

## Part I: Frontlines: Production and Trade

Historically, the main focus of international drug control efforts has been the reduction of supply, and therefore the availability, of drugs on the streets in consumer countries. Supply reduction, as it is known, has taken the form of counternarcotics law enforcement/interdiction as well as forced crop eradication programs, particularly in Latin America, the so-called Golden Triangle in East Asia, and the Golden Crescent in the Middle East. This has long been criticized as developed nations imposing their problems on poorer developing countries. It is difficult to argue with this reasoning given the disproportionate expenditure on supply reduction in producer nations over treatment and harm reduction in those where demand drives the drug trade.<sup>1</sup>

Between all of the regions of production there is shared experience. First, forced crop eradication has not worked. While cultivation and production fluctuate for various reasons,<sup>2</sup> cocaine and heroin are as available on the streets as ever before. The situation has been succinctly described by the high-level Latin American Commission on Drugs and Democracy in its 2009 official statement: “We are farther than ever from the announced goal of eradicating drugs.”<sup>3</sup>

Second, forced crop eradication has had severe negative consequences, including for children, contributing to human displacement, violence, food insecurity, and further poverty.<sup>4</sup> School enrollment and child health have also been affected.<sup>5</sup> In Afghanistan, it is accepted at high levels that forced eradication has helped the Taliban to recruit. Richard Holbrook, who was the U.S. Special Envoy to the country, called it “the least effective program ever.”<sup>6</sup>

Third, programs to replace such crops with licit alternatives must be properly sequenced (i.e., alternatives in place before illicit crops are removed) to avoid plunging poor farming families further into poverty;<sup>7</sup> basic infrastructure must be developed to assist in production and sale (e.g., roads to transport crops to market, irrigation, and assistance to compete with bigger, better resources companies);<sup>8</sup> “monocropping of plants such as rubber trees and African palm must be avoided; and, to date, such programs, overall, have had limited effect on drug markets. “Alternative development” as such programs are known, is not dealt

with in detail here, though chapters 1 and 3 are certainly relevant.<sup>9</sup> It is an important area, however, especially given the strictures of the international legal system for drug control, which do not permit the cultivation of coca, opium poppy, and marijuana outside of narrowly defined exceptions.<sup>10</sup> There are various reports available for further reading.<sup>11</sup>

Transit routes, the avenues by which illicit substances reach the streets in consumer countries, are often areas of extreme violence and corruption, violence that surrounds and often directly involves children.<sup>12</sup> As with forced eradication, however, interdiction measures have not worked. Instead, as transit routes are interrupted by law enforcement, they move, spreading violence, corruption, increased drug use, and drug-related harms, to new countries and territories.<sup>13</sup> West Africa is the most recent victim of this, with Guinea Bissau being one of the countries most affected.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, law enforcement in many countries has become ever more draconian and violent, and in some cases militarized, with the army fighting the drug “war.”<sup>15</sup>

Part 1 deals with three countries that today represent the frontlines and public face of the war on drugs—Colombia and Afghanistan in relation to production, and Mexico as the most infamous transit country in the world.<sup>16</sup>

Colombia and Afghanistan are the primary sources of global cocaine and heroin supply, respectively, being by far the areas of the greatest production of coca and opium poppy. Both have been the subject of extensive forced eradication campaigns. They are also both mired in conflict, which, while not caused by the drug trade, in both countries is now intertwined with it. In Colombia the drug trade is a key source of funding for illegal armed groups, while in Afghanistan the Taliban benefits significantly from the opium trade.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, growers of illicit crops in both countries have two main things in common—poverty and vulnerability to violence and extortion. It is this environment in which the children of these families grow up.

Jess Hunter-Bowman’s chapter, “Real Life on the Frontlines of Colombia’s Drug War,” was commissioned for this book. Along with colleagues from Witness for Peace, Hunter-Bowman interviewed three young people who have all been affected in different ways by the drug trade and drug-fueled conflict. Colombia is currently the only country in the world in which aerial fumigation with chemicals is used as a means to eradicate illicit crops. Javier’s interview explains

the consequences of fumigation for poor families and the desire of those families to leave the trade in coca, which has brought them only suffering. His outlook is bleak. “I don’t think they will ever stop fumigating,” he says. The remaining two interviews highlight the scale of drug-related violence in the country, and the involvement of traffickers, police, military, and, indeed, children in that violence.

“Children: The Forgotten Victims in Mexico’s Drug War” focuses on the primary transit route for drugs coming from Latin America and destined for the U.S. market. Barely a day goes by without reports of horrific carnage in Mexico since President Felipe Calderón initiated the current war on drugs in the country, deploying tens of thousands of troops onto the streets. Aram Barra and Daniel Joloy work in Mexico focusing on drug policy and human rights and their chapter looks at killings of children and parents in the midst of the drug war; attacks on schools and rehabilitation centers, which have increased since the militarization of the campaign; and the psychological damage of conflict to children based on studies in other conflict zones. According to the authors, next to this collateral damage, the small gains in seizures and arrests are rendered “hollow and irrelevant.”

In the context of Afghanistan, Atal Ahmadzai and Christopher Kuonqui, in another piece commissioned for this book, have conducted interviews in Helmand, Kandahar, and Kabul on the practice of child bartering (selling) to pay opium debts when poppy crops fail through disease, natural shocks, or are eradicated in counternarcotics operations. It is an issue not just of drug control, of course, but of culture, tribalism, conflict, and poverty. The result, however, is a fundamental challenge to those who may equate farmers with traffickers, or see them as greedy opportunists, and the often simplistic views of crop eradication as a viable strategy. As noted by one social activist in the country “Opium farmers are the most vulnerable people in the opium cycle, and the uncoordinated war against opium further strengthens their social and economic vulnerabilities.” The chapter is an illustration of the depths of poverty in which farming communities live, and the cultural complexities involved in opium production in Afghanistan. “In the Shadows of the Insurgency in Afghanistan: Child Bartering, Opium Debt, and the War on Drugs” shows how children, and especially girls, bear the brunt of Afghanistan’s opium culture and counternarcotics strategies.

Finally, the section turns away from specific countries to the legal

and policy framework for production and trade itself. Steve Rolles's chapter, "After the War on Drugs: How Legal Regulation of Production and Trade Would Better Protect Children," asks whether a legally regulated model of production and trade, taken out of the hands of criminals and cartels, would better "protect" children from drugs—children who use them, children involved in transporting them, and children who farm them. Set against the harms of the drug war, Rolles's arguments are compelling in their lucidity and underlying morality.

## Endnotes

1. Some, however, also see this as a means to pursue other political objectives, such as strengthening foreign strategic positions. Based on these goals, the war on drugs can be seen as a resounding success. The history of the U.S. drug war in Latin America is perhaps the clearest example of this, justifying over many decades U.S. intervention in various sovereign states.
2. In 2009, for example, the Afghan opium poppy crop was badly hit by a blight that greatly affected cultivation.
3. *Drugs and Democracy: Towards a Paradigm Shift*, Statement by the Latin American Commission on Drugs and Democracy, 2009, [www.drogasedemocracia.org/Arquivos/declaracao\\_ingles\\_site.pdf](http://www.drogasedemocracia.org/Arquivos/declaracao_ingles_site.pdf).
4. International Harm Reduction Association, Human Rights Watch, Open Society Institute, and Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, *Human Rights and Drug Policy Briefing No. 6, "Crop Eradication,"* 2010, [www.ihra.net/files/2010/11/01/IHRA\\_BriefingNew\\_6.pdf](http://www.ihra.net/files/2010/11/01/IHRA_BriefingNew_6.pdf).
5. For example, research conducted in 2002 and 2003 by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime and published in 2005 in the Kokang Special Region 1 in Myanmar (Burma) found that eradication led to a 50 percent drop in school enrolment. Independent Evaluation Unit of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, *Thematic Evaluation of UNODC's Alternative Development Initiatives*, November 2005, 23–24. In its 2006 report on Colombia, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child noted it was "concerned about environmental health problems arising from the usage of the substance glyphosate in aerial fumigation campaigns against coca plantations (which form part of Plan Colombia), as these affect the health of vulnerable groups, including children." UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *Concluding Observations: Colombia*, June 8, 2006, UN Doc. No. CRC/C/ COL/CO/3, para. 72. These concerns were echoed by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Health in 2007 (P. Hunt, "Oral Remarks to the Press," Friday, September 21, 2007, Bogota, Colombia) and UN Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights in 2010 (*Concluding Observations: Colombia*, UN Doc. No. E/C.12/COL/CO/5, May 21, 2010, para. 28).
6. *Christian Science Monitor*, "US Changes Course on Afghan Opium," June 28, 2009.
7. In Burma and Laos, for example, "opium bans" were enforced before alternative sustainable livelihoods were in place, thereby leaving farmers with no source of income. With the additional problem of insufficient development assistance and the insistence on rubber as an alternative crop (which takes years to develop), the policy led to a humanitarian crisis requiring food aid. See Transnational Institute, *Withdrawal Symptoms: Changes in the Southeast Asian Drugs Market*, August 2008, [www.tni.org/briefing/withdrawal-symptoms-briefing/](http://www.tni.org/briefing/withdrawal-symptoms-briefing/).

8. As one nongovernmental organization expert put it, “We are expecting them to produce tons of fruit and vegetables to transport on trucks they do not have, on roads that literally do not exist, to sell in globalized markets against which they cannot compete.” Sanho Tree, Institute for Policy Studies, presentation at Bogota University, September 2009.
9. See, for example, Javier’s interview in chapter 1, in which he describes farmers’ desire for alternative livelihoods in Colombia.
10. Licenses can be obtained to grow opium poppy for medical and scientific purposes (e.g., production of morphine).
11. See, for example, UN Office on Drugs and Crime, *Alternative Development: A Global Thematic Evaluation, Final Synthesis Report* (Vienna, 2005); and Washington Office on Latin America, *Development First: A More Humane and Promising Approach to Reducing Cultivation of Crops for Illicit Markets*, March 2010.
12. On this, see also chapter 7, “Young Soldiers in Brazil’s Drug War,” by Michelle Gueraldi.
13. Drug-trafficking routes have been shown to have an effect on HIV transmission due to unsafe injecting drug use. See C. Beyrer et al., “Overland Heroin Trafficking Routes and HIV-1 Spread in South and South-East Asia,” *AIDS* 14, no. 1 (January 7, 2000): 75–83.
14. See T. McConnell, “The West Africa Connection: How Drug Cartels Found New Routes,” *Sunday Times* (UK), February 28, 2009; UN Office on Drugs and Crime, *Cocaine Trafficking in Western Africa: Situation Report*, October 2007; *Time Magazine*, “Guinea-Bissau: The World’s First Narco-State,” photo essay available at [www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1933291,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1933291,00.html); UN Office on Drugs and Crime, *The Globalisation of Crime: A Transnational Threat Assessment* (2010), 233–37; Emmanuelle Bernard, “Guinea Bissau: Drug Boom, Lost Hope,” *Open Democracy*, October 23, 2008.
15. See chapter 2 on Mexico and chapter 7 on Brazil. See also Human Rights Watch, *Not Enough Graves: War on Drugs, HIV and Violations of Human Rights in Thailand*, 2004, [www.hrw.org/en/reports/2004/07/07/not-enough-graves/](http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2004/07/07/not-enough-graves/); P. Gallahue, “Targeted Killing of Drug Lords: Traffickers as Members of Armed Opposition Groups and/or Direct Participants in Hostilities,” *International Journal on Human Rights and Drug Policy*, vol. 1 (2010), [www.humanrightsanddrugs.org/?p=977/](http://www.humanrightsanddrugs.org/?p=977/).
16. The Golden Triangle is not covered here, but it is an important region for understanding the global drug trade. For a recent report on this region see Transnational Institute, *Withdrawal Symptoms in the Golden Triangle: A Drugs Market in Disarray*, January 2009, [www.tni.org/report/withdrawal-symptoms-golden-triangle-4/](http://www.tni.org/report/withdrawal-symptoms-golden-triangle-4/).
17. See V. Felbab-Brown, *Shooting Up: Counterinsurgency and the War on Drugs* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2010).

# 1. Real Life on the Frontlines of Colombia's Drug War

*by Jess Hunter-Bowman*

At least one fact about Colombia is well known; Colombia exports drugs. Most people know two things and two things only about this South American country; it produces coffee and cocaine. Colombia's love affair with drugs began with marijuana production in the 1970s. In the early 1980s, the Medellín and Cali cartels expanded into cocaine production and trafficking. These two cartels, the Medellín cartel run by Pablo Escobar and the Cali cartel run by the Rodríguez Orejuela brothers, made their fortunes processing coca paste flown from the coca fields of Peru and Bolivia into cocaine, which was exported to markets in the United States and Europe.<sup>1</sup>

Due to multiple factors, coca production shifted from Peru into Colombia during the 1990s, making it the world's leading coca as well as cocaine producer. While a minor player globally, Colombia is also a significant heroin producer. The country's principal drug market is the United States, with a minority share making its way to Europe via West Africa. According to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), almost 90 percent of the cocaine and 60 percent of the heroin seized in the United States originates in Colombia.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, Colombia is home to a raging civil war, including the oldest and largest guerrilla group in the Western Hemisphere, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The multifaceted war pits two leftist guerrilla groups<sup>3</sup> against the Colombian Armed Forces who for more than two decades have worked with paramilitary groups to fight back the insurgency.<sup>4</sup> Many assert that Colombia's war is simply a drug war, suggesting guerrillas and paramilitaries are purely drug traffickers. While both groups are heavily involved in the drug trade, trafficking some drugs themselves and taxing all aspects of the trade, the single goal of the guerrillas is to overthrow the Colombian democracy to install a Marxist government. Solutions to Colombia's stubborn drug production and trafficking problems and its deadly civil war are connected, but distinct.

