The balloon effect: The role of US drug policy in the displacement of unaccompanied minors from the Central American Northern triangle

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Abstract: In recent years there has been a significant increase in unaccompanied minors entering Mexico and the US from the Central American Northern Triangle. This displacement is being encouraged by factors both internal and external to the countries of origin of these unaccompanied minors, and can rightfully be considered one of the most significant migrant crises in recent memory. Drug-related violence and crime in this region is one of several factors underlying this displacement. It is clear that the increasing violence in the CANT is, in part, a consequence of failed US drug policies in Mexico and South America that have displaced drug-related criminal activity to CANT states. This paper provides an overview of the US drug policies that have played a significant role in the continued influx of unaccompanied minors, which prolongs the humanitarian crisis, and links them to past failed anti-drug efforts attempted by the US in other parts of Latin America.

Keywords: Central America; migration; unaccompanied minors; drug trafficking; drug policy

Introduction
In recent years, there has been a noticeable surge of migrants (particularly unaccompanied minors) entering Mexico and the US from the Central American Northern Triangle (CANT) nations of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2014; US Customs and Border Protection, 2015). In fiscal year 2014 alone, US Customs and Border Patrol agents apprehended (at the southern US border with Mexico) over 50,000 unaccompanied minors from CANT states (US Customs and Border Protection, 2015). Between October 1, 2008 and January 31, 2016, the total number of unaccompanied minors from the CANT countries apprehended at the US southern border was 139,162 (US Customs and Border Protection, 2016). Table 1 below shows the increasing trend of this influx from CANT states between fiscal year 2009 and the first 4 months of fiscal year 2016, as compared to the influx from Mexico during this time (US Customs and Border Protection, 2016).

It has been long recognized that the displacement of peoples out of Central America is motivated by a complex blend of “pull” (such as economic opportunities or family in the receiving country) and “push” factors (such as civil unrest or domestic violence; Hamilton and Chinchilla, 1991). However, a 2014 report from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees concluded that the influx of unaccompanied minors to the US from Mexico and CANT states can primarily be attributed to “push factors” such as poverty and personal and generalized violence. The violence that these children are fleeing is often the direct or secondary product of drug cartels, transnational and local/street gang activity (including forced gang recruitment) that is related to the broader system of drug com-
merce, and armed state actors associated with drug-related criminal activities (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2014).

Table 1. Unaccompanied alien children from the Central American Northern Triangle (CANT) and Mexico: Fiscal Years 2009-2015, FY 2016 (October 1, 2015 - January 31, 2016)

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>1,221</td>
<td>1,910</td>
<td>1,394</td>
<td>3,314</td>
<td>5,990</td>
<td>16,404</td>
<td>9,389</td>
<td>5,766</td>
<td>45,388</td>
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<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>1,115</td>
<td>1,517</td>
<td>1,565</td>
<td>3,835</td>
<td>8,068</td>
<td>17,057</td>
<td>13,589</td>
<td>7,520</td>
<td>54,266</td>
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<tr>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>968</td>
<td>1,017</td>
<td>974</td>
<td>2,997</td>
<td>6,747</td>
<td>18,244</td>
<td>5,409</td>
<td>3,152</td>
<td>39,508</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CANT subtotals</td>
<td>3,304</td>
<td>4,444</td>
<td>3,933</td>
<td>10,146</td>
<td>20,805</td>
<td>51,705</td>
<td>28,387</td>
<td>139,162</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>16,114</td>
<td>13,724</td>
<td>11,768</td>
<td>13,974</td>
<td>17,240</td>
<td>15,634</td>
<td>11,012</td>
<td>3,726</td>
<td>103,192</td>
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<tr>
<td>TOTALS for CANT &amp; Mexico</td>
<td>19,418</td>
<td>18,168</td>
<td>15,701</td>
<td>24,120</td>
<td>38,045</td>
<td>67,339</td>
<td>39,399</td>
<td>20,164</td>
<td>242,354</td>
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Source: US Customs and Border Protection (2016)

Youth fleeing CANT states do not typically choose to leave their homes willingly; rather, they decide that they must leave their places of origin and migrate to where they have family, whether that be the US, Mexico, or another Central American nation (Kennedy, 2014). This counters the prevailing popular rhetoric in the United States, which suggests that unaccompanied minors from Latin America are principally motivated to enter the US specifically due to “pull factors” such as economic opportunities, a promise of amnesty, or lax border security. In reality, child displacement from the CANT nations is typically a forced “last resort” for these individuals, who would ideally prefer to remain in their home countries (Kennedy, 2014).

