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**Photo caption:** The amount of cocaine produced in South American Andean region has surged in the past few years. In this photo, Ecuadorian police from the National Police's Special Mobile Anti-narcotics Group guard eight tons of cocaine from the Guayas province on January 17, 2022.

**Photo credit:** Dialogo Magazine and Ecuadorian National Police

## The Colombia Coca Bloom, the Mexican Heroin Surge, and the Fentanyl Crisis

By Daniel Chang and Patrick Paterson, Ph.D.

### Introduction

Revenue from illegal drugs is the principal source of income for transnational organized crime groups in the Americas. The money is used to pay off corrupt officials, buy lethal arms, and contributes to other problems such as corruption, weak government institutions, and money laundering. In that sense, the illicit drug industry – worth an estimated \$30-50 billion dollars per year – is the fuel that drives the high levels of crime and violence that make Central and South America the most dangerous regions in the world.

Of all the illegal drugs produced, transported, and marketed through the Americas, cocaine is the biggest revenue generator. The cocaine market is worth billions of dollars per year and, in a region that suffers from chronic poverty, severe inequality, and an extensive informal economy, the illicit drug market can be a

highly seductive temptation for inhabitants. The addictive substance is processed from coca leaves grown in highlands along the Andean Mountains, especially in Colombia, Peru and Bolivia. The coca leaves are treated with chemicals to make a white paste and then baked into a powder which is then packaged and shipped to markets in North America, Europe, and Asia.

Cocaine is not the only dangerous and addictive substance in the Americas. Heroin and fentanyl, a synthetic opioid, have recently surged in Mexico. The number of metric tons of heroin being produced in Mexico has increased 350 percent since 2012. The number of hectares of opium poppies in Mexico (the plant from which heroin is produced) has increased more than 1,000 percent since 2005.

This report examines the surge in cocaine, heroin, and fentanyl from the Americas. Data are drawn from the U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP)'s National Drug Control Strategy Data Supplement from 2020 and from the ONDCP Drug Dashboard.<sup>1</sup> The article is a sequel to one published in 2014, titled "Measuring Success in the War on Drugs." More than eight years later, a lot has changed in the Western Hemisphere.

### *Coca cultivation and cocaine production in the Americas*

Coca is grown in the hot, humid conditions along the Andean mountains. As depicted in Figure 1, Peru was the principal source of coca in the region during the 1990s, producing more than Colombia and Bolivia combined. However, Peruvian security efforts against

traffickers and insurgents in the 1990s helped curtail coca cultivation. Traffickers from other countries filled the void.

The 1990s were the era of Colombian major drug traffickers. Pablo Escobar's Medellín Cartel and the Rodríguez Orejuela brothers' Cali Cartel were two of the most notorious drug trafficking groups although many others also operated in the lucrative multi-billion dollar industry. By 1995, Escobar was dead and the Rodríguez Orejuela brothers were arrested. Other smaller cartels picked up where the Medellín and Cali cartels had left off and insurgent groups such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and National Liberation Army (ELN) became involved in drug trafficking. Colombia's coca cultivation eclipsed Bolivia's in 1995 and Peru's in 1997, the result of successful eradication operations in those two countries.

By 1999, concerns of the collapse of the central government in Bogotá prompted the U.S. and other nations to inject Colombia with an immense amount of counter drug funds and equipment. Supplies to eradicate coca fields was also a big part of the assistance package. By 2007, Plan Colombia finally began to show its return on investment as brave Colombian soldiers and police drove the insurgent groups deep into hiding in remote parts of the country. Coca cultivation and cocaine production slowed in the country. By 2012, coca growing in Colombia dropped to levels not seen in 1997.<sup>2</sup> Without the raw source material, cocaine production also plummeted in the country. By 2012, traffickers were only able to produce 210 metric tons of cocaine. The last time Colombia had seen such low production levels of cocaine was in 1994, nearly twenty years earlier.

Following the security efforts of Plan Colombia and the counter-insurgency efforts that drove the

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<sup>1</sup> The National Drug Control Strategy Data Supplement is produced as an addendum to the National Drug Control Strategy, produced annually by the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP). The most recent report from 2020 can be found here: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2020-NDCS-Data-Supplement.pdf>. The year that a new political administration takes office does not generally include an annual strategy nor a data supplement. Additional information can be found in the helpful ONDCP Drug Control Data Dashboard: : <https://www.whitehouse.gov/ondcp/drug-control-data-dashboard/>.

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<sup>2</sup> By 2012, the U.S. estimated Colombia had 78,000 hectares under cultivation. The last time an area as small as that was used for coca cultivation was in 1997 when 79,500 hectares were used. For both coca cultivation and cocaine production trends, see National Drug Control Strategy Data Supplement, 2020 (table 164).

Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia to lengthy peace negotiations with the Colombian government, coca cultivation and cocaine production dipped to almost a 20-year low. However, since then, policy decisions regarding coca eradication have permitted a massive “bloom” in coca and cocaine. Consequently, cocaine production in Colombia has increased almost 350 percent in the last ten years.

### *The Colombia Coca Bloom*

The decreasing trends of coca cultivation and cocaine production did not last. Starting in 2014, the country saw surging amounts of coca in remote parts of the country. Before long, the amount of territory dedicated to growing coca would more than double and rise to levels never seen before in the history of the country. As clearly shown in Figure 1, the number of hectares of coca in Colombia skyrocketed from about 75,000 hectares in 2013 to more than 200,000 hectares in 2018. Meanwhile, the area dedicated to coca cultivation in Bolivia and Peru remained static. Overall, coca cultivation in the Andes reached nearly 300,000 hectares, nearly double the area in 2012. This marks the highest amount of coca being grown in South America in the history of the region, a worrisome development for policy makers across the hemisphere. Unsurprisingly, Colombia is the world’s largest producer of cocaine and 90 percent of the illegal narcotic intercepted in the United States originates in Colombia.<sup>3</sup>

What caused the ballooning amount of coca, particularly just after the government managed to reduce coca cultivation to levels not seen in nearly two decades? According to Adam Isacson of the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), there were a number of factors that occurred simultaneously

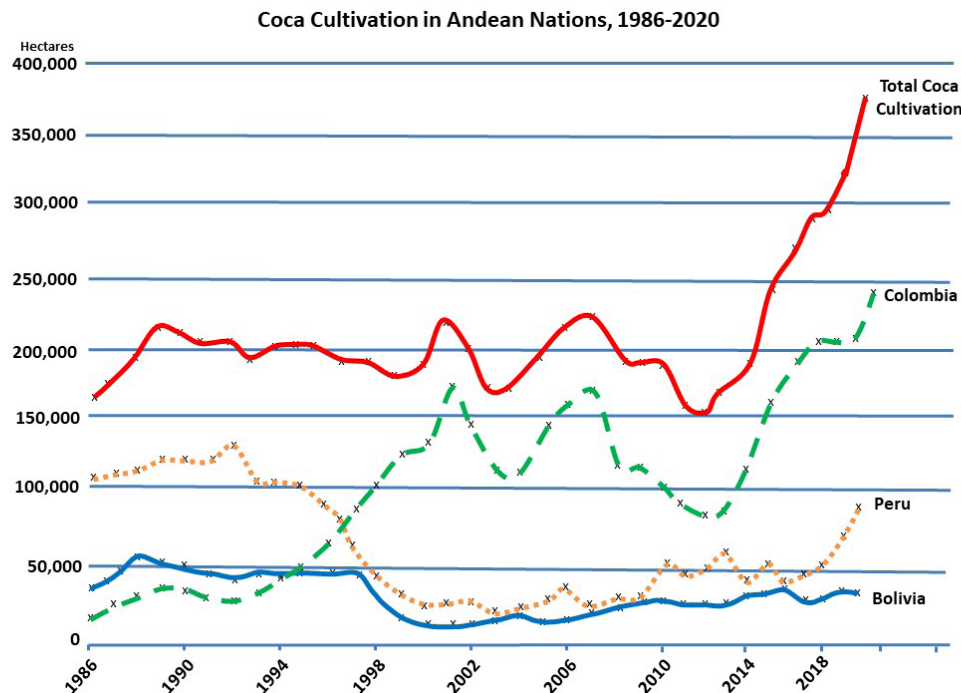
that resulted in the coca bloom.<sup>4</sup> First, as a result of the positive trends in the reduction of cultivated areas for coca, the Colombian government reduced the funds it dedicated to the effort. Coca eradication normally occurred through two methods, aerial spraying with chemical pesticides and manual eradication. The former involved a fleet of planes (many of them provided by the U.S. and flown by U.S. contracted pilots). The plans would swoop low over coca fields and crop dust the coca plants with chemicals such as glyphosate. The second method, manual eradication, was a much more dangerous process. Workers – often escorted by Colombia Army soldiers – would pull the coca plants out by the roots and then burn them. However, traffickers often placed land mines or improvised explosive devices (IED) in the coca fields or attacked the workers as they attempted to destroy the illegal crops. Hundreds of workers and their security escorts were killed and an estimated 1,000 others were injured in these attacks.