For four decades, the United States has spent billions of dollars in a failed attempt to disrupt the Andean cocaine trade. At the beginning

of the twenty-first century, the United States inserted itself in a new way into fighting Colombia's drug trade and propping up the country's ragtag Armed Forces. Since 2000, the United States has spent \$7.3 billion<sup>5</sup> on a fumigation program targeting coca production, spraying 1.2 million hectares;<sup>6</sup> on training and assistance to the Colombian military for counternarcotics and counterinsurgency activities; and on a secondary socioeconomic assistance program.

This assistance has brought with it modest security gains, reducing conflict-related attacks and deaths back to 1990s levels from their peaks in the early years of the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, this drug-fueled conflict killed 32,436 people between 1998 and 2008<sup>7</sup> and displaced an additional 3.4 million. The results are even worse on the counternarcotics front. Policymakers proclaimed that a full frontal assault on coca production through aerial fumigation would reduce production by 50 percent by 2005. Instead Colombian coca production, which appeared to be on the decline as production shifted back to Peru, actually increased by 17 percent over the ten-year period beginning in 1998.<sup>8</sup>

But the human cost of the drug trade and the drug war cannot be accurately measured by statistics. What follows are the stories of three children of the drug war—Colombian children whose lives have been torn apart by drug trafficking, armed groups funded by the drug trade, and punitive counternarcotics policies. These stories, although dramatic, are not unusual in Colombia. They are the untold stories of millions of innocent victims of the drug wars.

## Javier

Javier<sup>9</sup> was born and raised in Guaviare province in Colombia's Amazon basin. His was one of an estimated 59,000 households living off of small-scale coca production<sup>10</sup> before his family was displaced and broken apart by the counterdrug aerial spray program. By and large, these families turned to coca production not to get rich, but rather to cross the line from extreme poverty into poverty. The United Nations estimates the annual gross income for a family farming coca in 2009 was US\$8,710.<sup>11</sup> As eleven-year-old Javier eloquently explains, coca production is a last resort rather than a dream for Colombian farmers. They know coca production is a magnet for violence associated with Colombia's war as armed groups fight to tax drug production, as well

as indiscriminate aerial fumigation, which is purported to target coca fields but in practice destroys any and all crops in the area. Javier offers insights that have escaped many a counternarcotics policymaker; the vast majority of Colombia's coca farmers would jump at a way out, they are just looking for a sustainable alternative.

*My name is Javier. I am eleven years old and from a small farming community in Guaviare province. My family farmed coca and food crops. We had a small farm and didn't make much money off of the coca, but the money we made, we used to buy food for the house, seeds for food crops, and more land to raise a cow. The farmers around us did the same. If they had any money, it was because they had some coca. Nothing else makes money.*

*Most people don't want to grow coca, but they feel like they have no other option. If they were given another option, most would leave coca behind. Where we're from, the people don't get any help. There are no [assistance] programs to support them. People even die of starvation out there. And that's why they grow coca. It's the only way to earn a living. People get scared about the violence and the fumigation that comes with the coca, but they do it because it's the only way to make money.*

*The planes often sprayed our community. People would get very sad when they saw the fumigation planes. You see the planes coming—four or five of them—from far away with a black cloud of spray behind them. They say they are trying to kill the coca, but they kill everything. I wish the people flying those fumigation planes would realize all the damage they do. I wish they'd at least look at where they're going to spray, rather than just spraying anywhere and everywhere. The fumigation planes sprayed our coca and food crops. All of our crops died. Sometimes even farm animals died as well. After the fumigation, we'd go days without eating. Once the fumigation spray hit my little brother and me. We were outside and didn't make it into the house before the planes flew by. I got sick and had to be taken to the hospital. I got a terrible rash that itched a lot and burned in the sun. The doctor told us the chemical spray was toxic and was very dangerous. I was sick for a long time and my brother was sick even longer.*

*We were fumigated five times. I don't think they will ever stop fumigating. They'll keep fumigating because there's still coca. They say they won't stop fumigating until all the coca is dead.*

*Two years ago, after the last round of fumigation, we couldn't take it anymore and we were forced to flee. The farm was abandoned. My parents separated and they put me into an orphanage run by a Catholic priest. I miss my family terribly. When I said goodbye to my mom and dad, I couldn't stop crying.*

*I really want to go back to our farm, but I am scared because of all of the terrible things that happen there; the fumigation and the armed groups . . . so much violence. The coca brought not only the fumigation planes, but also the war. The guerrillas were around a lot and sometimes even killed people, saying, "They're working with the army." People were also killed by the military. Sometimes people are killed in the fighting between the armed groups.*

*At first I wasn't so scared by all of this, but now I am terrified by what happens out there. I know if I go back there, I'll see lots of people get killed. I saw two people killed right in front of me; Rebecca and her brother. They lived close by us. The guerrillas had been looking for Rebecca and caught her while she was with her brother. I was standing close by and saw the whole thing. They made them get down on their knees. They shot them many times in the head with machine guns, picked up their dead bodies, put them in chairs, put bags over their heads, and left.*

*The guerrillas also recruited child soldiers. They would try to seduce us by showing us their machine guns, teaching us how to fire them and to use grenades. My mom told me not to listen to them, that they just wanted to take me. One day I was down by the river with a group of kids and the guerrillas came by, grabbed one kid, and took him off to join them. He screamed, "I don't want to go. I don't want to go." I felt terrible watching him being taken to join the guerrillas by force. I was scared; scared that one day they may come for me, come and kill my mom or take my brother, take me and make me kill someone.*

*When I was five, my uncle was killed by the paramilitaries. My mom told me that he helped our family and helped pay for me to go to school when I was little. But one day he went to town to buy some chemicals for coca production and paramilitaries pulled up on a motorcycle. They stopped him, tied him up, and tortured him. They asked him questions and if he didn't know the answer, they cut off one of his fingers. They cut off finger after*

*finger until there were none left. While he was still alive, they cut him into pieces with a chainsaw. I remember his funeral. People were crying so much, screaming. I still don't know why they killed him. I wish this violence would end, that the hatred would end.*

*When I grow up, I want to be a lawyer. But if I end up farming, I think I'll have to farm coca. I know that if I was offered support, a government program that allowed me to farm and survive, I wouldn't go back to coca. There would be no reason to take the risk. But if things remain the same and there is no support, I think I'd have to grow coca. Of course, I'd be scared of the fumigations and all the violence coca production brings with it. I wish we could stop growing coca because it has brought the war to us. I know we can make it, but we'll never make it with coca. I'd like to speak to the president of Colombia; to tell him that he should help farmers like us. If he'd help us, send programs here, people would stop growing coca. And if there was less coca, there'd be less violence.*

*I'd like to ask people in other parts of the world to help us. People are suffering. People are being killed. People are starving. Please help the people of my community and the other communities all over Colombia.*

## Alfredo

Alfredo's<sup>12</sup> family knew their uncle's involvement in the drug trade would come back to haunt them, but they never could have imagined the extent to which that would be true. Shady deals put paramilitaries after him and by the time Alfredo was seventeen, paramilitaries had killed his two uncles and his father. A significant and illustrative aspect of Alfredo's story is the role of the Colombian security forces, recipients of billions of dollars in counternarcotics security assistance from the international community, principally the United States. The Colombian security forces have the worst human rights record in the Western Hemisphere and long-standing ties to paramilitary groups (both the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia and post-demobilization, "next-generation" groups).<sup>13</sup> Alfredo recounts multiple instances in which the Colombian National Police, the principal entity responsible for counternarcotics activities in Colombia, facilitated or turned a blind eye to paramilitary activities.

*My family's tragedy started in 2002, when I was seventeen. My uncle was involved in the drug trade. The rest of my family didn't have anything to do with my uncle's business and we told him that he was going to get us into trouble. When he was about twenty years old, barely starting in the trade, he got into trouble. Paramilitaries were after him and he went into hiding. They went to his house looking for him and tied up my grandmother and interrogated her. I don't know what he did, but they looked for him for a long time, many years.*

*One night at 2 a.m., paramilitaries opened the door and they killed him. They shot him three times and killed him. They also killed the man he worked for, on Christmas Eve. The coroner's report showed that they pulled forty bullets out of his body. That's how the story started, when my uncle, who was the youngest of his three brothers, was killed.*

*And so my dad and his brother inherited these problems. The paramilitaries who killed my uncle thought his brothers might go to the police or seek revenge. Paramilitaries sometimes showed up at my dad's office to tell him they needed to "fix the problem." They threatened to kill him and his family. He worried about his kids. At times he would cry just thinking about these threats. He told us that if he was ever murdered, we'd know paramilitaries were responsible.*

*One day my brother and I were coming home from school and there were two men with guns at the house looking for my dad. I asked them why they were looking for him and they said, "So we can take a look at some papers that he's working on." My older brother told my dad that there were some strange guys at the house looking for him. My dad went to the door and they shot him fifteen times right in front of me. The only thing I could do was watch and wait as they pumped bullets into him. I was powerless. The police came and asked what happened. Neighbors pointed out the guys that murdered my dad and said, "Run! You can still catch them! There they go!" But the police just stood around; they themselves were mixed up in this. I grabbed my dad and tried to pick him up, but the police stopped me. They said that he was dead and we had to wait for the coroner's office to deal with the body. But it was so horrible; people were looking at him so I carried him into the house.*

*And then they killed my last uncle. He was a mechanic and hardly left the house because he knew the paramilitaries were going to kill him. We begged him to leave the city, but he said he didn't want to. One way or the other, he said, they were going to kill him. One morning, as he was feeding breakfast to my eighty-year-old grandfather, they came and they killed him. They left us a message: if any of us talked about these killings, reported them to the police, or sought revenge, we would be killed, just as my dad and uncles were killed.*

*This has devastated our family. My youngest brother hardly talks anymore. He was about fourteen when my dad was killed. He dropped out of school and locks himself in his room all day. And now my mom works as a street vendor to bring food home for the family. It all makes me sad because you want the best for your family and with this situation, everything is different. Christmas, for example, isn't like it used to be. We now remember Christmas Eve at 5 p.m. as the time they killed my uncle's drug-trafficking partner.*

*When my mom went to file a report about my father's murder, the lawyer from the Prosecutor General's Office said, "Ma'am, I don't know you but you seem like a nice person. You shouldn't file this report. If you do, they'll kill you and your sons. Let sleeping dogs lie." He was right because the paramilitary leader behind my father's murder later killed a young man and the boy's father filed a police report. The police immediately handed the file over to the paramilitaries with the father's name, address, and what he had reported. The paramilitaries killed him that day. Here we cannot trust the justice system or the security forces. You see paramilitaries driving around on police motorcycles. You see paramilitaries and police playing pool and dominos while drinking beer on street corners. This is normal.*

*People often ask me, "How do you keep going with everything that has happened to your family? I would have picked up a gun and gone after the people that killed your dad if I were you." And I hope you don't think I am a bad person, but if the guerrillas hadn't lost their ideals, I probably would have joined them. I just want justice so badly and I know that it is never going to come through the justice system. I saw the people kill my dad. I know who they are. Sometimes I pass them on the street. I have this terrible feeling of powerlessness.*

*But what can I do? There is nothing to do. I have to focus on the rest of my family that is still alive and try to move on.*

## Yina Paola

Yina Paola<sup>14</sup> was the epitome of a child of the drug war. Now twenty-three, she is also a sign of hope. Yina was born into an opium poppy farming family that treated her more as an employee than a child. At eleven she joined the FARC to escape her family and spent the next three years on the frontlines of Colombia's war. Years later she demobilized and managed to turn her life around. She began working on children's rights with a nonprofit organization and soon founded a new organization to do the same. Thanks to her efforts, she was sent to New York to speak with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon about the plight of child soldiers across the globe. Closer to home, she is breaking the cycle of violence. She took in her fourteen-year-old sister who was recruited to join the FARC and will soon do the same for her young brother.