Although there has been considerable media attention in the US directed toward the issue of unaccompanied minor displacement from the CANT countries, few of these reports have meaningfully linked this phenomenon with one of the root causes of such displacement - the long history of interventionist US policies and geopolitics intended to control the production and trafficking of illicit drugs throughout the hemisphere.

What is Driving the Displacement of Minors Out of the CANT?
The internal pressures that are pushing people to migrate out of the CANT states are both enormous and clear. Following decades of armed civil conflict, the formal governmental power structures within Guatemala and El Salvador have been severely damaged, and are unresponsive to the needs of impoverished citizens (Demombynes, 2011; Dudley, 2011). Throughout the region, authority has increasingly shifted from central governments to an emerging power network residing with numerous transnational criminal organizations, local/regional gangs, and corrupt police, military, and governmental employees that work in concert (either by choice or by force) with these groups (Carpenter, 2015; Dudley, 2011; Farah, 2013).

In the CANT, national, regional, and local economies have been systematically undermined by crime and corruption to the point where licit and illicit activities can no longer be clearly distinguished, and few economic development and educational opportunities exist (Dudley, 2011; Farah, 2013). Dysfunctional state structures have fostered a low confidence in the police and efficacy of the criminal justice systems of CANT nations, which further contributes to a sense of disenfranchisement and hopelessness amongst residents (Demombynes, 2011; Dudley, 2011; Main, 2014). Impoverished citizens may have little to no access to the public works, services, and assistance programs that highly-functioning governments typically provide, and are largely on their own to survive in this challenging environment (Farah 2013).

At present, violence that differentially affects the lower social classes is endemic throughout many regions of the CANT states, particularly in Honduras and El Salvador (Assessment Capacity Project 2014). The Honduran city of San Pedro Sula currently has the second highest homicide rate in the
world, with San Salvador (El Salvador) and Distrito Central (Honduras) following close behind on this dubious list (Seguridad, Justica y Paz, 2016). A notable proportion of this violence stems from the increasing geostrategic importance of the CANT countries to international criminal organizations as a central transshipment point for cocaine (Assessment Capacity Project, 2014; Demombynes, 2011; Dudley, 2011; Farah, 2013).

Governments in the CANT have a long history of instability, weakness, and corruption—traits that have been exploited by international criminal organizations and have pushed these governments to the point of being generally unresponsive to the needs of poor and disenfranchised citizens (Carpenter, 2015; Dudley, 2011; Farah, 2013). Drug trafficking operations are commonly directed by current and former members of the government and military, as well as from within the region’s prisons (Demombynes, 2011). This chaos and corruption has created a situation where many governmental actors and activities cannot be meaningfully distinguished from those of the embedded Mexican (Los Zetas) and other transnational criminal organizations, including The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and Hezbollah (Dudley, 2011; Farah, 2013).

The CANT is greatly challenged by the activities of thousands of gang members from two large transnational organizations (maras): Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Dieciocho (Calle-18/Mara-18/M-18); as well as many local street gangs (pandillas; Farah, 2013; Grillo, 2016; Jutersonke, Muggah, & Rogers, 2009). Originating in Los Angeles CA, Salvatrucha and Dieciocho initially gained a foothold in CANT following a crackdown on street gangs in the US, wherein thousands of gang members were deported to their home countries and brought LA-style gang culture with them (Demombynes, 2011; Grillo, 2016; Seelke, 2014; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2012). These maras are central players in a wide variety of illicit activities including kidnapping, extortion, robbery, loan sharking, labor racketeering, money laundering, and human and transnational drug trafficking (Farah, 2013; Grillo, 2016; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2012). Regional territorial organized crime groups (such as Los Mendozas, Los Lorenzanas, and Los Chamales) function to control individual territories in the CANT, where larger transnational organizations with which they are allied (such as Los Zetas, Salvatrucha, and Dieciocho) conduct their trafficking operations (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2012).

