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Drug Trafficking, Gang Violence, and the U.S. Immigration Crisis

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Introduction

Between 2010 and 2015, thousands of unaccompanied minors migrated to the United States in an attempt to escape the growing violence in their home countries in Central America (Park, 2014). The Central American and Caribbean region have eight of the top ten highest homicide rates by country in the world, as ranked by the United Nations (Bisogno et al., 2013). This violence can be attributed to growing gang activity in the region. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees recently released the story of a young boy named “Alfonso” and his reasons for leaving El Salvador to immigrate to the United States:

“The problem was that where I studied there were lots of M-18 gang members, and where I lived was under control of the other gang, the MS-13. The M-18 gang thought I belonged to the MS-13. They had killed the two police officers who protected our school. They waited for me outside the school. It was a Friday, the week before Easter, and I was headed home. The gang told me that if I returned to school, I wouldn’t make it home alive. The gang had killed two kids I went to school with, and I thought I might be the next one” (Velez, 2014).

Gangs, such as MS-13 and M-18, as well as cartels and insurgent groups, including Los Zetas and Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), gained a substantial amount of their power from funds obtained through trafficking drugs to the United States (Kilmer 2014). The illicit drug market in the United States accounts for billions of dollars in sales, most of which is collected directly by these illegal organizations (Kilmer, 2014). The domestic demand for these illegal substances has only increased over the past thirty years (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2014). In an effort to supply illegal substances for American consumption, gangs have begun to shift their trafficking routes from the Caribbean to overland routes across Central America and Mexico to avoid detection (Bunck, 2012). A report issued by the FBI claimed that MS-13 established a “new formalized structure to open new drug distribution channels facilitated by cartel alliances and bloodshed” from South America to the United States (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2014). One *Washington Post* article described how “experts traced the renewed activity to the gang’s leadership in El Salvador trying to create a more disciplined and structured organization in order to rejuvenate its ability to make money” (Jouvenal 2014). Funds from drug trafficking are then used to corrupt officials, buy weapons, and intimidate rivals in Central America in an effort to maintain their drug trafficking routes.

This paper argues that the United States needs to reduce violence caused by drug trafficking in Central America in order to address the unaccompanied minor immigration crisis. Recent policy proposals, including President Obama’s executive actions from 2012 to 2015 and The Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act, follow historical U.S. policy trends, which alter domestic policy to address the influx of new groups of people. Traditionally, U.S. policymakers have either created laws that prohibited certain groups from becoming citizens or have promoted permissive policies that gradually relaxed barriers to gaining citizenship. However, these policy trends fail to address the major cause of the immigration crisis: gang violence (Velez 2014). Additional military and economic support to Central and South America should strengthen

governmental institutions and subsequently reduce the high rates of violence. This paper will first examine the approach the United States has taken regarding the illicit drug trade and how these policies have affected the Central American and Caribbean region. From this perspective, domestic drug control policies and the market for illegal drugs in the United States will be discussed. I will then highlight the link between gang violence and trafficking of drugs through Central America. Finally, I will comment on both President Obama's and Congress's proposed policies and their potential effects.

Current Drug Policy

President Reagan set the precedent for U.S. domestic and international illicit drug policies. He was responsible for shaping “the contours of drug policy, expand[ing] the drug bureaucracy at home, and [he] took the drug war abroad” (Shahidullah, 2008). Shahid M. Shahidullah, the author of *Crime Policy in America: Laws Institutions, and Programs*, characterized President Reagan's approach to drug use when he wrote, “Reagan, like Nixon, deeply believed and theorized that the war on crime and the war on drugs are essentially a culture war” (Shahidullah, 2008); thus, Reagan believed that that drug related activities were a failure of morality. Many of the policies Reagan pursued regarding the “war on drugs” were focused primarily on reducing the supply and trafficking of illegal substances to the United States, as well as increasing enforcement measures on people who abused these substances domestically. In the next two sections I will discuss how this approach to drug policy has had adverse effects in the Central American and Caribbean region and how these domestic policies have failed to reduce the demand for illicit substances across the United States.

