4.2 Reducing drug market violence

Drug policies and law-enforcement strategies should focus on reducing the violence associated with drug markets rather than their overall scale, and reduce levels of socio-economic inequality in the areas most affected by them.

Why is reducing drug market violence important?
Urban violence and organised crime are some of the most worrying aspects of the global drug market. As those involved in the illicit drug market cannot appeal to legal methods to avoid or settle their disputes, they often engage in violence to protect their reputation, revenues, territory and profits. The extraordinarily high profit margins available to drug traffickers and dealers also provide them with great incentives to take the risks that come with the violent drug trade (see Box 1).

Box 1. Former UNODC Executive Director statement
‘The first unintended consequence is a huge criminal black market that now thrives in order to get prohibited substances from producers to consumers. Whether driven by a ‘supply push’ or a ‘demand pull’, the financial incentives to enter this market are enormous. There is no shortage of criminals competing to claw out a share of a market in which hundred fold increases in price from production to retail are not uncommon.’

Recently, many regions have experienced increased levels of drug market violence. The Caribbean has become the region most affected by lethal violence; murder rates in Jamaica reached 58 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2008, before dropping slightly in 2011. Similarly, Mexico is currently experiencing an explosion of violence related to the drug market – since December 2006, at least 47,000 people have died as a result of drug-related violence, and Ciudad Juarez, on the border with the USA, is the most violent city in the world. In contrast, other Latin American cities have experienced a reduction in murder rates compared to a decade ago. Bogotá (Colombia), which used to be the world’s most violent city, has seen its murder rate decline to 21.5 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2011. Similarly, many US cities that experienced spikes in urban violence in the 1990s have seen more recent declines. Despite hosting some of the most lucrative drug markets, European cities are less affected by large-scale urban violence.

Evidence suggests that increases in violence are largely linked to the transit routes of controlled drugs and related drug consumption in areas where poverty is high and governance is weak. Puerto Rico had a very low murder rate until it became a trans-shipment point for drugs en route to the USA. Traffickers
paid the local middlemen with drugs, which led to a surge in drug use and violent crime in the 1990s.\textsuperscript{7} The same phenomenon is now occurring in West Africa, which has become a new transit area for drugs en route to Europe.

Thus far, governments have believed that implementing tough drug laws against drug traffickers and users would automatically reduce violence by removing drug markets. However, these measures have not succeeded in reducing the scale of the global drug market and related violence. In practice the opposite has often happened and the use of law enforcement by the police and sometimes the military has tended to exacerbate levels of violence. An approach focusing on shaping the illicit market to make it less harmful, coupled with socio-economic development and strengthening of justice institutions and community ties are more effective in increasing citizen security in the face of high levels of violence, and reducing the reach of powerful organised criminals.\textsuperscript{8} Some experts have recently started to promote such an approach as the application of ‘harm reduction for the supply side’.\textsuperscript{9}

**Examples of drug-related violence**

There are various stages in the journey of drugs from their cultivation to their consumption, and each is associated with different forms of violence.

**Drug production**

Violence may be employed to control the crops destined for the illicit drug market. This includes the use of violence by individuals and groups wanting to protect their crops from seizures or destruction by state authorities or criminal rivals. In Colombia, clashes often occur between farmers and factions of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.\textsuperscript{10} Violence is also commonly employed in Afghanistan. In 2001, the Taliban severely restricted the production of opium through threats of violence to farmers who grew opium poppy. North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) soldiers are also engaged in ongoing deadly operations to control Afghan opium fields.\textsuperscript{11} In the Andean region, less direct forms of violence include poisoning food crops and water supplies and displacement of farmers because of aerial herbicide fumigation campaigns.

Crops destined for the illicit market also tend to proliferate in areas affected by conflict. In Colombia, for example, coca and poppies are cultivated in areas where both left-wing guerrillas and right-wing paramilitaries fight for territorial control or control of the various stages of the illicit drug industry. Violent incursions by the Colombian army add to the pressure on the local population and the abrogation of their human rights.\textsuperscript{12}

**Drug trafficking**

Significant levels of violence are associated with trafficking of drugs en route to Europe and North America, especially in Central America and the Caribbean. Mexico is particularly affected by drug-related violence because of intense conflicts among heavily armed trafficking gangs and between drug-trafficking organisations and state authorities, especially since the Calderón government intensified its war on the drugs cartels. In 2003, following the imprisonment of several leaders of the Gulf cartel, the Sinaloa cartel aggressively attempted to seize control of their lucrative smuggling routes. The government responded with a major crackdown against drug cartels in 2006. The conflict unleashed an upsurge of violence in border cities (see Figure 1).
Recently, tough law enforcement in the Caribbean has forced drug traffickers to find alternative trade routes. Drugs trafficked into Europe are now shipped via West Africa, which is currently experiencing an increase in drug use and drug-related violence. This is a result of the so-called ‘balloon effect’ (for a definition, see Box 2 in Section 2.2: Effective drug law enforcement).