Although the principle activities of local street gangs (which are most directly responsible for the types of violent activities that push youth out of CANT countries) include localized criminal acts such as muggings, petty theft, and the extortion of local businesses, they are also involved in the small scale/local trafficking and sale of drugs (Grillo, 2016; Jutersonke, Muggah, and Rogers, 2009). Little insight regarding the specific activities and extent of street gangs in the CANT can be obtained from official records, which are often misleading due to incomplete/problematic data collection, under-reporting, and an intentional distortion of data for political gain (Jutersonke, Muggah, and Rogers, 2009). However, it is clear that local street gangs in the CANT have evolved into a small and localized, but increasingly enmeshed, cog in the greater transnational drug trafficking machine; thus directly implicating the commerce in drugs as one of several causes of the crisis of unaccompanied minors from the CANT (Grillo, 2016; Jutersonke, Muggah, and Rogers, 2009). The lack of educational and economic opportunities for young men in CANT nations exacerbates both the street gang problem and humanitarian crisis, as marginalized youth are readily recruited (often against their will) into these street gangs; forcible recruitment is one of the key factors pushing minors out of the CANT (Assessment Capacity Project, 2014; Grillo, 2016; Seelke, 2014).

Given the multiple challenges faced by CANT citizens, it is easy to see why many would be motivated to move northward to Mexico and the US Southward movement is limited by both ongoing political and economic unrest in South America and the geographical barrier of the Darién Gap (Dudley, 2011). This displacement is occurring despite the many perils faced by those fleeing on their journey north, including: (1) Debt (monies paid to coyotes, etc.); (2) Limited/no access to adequate food, clean water, and health and protective services en route; (3) Risk of physical and sexual violence, kidnapping, and extortion while travelling; (4) Forced recruitment into illicit sex work or human traf-
ficking; (5) Physical mutilation and disability (such as concussions and loss of limbs) from muggings, beatings, or hitching rides on the Mexican freight train system; and, (6) Abuse and violence in detention centers (Assessment Capacity Project, 2014; Casillas, 2011). Although recent controls in Mexico have appeared to reduce the numbers of riders on Mexican freight trains, travelling across Mexico by other means (by foot, by bus) also exposes those fleeing CANT states to significant physical peril (Martinez, 2013).

But just how did the CANT region became a hemispheric hub of transnational drug trafficking as well as one of the most violent and economically challenged places on Earth? In no small measure, the answer lays in the sordid history of US interventionist anti-narcotics efforts throughout Latin America.

The Role of US Drug Policies in the Humanitarian Crisis of Unaccompanied Minors

In its decades-long anti-narcotic efforts in Latin America, the US has consistently enacted policies that over simplified the complex socioeconomic causes of narco violence and favored overly militarized approaches to reduce drug production and trafficking (Main, 2014). The $1.3 billion Clinton-era Plan Colombia made Colombia the third largest recipient of US military aid, after Israel and Egypt (Stokes, 2001). A large majority of the billions of dollars spent on Plan Colombia, the Andean Regional Initiative, the Mérida Initiative, and the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) have been dedicated to military assistance, with little being spent on impactful social/economic development, judicial reform, or prevention and rehabilitation programs (Amatangelo, 2001; Main, 2014; Seelke & Finklea, 2014). This de-emphasis of meaningful economic stimulus is particularly troubling, as systemic poverty creates a vacuum that is all too often filled by drug production, trafficking, and related violence. To date, attempts at alternative agricultural development initiatives in the Latin America have failed, principally because much of the region lacks the civil stability, infrastructure, and markets that are required in order to successfully compete against large-scale international agribusiness (Amatangelo, 2001; Mansfield, 2011).

Because coca, opium poppy, and marijuana eradication efforts have been initiated before meaningful alternative development plans have been put in place, the destruction of drug crops has significantly worsened rural poverty throughout Latin America (Amatangelo, 2001; Mansfield, 2011). This creates a vicious cycle of poverty, wherein rural farmers are left with no choice but to cultivate drugs. The destruction of illicit crops results in significant peasant dislocations, reduces an already eroded trust in the government, and may encourage farmers to join insurgent groups or force them to partner with criminal organizations (Amatangelo, 2001; Mansfield, 2011).

The US’s militarized response to drug production in the Western Hemisphere is further complicated by the reality that drugs and civil conflict are tightly enmeshed. Colombia, Peru, and Mexico all provide hemispheric examples of civil conflicts where one or more parties have utilized narco trafficking to generate revenue that is employed to finance armed insurgent activities (Cornell, 2005). Such funding has become more common in recent decades, as 3rd party financing of conflict proxies by global powers has generally decreased since the end of the Cold War (Cornell, 2005). Funds generated through narco trafficking have taken on a particularly heightened importance following September 11, 2001, as international banking measures engineered to combat the financing of so-called “terrorist” groups have made it increasingly difficult for these groups to bankroll their activities (Cornell, 2005). As leftist guerrilla groups in Latin America increasingly utilize drugs as a monetary lifeline, the focus of US Andean policy has shifted from anti-drug to that of counter terror and counterinsurgency (Petras, 2000; Stokes, 2001; Sweig, 2002).