International Drug Policy

Some of the U.S. policies implemented to reduce the international drug supply and drug trafficking had unintended consequences. In the 1970s and early 1980s, Columbian cartels and insurgent groups preferred the Caribbean route to traffic cocaine, heroin, and marijuana to the black market in the United States (Bunck, 2012). The U.S. quickly began monitoring and increasing enforcement measures in this region to ramp up pressure on drug traffickers. Cartels, eager to retain control of their market share in the United States, began to use land routes to export illegal drugs. This had a drastic impact on the evolution of drug trafficking. Cocaine imports transported via the Central America route to the United States increased “by one-third of the total in 1989, to more than half in 1992, and to 80 percent by century's end” (Bunck, 2012). Shifting trade routes through Central America destabilized governmental institutions. Violence, bribes, and intimidation were all used by increasingly powerful drug smuggling cartels and gangs in order to continue their illicit activities (Bunck, 2012). Youngers and Rosin (2003) noted that the drug trade had “corrupted and further weakened local governments, judiciaries, and police forces” and, “drug-trafficking-related corruption has influenced the actions of [regional] politicians across the spectrum”. Thus, the United States' intervention in the Caribbean is the major reason for the shift in trafficking routes.

In another set of international policies, the U.S. government gradually increased military and economic support to Central America and the Caribbean in an attempt to address the drug-trafficking problem over the past two decades. The U.S. Government has spent \$20 billion from 2002 to 2012 on military support in the region deploying “U.S. Army troops, Air Force pilots and Navy ships outfitted with Coast Guard counter-narcotics teams” (Youngers, 2004). A recent article from *USA Today* claimed that there are ongoing operations in Central America and the Caribbean requiring 4,000 U.S. troops, four U.S. Naval ships and law enforcement agents from at least 10 different U.S. agencies (Youngers, 2004).

The U.S. has also provided training to Central and South American military and police forces. One particular operation in Colombia has proven to be very effective. Plan Colombia, a \$9 billion operation “has helped Colombian forces kill at least two dozen rebel leaders” (Priest, 2013). This operation provided Colombian troops with equipment and training to combat the leftist insurgency group. Plan Colombia left FARC, “once considered the best-funded insurgency in the world, at its smallest and most vulnerable state in decades” (Priest, 2013). The strengthened Colombian Government and Military forced FARC into peace negotiations last year, potentially ending a 60-year conflict. Additionally, the United States has ensured long lasting stability by providing additional assistance in a number of key sectors including governance, agriculture, and reconciliation between combatants (U.S. Agency for International Development, 2015). The United States Agency for International Development is ensuring that people living in rural areas are given the same economic opportunities by returning land to its rightful owners and granting title to this land (U.S. Agency for International Development, 2015). This simple policy provides the lowest income earners in this country with a livelihood they would not have had otherwise. These initiatives demonstrate the coordinated military and other assistance can strengthen a country and deter violence and the drug trade.

Domestic Policy

Despite this success in Colombia, this aggressive approach to drug enforcement inside the United States has failed to reduce the demand for illegal drugs. Illicit drug use has only increased over the past 40 years. A report released by the National Institute of Health “estimated the 23.9 million Americans aged 12 and above – or 9.2 percent of the population had used an illicit drug” in 2012 (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2014). This number is up from 2002 when it was estimated that 8.3 percent of the population had used a drug (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2014). A vast majority of the increase in drug use can be attributed to a higher percentage of the population using marijuana before it became legalized in several states (about 7.3 percent, or about 18.9 million Americans, currently use marijuana) (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2014). It is estimated that marijuana and cocaine sales in the United States amount to \$40.6 and \$28.3 billion, respectively, in 2010 (Kilmer, 2014). The global drug trade was estimated to generate \$321.6 billion in 2003, with most of this money going to drug smuggling cartels (Pollard, 2005).