*I lived with my grandparents and started working on the farm as early as I can remember. I had to get up at 4 a.m. most days to start working. My grandparents had a seven-acre opium poppy farm back then. I worked in the fields, weeding and harvesting the sap. On our farm, the sap was processed into morphine bricks and bought by local drug traffickers. The farm was fumigated a couple of times. The planes would fly by, spraying the poison on the crops. We'd run out and try to harvest before the poppies died. The poison was strong and would kill everything. The work was hard; I was treated poorly, especially because I was a girl. The family was sexist and the boys were seen as more important. That is why my aunt and I decided to escape. The only escape we could imagine was the FARC. I was eleven when I joined the FARC.*

*The FARC was very active in the area. Guerrillas marched by our farm regularly. I was intrigued by the guerrillas. They were the group in charge and having a gun was a quick way to gain respect. One day, when a group of FARC guerrillas passed by the farm, my aunt and I ran up to them and said we wanted to join them. My grandmother came running after us. She yelled at the guerrillas, told them to let us go because we were children. To join the FARC, you had to be fifteen. So, when the FARC commander*

*asked us how old we were, we lied and said fifteen so they would accept us.*

*My grandfather showed up at the guerrilla camp many times, demanding we be released. Once he came with our birth certificates. He said, "Look, you've taken these girls by mistake. They are under fifteen." The commander asked us about this. We admitted the lie. He yelled at us for lying, but sent us back to work.*

*The first couple of months we were in training, but the very first day they gave me a revolver. I was very excited. I was soon put on guard duty for an FARC member, a relative of mine who was being punished. He had been tied up for a week awaiting trial. I had to bring him his breakfast and keep him tied up. He had been a member of the paramilitaries and then joined the FARC. One night he got drunk and hit a civilian. That was a big mistake in the eyes of the FARC back then. You were not allowed to mistreat a civilian. He was soon taken before a guerrilla tribunal and tried. The judge asked all the guerrillas in the company to vote on his sentence. He said, "Raise your hand if you think he should be executed by firing squad." Everyone raised their hands. Without understanding what was going on, I raised mine too. Then the judge said, "Raise your hand if you think he shouldn't be killed." No one raised their hand. After everything was done, I asked a guerrilla fighter, "So, is he going to be tied up for another week?" And he said, "No. He's going to be executed by a firing squad." I couldn't believe it. He explained the guerrilla tribunal process to me and said that votes are counted and in this case everyone voted for him to be executed, even me. And in fact he was executed. That is my worst memory from my time in the FARC; naively voting for this person—this relative of mine—to be executed by a firing squad.*

*When we finished training, my aunt and I were split up. She was sent to a company of guerrillas up north and I was sent south. I soon got word that she was killed fighting the Colombian Army. That set me off. Rage filled me. I hated the Colombian Army and wanted to kill as many of them as I could. That hatred stayed with me for a long time, even after I left the FARC. I was so angry, I always asked my commander to send me to the frontlines to fight. That was my favorite thing, it was like a passion; being on*

*the frontlines, fighting the army and paramilitaries. There was a lot of fighting as it was a dangerous area, but I was never afraid. My heart had died and I only thought of getting revenge for my aunt's death. Of course, when they killed one of ours, a friend, that hurt.*

*I was twelve when I got married to a platoon commander. He was forty-six years old. There are a lot of rules in the FARC about relationships. If you want to date someone, you go to the company commander and tell him or her that you want to be a couple and you are given permission. But you are not allowed to sleep together. If you decide to get married, the commander marries you and then you can sleep together. So, I got married. If you want to get divorced, the commander will divorce you. The FARC is also very careful to make sure no women get pregnant. They put women on birth control and if a woman gets pregnant, she has to get rid of the child.*

*As I moved up the FARC ranks, I was sent to work with the FARC's financial manager. There we collected FARC taxes. Everyone paid taxes to the FARC—local farmers, drug traffickers, ranchers, businesses, everyone. All opium poppy farmers paid the FARC a share of the money they made selling their products. Coca farmers would also pay a share. The drug traffickers that purchased the morphine brick or the coca paste also paid the FARC.*

*The FARC also raised funds through kidnapping for ransom. The first time I ever visited the provincial capital of the province where I grew up was to kidnap a wealthy man from the city. We set up a roadblock and stole a couple of SUVs. A small group of us dressed up as civilians, got in the SUVs with our guns and made our way down into the city at night. We broke into the apartment while our victim was watching TV with his kids. We grabbed him and took him away as his family screamed and cried. We spent the whole night marching up into the mountains with him tied up the whole time. At 9 a.m. we arrived at our destination, 10,000 feet above sea level. It may sound strange, but there was no emotion in this, in stealing someone's life. It was just normal. Kidnapping someone was just that: normal. I didn't feel any pain.*

*I demobilized from the FARC when I was fifteen. I was on an intelligence mission dressed as a civilian and had to go into a*

*small town to get food. That day a woman saw me walking into town and yelled to me from her house, "What are you doing? Who are you?" I said that I was looking for a store. She said she could tell I wasn't from the town and asked again what I was doing. The FARC told us that if we ever ran into any trouble, we should say we were runaways. So I said that I had run away because my parents beat me. She invited me in and offered me a drink and something to eat. While I was there and without me knowing, she called the police, who picked me up and took me to Child Protective Services because I was a minor.*

*I wanted to escape, get back to the FARC, but they put me under special watch as they thought I was in danger. My family picked me up and took me home. I thought I'd sneak out of the house when the FARC marched by and rejoin. My family pleaded with me not to go back, but I knew what I wanted. So they kept me holed up in a room and when the FARC was in the area, they'd put someone in the room with me so I couldn't yell to them.*

*My family finally convinced me to go to Bogota, where I entered the Child Protective Services demobilization program. I was in the program until I was eighteen. Like most of the women in the program, we believed we had two options: rejoin an armed group or move in with a man. I moved in with an ex-FARC combatant I met in the program and was soon pregnant. Our relationship didn't last and I ended up on my own with a young son. Then the FARC started recruiting my fourteen-year-old sister, so I brought her to live with us in Bogota. I was twenty, raising a year-old son and my sister without any support and no real income. It was tough. I made US\$290 a month and my monthly rent alone cost US\$190. There simply wasn't enough money for food and I hardly ate anything. My son would go a whole day eating only an egg. And I'd get a lunch at work and would bring whatever they gave me home to feed my sister. I didn't even have plates to eat off of. That was the most difficult thing I've ever faced. I will never forget it. And if not for my son, I probably wouldn't have overcome that. I would have probably gone back to the FARC.*

*But, instead, I started a new life. I joined an organization called Taller de Vida that works on children's rights issues with ex-combatants and in local schools. I realized I wanted to dedicate my life to working on human rights and children's rights, and*

*I dove right in. We worked with children through art and rap, helping them express their feelings about abuse they'd faced and work through it. And last year, two other ex-combatants and I founded a human rights organization called Red Ali Arte. This organization works with ex-combatants on children's rights and women's issues, displaced people, and local community members. Currently, we are working on a play—written by one of our members, an ex-combatant—that will be performed at a theater festival later this year. Because of my work, I was selected by the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers to travel to New York in 2009 to speak with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon about the Red Hand Campaign and the use of child soldiers in Colombia and across the world.*

*For years after leaving the FARC, I had dreams every night about being back with the guerrillas. Sometimes they were nightmares about a commander taking my son away from me. Sometimes they were just dreams about being a guerrilla again. But I had them every single night. Three years ago, when my son was one year old and I started working with Taller de Vida and then Red Ali Arte, the dreams stopped. That life is behind me now and a new one has begun. Today, I am the only person in my family who has a high school diploma. Today I am twenty-three years old, working on children's rights with Red Ali Arte and continuing my studies.*

## Endnotes

- † Diego Benitez, Candice Camargo, and Amanda Hooker assisted with interviews for this project.
1. Winifred Tate, "Colombia's Role in International Drug Industry," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, November 1, 1999.
  2. Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, U.S. Department of State, March 2010, 201.
  3. Colombia is home to two major guerrilla groups, the FARC and the smaller National Liberation Army (ELN), both founded independently in 1964.
  4. The consolidated paramilitary group known as the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) demobilized in recent years, leaving behind thousands of loosely organized "next-generation paramilitaries."
  5. Adam Isacson, "Don't Call It a Model: On Plan Colombia's Tenth Anniversary, Claims of 'Success' Don't Stand Up to Scrutiny," Just the Facts, [www.justf.org](http://www.justf.org).
  6. Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report 2010*, U.S. Department of State, [www.state.gov/documents/organization/138548.pdf](http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/138548.pdf). For the relevant statistics, see p. 217.

7. Comisión Colombiana de Juristas, *Violaciones de Derechos Humanos y Violencia Sociopolítica en Colombia*, Julio de 1996 a junio de 2008, 13 de marzo 2009, <http://witnessforpeace.org/downloads/CCJ%20hr%20info%2096-08.pdf>.
8. Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*. For the figure in 1998 see 2009 report, p. 208, and for the 2008 figure, see 2010 report, p. 212.
9. For security reasons, Javier's name has been changed and other identifying details have been excluded.
10. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Colombia Coca Cultivation Survey 2009* (June 2010): 56, [www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Colombia\\_coca\\_survey\\_2008.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Colombia_coca_survey_2008.pdf).
11. *Ibid.*, 57.
12. For security reasons, Alfredo's name has been changed and other identifying details have been excluded.
13. United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the Situation of Human Rights in Colombia*, March 4, 2010, 13; <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G10/118/19/PDF/G1011819.pdf>. The information cited is on p. 13.
14. For security reasons, Yina's last name and other identifying details have been excluded.

## 2. Children: The Forgotten Victims in Mexico's Drug War

by Aram Barra and Daniel Joloy

### Introduction

*My government is absolutely determined to continue fighting against criminality without quarter until we put a stop to this common enemy and obtain the Mexico we want.*

President Felipe Calderón<sup>1</sup>

*We live in a state of war and children are left to drift.*

Aurelio Paez,  
Orphanage director, Ciudad Juárez<sup>2</sup>

The “war on drugs,” in most places, is metaphorical. The term is rarely used by governments and was recently abandoned as a rhetorical device by the United States.<sup>3</sup> In Mexico, however, the war on drugs has a very real dimension. It is “declared” government policy, it is militarized, and it is extremely bloody. Shortly after taking power, President Felipe Calderón ordered a military offensive against the country’s drug cartels that eventually involved tens of thousands of troops. Keeping drugs away from Mexico’s children has been a central justification.<sup>4</sup>

While the consequent violence in Mexico has been well documented, the specific consequences for children are not so often brought to the fore. Despite President Calderón’s justification based on the welfare of children, his decision, combined with a zero-tolerance approach to drug use, has contributed to conditions in which children have been killed, orphaned, and neglected. Since the war on drugs began, there have been increased killings of children and parents with thousands dead and tens of thousands orphaned; increased attacks on drug rehabilitation centers, including massacres of young drug users; and increased attacks on schools resulting in a significant drop in school attendance for fear of violence. We consider these effects of the drug war and the long-term psychological damage experienced by children who are surrounded by conflict and violence. Due to space constraints, we cannot analyze all aspects of Mexico’s drug problems and policies. The involvement of children in drug trafficking, for example, is not

covered, nor is the incarceration of parents. We focus instead on the military intervention against the drug cartels, the related escalation in violence, and the connected zero-tolerance approach to drug use and dependence.

With this focus, it becomes clear that the harms of the drug war not only exist in the present but also will reverberate through many generations due to the specific harms inflicted on children. Next to them, the small gains against the cartels are rendered meaningless. After four years of poor results in frontally combating drug cartels and adopting zero-tolerance approaches to drugs, rethinking government strategies is now unavoidable.

## Military Intervention Against the Drug Cartels

Soon after taking power in 2006, President Felipe Calderón directed the Mexican army to wage a battle against drug cartels that, as he himself said, could not be put off any longer. Military operatives soon extended to several Mexican states such as Chihuahua, Sinaloa, and Baja California, and highways and streets were soon filled with armed men. In a matter of days, more than 30,000 soldiers were deployed in different cities in the country in order to avoid, as Calderón explained (somewhat ironically in hindsight) the risk of “being dominated by crime, insecurity and violence resulting from the activities of criminal groups.”<sup>5</sup>

Combined with a program to address corruption within the police force, the strategy was intended to shatter the cartels by carrying out arrests of gang leaders, extraditing them to the United States when possible, and seizing drug shipments. According to a report by the Security Cabinet to reflect the achievements made in three years of the drug war, from December 1, 2006, to April 30, 2009, 66,621 criminal suspects were captured.<sup>6</sup> High-profile criminals were extradited for trial in the United States in far greater numbers than in previous administrations,<sup>7</sup> thousands of metric tons of illicit drugs (mainly cannabis) were seized, and hundreds of millions of dollars were frozen.<sup>8</sup>

Initially, this strategy managed to reduce somewhat the presence and visibility of gangs and cartels in the states where they used to operate, such as Sinaloa, Baja California, and Chihuahua. Nevertheless, the so-called cockroach effect soon became evident and

cartels moved to new places.<sup>9</sup> In 2007, the presence of cartels was registered in twenty-one of the thirty-two Mexican states. Today they are in all but one.<sup>10</sup>

As a result, violence also spread to an alarming number of states, cities, and municipalities, and the number of casualties of the war has increased with every day that has passed. Although official figures are uncertain, the National Security Center CISEN estimates that there have been more than 28,000 deaths since the war began in 2006.<sup>11</sup> It is a figure that has alarmed many nationally and internationally. Regrettably, all these deaths have been considered simply as “collateral damage.”

Cases where civilians have died because of military operations are becoming more and more frequent as the increase in complaints to the National Commission on Human Rights shows. Queries directed against the military rose more than 900 percent in the first three years of the drug war, increasing from 182 cases in 2006 to 1,791 in 2009 at just the federal level. This does not include queries registered at local commissions of human rights.<sup>12</sup> However, in a recent report of the Defense Ministry in response to a request from Congress, it was claimed that only 565 civilian deaths may be linked to military action, a number that includes those suspected of being linked with drug cartels.<sup>13</sup>

## Killings of Children and Parents

The death toll among those under the age of seventeen since the war began amounts to over 900, according to the Network for the Rights of Infancy in Mexico. In the first half of 2010, it is estimated that ninety children have lost their lives to drug-related violence.<sup>14</sup> The same nongovernmental organization reported that homicide rates for children under seventeen years of age have increased, especially in the states of Durango, Baja California, Chihuahua, and Sinaloa. During the past three years, child homicide rates have tripled, increasing from 83 per year to 274 per year. Durango itself saw an increase of more than 450 percent in homicide rates for young people in 2006–8.<sup>15</sup>

Those most affected have been young people between the ages of fifteen and seventeen. For example, in Baja California the homicide rate for this age group increased from 8.33 per 100,000 in 2007 to 24.3 per 100,000 in 2008—an increase of almost 300 percent. In

Chihuahua the rate rose from 12.6 to 45.9 per 100,000, an increase of 364 percent.<sup>16</sup> In Ciudad Juárez—now considered the most violent city in the world—from September 2009 to February 2010, three different massacres took place with at least forty-five young people aged between fifteen and nineteen being killed. It is estimated that 30 percent of the 4,500 homicides committed in Juárez from 2007 to 2008 involved young people under the age of nineteen.

