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The Nomos of the Drug Trade in Latin America and the Caribbean

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the impact of illegal drug trade on the social, economic, cultural, and political landscape of the region, Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). The argument situates the contemporary issues within the context of the region's colonial past and examines the nexus between colonialism, imperialism, drug use and the drug trade. Through discussions of the normative social order present in LAC, the paper concludes that the nomos of LAC is significantly shaped by the illegal drug trade.

Keywords

Latin America and the Caribbean, Global Drug Trade, Drug Use, Crime and Violence

1. Introduction

City of God, (Meirrelles & Lund, 2002) is named after the eponymous slum settlement in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and offers an insight into the drug trade in Latin America and the Caribbean (henceforth referred to as LAC). The film presents a multifaceted reflection of criminality. Benevolent criminals support impoverished communities while sadistic drug lords commit wanton brutality and violence in pursuit of monopolising the trade. It is shown that the drug trade infiltrates every aspect of quotidian life; the politics, laws, economy, culture, and gender roles bear the influence of the drug trade. Using this as the framework of my paper, I will demonstrate how the nomos of LAC is shaped by the illegal drug trade.

2. History—The Criminology of Latin America and the Caribbean

I believe it necessary to situate contemporary issues within the context of the

colonial past which has shaped both the crime and the criminology of LAC. Authors posit that a nexus exists between colonisation, drug use and the eventual drug trade. 'Europeans introduced and used drugs in colonial contexts for the exploitation and placation of indigenous labour' (Jankowiak & Bradbury, 2003). Colonisation in the Americas, Africa and Asia involved the usage of alcohol, coca, marijuana and opium to overcome the physical pains and mental dejection associated with exploitative labour (Jankowiak & Bradbury, 2003). Furthermore, western economic expansion provided a lucrative way of bringing indigenous drugs as new commodities into markets in Europe and North America and creating demand for the products (Gootenberg, 2005). The development of Western civilisation has depended on an enormous soft drug culture… marked by the daily consumption (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 1995). In contemporary society, it is evident that there is dependency on hard drugs as well (UNODC, 2019).

3. Geography

'The concentration of crime within a small number of urban communities is an unfortunate yet enduring social fact (Bellair, 1997).

A list of the ten (10) countries with the highest murder rates as of December 31st, 2023 is displayed below, in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Countries with the highest murder rates in the world.

Country	Murder rate (per 100,000 people)
Jamaica	53.34
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	40.41
Trinidad and Tobago	39.52
Saint Lucia	36.70
Honduras	35.09
Bahamas	31.22
Belize	27.88
Ecuador	26.99
Mexico	26.11
Colombia	25.38

The prevalence of crime and violence in LAC led to its classification as 'the world's most violent region (Chioda, 2016). There are 42 cities amongst the 50 most dangerous cities worldwide and approximately 23.9 murders per 100,000 inhabitants (Chioda, 2016).

Further, the regional homicide rate is nearly three times the global average and ten (10) of the most violent countries worldwide excluding active war zones are located in Latin America and the Caribbean (UNODC, 2023b).

Despite hosting only 8% of the global population (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2022), 33% of the world's homicides occur in LAC (Cafferata & Scartascini, 2021). While statistics can be helpful in estimating the magnitude of criminality, they offer no explanation into the factors that are responsible for sustaining crime. The rate of violence in *barrios* and *favelas* (slum settlements) means that violence has become normalised as an aspect of everyday life (Poppovic & Pinheiro, 1995). It must be noted that there are significant disparities between countries heavily involved in the drug trade such as Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Guatemala, Honduras and Colombia which have higher crime rates than the regional average and countries that are not. Prima facie, it is noted that the drug trade engenders other crimes such as murder, arms possession and dealing, robbery and money laundering (Randall, 1990). However, this does not mean that the population comprises individuals who are biologically and inherently more violent and prone to crime. Rather, I posit that crime is a 'social product' (Shaw & McKay, 1942) and I will analyse how cities in LAC became known as 'criminal places' while acknowledging the overarching causes.

By Stark's theory (Stark, 1987), there must be some aspect about places that sustain crime. I rely on the theory of integrated and systemic ecology (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to analyse the favelas in Brazil as my case study. I will focus on the key elements which include: minimal police presence, low surveillance, transient populations, little to no community feeling, economic inequality, poor urban planning, limited public resources and cultural differences. **Figure 1** shows the urban population living in slums in LAC between 2005 and 2014 and **Figure 2** shows the same for 2018.