Domestically, the U.S. federal government has attempted to reduce the supply of these drugs by targeting several drug-trafficking gangs. In a 2013 crackdown on MS-13 gang members “236 gang

members were arrested and “10 kilograms of marijuana, 123 grams of cocaine, over 770 grams of heroin and about \$22,400 in cash” were seized (Bothelho, 2013). In another raid the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI), Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), and the bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) targeted the trafficking routes of heroin from the Dominican Republic and Guatemala to Providence, Rhode Island (Federal Bureau, 2014). This joint investigation resulted in the seizure of “more than 23 kilograms of heroin, including the largest single seizure in Rhode Island, as well as the seizure of over 100 grams of cocaine, 15 firearms, more than \$400,000 in cash, and 12 vehicles” (Federal Bureau, 2014). These incidences demonstrate MS-13’s coordinated efforts to traffic and sell drugs to specific markets in the United States. On November 1, 2014 the Attala County Sheriff’s office in Mississippi, along with the Mississippi Bureau of Narcotics, seized 118 pounds of cocaine and over \$1 million in cash (Thompson, 2014). This operation “began with undercover street level drug buys and morphed into a multi-agency investigation of a drug-trafficking organization with a distribution network all over Mississippi connected to Texas” (Thompson, 2014).

Drug Trafficking and Gang Violence in Central America

While the U.S.’s international policies have attempted to reduce the supply and trafficking of illegal substances, and domestic policies have failed to reduce the demand for these substances, crime due to drug trafficking over the past decade continues to plague the Central American and Caribbean region. Officials in El Salvador’s anti-narcotics task force captured 1,036 gang members for drug related crimes in 2013, a substantial increase from 590 in 2012 (Cawley, 2014). Additionally, there were 29 drug trafficking structures dismantled in 2013, including the transport group known as the Taxis Cartel, indicating the existence of a well-structured trafficking infrastructure (Cawley, 2014). In July 2014, InSight Crime released an article containing a warning from El Salvador’s drug enforcement agency (DAN), which stated street level gangs are beginning to control drug trafficking routes (Camilo, 2014). Many larger organized crime syndicates, such as Los Zetas in Mexico or FARC in Columbia, align themselves with these street level gangs, such as MS-13 and M-8, to transport and sell their products. Douglas Farah, a senior fellow at the International Assessment and Strategy Center, wrote that “these [gangs] can and do take a variety of positions *vis-à-vis* dealings with the transport networks working on behalf of Mexican drug trafficking organizations such as *Los Zetas* and the Sinaloa cartel, protection of cocaine loads moving through Central America” (Koplowitz, 2013).

Many of these street level gangs regularly engage in acts of violence to retain, capture, or defend their control of a drug trafficking route. For example, in Central America, the 18th Street Gang, known as Mara-18, and Mara Salvatrucha or MS-13, along with several others, regularly battle for control of entire cities to ensure stable transshipment routes for narcotics to the United States. Ana Arna, a writer for *Foreign Policy Magazine*, described the gang wars in El Salvador, “Today, the gangs regularly battle each other and the police for control of working-class neighborhoods and even entire cities. Fifteen municipalities in El Salvador are believed to be effectively ruled by the maras. Soyapango, a gritty working-class neighborhood of San Salvador that

was once home to leftist guerrillas, is now the subject of a fierce turf war between M-18 and MS-13” (Arana, 2005).

These and other gang wars have made Central America one of the most dangerous regions in the world. The Central American and Caribbean region have eight of the top ten highest homicide rates by country, Honduras and Venezuela are ranked first and second in these rankings with regards to homicide rates of 90.4 and 53.7 murders per 100,000 people, respectively (Bisogno, 2013). To put this in perspective, during times of conflict at the height of the 2007 U.S. presence in Iraq, the civilian casualty rate was 62.2 per 100,000 people (Center for American Progress, 2014); thus, Honduras and Venezuela have homicide rates that are comparable to war-time causality rates. Further, while not as high as Honduras or Venezuela, other countries in the region ranked among the top ten including Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, Jamaica, and Colombia (Center for American Progress, 2014). These homicide and causality rates indicate the high levels of violence present throughout the region due to gang violence. Thus, gang violence due to the drug trade is a major contributing factor in the current unaccompanied minor immigration crisis.