But Ciudad Juárez is not the only city where massacres of young people have occurred. In Durango, an armed group in the municipality of Pueblo Nuevo gunned down ten children and young people between the ages of eight and twenty-one after they had received scholarship awards at an official ceremony.<sup>17</sup> In Tijuana, three students (two boys and a girl) all aged sixteen, died on their way back from school when unknown gunmen attacked them with high-powered weapons.<sup>18</sup> In Torreon, five young people between seventeen and nineteen were found stacked in the back of a pickup truck with the engine running. All of them were gagged, had bullet wounds, and signs of torture. According to some neighbors, shots were heard at around five in the morning, though police and military forces did not arrive until almost two hours later.<sup>19</sup>

The killings have included cases where children have died at military checkpoints, such as that of the Almanza boys, killed by army forces on April 3, 2010, on a highway in the state of Tamaulipas. According to statements made by Cynthia Salazar, mother of the two brothers, the family was on their way to the beach to spend the holidays when they passed through a military checkpoint. They reduced their speed and soldiers allowed them through to continue their journey. However, a few meters down the road, soldiers opened fire, killing Bryan and Martin Almanza, aged five and nine.<sup>20</sup>

This case resulted in a recommendation from the National Commission on Human Rights to the military forces. While the official version given by the military and even by the Ministry of Interior argued that the family was caught in crossfire between the military and drug cartels, the National Commission on Human Rights rejected this and concluded that the van in which the two children and eleven other people were traveling was in fact under direct attack from the military.<sup>21</sup> A couple of months later, authorities accepted this version, but no one has yet been charged or indicted for the alleged crimes nor has a full and credible investigation been conducted.

This was not an isolated case. Since 2006, military checkpoints have been widely used in the drug war. In June 2007, two women and three children, aged two, four, and seven, were shot and killed when they failed to stop at a military checkpoint involved in “the permanent campaign against drug trafficking.”<sup>22</sup> More recently, a child of fifteen and his father died after being shot by soldiers in the city of Monterrey. The military argued that the vehicle missed a checkpoint, while other relatives who survived the attack declared they were shot at without having been given any indication to stop.<sup>23</sup>

Violence in Mexico has had myriad implications for society and specifically for child development and well-being.<sup>24</sup> It has, for example, eroded adults’ capacities to care for, nurture, and protect children. It is important to note that many of the 28,000 who have been killed since the war on drugs began were parents. While neither Mexico’s government nor the various nongovernmental organizations working in this area keep track of the number of children who have lost one or both parents in the war, it is estimated that tens of thousands of children are orphaned directly because of the drug war.<sup>25</sup>

Human rights lawyer and investigator for the Chihuahua local commission for human rights, Gustavo de la Rosa Hickerson, has analyzed these numbers and concluded that, based on data that Mexican men aged eighteen to thirty-five have on average 1.7 children, in Ciudad Juárez alone, the war has left more than 8,500 orphans.<sup>26</sup> Extending this figure to the national level, a total of 50,000 drug war orphans is possible.

The growing toll of children left orphaned because of the war is damaging not only to them but also to the country’s social network. Government officials at all the different levels have ignored the problem, and failed to take into account the future ramifications. Education and entry into the labor market, for example, may be more difficult for these children. For some this may be an additional factor pushing them toward the drug trade where employment is all but assured. “There is an opportunity cost from these hundreds of thousands of youths in Mexico who are either orphaned or part of criminal gangs,” said Eduardo Buscaglia, an expert on armed conflict and Mexico’s drug trade. “These are people who are growing up with high levels of deprivation, in dysfunctional families, with sexual abuse, and these risk factors should be addressed.”<sup>27</sup>

## Young Drug Users: Zero-Tolerance, Stigma, and Violence

Another goal of the Calderón administration's drug war was to prevent the use of drugs, which the government argued had alarmingly increased in recent years.<sup>28</sup> While this argument was on the right track, the government's zero-tolerance response, involving the criminalization of drug users and limited treatment options, has been deeply flawed. Article 4 of the Mexican Constitution provides for universal access to health services, but this is far from the case for people who use drugs. While this should include universal access to treatment options, including access to methadone and buprenorphine as substitution therapy, public funding of syringe exchange programs, and the availability of naloxone for the treatment of opiate overdose, such services are scarce and hampered by a lack of security, criminal laws, and drug-related stigma.

Some years ago, there was only one publicly funded methadone program clinic in the country, located in Ciudad Juárez, and today only two methadone clinics are functioning in all of Mexico—both located in the northern cities of Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez, where use of injectable drugs is more common and heroin dependence has increased in recent years. According to statistics provided by the Health Ministry in 2008 (National Drug Addiction Survey), there were more than 5,000 heroin users in Juárez—where most drug users are between the ages of twelve and seventeen.<sup>29</sup> Despite this, few efforts are being implemented either by the government or by civil society to help fill the gaps in services.

In addition, the criminalization of drug users by the federal government has acted as a significant barrier to health policies, contributing to public stigmatization, and driving them away from services. The National Drug Addiction Survey also states that only 16 percent of problematic drug users seek treatment.<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, although drug use among young people is a consistent justification for the offensive against the cartels, addiction rates continue to rise, including among elementary and high school students.<sup>31</sup>

Mexican society, however, sees little need to protect the human rights of drug users and people affected by drug use. Recently, widespread stigma and negative public attitudes toward drug users combined with the drug war have made violence against this particular community a valid political statement. Killings of young drug addicts as direct targets started in Ciudad Juárez, but disappearances,

*levantones*,<sup>32</sup> kidnappings and killings quickly expanded to the whole country. This is a little-known phenomenon but it is increasingly seen as cartels engaging in a form of “social cleansing.”<sup>33</sup> The alarm was raised only recently when nineteen young drug users were gunned down by an armed commando who entered a rehabilitation center in Juárez. Many of the victims were younger than sixteen.<sup>34</sup>

This massacre, however, was in fact the fifth reported attack on rehabilitation centers close to the northern Mexican border since August 2008, when two Alcohol and Drug Addiction Integration Centers were attacked, and ten young drug users were killed. In 2009, two other attacks were reported, one on June 6 at the Doceava Tradición center, where an intern was injured by gunfire and then died at the local hospital; the other one was on May 31, when five men were murdered in the rehabilitation center La vida sin Adicciones.<sup>35</sup> In Ciudad Juárez, there were at least forty-six killings of young people at different treatment centers during 2009.<sup>36</sup>

The government’s neglect of drug dependence and treatment is evident in the fact that there is no regulation of rehabilitation clinics. Many now function as “fronts” for criminal gangs, and operate as centers for recruitment or distribution.<sup>37</sup> As explained by Chihuahua’s public security minister, “rehab centers have become a nest for criminal groups to recruit young people aged seventeen to twenty-three years, considered ‘disposable’ because if they are detained or die they can be quickly replaced.”<sup>38</sup>

Despite the cruelty of the killings at the centers, the government reaction is to immediately argue that the victims were directly linked to organized crime, overshadowing any due diligence required to protect vulnerable young people from harm. For example, on the same day that ten young people were massacred at a rehab center in Juarez on September 17, 2009, Chihuahua’s Governor José Reyes Baeza argued “it is no coincidence, there is a clear motivation: everything is happening in the context of a war between different criminals. Dependent drug users at the clinic belong to one group or another.”<sup>39</sup>

Just a few days earlier, at the rehab center El Aliviane, also in Ciudad Juárez, hit men forced twenty-two young drug users to form a row against the wall before shooting with AK-47 rifles, killing eighteen of them, many under age sixteen who had arrived just weeks earlier. After the shooting, the state attorney declared, “the motive for these crimes is extermination between criminal groups.”<sup>40</sup>

Human rights defenders have questioned the authorities' responses to these cruel acts. Gustavo de la Rosa, an investigator at the local Commission on Human Rights, criticized the government response for putting the blame on children. He added that "the role of authorities is not to discriminate between good and bad people who die; this only reveals the utter contempt for those who have fallen into drug addiction."<sup>41</sup>

## Conflict and Psychological Damage

It is important to take into account the long-term psychological damage to children associated with high levels of violence and the resultant breakdown in family, community, and social structures. That damage is well known and documented from other conflict zones in the world, and some of those countries are still struggling with the harmful effects on children many years after the conflict ended.

Conflict and violence have direct consequences for the individual child, immediate family, and community that can be devastating, but while the long-term corrosive effects of the breakdown of social and political structures may take the severest toll, they are barely spoken of. In addition to understanding the damage to children's developmental processes caused by exposure to ongoing armed violence, it is essential to understand how the maintenance of family and community norms in addition to functioning state structures—such as education and health services—can mitigate the dire situation in which children find themselves when they live in communities exposed to violence.<sup>42</sup>

There is no doubt that exposure to violence, deprivation, fear, and stress affects children's development even before birth.<sup>43</sup> It is well documented that individual development is characterized by the interplay of environmental and biological factors from the outset. For example, evidence from neurological research reveals that, in utero, the wiring of the brain is affected by external factors such as adequate nutrition and levels of maternal stress, which, in pregnancy, may affect the unborn infant's brain development. In essence, exposure to stress hormones before birth can potentially lead to longer term behavioral disorders such as hyperactivity and attention deficit disorder in the young child, which in turn can be precursors of aggressive behavior,

making it more likely that cycles of violence are reproduced from one generation to another.

Each child is different, and many variables such as age, cultural norms, gender, and individual temperament will mediate how children experience the threat or reality of violence. Nonetheless, research draws out clusters of typical reactions of children experiencing loss and trauma. When faced with the death or maiming of a family or community member, children's reactions will vary tremendously, and will depend on the ability of the family and community to provide reassurance and explanation. However, reactions to ongoing violence may include increased anxiety, which manifests through emotional and physical withdrawal (e.g., elective mutism or inability to engage in everyday tasks such as washing) or demonstrations of aggression. Children may also find it difficult to separate from family members for fear of what will happen during separation, thereby making attendance at early childhood services or school very difficult. Some children regress to earlier stages and may, for instance, talk or behave like a much younger child. Bed wetting is another common example of regressive behavior. Other children become hypervigilant, feeling it is their responsibility to keep the family safe. Trust in adults and the future can also be eroded, leaving children without hope. This is particularly the case when children witness the helplessness of parents and caregivers to stop violence.

It does not matter to children whether violence is caused by states, militias, rebels, or criminal groups; whatever the cause and whoever is to blame, children experience violation and distress that can have long-term consequences. In the current situation in Mexico, the government must be held accountable for upholding the rights of children and for putting into place measures to reduce the violence children are experiencing, particularly if it emanates from agents of the state, in addition to providing services aimed at mitigating the effects of violence on children.

## Attacks on Schools

The constant battles between drug cartels and the military have made it increasingly difficult and dangerous for children in some places to reach school. In its 2010 report *Education Under Attack*, UNESCO documented a significant number of cases in which schools,

teachers, and students were attacked and threatened, both by cartels and by police or military forces.

The report found as reasons for these attacks, among others, the desire of irregular groups to undermine confidence in government control of an area or even the functioning of the education system.<sup>44</sup> In November 2008, armed drug gangs threatened teachers in six different schools, stating that they would kidnap students if they were not paid Christmas bonuses. Most of these schools had to evacuate all of their students and close their doors for more than three weeks due to a lack of security that should have been provided by the state.<sup>45</sup> On March 17, 2009, more than twenty high-caliber cartridges were found on the campus of the 83rd Baccalaureate Studies Institute, in the Triqui region of San Juan Copala, Oaxaca, following a raid by armed gangs on a community along its perimeter. Those were days of continued armed attacks attributed to the Union of Social Welfare of the Triqui Region, a paramilitary group that forced primary and secondary high schools to suspend classes during April 2009.<sup>46</sup>

Police and military forces have also been directly involved in cases where accessibility to schools, and even the very security of students, has been compromised. In March 2010, local police burst into a high school in Ciudad Juárez looking for drugs and arms without any previous notification to school authorities. They evicted 2,600 students and took them out for inspection. After a few hours, the police retreated and concluded that the students were not in possession of drugs.<sup>47</sup>

Schools have been a specific target in the government's strategy to reduce the demand for drugs by criminalizing drug use. Thus the program *Mochila segura* (Safe schoolbag) was implemented. It consisted of a series of police-led random search efforts inspecting students' schoolbags to make sure they are not carrying weapons or drugs with them. Different human rights authorities have spoken against this program because it not only pushes students away from schools and damages confidence between pupils and teachers, but also is an invasive measure that violates the right to privacy of children and youth.<sup>48</sup>

In states such as Tamaulipas, Morelos, or Chiapas, students have missed classes because of rumors that heavy shootings will occur around the city. In Reynosa, for example, absence from school extended to 90 percent of all students. Tamaulipas's Education Ministry explained that: "the reason for the large number of absences

was primarily email chains that contained phrases such as ‘care for your children’ and ‘don’t leave home because it will get worse than Iraq.’”<sup>49</sup>

Experience from other conflict zones has shown the value of reducing the harmful effects of violence on children by ensuring that they have access to safe spaces such as early childhood and community services and schools.<sup>50</sup> If schools are threatened with disruption or targeted as described above, the state must take every action to ensure that they still function. Education has proved its essential role in providing structure, routine, and a focus on the future that is highly beneficial to children and communities affected by violence and conflict. Equally, programs that enable children to explore and come to terms with their experiences in a safe environment through play, music, art, and drama are often sufficient to help most children deal with the extreme effects of exposure to violence. Initiatives such as those in Ciudad Juárez to establish safe spaces for play, supported by the community and World Vision, an international evangelical relief and development agency, will go a long way to lessening the effects of the violence that these children are still experiencing.<sup>51</sup>

## Conclusion

*Árbol que crece torcido jamás su tronco endereza*

Mexican proverb<sup>52</sup>

After four years of poor results in attempts to directly combat drug cartels and to adopt zero-tolerance approaches to drugs, rethinking government strategies is now unavoidable in the face of grotesque violence and rising rates of addiction (both affecting children); increased school absences and the breakdown of educational structures; and the prospect of almost certain long-term psychological damage to children exposed to the drug war.