In 2015, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that glyphosate, the principal chemical used in aerial spraying, was a potential carcinogen that could cause cancer in people who ingested it. The cessation of aerial spraying combined with the reduction of manual eradication efforts gave coca growers a chance to rebound. In 2016, coca farmers had an estimated 188,000 hectares under cultivation, almost 20,000 more hectares than had ever been planted in the history of the country.

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<sup>3</sup> Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, “International Narcotics Control Strategy Report; Vol I: Drug and Chemical Control,” Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of State, March 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Adam Isacson, “Confronting Colombia’s Coca Boom Requires Patience and a Commitment to the Peace Accords,” Washington Office on Latin America, 13 March 2017; Adam Isacson, “Restarting Aerial Fumigation of Drug Crops in Colombia is a Mistake,” Washington Office on Latin America, 7 Mar 2019.



**Figure 1. Coca Cultivation in the Andean Nations from 1986-2018.** Since the late 1990s, Colombia has led its neighbors in the number of hectares of coca under cultivation. However, the amount of coca under cultivation in Colombia has increased to 250 percent of what it was in 2012. Peru has also seen a recent uptick in coca cultivation, doubling in just five years from 44,000 hectares in 2016 to 88,000 hectares in 2020. Bolivia, in contrast, has remained consistently low in the amount of coca cultivation. Source: Data from 1986-2018 from National Drug Control Strategy Data Supplement, 2020 (table 164). Data for 2019 and 2020 from ONDCP Drug Control Data Dashboard (topic 4).

Isacson points out other reasons for the coca bloom in Colombia.<sup>5</sup> As part of the peace efforts that began in August 2012, representatives of the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) agreed to examine a number of contentious issues, one of which was finding a solution to the problem of illicit drugs.<sup>6</sup> By May 2014, the two parties had reached a tentative resolution in which the government agreed to subsidize coca farmers. In other words, coca farmers would be compensated monetarily if they ceased growing coca. To be eligible for the benefits, farmers had to demonstrate they were coca farmers dependent on

the income the plant provided. As a result, interest in coca farming surged significantly as farmers who had stopped growing coca started to do so in order to collect the government subsidies. By 2018, coca planted in Colombia covered 208,000 hectares, more than a 250 percent rise from just five years earlier and the largest amount in the history of the country. Thanks to a mix of public policy decisions, unforeseen consequences, and the controversial Colombia Peace Process, most of the progress achieved in the fight against cocaine production during the previous two decades was lost in the last seven years.

### *Record Amounts of Cocaine*

As we estimated in our 2014 report, *Measuring Success in the War on Drugs*, it takes about two years for the entire process – harvest to street sale – to occur. Historically, cocaine from Colombia was developed from coca leaves imported from Peru and Bolivia

<sup>5</sup> Adam Isacson, *Confronting Colombia's Coca Boom Requires Patience and a Commitment to the Peace Accords*, Washington Office on Latin America, 13 March 2017; Adam Isacson, "Restarting Aerial Fumigation of Drug Crops in Colombia is a Mistake," Washington Office on Latin America, 7 Mar 2019.

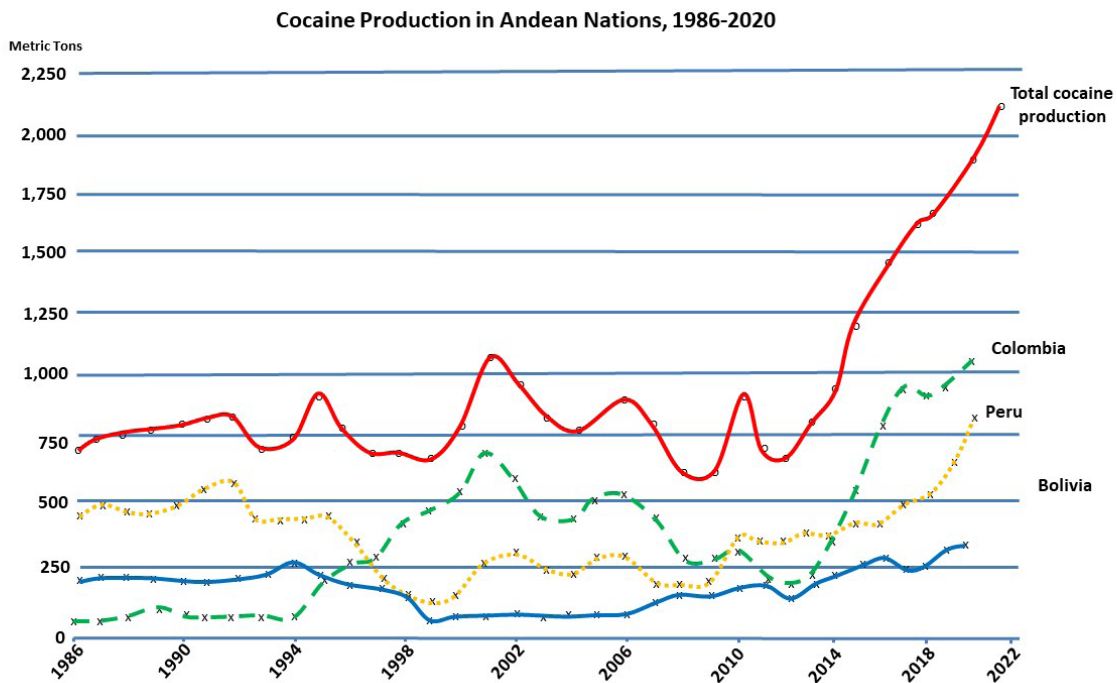
<sup>6</sup> A General Agreement for the Termination of the Conflict and the Construction of a Stable and Lasting Peace (in Spanish, *Acuerdo General para la Terminación del Conflicto y la Construcción de una Paz Estable y Duradera*) was signed by representatives of the Colombian government and the FARC on August 26, 2012 in Havana, Cuba.