Current Immigration Crisis

Over the past century, the demographics for migrants crossing the Mexican-American border have changed considerably. Before 1980, a majority of the immigrants were Mexican men seeking work between the ages of 15 and 35. Robinson and Gilbertson (1986) characterized this group of immigrants as remaining in the United States, with and without documentation, only temporarily until a worker made “enough money, [then] he [would] return to his native country where U.S. currency has greater purchasing power.” After 1980 and over the past 30 years, an increasing number of people began arriving from Central American countries, such as El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, to escape the violence in their home countries. One 1987 *New York Times* article entitled “Salvadorians Stream into U.S., fleeing Poverty and Civil War” recorded part of the changing demographics in their statistic that more than 400,000 Salvadorans had entered the United States illegally since 1982 (Lemoyne, 1987). The shift in immigration demographics suggests that the ongoing gang violence in Central America and the Caribbean played a major role in explaining why immigration motives changed from finding work to finding refuge.

One unanticipated change in these immigration demographics was a spike in the number of unaccompanied minors from Central America between 2009 and 2014. U.S. officials encountered 19,418 unaccompanied minors in 2009, and this number increased by 167% to 52,000 in 2014 (Kaplan, 2014). Tom Dart, a reporter for *The Guardian*, commented, “that the vast majority of the arrivals are fleeing poverty and violence in Central America, where gangs are endemic and murder rates are among the highest in the world” (Houston, 2014). Leslie Velez (2014), senior protection officer of the U.N. High Commission for Refugees, explained, “These people aren't coming here for economic opportunity. They are fleeing for their lives.” Terrence McCoy (2014) a writer from the *Washington Post* described the recent crisis, “unlike millions of undocumented workers before, who furtively cross the border for economic opportunity, many of these immigrants have immediately turned themselves in to authorities under the belief that, because they’re children and mothers,

they'll be allowed to stay." A total of 58% of the children they interviewed "were forcibly displaced because they suffered or faced harm that indicated a potential or actual need for international protection" (United Nations High Commission for Refugees, 2014). McCoy also noted that 66% of the survey participants from El Salvador left their home countries because they were "threatened with or were victims of violence" (United Nations High Commission for Refugees, 2014). One graphic account given by a girl named Maritza described the extent of the violence there:

"I am here because I was threatened by the gang. One of them "liked" me. Another gang member told my uncle that he should get me out of there because the guy who liked me was going to do me harm. In El Salvador they take young girls, rape them and throw them in plastic bags. My uncle told me it wasn't safe for me to stay there and I should go to the United States" (United Nations High Commission for Refugees, 2014).

The illicit drug trade has had drastic negative effects on Central America and the Caribbean. It is likely that the level of gang violence currently present would not exist without the effects of the drug trade on the region. Subsequently, the demographics of immigrants traveling to the United States would also be different. In order to adequately address the immigration crisis it is necessary to reduce gang violence and the drug trade.

