



# Why the Drug War Endures: Local and Transnational Linkages in the North and Central America Drug Trades

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**EDITORIAL**



## ABSTRACT

Despite the well-documented human costs of the war on drugs, and the growing evidence of the environmental impacts of illicit economies, the militarized repression of the illicit drug trade remains a central hemispheric security and cooperation strategy in Northern and Central American countries. Through a multi-disciplinary dialogue that combines history, sociology, anthropology, economics, and political science, this Special Issue critically interrogates why despite these failures the war on drug endures. Together, the contributors challenge explanations focused on state absence, weakening of the state, and ungoverned spaces and instead propose a research agenda that sheds light on the long-lasting, structural effects of the capitalistic integration of the region within the economy of illicit drugs. In particular, the Special Issue contributes to three existing and interconnected debates: First: the role of drug economies and illicitness on state formation, social inequalities, and development in Mexico and Central America. Second: the impact of illicit economies on local populations, and the connections between the licit and the illicit, margins and centers, and political orders and violence. Third: the variety of stakeholders that benefit from the war on drugs and that link the United States, Mexico, and Central America in licit and illicit fashions.

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The evidence of the human costs of the war on drugs in Central and North America is overwhelming. Life expectancy continues to decline both through homicides and overdose deaths in production and transit countries, and in the United States, respectively (Canudas-Romo & Aburto 2019; Aburto & Beltrán-Sánchez 2019; Tanne 2022), while illicit drug production has led to deforestation, water pollution, and high carbon footprints (Brombacher, Garzón & Vélez 2021). Yet, even with recent moves towards more liberal drug policies in the region, the militarized repression of the illicit trade remains a central hemispheric security and cooperation strategy in Northern and Central American countries.

Through a multi-disciplinary dialogue that combines history, sociology, anthropology, economics, and political science, this Special Issue shows how, despite ‘failing’ as a policy to enhance security, reduce violence and the flow of illicit drugs, the so-called war on drugs endures because while it is detrimental to human security, it provides benefits for a variety of stakeholders that link the United States, Mexico, and Central America in licit and illicit fashions.

The editors have brought together researchers working at the intersection of drug trafficking, state formation, and the complex relationships between licit and illicit economies in Mexico and Central America. Their work brings into sharp relief the ruptures and continuities that tie a region that is at the center of global drug production, trafficking, and consumption, while the Special Issue’s regional focus allows it to fill an important gap in the existing literature on the supply and demand of illicit substances in North and Central America.

Despite the inextricable link between shifting wholesale narcotics supply chains, US demand for drugs, overdose deaths, and Mexico and Central America’s roles in illicit economies, to date research linking drug users, drug production and transit sites—as well as macro-shifts in trafficking—has remained a series of parallel monologues. Initial efforts to bridge the gaps between them have been led by work evaluating the increased demand for synthetic opioids in the US and its impact in drug producing regions (Le Cour Grandmaison, Morris & Smith 2019; Sobrino 2019; Noria Research 2021), but theoretical, empirical, and methodological challenges remain. One of the most important of these is the stubborn tendency of scholars to envision the Global South as ‘the field’ and the Global North as the center of knowledge production (Ghiabi & Waetjen 2022). Similarly, whereas in the United States the ‘opioid crisis’ rightfully activates debates around the negative impacts of prohibition on public health outcomes, the drug production and trafficking that feeds this crisis tends to evoke spectacular images of ‘narcos’ and extreme violence that borders on caricature, and mostly *assumes* rather than *explains*.

In part, this focus on the spectacular and the ultra-violent is a product of the very real problems that Mexico and Central America have faced in recent years. Since 2006, when Mexican President Felipe Calderón deployed the army *en masse* to combat criminal organizations, the country has registered more than 300,000 homicides (INEGI 2022), and at least 100,000 individuals have gone missing or disappeared (RNPDO 2022; UN 2022). Hundreds of thousands more are estimated to have been internally displaced—although the legal category of IDP is not recognized by the government or the international community (CMPDH 2022)—or to have fled the country entirely.