and then transformed into coca paste in jungle drug laboratories in the country. With Colombia leading all nations in coca cultivation, that supply chain of coca leaves is now shortened, making it easier for traffickers to get their raw product to drug laboratories hidden deep inside the Colombia jungle. Once dried and packaged, it is transported to the Pacific or Caribbean coasts where it is shipped north. Whereas in the 1980s, cocaine was shipped across the Caribbean Sea into southern Florida, most of the drugs are now transported along the Central American corridor and into Mexico. The illegal narcotics can be transported by fishing vessel, go-fast speedboats, or semi-submersible. Once the drugs are offloaded in Central America, the shipments may be broken down into smaller ones and transported north by vehicle toward the U.S.-Mexico border.

The surge in coca cultivation contributed to

windfall harvests of cocaine. By 2018, traffickers were producing more than 350 percent of the number of metric tons of cocaine than they had in 2012. An estimated 900 hundred metric tons were produced in Colombia. In neighboring Peru, traffickers also had a bountiful year, producing more than 500 metric tons in Peru, an amount not seen in the country since the early 1990s. From the three Andean source countries – Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia – the amount of metric tons had doubled from 2013 to 2018.

The Colombia coca bloom and associated surge in cocaine production will have serious repercussions for governments in the Western Hemisphere. Cocaine leaves a trail of violence and corruption behind it. From the moment the coca leaf is removed from the plant, through the chemical transformation process into cocaine and the transport of the illegal drug to markets in North America, cocaine trafficking contributes to the violence that had made the Western



**Figure 2. Cocaine Production in the Andean Nations from 1986-2020.** Cocaine production has dramatically increased in the region. Both Colombia and Peru have seen marked growth since 2012. According to ONDCP data, overall cocaine production in the Andean Region has increased to more than 2,100 metric tons, far surpassing the previous record of 1055 metric tons set in 2001. Source: Data from 1986 to 2018 drawn from the Data Supplement (table 164) of the National Drug Control Strategy 2020, produced annually by the U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP). Data from 2019 and 2020 drawn from the ONDCP Drug Control Data Dashboard (topic 4).

Hemisphere the deadliest region of the world.

### *Goals in Colombia*

Colombia has attempted to slow the explosive growth of coca and cocaine. In 2020, Colombian forces managed to eradicate more coca fields than they had since 2012, with manual eradication efforts increasing to its highest levels since 2008. Part of the effort will be the restoration of aerial eradication. Colombia suspended aerial eradication of coca in 2015 because of the problems with glyphosate. In response to government efforts, the Colombian Constitutional Court set strict conditions to restore the program. The Court made additional requirements and clarifications to the aerial spraying program in July 2019 and the Duque Administration is attempting to comply with those requirements.<sup>7</sup>

Additionally, in 2018 U.S. and Colombian officials have vowed to reduce Colombia's coca cultivation and cocaine production to 50 percent of 2017 levels by the end of 2023. That would mean cocaine production would have to drop to 450 metric tons, half of the 900 metric tons produced in 2017. The U.S. Department of State admits that might be a tough goal to achieve; 2020 was the biggest bumper crop of cocaine in Colombian history with traffickers producing a record-breaking 1,010 metric tons.<sup>8</sup>

### *The Mexican Heroin Surge*

The second biggest development of the illegal drug market in the Western Hemisphere was the surge of opium and heroin in Mexico from 2013 to 2017. The U.S.'s southern neighbor supplies most of the heroin and methamphetamines that show up in illegal markets in U.S. cities. Two indicators reflect how severe

the problem has become in the past decade. First, in 2013 the amount of opium poppy being cultivated in Mexico has risen dramatically. Secondly, and directly associated with the first, the amount of heroin being produced in the country has hit record levels in 2017.