**Retail markets**

High levels of violence and intimidation are associated with street-level dealing. However, retail markets are not necessarily and continually violent, and co-operative relations can develop between street drug dealers. However, this requires that the government or local authorities realise that there will always be some level of drug dealing and that the new focus should be on targeting those retail markets that cause most harms to society, while implicitly tolerating other forms of less harmful retail markets.

**The nature of drug markets**

Several factors influence the levels of violence associated with drug markets:

- **the degree to which the wholesale drug trade has infiltrated the institutional structure of a city** – cities in Latin America, the Caribbean and West Africa, where drug markets have become entwined with competition between local businesses, bureaucracies and politicians are, for example, highly vulnerable to violence

- **the type of retail drug market** – open-air, street-based drug markets tend to be violent, as dealers compete for cash, customers, territory and reputation. By contrast, delivery-style markets are associated with lower levels of violence, as dealers consciously avoid violence so as not to attract the attention of rivals and the police. Even though the overall prevalence of drug use in the two types of drug markets is usually comparable, hidden markets avoid some of the negative effects of open street dealing, with important implications for community safety, neighbourhood reputations and motivations for young men to aspire to criminal lifestyles. Delivery-style markets are also more mobile, with dealers often switching delivery points to avoid the police and rival dealers. This means that the reduction in violence is accompanied by a reduction in the spatial concentration of problems related to the drug market in economically vulnerable neighbourhoods.
• **socio-economic conditions** – cities and neighbourhoods that are socio-economically vulnerable, suffering from lack of employment opportunities or urban segregation, are most vulnerable to drug markets and violence. Deprivation also causes low community cohesion, reducing the potential for informal social control of drug use and violence.

• **state violence** – when law-enforcement agencies increase the intensity of their operations against drug markets, rates of urban violence can soar. In some cases, the state can become one of the main sources of drug market violence. Even if we leave aside those countries that still use the death penalty for drug offences, there are others (including at various times Thailand [see Box 2], Mexico and Brazil) where drug control policies have led to high levels of urban violence.

**Box 2. Thailand's 2003 war on drugs**
In February 2003, the Thai government launched a 'war on drugs', which resulted in the extrajudicial killing of approximately 2,800 people, the arbitrary arrest of several thousand more, and the use of extreme levels of violence by government officials. In August 2007, the military-installed government of General Surayud Chalanont appointed a special committee to investigate the extrajudicial killings during the 2003 war on drugs. The committee's report, which has never been made public, found that of the 2,819 people killed between February and April 2003, more than 1,400 were not involved in the drug market, and that there was no apparent reason for killing them.

• **the availability of firearms** – drug markets flooded with automatic and semi-automatic weapons are naturally more lethally violent than other markets. Once guns are introduced into a drug market, it is exceptionally difficult to eliminate them. This provides an incentive both to prevent the development of violent drug markets and to limit the availability of firearms among the general population.

**Promoting a harm reduction focus for the supply side**

The challenge for policy makers is to design law-enforcement strategies that create incentives for drug dealers to avoid the worst aspects of violence, intimidation and corruption.

There has recently been a shift in focus from several local governments that have experimented with new policies seeking to shape the illicit drug market in order to reduce its associated harms and violence. These policies have primarily focused on tackling the underlying causes of drug-related violence and involvement in organised crime, through a combination of law-enforcement efforts and socio-economic programmes that seek to:

• promote good governance and the rule of law

• fight corruption within police forces and government institutions

• provide health and socio-economic services to communities that had so far been outside of the reach of the state; this includes the construction of healthcare facilities, the promotion of education with the provision of scholarships, the construction of libraries, parks and community centres, creation of life-skill programmes, etc

• strengthen community ties and the involvement of community representatives in the design and implementation of programmes seeking to reduce drug market violence

New policies have focused on tackling the underlying causes of drug-related violence through a combination of law-enforcement efforts and socio-economic programmes.
• involve local policy makers in the co-ordination and support of local strategies.