Over the same period, Central America’s ‘Northern Triangle’ has also been a venue for increasingly dramatic dynamics of violence. While these cannot be neatly separated from longer histories of brutal state repression and civil war, which date back to the late nineteenth century and reached a bloody crescendo during the 1980s (Gould 1998, 2008; Grandin 2011; Vela Castaneda 2021), rising rates of homicide, violence, extortion, and other crimes are today also tied to the impacts of the global drug trade on the region. This recent wave of violence has attracted widespread media attention as it forces tens of thousands of citizens to take to the road, either individually or, increasingly in collective manner, in so-called ‘caravans,’ in search of asylum in Mexico and, above all, in the United States, where the resultant ‘migrant crisis’ has become a hugely contentious political issue (Noria Research 2022). However, instead of seeing this migrant crisis as the result of inefficient security policies, migration *and* the illicit drug trade are conflated as a security threat to the United States.

This escalation of violence in the last 15 years in Mexico and Central America is often causally linked to the supposed weakening of the state (Lupsha 1989; Dal Bo, Dal Bo & Di Tella 2006). However, the assumption that governments cannot effectively confront criminal organizations,

be they drug cartels, gangs, or jointly understood under the banner of organized crime (Rodgers 2009), is a misleading zero-sum game construct (Das & Poole 2004; Le Cour Grandmaison 2021), which has also led to explanations of violence as a symptom of dysfunctional democracies within which ‘ungoverned spaces’ are alleged to have proliferated (Von Lampe 2016).

The Special Issue aims to challenge these assumptions by paying special attention to the long lasting, structural effects of the capitalistic integration of the region within the economy of illicit drugs. In so doing it puts to lie the idea that ungoverned spaces, state absence, and illicit activities are somehow insulated from licit ones (see Goodhand et. al. 2021). Above all, the Special Issue contributes to existing debates by focusing on three interconnected issues that have received varying degrees of attention in the scholarly and policy literature. First: the role of drug economies and illicitness on state formation, social inequalities, and development in Mexico and Central America. Second: the impact of illicit economies on local populations, and the connections between the licit and the illicit, margins and centers, and political orders and violence. Third: why, despite its tragic human and environmental costs, has the ‘war on drugs’ persisted as one of the most enduring hemispheric policies?

To be sure, the Special Issue builds on and adds new weight to innovative recent analysis of the relationship between licit and illicit activities and the phenomenon of ‘criminal governance’ (see Gootenberg & Campos 2015; Sauls, Dest, McSweeney, 2022; Farfán-Méndez, García Ponce, & Camacho forthcoming). The final section connects our findings to existing research agendas and suggests paths for developing this regional agenda.

## DEBATE ONE—DRUG ECONOMIES AND STATE FORMATION

For many years, policy reports, political speeches, popular literature, television dramas, and ‘true-crime’ documentaries have all presented the drug trade as a world of inter-cartel warfare, daring police raids and charismatic, ultra-violent traffickers who rule cross-border ‘narco-empires’ and penetrate previously respectable state institutions (Arias-Goldstein 2010). Scholars such as Naylor (2002) argue that this idea is the product of a ‘symbiosis of objectives between law enforcement and the mass media,’ as police forces ‘hype the target both to enhance self-esteem and to coax more power and money from governments,’ while journalists and screenwriters alike ‘cater to a public in search of vicarious thrills’.

But this normative vision of the drug trade also has a deep hold on certain sections of the academy, whose representatives argue that ‘state failure’ or ‘state voids’ have allowed illicit activities and criminal violence to flourish throughout Mexico and Central America. More recently, however, increasing numbers of political scientists, sociologists, historians, and anthropologists have challenged these narratives. Some have analyzed the practices of violent non-state actors in Mexico and Central America, and found they fit rather neatly into longstanding traditions of state regulation of the private use of coercion (Cruz 2011; Cruz and Duran-Martínez 2016; Kloppe-Santamaría 2020). Others have shown that supposedly ‘cartel-related’ violence is closely connected to the perpetuation of violent social orders in rural areas (Berber 2017; Gaussens 2020; Morris 2020a), highlighting the extent to which the mechanisms governing the delegation of power from public authorities to informal bosses—who today include drug traffickers—can only be properly understood within the context of longer histories of capitalist accumulation (Maldonado-Aranda, 2010).

Moreover, a range of historians have shown how informal—and violent—actors have been instrumental to processes of state formation in Mexico and Central America both at the regional level (Blom-Hansen & Stepputat 2001; Smith 2013; Aviña 2014; Morris, 2020b; Pansters & Smith 2022) and in national contexts (Knight & Pansters 2006; Stack 2012; Grandin 2000; Holden 2006). Thus, political-criminal and licit-illicit relations are, in reality, entirely porous worlds, in which the use of criminal resources to exert state power is often a constituent part of ‘the democratic order’ and ‘high levels of crime, far from revealing a failure of state institutions, reflect a degree of state power’ (Arias 2009: 42).