3.1. Case Study: Rio De Janeiro, Brazil

Informality characterises the urban life in Rio de Janeiro. After the abolition of

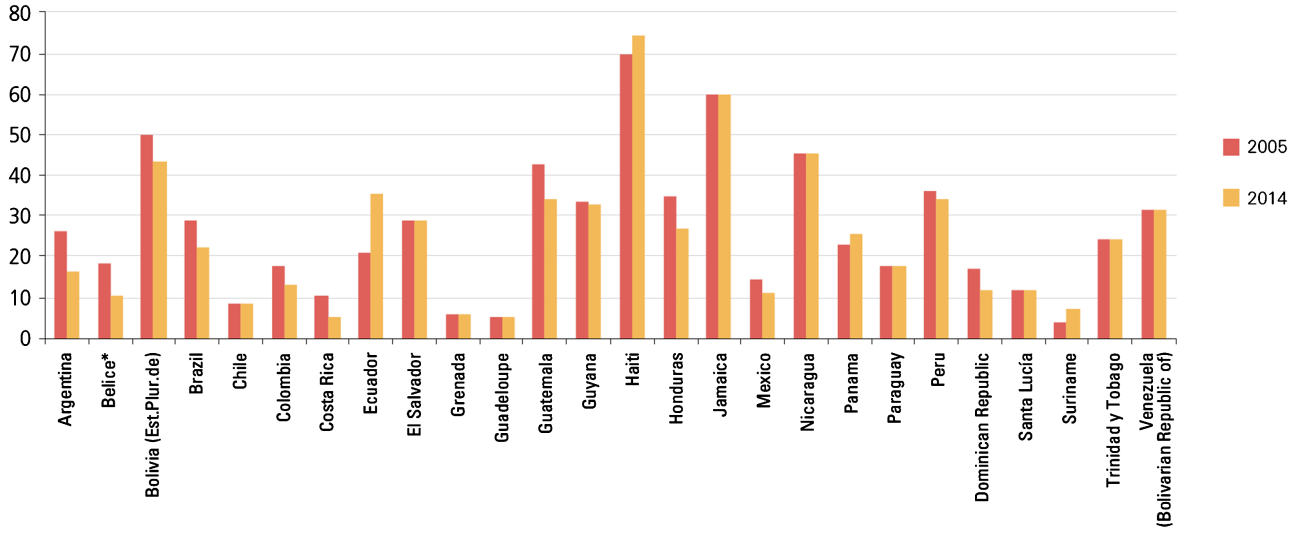

Figure 1. Urban Population living in slums in LAC. UN-Habitat Global Urban Indicators Database 2014, based on household surveys considering the characteristics of lack of adequate water and sanitation and sufficient space (more than three persons per room or durable housing) (UNODC, 1995).

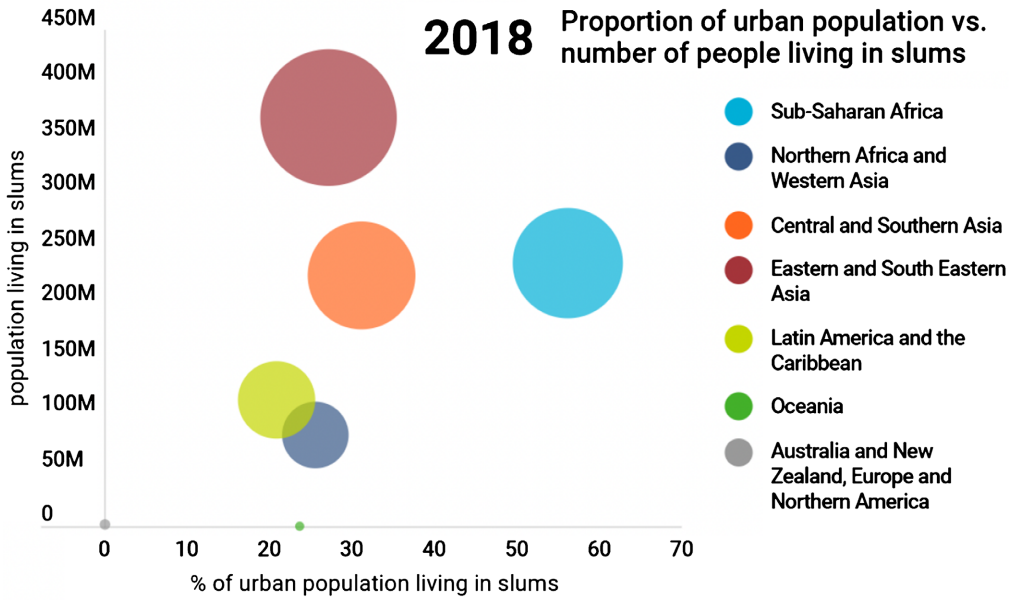

Figure 2. The percentage of the Urban Population living in slums in 2018. (Source: UN-HABITAT, 2020: p. 318. World Cities Report 2020. https://unhabitat.org/wcr/. Table B.3: Regional Slum Estimates 1990-2018, referring to UN-HABITAT Global Housing Indicators Database 2020.) Infographic by Nora Feldmar).