A radical change in direction is required, for as more and more children fall victim to violence directed at them, their parents, and their schools, and as more and more young people who use drugs are abandoned by the state, the long-term impact of Mexico’s violent experiment will become clear. Next to this prognosis, the earlier gains in terms of dollars frozen, criminals extradited, and metric tons of drugs seized, seem all the more hollow and irrelevant.

Former president Vicente Fox has now stated that he is in favor of considering models of legal regulation of currently illicit drugs. President Calderón, while against this proposal, says that the debate is important.<sup>53</sup> Whatever the outcome of such debates, Mexican authorities must refocus and increase actions aimed at promoting young people's comprehensive development, particularly in the areas of education, employment, and leisure. This is possible if it is proactively decided that drugs should be addressed as a public health and development issue, rather than a security issue, and only if children are truly placed at the forefront of more effective drug policies rather than being left to drift in a sea of violence.

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### 3. In the Shadows of the Insurgency in Afghanistan: Child Bartering, Opium Debt, and the War on Drugs

by Atal Ahmadzai and Christopher Kuonqui

*[T]his is a real crisis for the young sisters and daughters of the opium farmers' families in this region.*

Khamosh Hezb-u-Allah  
Freelance Afghan reporter<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction

In 2010, Afghanistan produced over 3,600 metric tons of opium. While marking a continual decline over recent years (a 48 percent fall from 2009), this figure represents a tremendous illicit economy, the value of which is on the rise. Farm-gate incomes in 2010 reached an aggregate US\$604 million, up from US\$438 million in 2009.<sup>2</sup> Many argue that this trade bolsters the Taliban and related networks. Others dispute this. Whatever the security reality, the Afghan opium trade produces an often-ignored face of the global war on drugs: that of the children and families who often pay the steepest human costs of the direct and indirect consequences of national and international policies.

History shows that drug wars and violent wars often travel together. Today's Afghanistan may represent the strongest expression of this pattern. Opium production in the country takes place precisely in those areas where the rule of the gun supersedes the rule of law. As the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) *Afghan Opium Survey 2010* finds, 98 percent of total cultivation takes place in nine provinces in the southern and western regions, including the least secure areas of the country. The link between opium cultivation and lack of security remains salient despite twists and turns in counterinsurgency and poppy-field eradication strategies, military leadership changes, and national elections, disputed and otherwise.

The war on drugs in Afghanistan pivots on an understanding of the opium trade as a major source of financing terrorism. The UNODC estimated the value of trafficking, lab processing, and the precursor chemical industry in Afghanistan at US\$3 billion in 2009, including farmers' and traffickers' incomes.<sup>3</sup> This mirrors roughly one-third of

total Afghan gross domestic product in that year.<sup>4</sup> Based on these figures, many argue that the opium trade helps to finance recruitment to the Taliban and other quasi-terrorist groups operating in the largely unregulated Afghan countryside. NATO officials say that insurgents receive 40–60 percent of the income from drugs (though some of this may come from Pakistan’s opium fields).<sup>5</sup> Former UNODC head Antonio Maria Costa in turn estimated that the Taliban annually reaps \$400 million from the trade.<sup>6</sup> The magnitude of these estimates makes the opium trade a significant concern on many fronts.

But the drug–security dynamic does not exist in a vacuum. Deep, changing cultural practices also provide a backdrop that shapes the war on drugs and its implications in Afghanistan. Driven by shifts in cultivation, market forces put the price advantage of opium over wheat—the main competitor—at three to one in 2009.<sup>7</sup> In 2010, the ratio was more than six to one.<sup>8</sup> Afghan farmers can make far more money growing poppies than pursuing any other alternative. The economic role poppy plays in one of the world’s poorest economies influences social perceptions and attitudes, in turn leading to stark practices that include trading in children to resolve opium debts. This double setting of insecurity and profoundly rooted socioeconomic practices informs how the opium trade and the war on drugs affects the children of Afghanistan, a crisis that is otherwise all but invisible in the flight path of the war on terror and global security policies. This chapter sets out some of these more obscure processes.

The war on drugs framework placing poppy-field eradication at the heart of counternarcotics policy<sup>9</sup> in Afghanistan cannot claim victory for the production decline, despite ongoing eradication campaigns. Disease and pests caused the large cultivation drop in 2010. Regardless of cause, however, decreases in opium supply produce two major effects in Afghanistan: as observed in 2010, they sharply edge the price of opium upward; and this is worrisome from the perspective of poverty and livelihoods because it severely stresses farmers who rely on opium for income. Most opium farmers buy their seeds and food for the year on credit from drug lords—a transaction filtered through a debt system called *salaam*. This has potentially significant consequences. When in 2000 the Taliban’s Mullah Omar decreed that opium planting was against religious practice, the economic implications were so great that more than 30,000 Afghans fled to Pakistan from Helmand alone to avoid defaulting on *salaam* loans. Some argue that the motivation for the opium ban was to induce a

price rise, rather than to prevent use.<sup>10</sup> Since the 2001 invasion, due in part to the onset of eradication practices and, more important for overall reductions in production, disease, and pests, sudden opium income losses can have the result that farmers sell off their children to avoid violent reprisals from drug lords who are unwilling to accept a default.

The crux of the problem is that a drop in opium production leaves farmers with few options to repay *salaam* loans. While abrupt and catastrophic losses of opium crops can be cause for celebration in some circles, the direct consequences for small-scale and poorer farmers' families and livelihoods require deeper caution. Drops in opium can unintentionally harm already vulnerable farmers while not affecting the intended targets—smugglers and terrorists. This suggests that perhaps the most viable means of weaning Afghanistan off opium may be to do so gradually, giving the rural farmer a chance to adapt. Expanding microcredit systems in Afghanistan represents a positive initial step. Another is to implement alternative crop programs that effectively secure livelihoods for farmers, although the record so far is weak.<sup>11</sup> As long as poor decisions remain subsidized, little ground for developing nonopium-based self-sufficiency can form. Either way, the social and economic tragedies wrought by opium production declines complicate this otherwise desirable outcome.

This chapter studies the socioeconomic practices and implications of the *salaam* system, opium cultivation declines, and the consequences for children of the drug wars in Afghanistan. Based on a series of interviews conducted with farmers, villagers, journalists, activists, and policymakers in Helmand, Kandahar, and Kabul, it sets out new evidence that substantiates the links and results. While the scale of the research can only reveal the tip of a large iceberg of consequences, what emerges is how bartered girls, child addicts, and their families suffer the unintended consequences of counternarcotics, counterterrorism, and counterinsurgency stratagems in a society already marred by decades of poverty and violence.

## Entrapping Opium Farmers: The Practices of *Salaam* and “Opium Culture”

*The bartering of girls happens more but not exclusively in areas well-known for opium trade such as Naad Ali, Gareshk, Musa*

*Qala, and Sangeen districts. Recently we got information that in Baba Jee area—walking distance from the provincial capital—a farmer who owed a debt to a drug smuggler gave his daughter to him. One other case that I can remember happened in Musa Qala district. We eradicated a farmer’s opium field. The farmer actually took salaam from a drug lord. Eventually, we got to know that the farmer married either his daughter or sister to the salaam provider.*<sup>12</sup>

Shafi-u-allah, Head, Department of Counter Narcotics in Helmand

Farmers form the foundation of the opium economy and culture, planting poppy seeds and setting the stage for one of the most profitable markets in Afghanistan. But despite their role, farmers largely fail to reap the rewards of partaking in the opium industry—earning the least, remaining the most vulnerable, and often suffering the worst consequences affecting their income and family lifestyle when crop or financial shocks take place. Reports in fact suggest that large-scale landowners rarely cultivate opium, leaving the crop to be managed by farmers who lease or mortgage their lands, or else by small-scale landowners. This trend provides wealthier landowners a social and economic buffer from losses due to field eradication or natural disasters, expected or unexpected. As a prominent social activist in Kandahar describes this state of power inequities:

*Opium farmers are the most vulnerable people in the opium cycle, and the uncoordinated war against opium further strengthens their social and economic vulnerabilities.*<sup>13</sup>

In many if not most cases, farmers cannot afford the upfront capital investment of opium production, from overhead expenses to seeds, fertilizer, and irrigation costs. In these instances a “drug dealer,” yet another actor in the opium system, intervenes to offer farmers financial assistance in the form of credit. This special financing mechanism is a conditioned debt called *salaam*—cash money loaned to the borrower. But returns are not paid in cash or with interest (*Rheba*), the latter being strictly prohibited in Islamic jurisprudence. This leaves the *salaam* to be repaid in kind or in goods and products, leaving the distinction between *Rheba* and *salaam* to effectively cloak opium production in a veil of religious legality.

*Salaam* is generally offered to farmers in cash money equivalents to a specified quantity of processed opium, at market prices at the

time of issuing the debt. But the repayment terms obligate the farmer to return the same amount of opium, not cash, to the lender at the time of harvest, usually when opium prices are at their highest. A cycle of financial risk subjects farmers to the full brunt of crop failure or market changes, from expected and unexpected yield losses due to disease, flood, low productivity, or the increasing prevalence of opium-field eradication by the state and war on drugs policies. If any of these crises affect farmers, then they are left with steep debts to *salaam* providers.

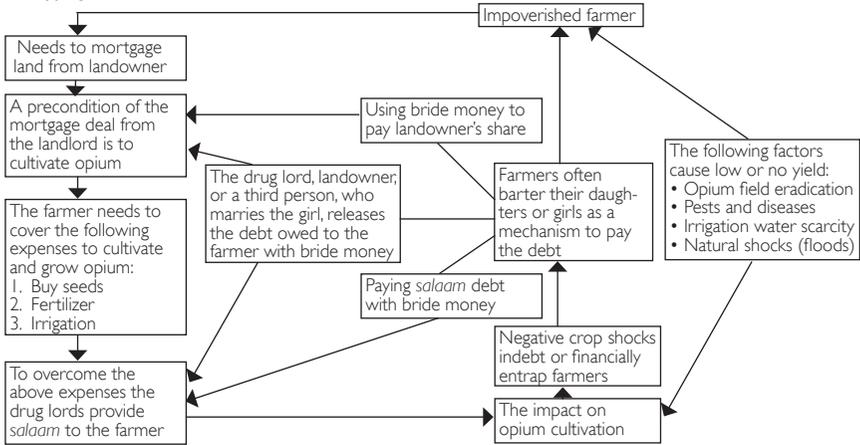
Often, farmers do not have alternative means to compensate and release the debt other than to offer their daughters or sisters as repayment, either with bride money<sup>14</sup> or directly to the lender. A civil society activist in southern Afghanistan succinctly captures this tragedy:

*Drug lords and sometimes landlords give loans to farmers with cash money and ultimately the farmer is entrapped. For example, at the start of the opium cultivating season, the drug lord gives a specific amount of money and demands a particular amount of opium at harvesting time. Thus, the farmer is under debt from the beginning of the year. The bad times for farmers are when crops fail or are eradicated by police. Subsequently, the farmer does not have any other option except to satisfy the debt using his daughter's bride money or by marrying his daughter directly to the loan provider.*<sup>15</sup>

Alongside the promise of higher income rewards of dealing in poppy production, *salaam* is used as an additional tool to encourage farmers to enter opium cultivation rather than other yields such as wheat, maize, and corn.

To be sure, however, the prepaid *salaam* debt does not always prove to be financially damaging to farmers. On the contrary, if opium yields remain immune to natural disasters or field eradication, farmers can stand to benefit. Often, the price of opium at the beginning of the cultivation seasons, when farmers receive *salaam*, is much higher in comparison with the price during the harvesting season. This range of price changes can financially benefit farmers when repaying opium debts at lower prices. Yet, twenty-first-century opium trends have so far provided little consolation with these rewards, more often leaving farmers steeped in financial burdens.

### Entrapping Farmers in *Salaam* Debts



### A Culture of Opium

*Farmers are the most vulnerable; however, the opium brides directly suffer from both opium culture and field eradication. Opium culture instigated the practice of polygamy, and field eradication mostly and exclusively affects the farmer.*

Child Rights Officer, Kandahar<sup>16</sup>

The *salaam* system sets part of the scene for the drug war's affect on Afghanistan's children. The sociocultural milieu across Afghanistan sets much of the rest. An "opium culture" practiced by those high in the narcotics apparatus hierarchy—including dealers, traffickers, and large-scale landowners—breeds and gives momentum to polygamy practices. Transformed over generations into a marker of social status, polygamy is widely practiced among those of this social faction—with underage girls from poorer rural families having the least voice in decisions.

The case of Ruzi Mohammad underscores this reality. Ruzi Mohammad is a farmer living in Alakozo village in the Marja District, Helmand Province (site of the spring 2010 NATO offensive). Earlier, in 2008, enjoying relatively good economic standing, Mohammad mortgaged several *geribs*<sup>17</sup> of farm land from local owners, with the aim of cultivating opium. That year, however, saw the onset of a severe drought that dried up traditional irrigation systems such as springs and *karizes* (underground canals). A local drug dealer offered help by way of a *salaam* loan, which Mohammad used to install fuel-run water pumps on a bore well. But then disease hit

the crops. With his investment threatened, the farmer in time found himself under huge financial stress, with a mortgage and *salaam* debt to repay and hardly any means to compensate for his losses. To reconcile his debts, Mohammad married off his sister as a second wife to another villager, an opium dealer. Instead of paying the customary bride money to Mohammad, the dealer secured release of the mortgage and *salaam* debts. At the time of his interview in 2010, Mohammad's family remained in deep poverty and had not heard of his sister since the debt repayment.