The articles in this Special Issue provide important new case-studies of exactly how state formation in Mexico and Central America has been—and remains—a process inseparable from the organization of violence by private actors *in articulation* with state institutions; from

elite groups' accumulation and conversion of resources extracted from illicit activities; and from the attempts of public institutions to regulate illegal markets, rather than completely dismantle them. In so doing, they suggest that the state itself should be considered as both an overarching administrative structure and as a collection of networks that can project influence beyond institutional boundaries, and that these networks may well be in conflict with each other. This is particularly true within the security apparatus in Mexico, Central America, and the United States, where different law enforcement agencies and public security forces present themselves as closely aligned governmental bodies, but actually compete for formal resources (e.g., access to budgets), and in many cases, for informal ones (from power over illicit markets to regulation of extortion, or even active participation in drug trafficking).

Focusing on Mexico in the mid-twentieth century, Juan Antonio Fernández Velázquez and Benjamin T. Smith offer new data on the evolution of the country's drug trade, showing that in the key production and trafficking hub of Sinaloa, this was inseparable from the development of state-trafficker pacts centered around opium. They argue that opium, although it has often been neglected by scholars of the Latin American drug trade, did more than the 'marijuana, cocaine or amphetamine trades to shape the Mexican narcotics business,' with important consequences for our understanding of this industry's modern dynamics and the state-criminal nexus at its centre.

Turning our gaze further south to the Mexican state of Oaxaca, Marcos García de Teresa explores the collisions between ancient traditions of Indigenous drug use, postrevolutionary political and economic policies, and the self-consciously 'modern' phenomena of international scientific exploration and cultural tourism. Answering Gootenberg and Campos' (2015: 11–12) call for more research into the ways that the drug trade has affected the 'rights discourse of indigenismo,' and has in turn been shaped by 'transnational social movements such as hippies and wealthier New Age niche cultures,' García de Teresa shows that the commercialization of sacred mushrooms has transformed the Mazatec community of Huautla, with important consequences not just for the regional economy, but also for politics, culture, and even ethnic identity itself in southern Mexico.

Meanwhile, in the neighbouring state of Guerrero, Irene Álvarez, Pierre Gaussens, and Paul Frissard show that the use of the Mexican army since the 1970s to repress local drug trafficking and counterinsurgency has allowed the institution to assume a significant level of practical autonomy on the ground. Thus, the local antinarcotics actions of the army do not necessarily reflect the direct orders of the central state; instead, Álvarez, Gaussens, and Frissard reveal that the army has been able to build its own relations of power, which may compete with separate structures linked to the police forces and to local and regional governments. Moreover, and in crucial dialogue with Velázquez and Smith's article, they show how the army has played an instrumental role in the development of a local economy of drug production and trafficking by selectively repressing certain actors—especially those involved in the guerrilla—while allowing others to thrive in illicit markets, as long as they would not put the political order at risk.

Recognizing that the 'war on drugs' is therefore neither a monolithic nor even a fully coherent set of policies helps us to understand how Mexican and Central American governments have been able to interpret it in their own, often disparate terms, and use it to their own specific advantages, as Gema Kloppe-Santamaria also argues in this Special Issue. In a detailed piece of policy commentary, she shows that far from being a policy unilaterally imposed by the US, the 'war on drugs' illustrates the unstable balance of power in the region. Thus the 'war on drugs' has become a powerful political tool in complex processes of negotiation between governments, despite its apparent failure to actually 'solve' the issues of drug production, trafficking, and consumption.

This is particularly blatant when we consider the case of the drug trade in the United States itself, especially in the context of the contemporary 'opioid crisis.' As Montero, Friedman, and Bourgois show in their article, critical public health and social science analyses have had a 'limited impact linking systemic knowledge of the socioeconomics of narcotics markets and the political and public health implications of these changes', by narrowing the scope of analysis to drug use and 'more specifically, individual drug use micro-behaviors' that tend to make the role of the state, police forces, and structural policies ever more invisible.