slavery, large populations of black immigrants began to move into informal settlements in the city (Ney dos Santos, 1996). The government decided to leave the settlements as unregulated and this engendered mass poverty. Also, the state essentially neglected the development of the city by failing to properly provide public utilities such as electricity, water, healthcare and education (Portes, 1979). Accelerated urbanisation occurred from the 1950's onwards as rural populations migrated to Rio de Janeiro in search of employment in opportunities (Campolina Diniz & Vieira, 2016). However, conventional housing was not affordable to the influx of poverty-stricken residents. Hence, approximately 1.4 million people reside in informal housing developments—*favelas* and two hundred thousand live in subdivisions without services (Fahlberg, Vicino, Fernandes, & Potiguara, 2020). Furthermore, 900,000 people live in low-income subsidised housing developments (O'Hare & Barke, 2002). This led to severe overcrowding in the commercial districts and eventually, the population faced stigmatization, exploitation and social exclusion (Pearlman, 1975). After losing its capital status in 1960 for political reasons, the volume of industrial investment diminished (O'Hare & Barke, 2002). Consequently, it is estimated that approximately 37% of the workforce is employed in the informal sector of the economy (Bouvier, Vanek, & Roubaud, 2022).

Additionally, the environment in favelas facilitates drug commerce (Vargas, 2006). Social exclusion is considered one of the determining factors in the growth of the drug trade in favelas (Zaluar, 2000). The spatial territory is home is overpopulated by economically marginalised persons who are politically disenfranchised and socially excluded (Green & Divan, 2016) from the rest of the country. Consequently, vulnerable youth are susceptible to joining gangs not

only for the prospect of economic prosperity but also for the promise of inclusion. For example, the name of a notorious gang—"*Amigos dos Amigos*" (friends of friends) exemplifies this social reality (Tealde, 2019). Life in favelas is controlled by drug dealers who establish control of territory, define boundaries and engage in surveillance (Miraglia, 2016). Some drug lords even use profits to support residents in terms of healthcare and education. This trend almost subverts Newman's theory (Donelly, 2010) of defensible space which is often practiced by law abiding citizens rather than criminal entities.

The threat of violence is also a persistent aspect of the drug trade and quotidian life. Between 2005-2013, there were 17,392 murders and 4797 police killings (Magaloni, Franco, & Melo, 2015). The Drug War policy meant that most residents experienced military-like patrols by the police (Saborio, 2014). During its operations, the police force faced accusations of rampant corruption and violence (Magaloni, Franco, & Melo, 2015). Corrupt officials are known to accept monthly payments or *mensalão* in exchange for allowing the traffic of drugs occur uninterrupted (Allegation of Violation of a Fundamental Precept ADPF No.635, 2019). Others, notably the Special Police Operations Battalion or *Batalhão de Operações Policiais Especiais* (BOPE) use excessive violence in their operations and consider favela residents as 'enemies of the state' (Alves, Evanson, Pedroza de Faria, & Vilches, 2011). Police tactics have included arbitrary searches, beatings, torture (asphyxiating and drowning victims in order to obtain information) and summary executions (French, 2013).

Hence, it can be said that criminality is an element of urban life in Rio de Janeiro. Countries in LAC share similar histories, cultures and economic industries with few relative differences. Consequently, common social issues are prevalent and there are similar population settlements found across the region (Guzmán, Rodríguez, Martínez, Conteras, & González, 2006). In addition, the geographic proximity to the USA has impacted the region as it is embroiled in the transit of drugs to the American market. Countries in LAC function as hubs along new and existing drug routes, sustaining the movement of drugs throughout the region. **Figure 3** shows cocaine trafficking routes based on information obtained during seizures which were carries out from 2014-2018 while **Figure 4** and **Figure 5** depict drug trafficking routes within the Caribbean and within Latin America and the Caribbean; respectively.

3.2. Trade Routes

Figure 3 shows cocaine trafficking routes based on information obtained during seizures which were carries out from 2014-2018 while **Figure 4** and **Figure 5** depict drug trafficking routes within the Caribbean and within Latin America and the Caribbean; respectively.

4. Economy

'Selling drugs is just like any other business… you can make a career dealing drugs.' (Meirrelles & Lund, 2002).

