Violence and Drugs: Divide, Then Conquer?

by Franklin E. Zimring

Mexico's most important drug problem is not the sale and transport of illegal substances. It is the byproducts of the drug trade — violence and corruption — that plague the nation. What is important to understand is that violence and corruption in Mexican drug transit zones are contingent, variable and indigenous.

Let me begin with the first term — contingent. Between 1975 and 1980, the United States had high use problems with every drug, including the biggest illegally trafficked drugs — heroin, cocaine and cannabis. Australia also had the highest usage level for both heroin and cannabis, but smaller levels of cocaine availability and use. While both Sydney, Australia and Los Angeles, California continued to have extensive illegal drug markets in 1990, their levels of violence were radically different. Despite having the same population as Sydney, 3.7 million, Los Angeles had 30 times the number of criminal homicides. During that same year, Los Angeles police reported 119 drug-related homicides. The Sydney police reported that two of their 55 killings were drug-related. This means that cities with similar illegal drug problems can have rates of lethal drug violence that vary by 50 to one. [Insert Table 2]

The amount of drug violence is contingent on the violence in the culture of drug criminality, among other elements. There is no fixed formula determining that x kilos of drug sales equals y number of killings.

That is one reason for the extraordinary variability of violence and corruption over time and between different Mexican drug trafficking zones. Drug transit zone deaths go up and down by a factor of four or more without any real change in drug volume.

This variability in drug violence can be good news as well as bad news. Deaths can go down even if the drug volume does not go down.

The final key term for Mexican drug violence and corruption is indigenous. The drugs come from South America and go to the United States, but the crime problem and the criminals and the corruption are home grown.

If the corruption and terror of drug transport are variable and contingent, it is not impossible to use policy incentives and deterrents to reduce these debilitating byproducts of the drug trade.

Choosing Priorities

Prioritizing policy goals is critical given Mexico's very limited resources for law enforcement and prosecution and the serious set of problem the national government faces in several states and localities. The struggle against violence and
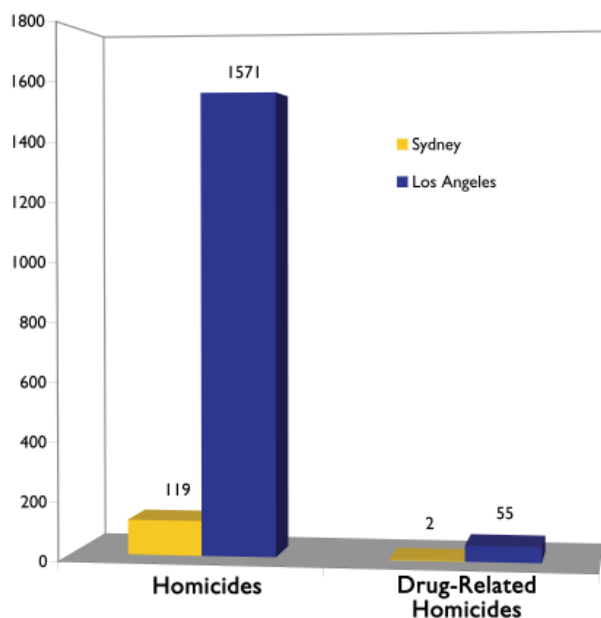
Country	Heroin	Cocaine	Cannabis	Hallucinogens	Amphetamines	Barbiturates/ Tranquilizers
Canada	2	2	1	2	1	1
United States	1	1	1	1	1	1
Brazil	4	2	1	3	2	2
Argentina	4	1	2	3	3	2
Mexico	3	1	1	2	1	1
Sweden	2	3	1	4	2	3
France	3	3	3	3	3	3
Great Britain	3	3	2	3	3	3
Australia	1	3	1	2	3	3
Italy	1	3	1	3	3	3
Japan	3	3	2	3	1	3

Key: Abusers per population
1 = extensive abuse (less than 1:1,000)
2 = moderate abuse (more than 1:1,000 - 1:10,000)
3 = minimal abuse (more than 1:10,000 or verbal estimate)
4 = no abuse or no report

corruption is a high-cost enterprise in each zone and targets must be carefully chosen.

Identifying priority concerns helps lawmakers reach appropriate decisions. For example, if City A has twice as many drug-related killings as City B, but City B is responsible for twice as much cocaine and heroin transport, which city should receive limited federal attention? The answer depends on which problem is determined to be most important. I would choose the city with the high homicide rate.

A similar set of priority concerns should influence decisions made in the prosecution of drug-related cases. Here's another example: An investigation leads to serious drug charges against three mid-level drug cartel employees and three corrupt police officers who cooperated with the cartel. The prosecutor must decide whether to offer concessions to the police so that they will testify against the cartel staff or to the cartel employees so that they will testify against the corrupt police officers. If corruption is given higher priority than drug volume, the concessions go to the drug soldiers and the harsher punishments go to the police. But what if the cartel employees are killers? If violence is the key priority, then the concessions should go to the police.

Choosing high violence areas for special enforcement may have some general deterrent value because it provides an incentive for drug traffickers and those who work with them to minimize violence to avoid priority targeting. When single organizations control drug trafficking in a locality, these general deterrent effects might be substantial. Where violence is the product of contests for power at the local level, the prospect for deterrence is less promising.

It would be wise for Mexico to reserve its largest enforcement efforts and harshest penalties for the deadly and the corrupting, making the reduction of drug volume a secondary goal. This might mean that the U.S. and Mexico have different priorities: the United States' main concern is reducing drug flow, while Mexico should focus on deterring violence and reducing corruption.

The U.S. drug problem is chronic and not measurably worse than 10 or 15 years ago. The Mexican epidemic of drug violence and corruption is acute; it is a crisis that threatens civil society in several parts of the country. I would hope that the U.S. would come to appreciate Mexico's problems and priorities. But the first order of business is for Mexico to focus on its most pressing concerns.

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