The opium culture and the war against drugs levy dual negative effects on farmers and their children in contemporary southern Afghanistan, particularly in the high-producing areas of Helmand. First, children directly participate in opium cultivation through irrigation, harvesting, trade, and, to some extent, addiction. Their involvement in both production and consumption clearly exposes children to high-risk activities and behavior. Second, children, mainly the daughters of poor farmers, are often bartered or "sold" as compensation for their families' financial losses. Instances where drug lords intentionally aim to entrap farmers in order to pave the road to matrimony deals have also been reported from the field. These girls are called "opium brides" in the brief social literature on the practice.

## Drug War Impacts

*Eradication of opium fields means taking bread away from the farmer's mouth. The farmer who is poor after suffering field eradication does not have any other means to return the debt he owes, mainly to drug dealers. He is disgraced and on the breadline. To save face in society he has to barter his daughter or sister to satisfy the debt.*

Abdullah Khan,  
Helmand Representative, Independent Human Rights  
Commission of Afghanistan<sup>18</sup>

*I am not hesitant to state that both opium cultivation and trade and opium eradication are equally endangering the children of farmers' families. You can easily see school-age children who, instead of going to schools, are involved in cultivating, irrigating, and harvesting opium. On the other hand, when*

*we eradicate opium fields, we indeed make the farmer and his family poor and impoverished. In such circumstances the children of poor families cannot afford to go to school, so they become means of income for their families.*

Shukran G. Mohammad,  
Head, Department of Counternarcotics in Kandahar<sup>19</sup>

Counternarcotics strategies aim to foster alternative livelihoods and means of diversifying income that encourage farmers to leave the opium economy. For the most part, these “carrots” include providing farmers with fertilizer, crop seeds, water pumps, and tractors, largely *after* the “stick” of field eradication has occurred. The scope of assistance is rarely (if ever) sufficient to alleviate the financial losses of the total destruction of a farmer’s crops.

The war against drugs initiated by the government of Afghanistan and the international community appears as a comprehensive strategy to target cultivation and trafficking, and to support a legal agriculture-based economy. The practice of antidrug policy presents a different picture, where farmers and small-scale landowners are most affected. Opium smugglers and dealers, who have a strong influence over farmers and small landowners, remain immune. Moreover, Shafiullah, head of the Department of Counternarcotics of Helmand Province, notes that, in 2009, existing counternarcotics practices led to a 33.7 percent drop in opium production. He hastens to acknowledge that increased child bartering may be a likely consequence of these practices.<sup>20</sup>

The underlying sociocultural current means that the bartering of girls is not, of course, exclusively the outcome of field eradication under drug control policy. Factors such as natural disasters and crop disease can also devastate yields and leave farmers with high debts. The perception, however, among those interviewed for this study is that field eradication plays a dynamic role in financially entrapping farmers and that the bartering of girls is a means to resolve opium debt. Yet the generally obscure nature of opium-related culture similarly prevents gaining access to knowledge of bartering practices, which remain undiscovered and unreported by civil society and human rights bodies.

The drug trade also facilitates drug use among Afghan children. While policies aim to curb Afghanistan’s opium exports, the plight of domestic use goes scarcely noticed, with as many as 1.5 million

Afghans estimated to be dependent on drugs—a substantial share of the 24 million population estimated by national demographic data.<sup>21</sup> According to a recent report by the UNODC, up to half of the drug users surveyed gave their children opium.<sup>22</sup> More than 2,000 drug-dependent children are estimated to live in the western city of Herat alone.<sup>23</sup> These figures point to the need for refined policies able to recognize and better account for child and adult drug dependence.

### Obscured Reality

Although the term “opium bride” has emerged to capture the phenomenon of bartering girls to satisfy opium debts,<sup>24</sup> the international and local literatures remain nearly blank on the subject. The fieldwork conducted for this chapter finds that the incidence and practice of bartering girls is more prevalent than this scant coverage suggests. What explains this difference?

The decades-long media focus on war, insurgency, and corruption can serve as a wedge between the actual phenomenon and its media representation. Scarce opportunities for reporters to visit villages and capture local grievances means that the melancholic social character expressed daily by ordinary people is all but ignored. Indeed, as one respondent affirmed:

*The reality and concept wrapped in the term “opium bride” exists to a large extent in our society. We accept that “opium brides” exist in the villages.*<sup>25</sup>

The Afghan media and civil arenas have altogether failed to report on “opium brides.” Several respondents link this paucity of recognition to the social and cultural sensitivities surrounding child-bartering practices, as well as the devastating security situation in areas packed with the opium trade. One journalist describes this situation as follows:

*Cases of bartering of girls are not breaking into media to the extent that they actually occur. The reasons are multidimensional, including cultural and social sensitivities and the strong de facto hold on society of drug lords, who obstruct the flow of opium-related information. We receive reports about the bartering of girls but it is difficult to give proper coverage to this phenomenon through firsthand information. The reason is that most of the*

*time drug-related trades including girls are prevalent mainly in unsecured districts and it is not feasible for the media to easily break through.*<sup>26</sup>

Strongly acknowledged by nearly all respondents to this study, incidences of “opium brides” are undoubtedly much more numerous than what surfaces in media, human rights, and civil society circles. It represents a social cost whose full magnitude remains unknown. Despite the inadequate literature and discourse, the child-bartering phenomenon is widely acknowledged among average individuals at local levels, from government officials to members of the media and civil society as well as land- and business owners.

In Afghanistan, the quality of life for many children and women is highly compromised in terms of their rights and roles in society. In the southern region, hit hard by active insurgency and counterinsurgency, conditions for women and children exist in even more acute states of crisis. The opium culture and active insurgency pose a double disadvantage to women and children. First, social and political upheaval leaves children and women particularly vulnerable to violation of their rights, such as child bartering. Second, the large focus on these upheavals often leaves children and women neglected, overlooked, and overshadowed by contemporary so-called strategic issues.

Journalists working in southern Afghanistan note the enduring frequency of child and gender discrimination in the shadows of the insurgency:

*As a reporter working in Helmand, I know many families have bartered and married their girls to the drug smugglers who gave the farmer money to cultivate opium. Eventually, when there is no yield then they have to get engage in bartering.*<sup>27</sup>

## Married Lives of Bartered Girls

*In our village two families brought brides from farmers' families, yeah I mean opium brides. Now the stories of mistreating and miseries of those brides are spread all around the village. The stories of their suffering are the topic of women in all social gatherings such as weddings, death prayers, and everywhere.*<sup>28</sup>

Local shopkeeper  
Lashkarga, Helmand

Child bartering as a means of paying opium debt is largely weighted against girls. This fact gives way to two clusters of responses—one driven by values, and the other by consequences—but both are united in their opposition to the practice. The value-driven response consists largely of human and women’s rights objections, where the very suggestion of using girls as a legitimate “unit of transaction” to resolve financial debt or to prevent social enmity is a nonstarter. By contrast, the basic thrust of local and village concerns about bartering practices is seen in their actual consequences. Where paying bride money is an embedded cultural value that offers brides some measure of security in married life, the procedure and involvement of money does not figure as a concern. For these, opposition is rooted in what is painted by respondents as a devastatingly bleak post-marriage portrait of bartered girls.

Practical social, cultural, and security constraints to the fieldwork undertaken for this chapter limited firsthand conversation with girls bartered into marriage to resolve opium debts.<sup>29</sup> In addition to other sources, the paternal families of some bartered girls, however, managed to provide some insight into their experience. All respondents reported the suffering of opium brides in their married life. In the local context, a legitimate and plausible reason for suffering was not apparent. But the closer examination made possible by this study highlights the underlying causes of the poor matrimonial living standards and status of the opium brides.

Three structural themes surfaced throughout the interviews. The first involves the implications of a marriage where the bride’s family holds a disproportionately inferior social status to the matrimonial husband—and no options are apparent in the matrimonial terms. This widely contradicts the cultural expectations of “normal marriages,” where the upper hand usually lies with the would-be bride’s father, who has the final choice in weighing suitor options and selecting a husband for his daughter. In opium-debt-induced marriages, the bride’s family lacks these freedoms, subsequently severely harming the bride’s social status among her in-laws, in turn, initiating a vicious circle that holds the potential to make the bride’s married life increasingly difficult.

A second described feature is rooted in the very nature of marriages facilitated by debt. Normally, the paternal family provides the bride with staff to establish the new home; the family in some cases even

delivers the bride money directly to the bride to satisfy her household needs. This code of conduct provides the newlywed bride with the desired social status as well as a safety social net. On the contrary, due to the impoverished socioeconomic status of the farmer, the opium bride goes empty-handed to her in-laws' home. This trend deprives opium brides of conventional social status and social security nets. The scenario gets worse when the bride money is already spent by the farmer on expenses required for cultivating opium. A children's rights officer in Kandahar summarizes the result:

*These girls have horrible marriage lives. They do not have the same social status and respect as other women do. Mostly they get married to those who already have one or more wives. Second, these girls go empty-handed to their in-laws, which gives them a compromising and disregarded social status among the family.*<sup>30</sup>

The third theme recognized in the interviews describing the married life of opium brides involves age gaps and polygamy. In most cases, these brides are underage, not of marriageable age. The rapid and unexpected social change from adolescence and even late childhood into womanhood is an unnatural transformation that is noted to cause immense challenges for the girl. Polygamy, as revealed by all respondents, is one of the principle practices of the opium culture, functioning as what seems a de facto marker of social status among those engaged in opium circles. On the one hand, vulnerable farmers who are deliberately trapped into debt is a means for drug lords to practice polygamy, and on the other hand, the practice serves as a vehicle for the suffering and misery of opium brides. As one respondent notes:

*The hallmark of opium marriages is the huge gap in ages. Normally, the girls are much younger and even underage for marriage, while the man is married and overage. The reason for the age gap is the "no option" reality. The farmer does not have another option; in order to overcome the financial and social ordeal originating in opium debt, he must marry the girl to someone who has the upper hand over the farmer.*<sup>31</sup>

Mohammad Khan, a farmer in Helmand who married his daughter to an opium trader when she was younger than fifteen years old in return for the debt he owed the trader, describes how he still remains a caretaker of his daughter:

*My daughter has two sons and a daughter. Most of the time, I purchase medicine for her because her husband does not treat her like his wife. I take sugar and sweets, and tea to her. My son-in-law has another wife and he married her with bride money. This is the difference between my daughter and his other wife.<sup>32</sup>*

The farmer's inferior status, that of his daughter in her marriage home, and the age gap and polygamous household she is subjected to each play a role in what Khan describes as the suffering his daughter experiences as a result of his opium debt.

### “Opium Flower”

A web of complexity entangles social attitudes to opium-debt-induced child bartering. Part of the complexity is due to the significant social transformations wrought over much of Afghanistan in the past three decades, rooted in sociopolitical turmoil. These shifts have led to increasingly incoherent matrimonial practices, such as the engagement of girls and boys in childhood or even during infancy, and have served to entrench a patriarchal order in social life across many villages.

A powerful repercussion of these changes has been weakened social and cultural practices and the waning importance of traditional elites, from elders to *Maliks* (tribal leaders), *Khans* (landowners), and traditional religious figures. These actors have usually functioned as the mediators of social interactions in conflict, business, and trade, and played a strong role in marriage negotiations. Today, these elites are increasingly marginalized, subsequently leaving a social vacuum to be filled by those with the means to control power—warlords and drug traffickers often take advantage of these circumstances. The approaches of the latter to social affairs are undoubtedly different. While most families still engage in relatively traditional matrimony practices, early-age marriages, polygamy, age gaps, and exchange marriages or *Badal*<sup>33</sup> figure more commonly in many villages. What results is that instances of child bartering are met with silence. The former gatekeepers of social life largely ignore these cases, as the traditional elites fail to voice opposition through their respective platforms in mosques, *Jirgas* (tribal councils), or local community meetings. Whether the disregard is due to their suppressed social roles, shifts in their perceived responsibilities, or other factors is

unclear. That drugs and warlords wield their newly evolved influence to their own benefit is less subject to doubt.

Despite these transformations, however, child bartering remains largely an implicitly ill-considered practice. As Khamosh Hezb-u-allah puts it,

*Culturally, the practice of bartering girls to satisfy opium debts is considered a reprehensible and socially ill practice, and such conduct does not exist in any ethnic or tribal cultural setups. Those involved in practicing “child bartering” are socially stigmatized.*<sup>34</sup>

This strong stigma exists against those involved in bartering girls—on both sides. Farmers who barter their children to fulfill debt suffer subsequent social discrimination and stigma from having done so. Mohammad Khan notes:

*I am disgraced at home, in the village, and at the mosque. I lost face with my family and my people. I know that I am badly dishonored in the village, though they do not express it verbally.*<sup>35</sup>

He goes on to wish protection for his daughter.

*May Allah protect even the daughter of Kafir<sup>36</sup> from the suffering that my daughter is having. She has been teased by other women of her in-laws and she is called “the opium flower.” They tell her that wherever the opium flower grows it destroys everything, and eventually you will destroy our home.*<sup>37</sup>

While the practice of bartering girls to resolve opium-induced debt remains obscure and in the shadows of better-known crises in Afghanistan, there may exist no clearer representation of suffering among the children of Afghanistan’s terror and drug wars.

## Endnotes

† We would like to thank the individuals interviewed for this chapter for agreeing to discuss a sensitive topic, and at times putting their lives at risk. Atal especially thanks Safatullah Zahidi, Internews reporter in Helmand Province, for his efforts in assisting data collection. Our hearts go out to the children adversely affected by the consequences—intended or unintended—and we hope this essay in some small way helps to shed light on their conditions.