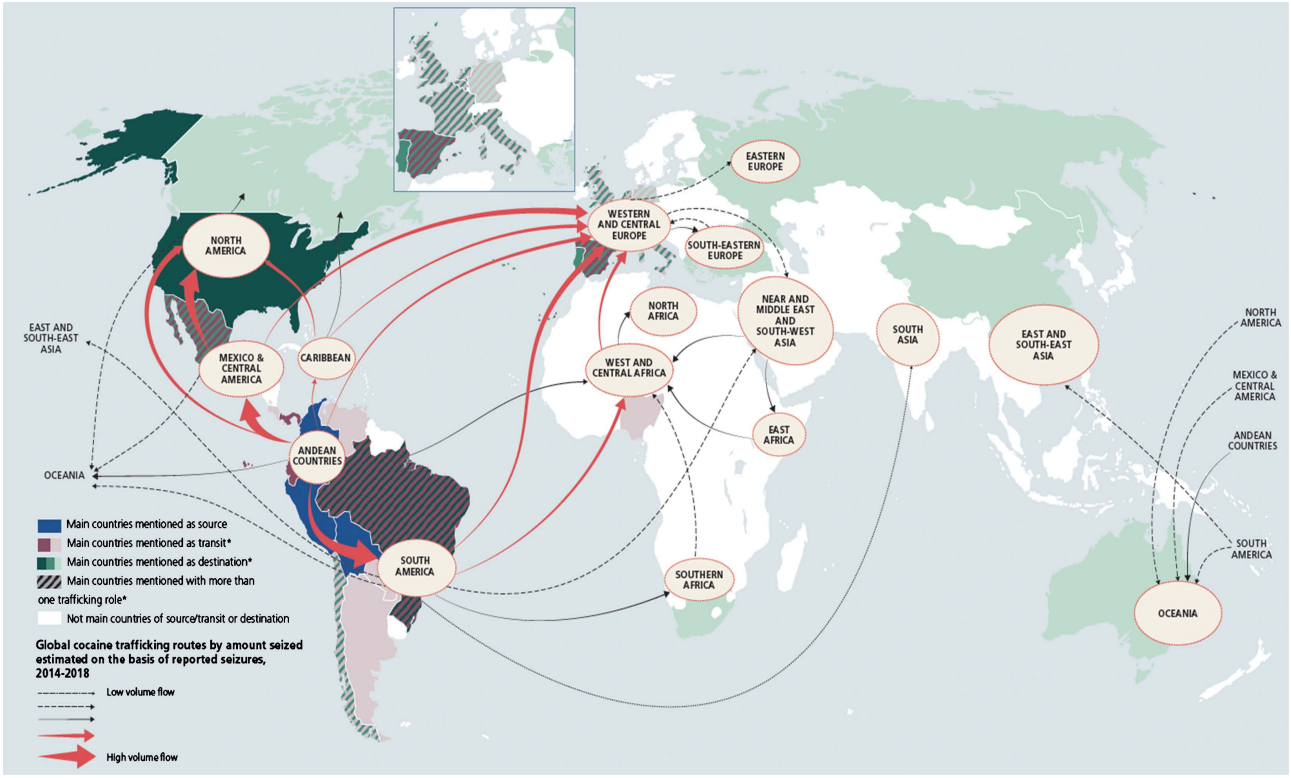

Figure 3. Cocaine Trafficking Routes as described in reported seizures 2014-2018. Source: UNOD.

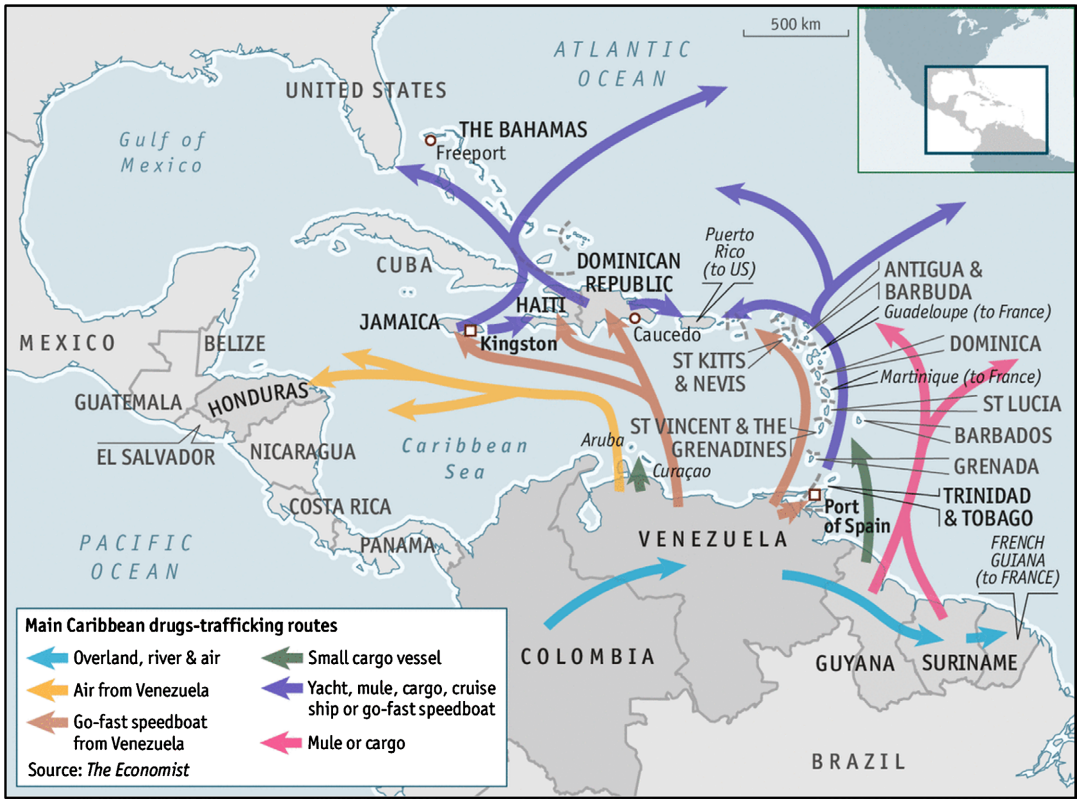

Figure 4. Drug Trafficking routes within the Caribbean. Source: The Economist (2014, 24th May. Full Circle—An Old Route Regains Popularity with Drug Gangs).