The new policy adopted in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, has attracted much attention in Latin America and elsewhere (see Box 3). Another interesting case study, presented in Box 4, is that of city of Santa Tecla, El Salvador. The final example in Box 5 explains the principle of ‘focused deterrence’ law enforcement adopted in some US communities to reduce drug market violence.

**Box 3. Rio de Janeiro’s ‘Pacifying Police Units’**

Rio de Janeiro has a long history of violence associated with controlled drugs, organised crime and police repression. In Rio, the drug trade remains concentrated within economically and socially vulnerable communities living in the city’s favelas (slums). Since the 1970s, Rio became an important transit point for cocaine exports to North America, Europe and South Africa. Newly established drug factions quickly settled in the favelas, where they became important figures in the socio-political life of the community, providing them with health and social services and opportunities for employment in the drugs trade – services that were not offered by the government itself. In the 1980s and 1990s, divisions within and between drug factions, the increasing availability of high-calibre weapons, and violent police interventions in the favelas led to increasing levels of violence. High numbers of deaths (in 2010, the murder rate in Rio reached 46 per 100,000 inhabitants), an overcrowding of Brazilian prisons with drug offenders, high levels of corruption, and an ever-expanding drug market led the local government in Rio to review its drug policy.

Launched in 2008 in the favela of Santa Marta, UPPs (‘Unidades de Policía Pacificadora’, Pacifying Police Units) consist of a new public security policy that combines law enforcement with actions seeking to tackle the social, economic and cultural aspects of the drug market. A key element of this policy is that it should focus on those areas where the market is most harmful, while acknowledging that some level of trafficking will be tolerated elsewhere. The pacification process consists of four steps:

- **invasion**: this step aims to retake control of the territories under the influence of a drug cartel; it involves the intervention of the military
- **stabilisation**: while the military used to invade problematic favelas only to withdraw a few hours later, this new strategy now entails that the military remain in the pacified territory until the UPPs take over
- **occupation**: the UPPs start to operate in the favelas and seek to restore the rule of law through a system of community policing
- **post-occupation**: the UPPs develop a strong relationship of trust with the community and establish socio-economic programmes to boost education and employment opportunities.

Since 2008, 17 favelas have been retaken by the UPPs. Several concerns were raised about the policy. First, some have criticised a feeling of militarisation of the communities, with the military remaining in the favelas for an extended period of time, leading to tight police control, arbitrary search and seizures and harassment. Others have raised concerns about the capacity of the UPPs to tackle drug-related violence extensively. Indeed, out of the 1,000 favelas in the city, only 17 have been pacified so far. This may lead organised criminal groups to migrate to those neighbouring favelas that have not yet been pacified and resume their violent activities. Nevertheless, the UPPs have been well received by favela residents. A study in eight pacified favelas found that 83% of the residents considered that their security situation had improved as a result of the programme.
**Box 4. The example of Santa Tecla, El Salvador**

With a national homicide rate of 66 per 100,000 in 2010, El Salvador has one of the highest murder rates in the world. During the 1980s, El Salvador suffered a bloody civil war that led to massive internal migration from the countryside to the major cities. A devastating earthquake in 1986 left a further 100,000 people homeless. Today, El Salvador suffers from high levels of violence, predominantly in urban areas. In a 2010 survey, 24.2% of Salvadorans reported having been the victim of crime in their neighbourhoods.

Throughout the 1990s, El Salvador also experienced a rise in gang culture. The government principally used security forces and the criminal justice system to tackle the problem. This policy did little to reduce crime rates and resulted in driving these criminal organisations underground. It also led to thousands of arbitrary arrests and a greater gang presence in the country’s prisons.

In the face of this problem, the municipality of Santa Tecla, a satellite city of San Salvador, developed a different approach, focusing on a social-oriented strategy, to combat drug-related violence. The municipality undertook long-term plans that prioritised social development, community-building capacity, and co-ordination among local government agencies. The municipal government analysed city infrastructure and connectivity, land use demographics, employment, access to basic services and other factors crucial to development. Other policies such as ‘school scholarships’ were devised, offering financial incentives to stay in school and projects to ‘recuperate’ public spaces. The municipal government also created a local Observatory for the Prevention of Crime, which gathered data on violent crimes, in order to fine-tune local decision making, based on standardised evidence and information.