Licit and illicit activities are not entirely distinct or separate from one another. The articles that explore these linkages build on the robust findings of the first debate—that political-criminal and illicit relations are, in reality, entirely porous worlds, and further complexify how the exchanges between licit and illicit activities take place. In so doing, the authors challenge the notion that illicit activities only take place in remote areas where the state is at best intermittently present, as well as the ‘myth of inaccessibility’ that portrays certain territories as elusive for researchers, not to mention the average citizen (Alvarez 2021). Without denying the real dangers faced by local inhabitants and by researchers conducting work in these territories, drug markets throughout the Western Hemisphere often use the same actors and resources available to licit activities. This is to say, there is no special “narco highway” connecting the highlands of Guatemala or Sinaloa to the streets of Los Angeles or Philadelphia but stakeholders within illicit activities that benefit from the infrastructure and assets available for licit economies.

While scholarly literature and policy work on money laundering has examined the connections between licit and illicit, insofar as money laundering *requires* using the financial system, less attention has been paid to these connections outside of money laundering. However, despite the empirical challenges, more researchers in a wide array of disciplines ask about these connections. For instance, from a historical perspective, Gootenberg and Campos (2015) ask,

Does drug smuggling share social affinities and practices with neoliberal free-trade mentalities? The looming question for economic historians of a region long marked by cyclical export booms is why the largest boom of the late twentieth century—with prohibition-inflated revenues topping 100 billion dollars annually—developed in spheres of illicit commerce. Why—and here as well the process is problematically circular—has the drug war, escalated with US policies after 1970, been utterly unable to contain this quintessentially Latin-controlled business? How much can we blame on the well-studied and oft-criticized contradictions of supply-side drug war policy, and how much of this paradox is peculiar to the region’s history?

Answering these and other questions on the links between the licit and illicit also allows us to add much-needed nuance to commonplace ideas of the drug trade as involving unidirectional flows of drugs moving North, and cash and weapons moving South. Drug production and trafficking from Central America and Mexico to the United States (and Canada) has had multiple phases over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that saw radical changes in terms of products, value chains, and the social conditions in which producers, traffickers, and consumers live, as well as the evolution of multilateral relationships for both economic and security cooperation (Teague 2019). In this sense, rather than thinking of unidirectional flows, it is arguably more fruitful to characterize these dynamics as feedback loops. Illicit economies in Mexico and Central America, therefore, have been shaped by complex configurations of national and international economic, social, and political pressures.

In line with the discussion advanced by this journal’s recent Special Issue on ‘Environmental Impacts of Illicit Economies’ (2021), we demonstrate the numerous, important linkages that exist between both the illicit and licit spheres. In doing so, we add weight to recent analyses of the drug trades in Colombia, Andean nations, and Afghanistan (Gootenberg and Dávalos 2018; Grisaffi 2018; Mansfield 2016; Bradford 2019), which have found that coca cultivators and opium producers are above all members of rural communities that have been partially integrated into international markets but have yet to receive the promised rewards of such economic ‘development.’ Furthermore, the articles in this Special Issue provide robust evidence for an emerging intellectual community that seeks to understand the rise and endurance of criminal governance.

Importantly, whereas prohibitionist transnational policies can produce violence at the regional level, the drug trade in and on itself is not a violent activity (Farfán-Méndez 2016) and can, in fact, contribute in various ways to regional development. Thus, Pearson et al. show that ‘cocaine transshipment has become an engine of dramatic socioeconomic and environmental change in Central America.’ Using an innovative dataset, the authors estimate the until-now significantly understudied economic influence of cocaine trafficking through Honduras and

Guatemala, as compared to Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). According to their analysis, in 2014 FDI flows into Guatemala amounted to approximately \$1.4 billion (ECLAC 2015) compared with the estimated value of primary cocaine movements of approximately \$1.7 billion value added. In the same year FDI flows into Honduras reached a record of approximately \$1.1 billion (ECLAC 2015), compared to approximately \$1.5 billion in cocaine movements' value added.

This influx, the authors find, also distorts the development of regional economies by perverting wage, land, and product markets, which in turn fuels corruption, violence, exploitation, and dispossession. Importantly, their estimates show that there is no linear process to corruption but rather a series of marked shifts along complex value chains. Velázquez and Smith make a similar argument, albeit from a historical point of view, contending that 'even before the era of globalization, changes in the illicit economy paralleled (and perhaps even pre-empted) those in the licit economy. Pushed to improvise and shift strategies rapidly, drug traffickers were (and still are) at the center of broader economic changes. Deviant capitalism was always at the cutting edge (Gilman et al, 2011).'