Historically, Afghanistan and the countries of the Golden Triangle (Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand) have been the world's largest producers and distributors of heroin. However, in the early 2000s, the governments of Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand managed to reduce the production of the illegal narcotic from their countries. In 2018, the amount of heroin from Laos and Thailand remained low while Myanmar (formerly Burma) continued to produce a significant amount, particularly in the politically disputed eastern province of Shan. However, Afghanistan remains the leading producer of opium poppy (the plant from which heroin is produced) in the world, producing four to five times more than the entire amount of opium of the countries of the Golden Triangle.<sup>9</sup>

Since 2007, the hectares of opium cultivated in Mexico and the number of metric tons of opium produced in Mexico has increased six-fold. Afghanistan still leads the world in both these indicators. In 2017, for example, Afghanistan had an estimated 329,000 hectares of opium poppies under cultivation. Myanmar and Mexico each had about 44,000 hectares of opium poppies, according to the ONDCP.<sup>10</sup> But, as shown in Figure 3, Mexico has emerged as the second largest producer of heroin in the world, producing 944 metric tons in 2017.<sup>11</sup>

As shown in Figure 4, Mexico produced 81 metric tons of heroin in 2016, surpassing Myanmar as the second-largest heroin provider. The amount of heroin in Mexico continues to grow; since 2005, the

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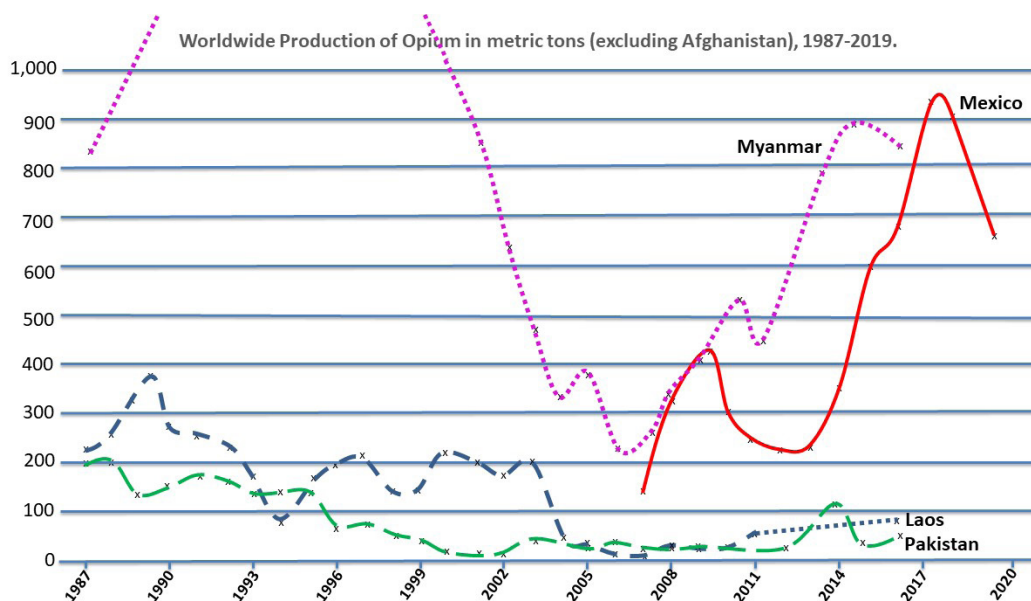
<sup>7</sup>Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, "International Narcotics Control Strategy Report; Vol I: Drug and Chemical Control," Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of State, March 2021, pp. 113-116.

<sup>8</sup>Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, "International Narcotics Control Strategy Report; Vol I: Drug and Chemical Control," Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of State, March 2021, pp. 113-116.

<sup>9</sup> ONDCP Data Supplement 2020, table 160.

<sup>10</sup> 2020 Data Supplement, table 161.

<sup>11</sup> ONDCP Data Supplement 2020, table 160 and 161.