Current Immigration Policy Initiatives

United States immigration policy has followed two major trends: policymakers have either created laws that prohibited certain groups from becoming citizens, or have promoted permissive policies that gradually relaxed barriers to gain citizenship. U.S. policymakers have not attempted to address the current immigration crisis by reducing extreme violence, including homicide, rape, and assault, in the Central America and Caribbean Region because they have focused on either *relaxing* restrictions barring entry into the United States or *preventing* certain groups from obtaining citizenship, as evidenced through executive action and proposed legislation. President Obama's executive actions between 2012 and 2015 would augment existing domestic policy to create an easier path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants already in the U.S. The Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act would increase the number of border enforcement agents, as well as grant citizenship to a large number of undocumented immigrants, but would leave international policy concerning Central America largely untouched. These immigration policies follow the same historical trends established in the U.S. over the past century. For example, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 and Immigration Act of 1990 reduced citizenship restrictions and led to unprecedented migration to the United States. The Immigration Act of 1917 and the Emergency Quota Act of 1921 were designed to prevent certain ethnic groups, including Eastern Europeans and Africans, from entering the country. These permissive and restrictive policy trends will never address the major cause of the immigration crisis: crime due to drug trafficking.

Policy Recommendation

Domestic

In order to adequately reduce the growing demand for illicit substances throughout the United States, there needs to be a shift in the way drug abuse is perceived. Addiction is still widely viewed as a moral failure rather than a medical condition. Some people are genetically predisposed to have dependency concerns. Rather than *treating* people with these addictions, *incarceration* has become far too common. Approximately 65% of the prison population in the United States meets the medical criteria for a substance abuse addiction (Sack, 2014). Of those addicted to an illegal substance in prison, only 11% received the treatment they need (Sack, 2014). It is recommended that treatment for drug dependency is expanded to drug offenders and the prison population. It has been demonstrated that medical treatment for substance abuse reduces dependency, relapse, and withdrawal (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2009). Treatment would therefore, reduce the demand for these substances in these populations (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2009). Millions of dollars of investment would be needed for the construction of treatment facilities and training of medical professionals. However, the return on this investment could be substantial. Incarceration rates should fall, and there could be less money flowing from the United States to illegal organizations in Latin America.

International

A policy intervention similar to Plan Colombia would benefit the Central American and Caribbean region for a number of reasons. Plan Colombia provided military training, supplies, and advice to the Colombian Government to fight the FARC. Providing similar resources for Central American and Caribbean countries would strengthen local governments and establish a sustainable knowledge base to combat gang violence. It is suggested that the countries with the highest rates of violent crime, gang activity, and immigrants travelling to the United States, such as Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, should be provided with a similar program. This policy note advocates for the provision of military advisers to these countries, while having no U.S. troops engaged in military operations. Providing these Central American countries with the weapons and supplies, as well as counter-narcotics training, should amplify the effect of the currently existing military and police forces throughout the region. Moreover economic development in the agricultural sector should provide people in this region with opportunities to earn a living outside of criminal activity; people should be less likely to join or be forced to join these organizations if there are alternative means to earn a living. Providing farmers in rural communities the ability to purchase or gain the title for the land they reside on would provide a livelihood for a large number of people. This holistic policy alternative would in turn reduce the flow of unaccompanied minors immigrating to the U.S. by making their home countries a better place in which to live. Other direct interventions by the United States or United Nations involving the deployment of troops would leave this region with a *temporary* solution to a *long-term* problem. The troops would reduce gang violence and drug-

trafficking in the short term, but would fail to strengthen regional governments. It is likely that these governments would face renewed violence after United States or United Nations troops are removed.

Conclusion

The United States needs to develop policies to reduce violent crime in the Central American and Caribbean Region in order to adequately address the current immigration crisis. The current immigration policies proposed in the United States largely follow the same trends established over a hundred years ago. These policies fail to address the causal relationship between drug trafficking, gang violence, and the current immigration crisis. The surge of unaccompanied minors travelling to the United States has been caused by the extremely high homicide rates, which have been caused by gangs fighting to control drug trafficking routes. The United States could provide further assistance in the form of economic and military aid, which would include arming and training the various armed forces of Central America, to address illegal immigration. US military and economic aid will strengthen local governments and enable them to fight gangs, cartels, and other organizations in a sustainable manner. Economic development will provide people in this region with the means to support themselves outside of the drug trade. These two policies should drastically reduce the levels of crime currently present throughout the region and subsequently reduce illegal immigration arising from gang violence to the United States.

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