Zooming in, Montero, Friedman, and Bourgois compare the markets for Mexican powder heroin, methamphetamine, fentanyl, and xylazine in the cities of Philadelphia and Tijuana. Whereas cocaine has changed regional development, the fine grain data collected by Montero, Friedman, and Bourgois with substance users shed light on neighborhood-level supply chains. Street-level changes in the supply, particularly through the introduction of fentanyl, have had profound impacts on the pricing structure and by extension the harm reduction responses required to better care for users. Montero, Friedman, and Bourgois also issue a call to action for scholars to rethink and cultivate relationships with criminalized actors in order to develop innovative harm reduction interventions. Without exaggeration, hundreds of thousands of lives depend on it.

But money and drugs need not reach their final destinations to prompt changes. Garcia de Teresa shows that constant enthusiasm for drugs of all kinds within the US spurred the development of drug tourism, bringing Americans to Mexico in search of transcendent experiences and an escape from the realities of industrial capitalism and consumerism, which neither the US nor Mexican governments could stop. Thus, even without arriving in the US, drugs had important effects on US citizens, which in turn prompted further economic, political, and cultural transformations in Mexico.

As northern demand for southern drugs dragged illicit commodities over snags created by transnational law enforcement and local competition over power and profits, gender relations were also affected. Karina Reyes (this issue) shows 'that violence produced by criminals, and the violence produced by state institutions are two sides of the same coin. According to Reyes, this coin is the militarized masculinities that are embedded at the very core of the war on drugs, and traditional gender discourses which promote violent strategies purportedly to protect society from the 'threat' of drugs. The author shows how gender plays a key role in perpetuating the global war on drugs and, therefore, the violence on both sides of the trenches.

In line with this, Emilia Ziosi reverses the commonly-accepted direction of 'criminal flow,' showing that rather than Central American individuals and organizations being criminal actors within and towards a law-abiding US society, the US itself, as a nation, is 'a transnational actor of power within the Honduran state-crime nexus.' Ziosi draws on an exciting range of new sources to reveal 'the symbiotic relationship between state actors, business elites and drug trafficking organizations in contemporary Honduras; uncovering the blurred boundaries between the licit and illicit; upper and underworld in the country.' She argues 'that state actors' involvement in the drug trade in Honduras goes far beyond protection, and has evolved into a powerful network of public, private and criminal actors that has been able to capture the state's basic sovereign functions with the aim of protecting and promoting their own private interests.'

This finding echoes Kloppe-Santamarías policy argument that 'Mexico's war on drugs is neither mainly nor exclusively a by-product of US influence or diplomatic pressure. Instead, it reflects Mexican governing elites' inclination to support repressive counternarcotic policies based on their own interests and political agendas. This point is crucial as it allows us to illuminate Mexico's responsibility in reproducing a punitive approach to drugs that has had devastating consequences for thousands of citizens.'

The war on drugs has had a devastating social and humanitarian impact on the entire region. From mass migration in Central America to the ‘opioid crisis’ in the United States, the war on drugs has not only failed to improve the region’s security issues. It also fuels more violent competition between criminal actors over the control of illicit markets, spurs corruption amongst elected officials, and in so doing actively undermines efforts to actually stop the flow of drugs. Given its lack of any apparent progress on the ground, it appears rather counterintuitive that the war on drugs has remained at the center of regional security and cooperation strategies for decades (Pérez Ricart, 2020). Unpicking this paradox allows us to dig further into the interdependencies that connect consumer markets in the United States and Canada, the evolution of drug policies, and the dynamics of production and trafficking, especially in rural areas of Mexico and Central America.

In Central America, Pearson et al argue that part of the explanation is that repression ‘pays’ by increasing competition for the control of drug markets, as well as the price of drugs themselves. This has led criminal actors to invest more resources in making sure that drugs do manage to find their way up north, via massive schemes of corruption that irrigate governments, political parties, armed forces and local elites in order to avoid arrests and seizures. Thus ‘the economic ramifications of counterdrug policies in the region’ are huge, and ‘tend to benefit a select set of already-powerful actors’, both public and private.