**Figure 3. Worldwide Production of Opium (excluding Afghanistan) in metric tons.** Because of the focus on Mexico, this graph excludes opium production in Afghanistan which is almost ten times the amount in Mexico or Myanmar. Data on Mexico began in 2007 and ended for Myanmar in 2016. The takeaway should be obvious: opium production in Mexico more than quadrupled between 2012 and 2018. Source: Data Supplement (table 160), National Drug Control Strategy 2020, produced annually by the U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP). See also the ONDCP Drug Dashboard (topic 4).

amount of heroin produced in Mexico has increased 1200 percent, from eight metric tons in 2005 to 106 metric tons in 2018, according to the ONDCP.<sup>12</sup>

Mexico emerged as a producer of opium and heroin primarily to feed the demand for heroin in the United States. This represents a major concern for U.S. policy makers since 90 percent of the heroin that reaches the United States comes from Mexico. The growing heroin surge in Mexico is part of a complicated narcotics problem in its northern neighbor, a three-stage wave of addiction that has had profound effects in the United States for the past two decades. The crisis began in the early 1990s when opioids flooded U.S. communities in a marketing blitz by large pharmaceutical companies.<sup>13</sup> Addictions skyrocketed. When the federal government tightened restrictions on the distribution of the powerful narcotics, addicts turned toward a ready substitute, Mexican heroin. Starting around 2011, demand for

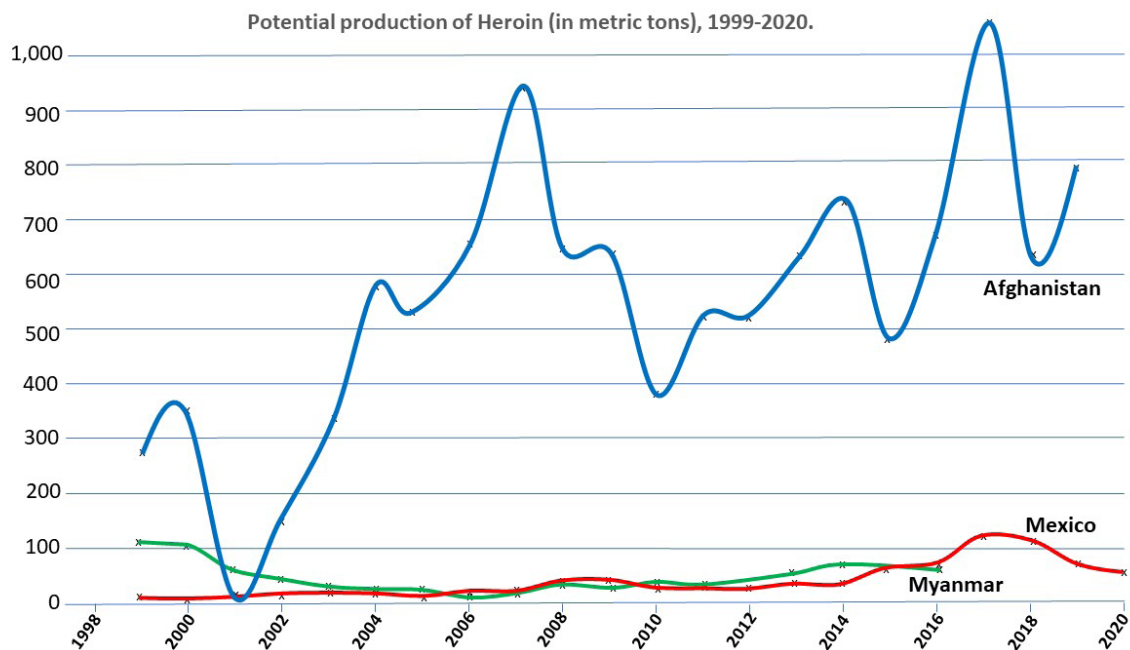
the powerful drug increased significantly in the U.S., and Mexican traffickers were more than willing to provide the drug for the North American consumers.

2018 marked an encouraging shift in the opium and heroin growth in Mexico. President Andrés Manuel López Obrador directed state resources to provide crop substitution programs to many of the opium poppy growers in the country. According to the U.S. Department of State, the result has been a reduction in the number of hectares of opium poppies and, as of late 2018, a surprising reduction in the amount of heroin being trafficked from the country. Heroin production dropped from its peak of 111 metric tons produced in 2017 to just 59 metric tons in 2020, a 47 percent drop in just three years.<sup>14</sup> Despite these positive trends, the situation in Mexico would soon take an ominous turn for the worse. However, the crop substitution programs of the Mexican government are only part of the story. A powerful and dangerous synthetic opioid would become the drug

<sup>12</sup> ONDCP Data Supplement 2020, table 163.