1. Khamosh Hezb-u-allah, freelance Afghan reporter in Helmand Province, August 16, 2010.
2. All estimates are from United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime, *Afghanistan*

- Opium Survey 2010*, [www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Afg\\_opium\\_survey\\_2010\\_exsum\\_web.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Afg_opium_survey_2010_exsum_web.pdf).
3. Gretchen Peters, *Seeds of Terror: How Heroin Is Bankrolling the Taliban and Al Qaeda* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009).
  4. UNODC, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2009*.
  5. George Gavrilis, "The Good and Bad News About Afghan Opium," Council on Foreign Relations, February 10, 2010, <http://rebecca.cfr.org/afghanistan/good-bad-news-afghan-opium/p21372/>.
  6. Colum Lynch, "U.N. Finds Afghan Opium Trade Rising," *Washington Post*, June 27, 2008.
  7. UNODC, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2010*.
  8. Ibid.
  9. [It should be borne in mind that the eradication of opium poppy is a specific obligation of the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs and the 1988 Convention Against the Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances.—Ed.]
  10. Edith M. Lederer, "U.N. Panel Accuses Taliban of Selling Drugs to Finance War and Train Terrorists," Associated Press, May 25, 2001; Peters, *Seeds of Terror*.
  11. Pierre-Arnaud Chouvy, *Opium: Uncovering the Politics of the Poppy* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2010), 184–85.
  12. Shafi-u-Allah, Department of Counternarcotics, Helmand Province, August 15, 2010.
  13. Mohammad Omer, social activist, is the managing director of both Hewad TV and Azad Afghan Radio, stationed in Kandahar, March 5, 2010.
  14. In contrast to other societies, across much of Afghanistan, the groom's family provides a mutually agreed sum of money to the bride's family, which is called "bride money."
  15. Ghulam Nabi Popal (not real name), civil society activist in the southern region, Kabul, August 22, 2010.
  16. Shams-u-Din Tanveer, children's rights officer, Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, Kandahar Regional Office, February 26, 2010.
  17. A *gerib* is a local unit of land measurement equivalent to 2,000 square meters (0.2 hectare) or 21,528 square feet (0.49 acre) of land.
  18. Abdullah Khan, representative, Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission in Helmand Province, Lashkarga, August 16, 2010.
  19. Shukran G. Mohammad, head of the Department of Counternarcotics, Kandahar Province, March 3, 2010.
  20. Ibid.
  21. Dan Williams, "Child Addicts Find Succour in a Corner of Kabul," Reuters, June 15, 2010.
  22. Aunohita Mojumdar, "In Afghanistan, Drug Rehab for Children," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 14, 2010.
  23. Sadeq Behnam and Sudabah Afzali, freelance journalists in Herat reporting for the Institute for War and Peace Reporting. In 2010, the Central Statistics Organization estimated a total of 410,700 people living in Herat City, the province capital.
  24. Sami Yousafzai and Ron Moreau, "The Opium Brides of Afghanistan," *Newsweek*, April 7, 2008.
  25. Shafi-u-Allah, head of the Department of Counternarcotics of Helmand Province, Lashkarga, March 3, 2010.
  26. Meenapal Dawa Khan, southern region correspondent, Radio Liberty, March 3, 2010.
  27. Khamosh Hezb-u-Allah, freelance reporter in Helmand Province, August 16, 2010.
  28. A local shopkeeper in Lashkarga city, August 17, 2010.
  29. Security constraints were not primarily tied to the well-known active insurgency and counterinsurgency in Helmand. Rather, the acute insecurity felt in the field

is driven by the desire of participants in the drug culture to remain hidden and undercover—in fact using the violent insurgency as a veil for their activities.

30. Tanveer.Shams-u-Din, children's rights officer, Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, Kandahar Regional Office, February 26, 2010.
31. Meenapal Dawa Khan, southern region correspondent, Radio Liberty, March 3, 2010.
32. Mohammad Khan, farmer in Nawa District, Helmand Province, August 18, 2010.
33. *Badal* literally means "exchange" and in matrimony practices it refers to a traditional bilateral conduct in which two families marry girls. In these circumstances, the families do not pay bride money.
34. Khamosh Hezb-u-allah, freelance Afghan reporter in Helmand Province, August 16, 2010.
35. Mohammad Khan, farmer in Nawa District of Helmand Province, August 18, 2010.
36. Literally means "infidel," though in common usage tends to refer to a "vicious person."
37. Mohammad Khan, farmer in Nawa District of Helmand Province, August 18, 2010.

## 4. After the War on Drugs: How Legal Regulation of Production and Trade Would Better Protect Children

*by Steve Rolles*

### Children in the Political Narrative of the Drug War

The emergence of the “war on drugs”—shorthand for a broader punitive and prohibitionist paradigm—has been predicated on the concept of drugs as an existential “threat” rather than a more conventionally conceived health or social policy issue.<sup>1</sup> Prohibitionist rhetoric frames drugs as menacing not only to health but also to national security (our borders), and not infrequently, to the moral fabric of society itself, using the “drug threat” to children as the specific rhetorical vehicle.

Emotive plays on the threat to our children have a long history in political propaganda (particularly in times of war), exploiting the potency of the parents’ greatest fear. Drug-war rhetoric presents the threat to youth both as the drugs themselves (although significantly only the illegal ones) and the sinister drug dealers who prey on the young and vulnerable (lurking at the school gates, etc.). While there are, of course, very real risks for children and young people associated with both drug use and illegal drug markets, perception of these risks has been dramatically distorted by the populist fearmongering of politicians (who can then position themselves as “tough” on the drug threat), aided and abetted by a sensation-hungry mainstream media.

The prohibition paradigm is very much framed as a response to such threats, and its popular narrative has cast itself as a moral crusade against an “evil” that threatens mankind itself. The preamble to the 1961 UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, for example, establishes the context of the legal framework it has enshrined in these terms:

- Concerned with the health and welfare of mankind.
- Recognizing that addiction to narcotic drugs constitutes a serious evil for the individual and is fraught with social and economic danger to mankind.
- Conscious of their duty to prevent and combat this evil.

Given this rhetorical context, it is easy to see how supporters of

prohibition understand any kind of moves toward legal regulation of drug production and supply as being immoral, a form of surrender, or a descent into anarchy in which our children will be the first and most obvious victims.

Criticisms of less punitive drug policies are, in fact, often framed in these terms. Critics define one or more worst-case scenarios, often extrapolated from “what if?” thinking built on an immediate and total absence of all drug control legislation, and then argue from the basis that such scenarios will be the norm. The popular public discourse on alternatives to prohibition is thus frequently characterized by the “imperiled child” narrative, with apocalyptic visions of stoned school bus drivers, heroin in candy stores, and armies of child drug-zombies. As advocates of legal regulation of drug markets have made abundantly clear (see below), this is a grotesque misrepresentation of what is actually being proposed.

Supporters of prohibition also frequently present any steps toward legal regulation of drug markets as “radical,” and therefore innately confrontational and dangerous. However, the historical evidence demonstrates that, in fact, it is prohibition that is the radical policy. Legal regulation of drug production, supply and use is far more in line with currently accepted ways of managing health and social risks in almost all other spheres of life. Yet prohibition has become so entrenched and institutionalized that many in the drugs field, even those from the more critical progressive end of the spectrum, view it as immutable, an assumed reality of the legal and policy landscape to be worked within or around, rather than as a policy choice.

Given that the war on drugs is predicated on “eradication” of the “evil” drug threat as a way of achieving an (entirely fantastical) “drug-free world,” it has effectively established a permanent state of war. A curiously self-justifying logic now prevails in which harms that are a direct result of drug prohibition—such as children killed in drug gang drive-by shootings, drug-fueled conflict, environmental damage, corruption or deaths from contaminated street drugs—are confused and conflated with harms related to drug use. These policy-related harms then bolster the “drug menace” rhetoric and justify the continuation, or intensification of prohibition.

This has contributed to a high level policy environment that routinely ignores critical scientific thinking, and health and social policy norms. Fighting the threat—defending the vulnerable from

the evil of drugs—becomes an end in itself, one that is seen as intrinsically righteous, and as such it creates a largely self-referential and self-justifying rhetoric that makes meaningful evaluation, review, and debate difficult, if not impossible. Indeed, while the drug-related victimhood of the child is a key part of prohibition narrative, furnished with emotive anecdotes of wasted youth and bereaved parents, prohibition's effect generally, and its influence on children specifically, remains largely immunized from meaningful scrutiny and evaluation.

## Practical and Intellectual Challenges to the Prohibitionist Status Quo

Despite this hostile ideological environment, two distinct policy trends have emerged in recent decades—harm reduction and decriminalization of personal possession and use. While both nominally permitted within existing international legal frameworks, they pose serious practical and intellectual challenges to the overarching status quo. Both have been driven by pragmatic necessity; harm reduction emerging in the mid-1980s in response to the epidemic of HIV among injecting drug users, and decriminalization in response to resource pressures on overburdened criminal justice systems (and to a lesser extent, concerns over the rights of users).

Both policies have succeeded in demonstrating effectiveness to the extent that harm reduction is now used in policy or practice in ninety-three countries,<sup>2</sup> while decriminalization (in various forms) has spread across mainland Europe, Central America, and Latin America, with cannabis-only decriminalization more widespread still—including states in Australia and the United States.

Decriminalization has demonstrated that less punitive approaches do not necessarily lead to increased use, most notably in Portugal, where even though drug use more generally has risen in line with its European neighbors, use among young people has actually fallen since the 2001 decriminalization of personal possession of all drugs (now dealt with via civil/administrative interventions).<sup>3</sup> While we should not assume a causal link between this positive development and the decriminalization itself—there being many other policy and wider environmental variables at play (not least the substantive investment in public health programs)—the fact that the apocalypse

predicted by many doomsayers has failed to materialize remains significant.

More broadly an extensive World Health Organization study concluded:

*Globally, drug use is not distributed evenly and is not simply related to drug policy, since countries with stringent user-level illegal drug policies did not have lower levels of use than countries with liberal ones.*<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, cannabis decriminalization states in the United States do not have higher levels of use than those without, and more significantly, the Netherlands, with its de facto legally regulated cannabis availability (for adults), does not have higher levels than its prohibitionist neighbors (for all age groups).<sup>5</sup> If there is a deterrent effect from increasingly punitive responses to drug use, the evidence base for it is strikingly weak. The near universal research aversion of governments to this question, despite the central role of punitive deterrence in the drug war narrative, is a particularly telling indicator of the paradigms roots in populist polemic, rather than science.

Without diminishing the importance and effect of these emerging policy trends, they can, however, be seen primarily as symptomatic responses mitigating against harms created by the prohibitionist policy environment. Neither directly addresses the public health or wider social harms created or exacerbated by the illegal production and supply of drugs.

The logic of both, however, ultimately leads to confronting the inevitable choice: nonmedical drug markets can remain in the hands of unregulated criminal profiteers or they can be controlled and regulated by appropriate government authorities. There is no third option under which there are no drugs in society. There is a need to make this choice based on a rational objective evaluation of which option may deliver the best outcomes in terms of minimizing harms, both domestic and international, associated with drug production, supply, and use. The impact on different policy regimes on vulnerable populations will naturally be one of the priority indicators of any policy's success or failure.

Exploring legal regulatory approaches does not preclude demand reduction as a legitimate long-term policy goal, indeed it is argued that it may facilitate it among vulnerable groups. Acknowledging

the need for regulation does, however, accept that policy must also deal with the reality of high levels of demand as they exist now. However, a historical stumbling block in this debate has been that the eloquent and detailed critiques of the drug war have not been matched by a vision for its replacement. Unless a credible public health-led model of drug market regulation is proposed, the myths and misrepresentations will inevitably fill the void. So what would such a model look like?

## A “Blueprint for Regulation”

Transform Drug Policy Foundation’s 2009 *After the War on Drugs: Blueprint for Regulation* attempts to answer this question by offering a menu of options for controls over all aspects of production, supply/availability, and use. This includes controls over products (dosage, preparation, price, and packaging); vendors (licensing, vetting and training requirements, marketing, and promotions); outlets (location, outlet density, appearance); where and when drugs can be consumed; and, crucially for this discussion, who has access to the legally regulated availability including age controls, along with explorations of licensed buyer and club membership access models.<sup>6</sup>

*Blueprint* then rationally explores options for different drugs and different using populations to suggest the regulatory models that may deliver the best outcomes. Lessons are drawn from successes and failings with alcohol and tobacco regulation in the UK and beyond, as well as controls over pharmaceutical drugs and other risky products and activities that are regulated by government. Such regulated models occupy a space on the continuum of policy options between the poles of the absolute prohibitions of a war on drugs and entirely unregulated free market models (such as the online sales of “legal highs” such as mephedrone).

Moves toward legal regulation of drug markets would naturally need to be phased in cautiously over a number of years, with close evaluation and monitoring of results and any unintended negative consequences being essential elements of any roll out—not least the negative effects on the most vulnerable. Where problems emerge controls could be adapted with alternative approaches or increased levels of regulation.

Clearly, there are particularly important lessons to be learned from

alcohol and tobacco policy, most significantly the corrosive effects on public health of unregulated commercial promotion aimed at children and young people. These experiences and the variety of responses to them over the past century do, however, mean that we now at least have a clear idea of how to effectively regulate these products to reduce the harm they cause to society. This understanding—while far from universally adopted—is clearly outlined in guidelines produced by the World Health Organization, in documents such as the *Framework for Alcohol Policy in the WHO European Region*, and the *Framework Convention on Tobacco Control*, that in many respects embody precisely the kind of rational public health-based regulatory approaches to drug control being advocated by the drug law reform movement.