Despite the end of the Cold War, the US continues to strive for political dominance over the rest of the Western Hemisphere, often at the expense of peace, political stability, and human rights. It has been suggested that these activities are conducted in a bid to help secure access to natural resources (especially petroleum), cheap labor, and friendly trading partners (Main, 2014; Paley, 2014; Petras, 2000; Scott, 2003; Stokes, 2001; 2003). Attempts at hemispheric hegemony by the US may also be
driven by the perceived threat of a “new anti-American narrative” promoted by political allies of the late Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez (Main, 2014). To this end, the US has repeatedly used foreign policy instruments intended to combat the drug trade as tools to affect the political outcomes of civil conflicts throughout the hemisphere (Petras, 2000; Scott, 2003). Because the parties in Latin American civil conflicts that are considered to be “unfriendly” to US political and corporate interests often use drugs to finance their insurgencies, it has been politically expedient for the US to redirect financial, military, and intelligence resources intended to combat drug production against these specific groups (Petras, 2000; Scott, 2003; Stokes, 2001; 2003). As US Representative John Conyers (D-MI) states in the documentary film Plan Colombia: Cashing in on the Drug War Failure (Ungerman & Brohy, 2005):

“If you call them narco-guerrillas, you can then turn on people that are prosecuting a civil war, and can consider them to be drug-runners, and then you can use the same helicopters and weapons and pilots against the people in the civil war, saying, well, they’re drug runners.”

It is particularly unfortunate that US-backed antinarcotics efforts in Colombia have been focused against drug-taxing neo-Marxist insurgent groups (such as FARC) that oppose free-market capitalism, while largely turning a blind eye to violent paramilitaries sympathetic to US economic interests (Stokes, 2001; 2003). These paramilitary groups (such as the United Self Defense Forces of Colombia-AUC) are centrally involved in drug production and distribution, and are widely recognized as systematic abusers of human rights (Stokes, 2001; 2003; Sweig, 2002). To this end, the US “War on Drugs” in Latin America has primarily functioned to contain radical armed opposition to neo-liberal economic policies (Paley, 2014; Petras, 2000; Stokes, 2001; 2003). This “war” is primarily a political instrument and has, in actuality, little to do with drug control (Paley, 2014; Petras, 2000; Scott, 2003; Stokes, 2001; 2003; Sweig, 2002). This simple fact accounts for why US-backed efforts have not negatively affected drug production or price, while they have simultaneously fostered political, social, and economic instability in every region they have been enacted (Paley, 2014; Scott, 2003; Stokes, 2001; 2003; Sweig, 2002).

By nearly any measure, the US’s drug-reduction efforts in Mexico and the Andean region can be considered a failure (Global Commission on Drug Policy, 2014). This overly-militarized approach has resulted in significant increases in production, decreases in price, and political and social collateral damage that fosters impoverished and chaotic environments where drug production, commerce, and use can thrive (Global Commission on Drug Policy, 2014; Gootenberg, 2012). Perhaps the most significant result of US policy has been the serial displacement of drug trafficking and associated violence from one region to another within the hemisphere. This phenomenon is often referred to as the “balloon” (or “sausage”) effect (Klein, 2008). Just as how pressing on one part of a balloon causes other parts of the balloon to expand, US pressure applied to drug activities in one region has consistently resulted in these activities simply moving to a different, less-scrutinized area and continuing largely unabated (Klein, 2008). Following decades of US antinarcotics operations in the Americas, cocaine is increasingly being trafficked through West Africa, where traffickers have taken advantage of regional political instability and the geographic proximity to markets in Europe (Aning and Pokoo, 2014).