Figure 5. Drug Trade Routes in Latin America and the Caribbean. Source: Seelke, Wyler, Beittel, & Sullivan (2011).

I found that the above quote expresses the unique criminality of the drug trade which, like any other industry, involves the law of supply and demand (Marshall, 1890). Criminality in Latin America and the Caribbean is one half of the global issue concerning the drug trade (Bagley & Rosen, 2015). In fact, many Latin American politicians have commented that if the USA did not consume such large quantities of illicit drugs, Latin America and the Caribbean would not produce the drugs for export (Badgley, 2013). Accordingly, the region would not be host to numerous drug-trafficking entities or cartels. It is noted that all monetary estimates of the illicit activity are speculative given the lack of credible information. Notwithstanding, the shadow economy is estimated to account for 34% of the GDP of LAC (Medina & Schneider, 2019) as shown in **Figure 6** which shows the shadow economy as a percentage of GDP by region; worldwide.

US Latin Trade 1995 (Medina & Schneider, 2018) estimated that 300 billion dollars travels through borders of which at least 33% comprises drug profits; meaning that criminal organisations in LAC receive approximately 50 - 80 billion dollars. These figures have been disputed by several authors who believe a more realistic figure to be much smaller. It was suggested that Colombian traffickers

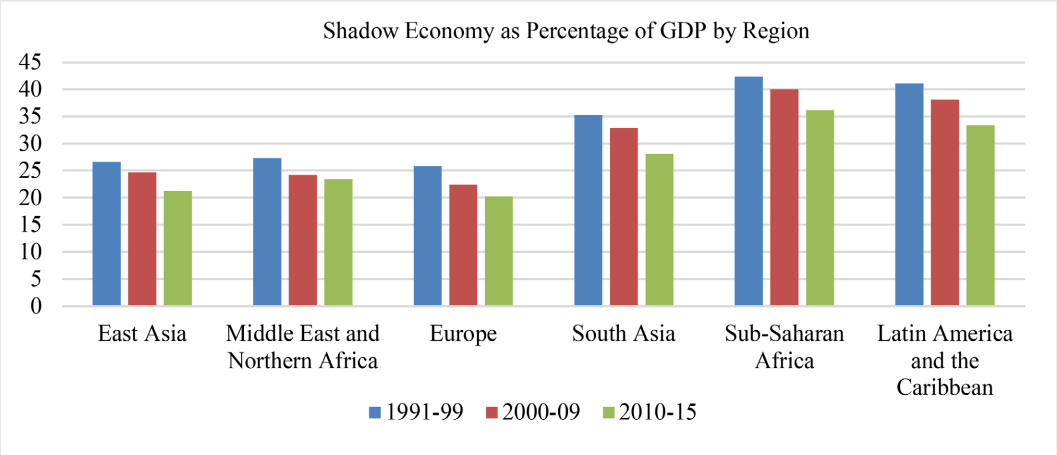

Figure 6. The shadow economy as a percentage of total gross domestic product in global regions.

received seven (7) billion dollars during the peak of cocaine trafficking (Steiner, 1998) whereas others consider two (2) to five (5) billion dollars as a more realistic estimate (Medina & Schneider, 2018). It is suggested that the other producers, Peru and Bolivia, received between 1.3 to 2.8 billion and 1.4 to 2 billion respectively (Medina & Schneider, 2018). Given that the income is not taxed, all profits are used to finance cartels' domestic operations. Furthermore, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between USA, Canada and Mexico, has been linked to patterns in the drug trade (Reyes Ratana Fernández, 2017). The absence of tariffs results in low costs of production, increased volume of trade, improved transportation routes, limited inspection by officials and money laundering (Drummond, 2008). The drug trade is also lucrative for the workers involved in the production process. For example, presently, Peru is the world's second largest producer of coca leaf (Busnel & López, 2023). Coca production is the only source of income for approximately 300,000 farmers in the Upper Huallage Valley who become prime targets by cartels (Dreyfus, 1999).

Facts and Figures

Globally, there is a strong demand for drugs within consumer markets. **Figure 7** presents an overview of cocaine users worldwide, which is shown a percentage.