There is, of course, no universal regulatory model. A flexible range of regulatory tools would be available and applied differentially across the spectrum of products and production/supply/using environments. Naturally, the more restrictive controls would be deployed for more risky products, and, correspondingly, less restrictive controls for lower-risk products. This potential for differential application of regulatory controls according to risk could additionally help create a “risk-availability gradient.” This holds the potential not only to reduce harms associated with illicit supply and patterns of consumption as they currently exist but also, in the longer term, to progressively encourage or “nudge” patterns of use to move toward safer products, behaviors, and using environments.

An understanding of such processes is emerging from both the literature on alcohol control (for example, progressive tax increases according to alcohol content) and the emerging understanding of *route transition interventions*<sup>7</sup> aimed at encouraging injecting drug users to move to lower risk noninjecting modes of administration via, for example, providing foil for smoking heroin. This process is the precise opposite of what has happened under prohibition, where an unregulated profit-driven dynamic has tended to tilt the market toward ever more potent (but profitable) drugs and drug preparations, as well as encouraging riskier behaviors in high-risk settings.

The oversight and enforcement of new regulatory regimes would fall to a range of public health, regulatory, and enforcement agencies—including established health and safety and policing infrastructure. Activities that take place outside of the regulatory framework would

naturally remain prohibited and subject to civil or criminal sanctions, or appropriate nonpunitive interventions for nonadults as deemed appropriate and established to be effective.

## Children in a Post-Prohibition Model?

Restricting or preventing access to drugs by nonadults is a key element of any existing or future regulatory models. Any rights of access to psychoactive drugs and freedom of choice over drug-taking decisions should only be granted to consenting adults. This is partly because of the more general concerns regarding child vs. adult rights and responsibilities. More important, however, in line with a risk-based regulatory logic, the specific short- and long-term health risks associated with drug use are significantly higher for children, and, of course, the younger they are, the greater the risks.

This combination of legal principle and public health management legitimizes a strict age-control policy. In practical terms, it should also be noted that stringent restrictions on young people's access to drugs—while inevitably imperfect—are more feasible and easier to police than population-wide prohibitions. Generally speaking, children are subject to a range of social and state controls to which adults are not. More specifically, drug restrictions for minors command near universal adult support—making them a more practical proposition than the widely flouted laws criminalizing adult drug use.

Combined with this is the fact that while markets created by any prohibition will always attract criminal interest, the nonadult market for drugs is a small fraction of the total adult market. Thus, enforcement could be brought to bear on it with far more efficiency, and correspondingly greater chances of success.

It is also worth pointing out that one ironic and unintended side effect of prohibition can potentially make illegal drug markets, that have no age thresholds, easier for young people to access than legally regulated markets for (say) alcohol or tobacco. According to the U.S. drug use surveillance systems funded by the U.S. National Institutes on Drug Abuse, over the past thirty years of cannabis prohibition, the drug has remained “almost universally available to American 12th graders,” with 80–90 percent over this period saying the drug is “very easy” or “fairly easy” to obtain.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, there is an important debate around what age constitutes an acceptable age/access threshold. Different countries have adopted different thresholds for tobacco and alcohol, generally ranging from fourteen to twenty-one for purchase or access to licensed premises. Where this threshold should lie for a given drug product will depend on a range of pragmatic choices. These should be informed by objective risk assessments, evaluated by individual states or local licensing authorities, and balanced in accordance with their own priorities.

As with all areas of regulatory policy there needs to be some flexibility allowed in response to changing circumstances or emerging evidence. In the UK, for example, the age of access for tobacco purchase has recently been raised from sixteen to eighteen, while in the United States there is a growing debate over whether the alcohol age threshold of twenty-one is too high. The Amethyst Initiative (supported by 135 chancellors and presidents of U.S. universities and colleges) argues, for example, that the age twenty-one limit has created “a culture of dangerous, clandestine ‘binge-drinking’—often conducted off-campus” and that “by choosing to use fake IDs, students make ethical compromises that erode respect for the law.”<sup>9</sup> Even within a legal regulatory framework, inappropriate prohibitions evidently have the potential to create unintended consequences. They can undermine, rather than augment, the development of social controls and responsible norms regarding drugs and drug use. It is clear that age limits need to be realistic and, crucially, properly enforced to be effective.

In the UK, for example—where “binge-drinking” among young people has been a growing problem—there has been a widespread lack of age restriction enforcement, with Alcohol Concern reporting that: “10–15% of licensed premises are found to persistently sell alcohol to the under-aged yet only 0.5% licensed premises are called up for review.”<sup>10</sup> Secondary supply of legitimately obtained drugs to nonadults will also require appropriate enforcement and sanction, perhaps with a graded severity depending on distance in age from the legal threshold.

Legal age controls can, of course, only ever be part of the solution to reducing drug-related harms among young people. Effective regulation and access controls must be supported by concerted prevention efforts. These should include evidence-based, targeted drug education that balances the need to encourage healthy lifestyles

(including abstinence) while not ignoring the need to reduce the related risks. Funding for such programs could be easily met by the inevitable savings in criminal justice and enforcement expenditure as a program of reform is rolled out.

## Drug Policy: Trying to See the Bigger Picture

Perhaps more important is longer-term investment in social capital. Young people—particularly those most at risk in marginal/vulnerable populations—need and should be given meaningful alternatives to drug use, and there is a strong evidence base to support the effectiveness of such interventions. The SMART program in the United States, for example, which works on public housing estates, has found that providing youth clubs has a real influence on reducing drug use, dealing, and overall criminal activity in both young people and adults.<sup>11</sup> It is also worth noting that the Netherlands and Sweden regularly top the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) child well-being table and have relatively low levels of drug misuse (despite markedly different drug policies), while the United States and the United Kingdom invariably sit at or near the bottom and have relatively high levels of misuse and a lower age of misusers.<sup>12</sup>

It is increasingly clear that levels of problematic drug use (among all age groups) primarily reflect a complex interplay of social, economic, and cultural variables. Key drivers include social deprivation, inequality, and broader measures of personal and social well-being. The corollary of this is that the results of drug policy as traditionally conceived (prevention, treatment, and enforcement) should not be overestimated, may be marginal, and, in many cases, irrelevant, relative to the underlying social determinants of drug-using behaviors.

This analysis—that problematic use is essentially a barometer of a social well-being (or its lack)—has obvious implications for longer-term prevention and harm reduction strategies. It suggests that success is likely to flow more from investing in social capital and addressing multiple deprivation and inequality issues, particularly as they affect young people, rather than from pouring ever more money into more conventional interventions that are poorly supported by evidence. This naturally points to a much broader program of social policy reform and investment, and notably highlights the need for

drug policy to emerge from its drug war bunker mentality, adopt a more holistic worldview, and integrate far more effectively with parallel disciplines and institutions involved with social and public health policy.

While conventional drug policy may only be able to achieve, at best, fairly marginal effects with respect to the prevalence of problematic use, the overarching prohibitionist legal framework can clearly have a dramatic influence on levels of harm associated with drug use, both by increasing health risks associated with use, and through the wider social harms created or exacerbated by the illegal drug market.

While it is specifically not envisaged that legal availability of drugs would be extended to children, it remains the case that illegal production and supply serves to maximize the risk associated with use itself for all age groups. As already discussed, an unregulated market serving the interests of criminal profiteers will tend to shift toward the most concentrated products—for example, why you can buy crack on the streets of London, but not coca. Furthermore, illegal products are of unknown strength and purity, often cut or contaminated, and without packaging information about dosage, safety, or risks. Legally regulated products—even if sold or passed on in an informal secondary marketplace or via peer networks—would be intrinsically less risky than their illicit counterparts. Furthermore, barriers and distrust between youth and authority figures perpetuated by punitive prohibitions—be they educators or law enforcers—would be progressively reduced, facilitating more effective communication and dialogue about drug risks and healthy lifestyles.

Arguably much more significant would be the reduction in harms to children and young people that would follow the progressive contraction of the illegal drug market as the trade shifted into the legally regulated models. As has been so eloquently described elsewhere in this collection, the harms to children from the war on drugs and its unintended consequences—quite aside from drug use—are profound and terrifying in scale. Even a small reduction in the extent of these harms, which include the brutality of the markets whose frontline children live on, the conflict fueled by illicit drug profits, and the destabilization of social infrastructure by illicit drug market-related corruption and violence, would be a huge social positive.

Prohibitions on commodities for which there is high demand

inevitably create criminal opportunities, pushing production, supply, and consumption into an illicit parallel economy. Such illicit activity is flexible and opportunistic, naturally exploiting the most vulnerable workforce and seeking out locations where it can operate with minimum cost and interference, hence the attraction of geographically marginal regions and fragile, failing or failed states. As a result, many countries or regions involved in drug production and transit have weak or chaotic governance and state infrastructure.

The illegal drug trade can be seen as providing a vital income stream for a range of insurgents, militias, and terrorist groups. The cocaine trade, for example, directly fuels the long-running civil wars in Colombia, and now undermines emerging transit states in West Africa, such as Guinea Bissau. The opiate trade similarly contributes to wider regional conflicts in Central Asia—prominently in Afghanistan, now spilling over into Pakistan, in which the Taliban and various rival political factions and warlords are substantially funded via their control of the opium/heroin trade.

At the same time, Mexico has witnessed a horrifying explosion of violence, with estimates of as many as 28,000 deaths in the past four years, as the government has tried and failed to use military force to crush the drug cartels (sustained by an impoverished population providing a ready supply of young foot soldiers), which are now powerful and rich enough to outgun state enforcement efforts. A similar, although largely unreported, level of violence has unfolded in Venezuela, which is also fighting its own very real, but equally futile, war on drugs.

Large-scale illicit activity can thus undermine governance and social infrastructure at local regional and even national levels, feeding into a downward development spiral. In such a spiral, existing social problems are exacerbated and governance further undermined through endemic corruption at all levels of government, judiciary, and policing, another inevitable feature of illicit drug markets entirely controlled by organized criminal profiteers.

As with all wars, in the drug war it is the young, poor, and marginalized who are most vulnerable to the violence and wider social harms that conflict creates.

Clearly, any high-value natural resources, whether legal or illegal, can potentially fuel conflict. Legal examples include oil, diamonds,

and coltan. But for these legal products high value is intrinsic and relatively consistent, regardless of international legal frameworks. By contrast, drug crops such as opium poppy and coca are essentially low-value agricultural commodities. They have only become high value as a result of a prohibitionist legal framework (a combination of unregulated profiteering and the high risk to producers/traffickers is passed on to the consumer), which in turn encourages expanded criminal control of the trade. By the time they reach developed world users, the alchemy of prohibition is such that they have become literally worth more than their weight in gold.

Progressive shifts toward legal regulation of these products would naturally undermine the markets, remove the extraordinary profits on offer, and choke off a key source of funding for so much of the conflict and corruption. About half of the world's opium production is entirely legal and regulated—that is, for the medical market. This legal production of opium (and indeed coca—albeit on a smaller scale) is associated with few, if any, of the problems highlighted above.<sup>13</sup> In this legal context, they essentially function as regular agricultural commodities—much like coffee, tea, or other plant-based pharmaceutical precursors.

Under a legal production regime, drug crops would become part of the wider development discourse (and drug products more resemble conventionally controlled pharmaceuticals). While such agricultural activities still present a raft of serious and urgent challenges to both the local and international communities—for example, coping with the whims of global capitalist markets and the general lack of a fair trade infrastructure—dealing with such issues within a legally regulated market framework means they are not additionally impeded by the negative consequences of prohibition and the criminal empires it has created.

Similar effects would be seen in the reduction of all specifically drug war-related harms: increased regulation of production would reduce the environmental impacts of the unregulated parallel trade; a key driver of urban gang violence would be reduced; family breakups related to incarceration of parents and caregivers would be reduced; and so on.

We should be careful not to imagine such reform as a silver bullet solution or panacea for the people or regions of the world blighted by the unintended fallout of prohibition, or that change could happen

overnight. Instead it should be realistically considered more as a gradual, probably generational, process of removing a key driver of personal and social harms, and an obstacle to longer-term social and economic development.

There can, however, be hope that reform would help facilitate more positive change, albeit indirectly, via the potential for the billions, *even trillions*, of dollars still being poured into failed, futile, and actively counterproductive enforcement efforts—to be redirected toward more socially beneficial ends, be it housing, food security, education, public health, environmental protection, or any number of worthwhile social programs. This holds enormous promise for the children and young people negatively affected by the war on drugs—and indeed, the poor and marginalized in society more broadly.

Different social environments will require different approaches in response to the specific challenges they face. Transform’s *Blueprint* does not seek to provide all the answers—but rather seeks to move the debate beyond “should we end the war on drugs?” to “what could the world look like after the war on drugs?”

## Endnotes

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9. See [www.amethystinitiative.org](http://www.amethystinitiative.org).
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12. UNICEF, *Child Poverty in Perspective: An Overview of Child Well-being in Rich Countries, Innocenti Report Card 7*, 2007, 4, [www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc7\\_eng.pdf](http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc7_eng.pdf).
13. See Rolles *After the War on Drugs*, Appendix 2.

## Discussion Questions

1. What is the connection between poverty and illicit crop production? What are the specific issues facing children? What are the policy implications of this?
2. The drug trade is a global security threat requiring a military response. Discuss, considering the impact of war and conflict on children.
3. Barra and Joloy claim that the gains in Mexico's drug war, measured in seizures, frozen assets, and arrests, are not worth the price that has been paid. Eighty percent of the Mexican public appears to disagree.<sup>1</sup> What is your view?
4. Do you agree that alternative regulatory frameworks may better protect children from drugs? What are the risks to children of this approach? How can they be addressed?

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