As US-backed efforts gradually displaced cocaine trafficking operations from the central Andes, to Andean Colombia, and then to Mexico, each “re-centering” of cocaine commerce has resulted in significant escalations of violence and social/political/economic harms to the affected country/region (Gootenberg, 2012). The truly horrific violence that characterized Ciudad Juárez and much of the rest of the northern Mexican state of Chihuahua in 2007-2012 (including the world’s highest homicide rate in 2009) largely stemmed from drug-related criminal activity that was pushed out of Colombia (Bowden, 2010). As drug-related activities have begun to transit from northern Mexico to the CANT, so too has related violence—with San Pedro Sula, Honduras currently boasting the world’s second highest homicide rate while Ciudad Juárez’s is no longer amongst the top 50 cities worldwide (Seguridad, Justica y Paz, 2016).
The Mérida Initiative was “successful” insofar that it has produced some pocketed reduction in drug crime in Mexico. But these criminal activities haven’t vaporized into the ether; the transnational Mexican criminal organizations have simply expanded their activities to the more hospitable CANT where they have purchased millions of acres of land, fully enmeshed themselves with the governments of the region, and acquired widespread functional territorial control (Carpenter, 2015; Farah, 2013; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2012). The hemispheric cocaine trade has become increasingly anchored in Peru (as a source) and the CANT (as a transshipment point) with approximately 80% of the cocaine destined for the US market now funneling through Central America (Farah, 2013; Zech, 2014). As suggested by Gootenberg (2012) the CANT is developing structural systems of endemic violence, crime, gang activity, governmental corruption, and civil strife at levels previously experienced by Mexico and Colombia, and the upsurge in these ills parallels the increasing presence of transnational drug trafficking syndicates (such as Los Zetas and the Sinaloa Federation) in this region (Farah, 2013).

While the US repeatedly employs the same militarized strategy to deal with international trafficking organizations, the organizations themselves remain flexible and continue to exploit whatever opportunities become available. For example, Los Zetas operating in the CANT have shifted their focus from developing and maintaining cocaine trafficking networks to a broad portfolio of criminal enterprises including forgery, weapons trafficking, and the taxation of drugs, prostitution, and human trafficking in areas they control (Farah, 2013; Martinez, 2013; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2012). Additionally, Los Zetas have derived considerable income from the theft of gasoline and other petroleum products from Mexico’s state-run oil company (PEMEX) and the sale of these products in Guatemala (Farah, 2013).

It is clear that the long history of militarized US drug policy is largely to blame for fostering the conditions that underlie the current crisis of unaccompanied minors leaving the CANT. It is important to note that Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador are “innocent bystanders” in the international drug war (Demombynes, 2011). High-level operational leadership in transnational criminal networks has not originated from within these countries, and because CANT nations lack the financial resources to address cartel activities within their borders, they have served as “second homes” for organizations displaced by the “War on Drugs” out of the US, Colombia, and Mexico (Demombynes, 2011).

As the US continues to push militarized plans like the Central America Regional Security Initiative (Carsi), the violence, corruption, lack of economic opportunities, and degradation of governmental efficacy produced by these policies in Colombia and Mexico are currently being re-created in the CANT. With its militarized focus, CarSI has appeared to increase rates of violent crime in the CANT, rather than reduce it (Main, 2014). It is these effects that make the CANT unlivable for so many, and produce the internal pressure that is driving desperate citizens of the CANT to Mexico and the United States in search of a better life.

**Future Policy Directions for the United States**

As conditions in Central America worsen, it is likely that the US will continue to intervene in the region by recycling the same hemispheric strategies used in the past. Such an approach will only perpetuate the cycle of past harms, and will continue to push drug crime into other destabilized regions, such as West Africa (Aning and Pokoo, 2014; Demombynes, 2011; Ellis, 2009; Náim, 2011; Shaw, 2015). The George W. Bush administration likened its Andean anti-narcotics policy (focusing on military assistance and crop eradication with minimal support for alternative development) to a “three-legged stool” (Amatangelo, 2001). But, like any three-legged stool (particularly one with one small and two large legs), this approach has proven to be inherently wobbly and unstable. There is every reason to believe that if the US continues to attempt to deal with the growing drug trafficking problem in the CANT with programs like CarSI that simply recycle the militarized thrusts of Plan Colombia and the Mérida Initiative, this effort will do little to reduce drug use, price, availability, or related violence and social ills, and will produce significant unforeseen consequences (Meyer & Seelke, 2014).
One such unanticipated outcome has been the rapid rise of self-defense groups (auto defenses) in the Mexican state of Michoacán. Because the Mérida Initiative has been minimally effective in stemming drug violence across the entirety of Mexico, Michoacán residents have taken the law into their own hands and formed armed vigilante groups that have achieved considerable success in weakening the Knights Templar drug cartel (Grillo 2014; 2016; Seelke & Finklea, 2014). The power of such irregular armed groups is worrisome, particularly since they recruit former Knights Templar members and others with criminal records and may receive material support from the Jalisco New Generation cartel (with whom the Knights Templar compete for territory; Grillo 2014; 2016). Although the auto defenses appear to be generally serving in the best interest of Michoacán citizens, there is no guarantee that these unregulated groups won’t, at some point, commit egregious human rights abuses in the name of “public safety” or themselves morph into a criminal organization. Significant additional questions about these groups include: (1) how will they be disbanded/demobilized if the security situation improves? and, (2) how will these groups be prevented from becoming permanent paramilitary organizations with their own independent agendas? (Grillo, 2016; Seelke & Finklea 2014). Given the general weakness of central governments in the CANT, fostering an environment that is fertile ground for the growth of vigilante auto defenses is a certain recipe for disaster.