Ziosi further develops this analysis in relation to Honduras, where she argues that the political class have been able to use the violence engendered by the ‘drug war’ to ‘capture the state’s basic sovereign functions with the aim of protecting and promoting their own private interests.’ In fact, the recent extradition to the United States of former President Juan Orlando Hernandez on drug-trafficking charges illustrates how politically and economically beneficial the war on drugs has been as a tool for power. Ironically enough, President Hernandez had initially been strongly aligned with US interests by supporting the 2010 coup against President Zelaya, before being elected in 2014 and arrested in 2022.

Meanwhile, from a regional perspective, Kloppe-Santamaría shows that the ‘long war on drugs has helped sustain forms of social and political control,’ allowing the country’s elites to ‘exclude and criminalise’ both individuals and entire communities that are ‘considered deviant, socially degenerate, or politically subversive. The instrumental use of this policy in upholding governing elites’ political dominance can help explain why, despite its apparent failures, Mexico’s punitive approach to drugs has persisted across different periods.’

Finally, these arguments find a crucial echo in the work of Reyes, who, through an innovative analysis of the life trajectories of former Mexican hitmen, shows how the militarized repression of the drug trade has led to the promotion of ‘militarised masculinities’ that present the ideal man as ‘physically strong, emotionally controlled, proud, rational, aggressive, and brave.’ These ideas have exacerbated violent and aggressive behaviors on the part of the armed forces and criminals alike, transforming social behaviors and cultural practices that are both rooted in, and also help to reinforce, the violent systems of patriarchal domination prevalent in the US, Mexico, and Central America.

In that sense, the Special Issue shows how pervasive and self-reinforcing the war on drugs has become. This is all the truer in current times when, from the United States to Mexico and Central America, the very vocabulary of the policy has been revised to encompass development and social programs (such as Mexico’s *Sembrando Vida*). Far from limiting its scope to security, military, and judicial cooperation, the war on drugs has shaped contemporary migration control efforts by transferring the responsibility of border management to Central American countries and Mexico in a deal that conditions US funding and support on these countries’ success in preventing their own populations—as well as other nationalities such as Haitians, Venezuelans or—from fleeing from the very consequences of the war on drugs. The circle is therefore closed: the war on drugs keeps on creating the conditions for the people to flee their countries, while hiding itself behind social, humanitarian, and political support.

## TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED REGIONAL RESEARCH AGENDA

This Special Issue aims at contributing to, and opening new questions within, the debate on the intertwined dynamics between the war on drugs as an ongoing, central security policy in the Western Hemisphere, as well as the development issues it continues to raise and provoke. As Montero, Friedman and Bourgois argue, in order to finally address the humanitarian disaster of the war on drugs, it is imperative that we develop a more solid qualitative and quantitative understanding of ‘hemispheric, national, regional, local, and neighborhood-level supply chains’ that underpin the drug trade itself, as at the same time we promote a shift towards harm reduction and public health initiatives, and away from the punitive logics that have been in place for more than half a century in the US, Mexico, and Central America.

Importantly, the Special Issue brings together scholars from a wide array of disciplines who also contribute a variety of methodologies for understanding the complexity of the illicit drug trade in the US, Mexico, and Central America. This matters because it shows the potential for multi-disciplinary dialogues that advance our understanding of transcontinental dynamics. In welcoming multiple methodologies and encouraging cross-pollination, our contributors show there isn’t a unique path for analyzing the effects of a policy that has impacted millions of lives in the region.

Of course, for practical reasons of space and time, this Special Issue cannot cover every single one of the countries in the region, and also lacks analysis of any country in the Caribbean. But the three interconnected debates with which the articles here engage could certainly be further enriched by the addition of work on those countries. On a similar note, as we continue to work towards a deeper understanding of the links between drug production, transit, and consumption, we will need to pay increasing attention to the effects of climate on these dynamics (see [Tiscornia 2022](#) for a good initial effort in this direction) as well as the gendered effects on production, trafficking, and consumption (see [Buxton, Margo, and Burger 2021](#) and [UNODC 2022](#)).

Whether well-versed on the existing debates or a newcomer to the research on the so-called war on drugs, this Special Issue is a stepping-stone in advancing our understanding of the illicit drug trade from a regional perspective with a focus on the US, Mexico, and Central America. Each article pushes forward our knowledge of specific facets of this story, while together they also expand scholarly and policy work of the wider history and contemporary social, economic, and political dynamics of the drug trade, the ‘war’ being waged against it, and the many, complex results of these violent phenomena in our region of focus and in the Western Hemisphere more broadly.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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