Cocaine

The geographical breakdown of drug markets in 2020 is shown in **Figure 8**, below. The USA and Europe contain the largest populations of cocaine users worldwide (UNODC, 2023a). It is estimated that about 18 million adults in the EU aged 15 - 64 (5%) have tried cocaine during their lifetimes (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), 2020). About 3.5 million consumed the drug in the last year, according to the latest European Drug Report (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), 2023). Out of the 3.5 million Europeans that consumed cocaine in the last year, 2.3 million were young adults aged between 15 and 34 years old. In the United States of America, approximately 41 million people over

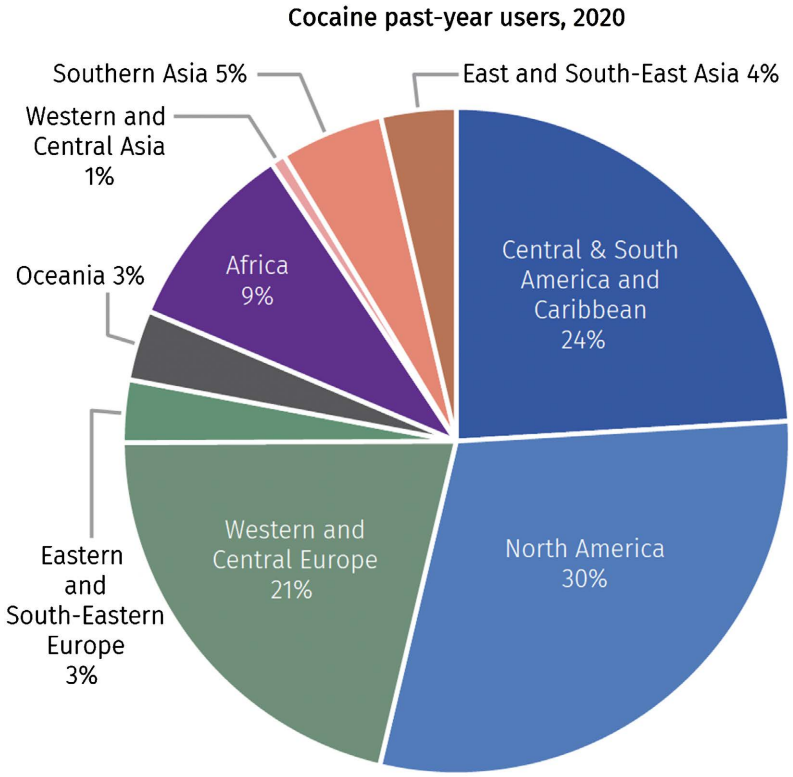

Figure 7. Cocaine users shown as a Percentage based on Geographic Region.

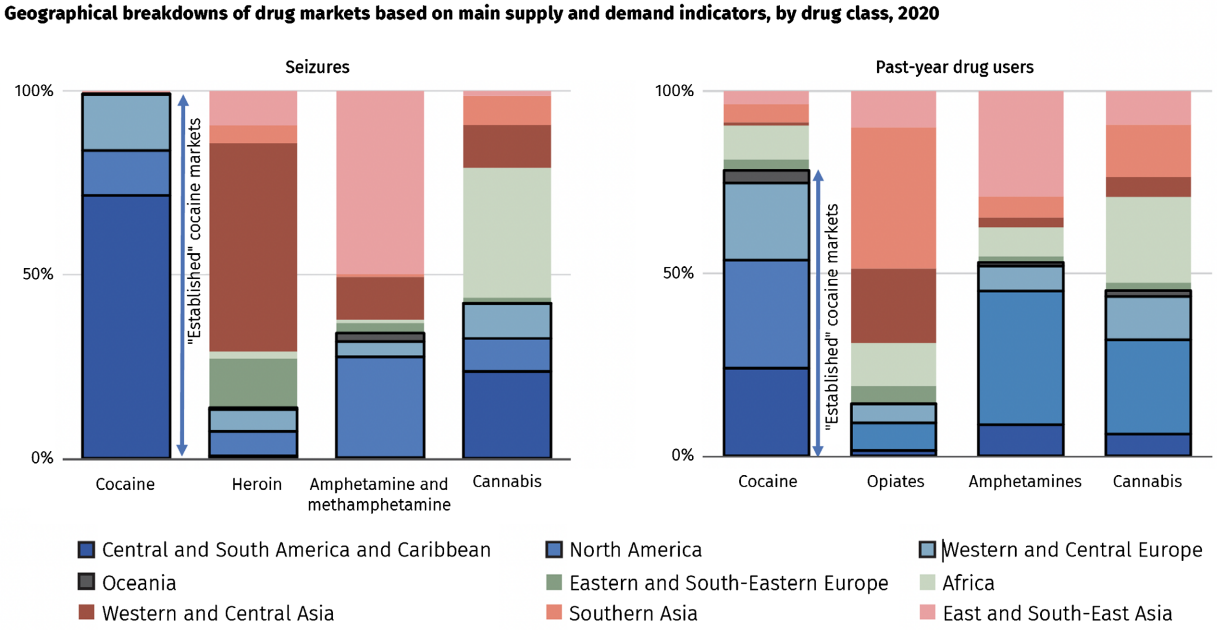

Figure 8. Geographical breakdown of drug markets, 2020. Source: UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire.