A lack of sustainable economic development and infrastructure and weak central governments throughout the CANT collectively breeds poverty, crime, violence, and civil strife. Based on the outcomes of Plan Colombia, the Andean Regional Initiative, the Mérida Initiative, and CARSI, it is clear that overtly military strategies and the “propping” up of actors in civil conflicts that are sympathetic to US political and economic interests is not appropriate. Nor is an approach that focuses on intercepting shipments or destroying drugs at the source, as decades of drug prohibition in the US has made clear that as long as there is a demand, there will be a supply. Instead, the US should focus on hemispheric anti-drug policies that emphasize: (1) demand-side domestic drug programs that focus on the treatment and prevention of drug use by US consumers; (2) real, meaningful, and sustainable economic development that is individually tailored to each country/region, rather than a “one size fits all” approach”; (3) peaceful, non-military support for governmental stability in Colombia, Mexico, Peru, and Central America; and, (4) support for new comprehensive local/regional violence reduction and organized crime suppression strategies in the CANT that attempt to address the root causes of gang formation and activities. The militarized “hard hand” (manodura) strategies used by CANT governments to fight gangs have not worked, and may have served to increase violence through the radicalization of gang members and potential recruits (Jutersonke, Muggah, and Rogers, 2009).

Although preventive and rehabilitative anti-gang interventions (manoaamiga/manoextendida; “friendly hand”/“extended hand”) have also been attempted, they have been minimally effective (Jutersonke, Muggah, and Rogers, 2009). However, because manoamiga/manoextendida programs have not been subject to meaningful monitoring and programmatic evaluation, the reasons for this apparent lack of efficacy are not well understood (Jutersonke, Muggah, and Rogers, 2009). Although the levels of violence in northern Mexico have plummeted in recent years, Mexico does not necessarily provide a model of intervention that CANT nations should emulate. Reductions in violence in Juarez seem to be the result of one actor in a bloody turf battle (the Sinaloa cartel) emerging victorious, and not the consequence of intentional governmental intervention (Carpenter, 2015). Rather than follow general “one-size-fits-all” models, future anti-drug and anti-gang initiatives in the CANT must recognize the unique mix of causal factors present in each CANT nation, rather than treat the region as a singular monolith. In order to prevent continued geographical displacement of criminal activity, it is also critical that all future intervention programs are coordinated between involved nations in a detailed fashion (Shifter, 2012; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2012). Action must also be taken to stop the flow of weapons from the United States into CANT, as the US appears to be a major source for firearms utilized by Mexican and Central American criminal syndicates (Shifter, 2012).
It is also perhaps time for the US to seriously consider systematic and regulated decriminalization or legalization of recreational drugs. The principle profit in trafficking drugs comes from moving these goods illicitly across international borders. For example, a kilo of cocaine worth US$1,000 in Colombia rises in value to US$13,000 as it moves through Central America to Guatemala (Demombynes, 2011). In the US, this same kilo has a wholesale street value of US$30,000 and a retail value of over US$170,000 (Demombynes, 2011). These huge profits are never realized by street dealers or coca growers, and are retained by the transnational trafficking groups. Removing this profit stream would destroy an important source of income for gangs, criminal organizations, and violent political insurgents throughout Latin America, and would likely result in reduced violence throughout the region.

It is unfortunate that the decades long “War on Drugs” has produced such significant collateral damage. But perhaps even more troubling is the US’s inability (or refusal) to recognize the substantial human costs of this war, and appropriately change course. The recent influx of unaccompanied minors from CANT nations into Mexico and the US is simply the latest in a series of negative international fallout from the drug war. Initiatives, such as the Inter-American Development Bank-backed Plan for the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle of Central America, are likely to perpetuate the support of militarized anti-drug policies that focus on the destruction/interception of illicit substances and the dismantling of trafficking groups rather than on reducing drug demand, facilitating meaningful alternative economic development, and finding local solutions to gangs. Thus, there is every reason to believe that humanitarian crises like these will continue to unfold wherever drug commerce occurs (McKibben, 2015).

References


