement of William Hoover and Anthony P. Placido before the United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime and Drugs. Retrieved July 28, 2010 from <http://judiciary.senate.gov/pdf/09-03-17HooverPlacidoTestimony.pdf>

<sup>ix</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2010). World Drug Report 2010. New York: United Nations. Retrieved June 29, 2010 from [http://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/WDR\\_2010/World\\_Drug\\_Report\\_2010\\_lo-res.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/WDR_2010/World_Drug_Report_2010_lo-res.pdf)

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<sup>x</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2010). World Drug Report 2010. New York: United Nations. Retrieved June 29, 2010 from [http://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/WDR\\_2010/World\\_Drug\\_Report\\_2010\\_lo-res.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/WDR_2010/World_Drug_Report_2010_lo-res.pdf)

<sup>xi</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2010). World Drug Report 2010. New York: United Nations. Retrieved June 29, 2010 from [http://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/WDR\\_2010/World\\_Drug\\_Report\\_2010\\_lo-res.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/WDR_2010/World_Drug_Report_2010_lo-res.pdf)

<sup>xii</sup> National Drug Threat Assessment 2010. Retrieved July 6, 2010 from <http://www.justice.gov/ndic/pubs38/38661/index.htm>

<sup>xiii</sup> MacCoun, R.J., & Reuter, P. (2001). Drug war heresies: Learning from other vices, times, and places. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>xiv</sup> Abt, V. cited in Casinos in Florida: An analysis of the economic and social impacts. (n.d.). Tallahassee, FL: Executive Office of the Governor Office of Planning and Budgeting. Retrieved April 1, 2010.

<sup>xv</sup> National Institute on Drug Abuse. (2005). Marijuana abuse. *Research Report Series*. National Institutes of Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

<sup>xvi</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/04/20/AR2010042002033.html>

<sup>xvii</sup> <http://www.oas.samhsa.gov/nsduh/2k8nsduh/2k8Results.cfm>