the age of 18 years reported use of cocaine over a lifetime (Gangu et al, 2022) and 5.4 million people reported having used cocaine in 2019. Although drug trafficking activities principally focus on gaining entry into the USA and Europe new potentially lucrative markets are developing in Africa and Asia. Trends

show increased demand in markets in African and Asian countries as well. The economic growth in the Asiatic region has resulted in the creation of a burgeoning middle class; which could be susceptible to experimentation with cocaine use (UNODC, 2023a). The rise in demand for cocaine has provoked cartels to explore new trafficking routes and involve international criminal networks.

Amphetamines

It is estimated that 12.3 million adults in the European Union (aged 15 - 64), or 3.7% of this age group, have used amphetamines at least once in their lifetime (EMCDDA, 2023). Also, data from 26 countries collected between 2014 and 2018 suggests that 1.4 million (1.2%) young adults (aged 15 - 34) used amphetamines during this period (EMCDDA, 2023). In the USA, it is estimated that 0.1% of young adults (aged 12 - 17) and 1.0% adults (aged 18+) of used Amphetamines in the last year (National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics, 2024).

MDMA/Ecstasy

It is estimated that 13.6 million adults in the European Union (aged 15 - 64), or 4.1% of this age group, have used MDMA/ecstasy at least once in their lifetime. Data from 27 countries suggests that between 2014 and 2018, 3 million young adults (15 - 34) used MDMA during this period (1.9% of this age group). Prevalence estimates for those aged 15 - 24 years are higher, with 2.4% (1.3 million) estimated to have used MDMA in the last year (EMCDDA, 2023).

Opioids

The USA is experiencing an 'opioid crisis' which has resulted in a public health emergency due to a drastic increase in deaths due to drug overdoses (Blanco, Wiley, Lloyd, Lopez, & Volkow, 2020). This is mainly attributable to the popularity of the drug, Fentanyl (Janetto et al, 2019). It is estimated that 1.6% of young adults (aged 12 - 17) and 3.6% of adults (aged 18+) used opioids in the last year of which 0.4% of adults (aged 18+) used Heroin in the last year (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2022) Comparatively, the prevalence of high-risk opioid use among adults (aged 15 - 64) is estimated at 0.4% of the EU population, equivalent to 1.3 million high-risk opioid users in 2018.

Marijuana

In the USA, it is estimated that 10.1% of young adults (aged 12 - 17) and 18.7% of adults (aged 18+) used marijuana in the last year (National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics, 2024). In Europe, it is estimated that 8% of adults (22.6 million aged 15 to 64) are estimated to have used cannabis in the last year (EMCDDA, 2023).

5. Law and Politics

The juridical culture of the region is shaped by its colonial past and American imperialism (Petras & Veltmeyer, 2007). The laws are derived from English, Spanish and French penal codes (Faberon, 2005). However, the justice system is

hybridised as the punitive measures bear the influence of the American techniques of treatment (Rosas, 1986). This renders the criminology distinct as the crimes are defined in accordance to European law while criminals are handled per the American system. At present, the legal systems still reflect this combination of Western ideas of justice. LAC recognises that its social ills must be addressed through law and order but imports the theoretical and practical tools to implement them (Del Olmo, 1999). Neo-Marxist theorists (Frank, 1974) see this as an outgrowth of structural dependency of post-colonial societies that need to look to metropoles for solutions.

Figure 9 depicts the criminalisation of drugs in LAC. Half of the countries in LAC treat drug use as a criminal offence. However, decriminalisation is more popular within North and Central America, followed by the Caribbean and then South America. Table 2 highlights the countries that have decriminalised drugs and shows an overview of the laws.

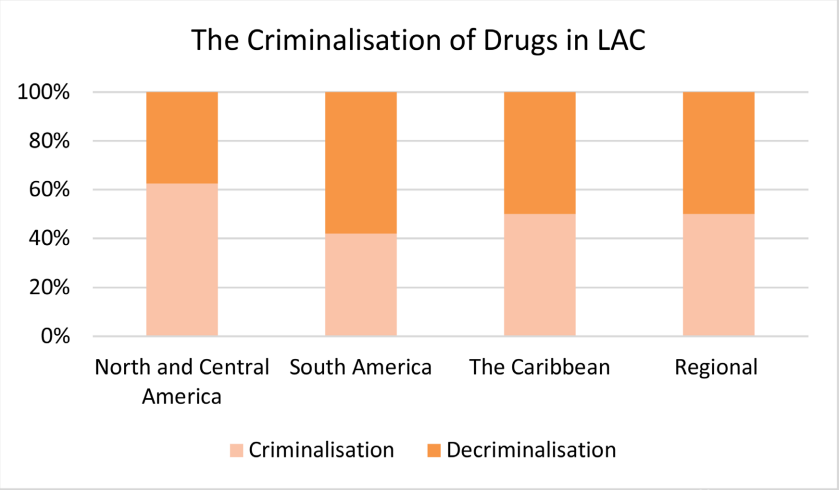

Figure 9. An overview of the criminalisation of drugs in LAC.