<sup>13</sup> Sarah Maslin Nir, "Inside Fentanyl's Mounting Death Toll: 'This Is Poison,'" *New York Times*, 20 Nov 2021; Spencer Bokak-Lindell, "Overdoses Have Skyrocketed During the Pandemic. How Do We Stop Them?," *New York Times*, 02 Dec 2021; Josh Katz and Margot Sanger-Katz, "It's Huge, It's Historic, It's Unheard-of": Drug Overdose Deaths Spike," *New York Times*, July 14, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> "The Office of National Drug Control Policy Announces the Third Consecutive Year of Reduction in Poppy Cultivation and Potential Heroin Production in Mexico," White House Briefing Room, June 10, 2021.



**Figure 4. Heroin Production (in metric tons).** Closely related to Figure 3, Mexico has emerged as the second largest producer of heroin in the world, surpassing Myanmar in 2016 but still trailing far behind Afghanistan. Data ends for Myanmar in 2016 and for Afghanistan in 2019. Much of the cause for the Mexican heroin surge is the demand for the narcotic in U.S. markets, part of an ongoing opioid crisis that has reached epidemic levels. Source: Data for 1999-2018 from Data Supplement (table 163), National Drug Control Strategy 2020, produced annually by the U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP). Data for 2019 and 2020 from ONDCP Drug Control Data Dashboard.

of choice, displacing opium growers and heroin traffickers in Mexico.

### *The Fentanyl Crisis*

The third part of the opioid crisis began in 2013 and involves perhaps the deadliest of the narcotics in the Western Hemisphere: fentanyl. Often used as a painkiller for severe cases of cancer, fentanyl has legitimate, legal uses. It is estimated to be 30-50 times stronger than heroin so a tiny amount can serve as a powerful, euphoric stimulant. Ingesting too much can be fatal. Only two milligrams of fentanyl – whether injected, inhaled, or absorbed through the skin – can kill a human. To put that in perspective, a sweetener packet provided at restaurants or coffee shops contains about 1,000 milligrams.<sup>15</sup>

Fentanyl is also less expensive than heroin, so

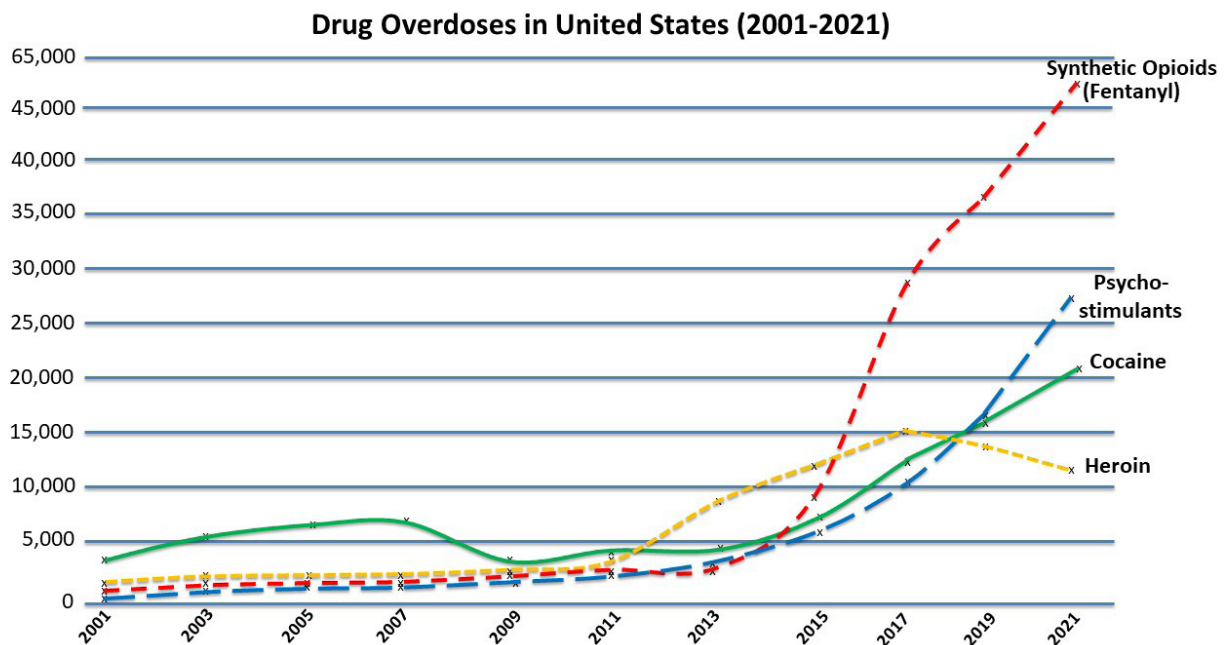
drug traffickers seeking to maximize profits have been “cutting” heroin with fentanyl.<sup>16</sup> In response to the reduction of opium cultivation in Mexico, drug dealers have had to resort to creative means by which to meet the demand of users in North America and other heroin markets. In 2013, U.S. border agents seized only two pounds of the powerful synthetic opioid. In 2018, that amount had skyrocketed to 2,463 pounds in 2018 and almost 4,000 pounds in 2020.<sup>17</sup> Somewhat paradoxically, the drug provides such a potent “high” that traffickers are lacing heroin to meet the fentanyl demand from users. In other words, fentanyl is both deadlier and cheaper than heroin, a truly frightening combination.