A model of community policing focused on prevention was implemented, including joint patrols between the municipal police and the national police. Mechanisms were also implemented to co-ordinate violence-prevention activities amongst local, state and national actors; this also allowed local citizens to participate in the design of policies, an important factor in the more socially oriented response to violent crime. The policy evolved thanks to civic participation, and the objective shifted to ‘strengthening peaceful community coexistence in the city through interagency co-operation and co-ordination and the promotion of responsible citizen participation in a way that is civic-minded and democratic’. This community-oriented style of policing, combined with long-term social projects, has been very popular with citizens who see it has achieved results. Indeed, since the initiation of the programme, although other security problems subsist today, Santa Tecla has seen a significant reduction in its homicide rate. In 2007, Santa Tecla was removed from the list of the 20 most dangerous municipalities.
Box 5. The US ‘focused deterrence’ law-enforcement strategy

In the US context, ‘focused deterrence’ law-enforcement strategies have achieved notable successes in reducing violent crime in numerous localities, from Boston, Massachusetts (see Box 4 in Section 2.2: Effective drug law enforcement), to High Point, North Carolina.

One of the central insights of ‘focused deterrence’ is that, at any given time, enforcement capacity is limited and clear priorities must therefore be set. Regardless of the country and circumstances, reducing crime understandably rises to the top of the priority list. By implication, other enforcement objectives take a back seat, at least temporarily. ‘Focused deterrence’ strategies arise from key insights about how law enforcement can shape criminal behaviour in ways that discourage violence – if the consequences of a certain type of criminal conduct (e.g. murder) are clearly communicated to the potential offenders, and the promised consequences are quickly brought to bear should such crimes be committed, there will be an important disincentive to engage in violence. That is, violence will be understood to be bad, rather than good, for business. Targeted enforcement has impressed upon drug dealers that flagrant violence makes them less competitive than their less violent rivals, and violent crime has fallen to a lower, more manageable equilibrium.

The successes achieved through variants of focused deterrence in US communities do not mean that illicit sales have been eliminated, but rather that the illicit drug market has shifted into modes of conduct that generate less mayhem in the streets.

Other cities that have suffered extremely high levels of drug market violence and have so far implemented policies primarily focused on law enforcement (sometimes involving the military), are also turning to this new approach. This includes, for example, Ciudad Juarez.

As these policies essentially involve long-term socio-economic development and community-strengthening strategies, time will be needed to truly assess their impact on drug-related violence. In addition, as each local drug market and its historical, political and cultural contexts are unique, it will often be difficult to apply one strategy in another context. However, important lessons have been learned from each of these policies, and available evidence shows promising results in areas where the policies have been implemented.

Recommendations

1) Law-enforcement efforts need to focus more on reducing the violence associated with the illicit market rather than attempting to reduce drug availability itself.

2) Policy makers need to recognise that social, political and economic exclusion form the context in which crime and violence take root, and that programmes that aim to reduce drug-related violence will require a long-term commitment based on socio-economic development, community strengthening, and citizen participation in policy-making processes.

3) Drug law-enforcement strategies must be based on a clear understanding of the structure and dynamics of specific illicit drug markets. Which drugs are more popular? What form does the market take? Is violence directly related to the drug market? Who is most likely to participate in and suffer from the drug market?

4) Where compromised by corruption, law-enforcement agencies and criminal justice systems need to be overhauled. Reforms are needed to generate an environment that is suitable for implementing policies aimed at reducing drug-related urban violence. These should include higher salaries, and better oversight and control mechanisms to root out corruption and prosecute those who engage in it.
5) Government agencies should always stay within the frame of the rule of law when intervening in drug markets.

6) Efforts should be made to reduce the availability of firearms in cities affected by drug markets. This involves a tighter regulation of the registration of firearms, campaigns to encourage the handing in of illegally held weapons (such as firearms amnesties), and other measures that make it harder for organised criminal groups to acquire weapons.

7) At the local level, the policy makers should set up integrated inter-agency partnerships, including law-enforcement, educational, social and health sectors, as well as communities, in order to design and implement strategies aimed at reducing drug market violence.

Key resources


Endnotes


19 Ibid.