<sup>15</sup> Opening statement of Congressman Tim Murphy (R-PA), “Fentanyl: The Next Wave of the Opioid Crisis.” Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, U.S. House of Representatives, March 21, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> According to the DEA, a kilogram of heroin costs about \$90,000 but a kilogram of fentanyl costs only \$3,500 to \$7,000. Paige Winfield Cunningham, “Skyrocketing fentanyl seizures illustrate its growing contribution to opioid crisis,” *Washington Post*, 06 December 2017.

<sup>17</sup> “CBP Border Security Report: Fiscal Year 2018,” U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 05 Dec 2018; “CBP Enforcement Statistics Fiscal Year 2020; Paige Winfield Cunningham, “Skyrocketing fentanyl seizures illustrate its growing contribution to opioid crisis,” *Washington Post*, 06 December 2017.





**Figure 5. Overdose deaths in the United States, 2001-2021.** In April 2021, the number of Americans dying from drug overdoses surpassed 100,000, primarily because of the fentanyl that had been laced into black market opioids and other narcotics. Drug overdoses from cocaine and psychostimulants (methamphetamines) have also risen dramatically. Overdose deaths from heroin, however, have taken a downturn since 2017. Source: overdose data drawn from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) through its searchable database, called CDC Wonder. Link: <https://www.drugabuse.gov/drug-topics/trends-statistics/overdose-death-rates>

The result is the worst wave of drug overdoses in the history of the United States. In the twelve months ending in April 2021, more than 100,000 Americans died from drug overdoses, most caused by fentanyl-laced heroin or opioids. That number – a 30 percent increase from the previous twelve months - is more than the combined total of deaths from car accidents and gun shootings.<sup>18</sup> Fentanyl, a white powdery substance, is easy to mix with heroin because of its physical similarity. More than 40 percent of black-market prescription pills contain lethal amounts of fentanyl. Traffickers are even mixing the deadly drug into cocaine and methamphetamines also.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Josh Katz and Margot Sanger-Katz, “It’s Huge, It’s Historic, It’s Unheard-of”: Drug Overdose Deaths Spike,” *New York Times*, 14 July 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Sarah Maslin Nir, “Inside Fentanyl’s Mounting Death Toll: ‘This Is Poison,’” *New York Times*, 20 Nov 2021; Spencer Bokak-Lindell, “Overdoses Have Skyrocketed During the Pandemic. How Do We Stop Them?,” *New York Times*, 02 Dec 2021; Roni Caryn Rabin, “Overdose Deaths Reached Record High as the Pandemic Spread,” *New York Times*, 17 Nov 2021; Josh Katz and Margot Sanger-Katz, “It’s Huge, It’s Historic, It’s Unheard-of”: Drug Overdose Deaths Spike,” *New York Times*, July 14, 2021; Casey Schwartz, “How Fentanyl and Meth Took Over America,” *New York Times*, 02 Nov 2021.

### Conclusion

Cocaine, heroin, and fentanyl are the biggest revenue makers for transnational criminal organizations that traffic illegal narcotics. User demand in the United States and other lucrative markets draws the drugs north. As every kilogram of cocaine makes its way from the Andes foothills through the littoral waters of the Central American isthmus, the bundles are dispersed through multiple means of transport in the Northern Triangle countries and then into the hands of violent Mexican cartels who compete for control of the routes north. The drug trail leaves death and chaos along its path. The Colombia cocaine bloom – in part because of the removal of the critical tool for aerial eradication – is an ominous harbinger of the growing challenges facing Western Hemisphere nations.

The heroin and fentanyl epidemics in the U.S. are, in many ways, a self-inflicted wound. Opioid ad-

diction in the U.S. – much of it the responsibility of pharmaceutical companies who use immense profits to manipulate government oversight of their industry – led to the heroin epidemic in 2015 and the fentanyl crisis of 2017. The record number of overdoses from April 2020 to April 2021 took the lives of more than 100,000 Americans. For the foreseeable future, government leaders through the entire Western Hemisphere face a regional catastrophe that will continue to worsen if not addressed.

### **Authors' Biographies**

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