Table 2. An overview of the regional laws which decriminalisation drugs in LAC.

Countries	Possession of cannabis	Cultivation of Cannabis	Possession any other drug	Possession of coca leaf	Cultivation of coca leaf
Antigua and Barbuda	X	X			
Argentina	X	X	X	X	
Barbados	X				
Belize	X				
Bolivia				X	X
Chile	X	X	X	X	X
Colombia	X	X	X	X	
Costa Rica	X	X	X	X	

Continued

Dominica	X	X			
Jamaica	X	X			
Mexico	X	X	X	X	
Paraguay	X		X		
Peru	X		X	X	X
Saint Kitts and Nevis	X				
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	X				
Trinidad and Tobago	X	X			
Uruguay	X	X	X	X	

The regional response to drugs bears the influence of international regimes' responses to the drug trade which ranges from the use of the death penalty (Amnesty International, 2018) to decriminalisation (Greenwald, 2009). Under international law, there are three UN treaties on drugs—The Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs 1961, as amended by the 1972 Protocol, The Convention on Psychotropic Substances 1971 and the Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances 1988. Taken together, the treaties urge all member states to establish criminal offences to tackle the production, possession and trafficking of drugs. Notably, coca leaves and cannabis were included as substances considered 'addictive and harmful' in Schedule I and IV of the Single Convention on Narcotics (Transnational Institute, 2015). I argue that International legal instruments reflect the economic and political interests of the dominant members of society. On a global scale, Europe and North America exert a hegemonic force over law (Andreas & Nadelman, 2006). Accordingly, moral factors such as paternalism, conscience, religion and prejudice undercut the legislative response to the drug trade. Consequently, LAC states face both international pressure and internal political struggles in regulating the drug trade.

5.1. Case Study: The War on Drugs in the United States of America

'America's public enemy number one is drug use', Richard Nixon (Farber, 2021).

I believe that the policies which influence the US war on drugs can be defined as moral panic. Social groups create deviance by 'making the rules about whose infractions constitute deviance (Becker, 1997). Moral statements are used to separate the morally right from the morally wrong and scares are orchestrated to draw the attention of the media and masses (Ben-Yehuda, 1994). In the USA, Politicians acted as 'moral entrepreneurs' who endeavoured to transform the public's opinion on drugs, drafted legislation criminalising drug-related activi-

ties and 'deviantized' others (Schur, 1971) i.e., the subpopulation of Latin America and the Caribbean. In 1930, the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (FBN) was established with Harry J. Anslinger as head (Powers & McWilliams, 1991). The FBN influenced laws such as The Narcotics Control Act 1951 which intensified the punitive measures for marijuana possession. The FBN also used propaganda which blamed marijuana for insanity, murder and sexual assault. Aslinger even proclaimed that marijuana caused people to 'fly into a delirious rage and commit many violent crimes' (Powers & McWilliams, 1991). Nixon's drug policy involved pressuring Mexico into regulating its marijuana suppliers (Plume, 2012). The border became more closed and trade relations deteriorate between both. However, this did not stop the flow of drugs entering the USA as Columbia replaced Mexico as the main supplier.

I consider the USA's war on drugs as an unsuccessful endeavour which has not affected the cartels' criminal activities. Instead, it merely forces them to re-structure their operations, intensify production and alter trade routes. Additionally, this has resulted in increased violence on a global scale (Global Commission on Drug Policy, 2011). Further, the 'War on Drugs' has resulted in a war on drug users (Buchanan & Young, 2000) who are deterred from seeking medical assistance to treat their addictions. Stigmatisation of drug use has caused users to affirm their identities as deviant members of subcultures from 'straight' societies (Young, 1973). Hence, I do not think that policies exclusively targeting the supply of drugs will be effective in reducing the level of criminality. I believe that policies that focus on demand such as the decriminalisation of drugs are the most effective in protecting members of the public from harms. I share the opinions expressed by Kofi Annan who concluded that, 'repressive strategies will not solve the drug problem' (Global Commission on Drug Policy, 2016). Decriminalising drug use and utilising health and treatment-based approaches would simultaneously take control from cartels and rehabilitate addicts. As a comparison, Uruguay is the first nation to decriminalise and regulate all aspects of the cannabis market. It formerly adhered to the USA's war on drugs during its military dictatorship from 1973-1985. However, the decision to decriminalise cannabis was based on reducing violence related to the drug trade (Queirolo, Rossel, Álvarez, & Repetto, 2019).

Another argument focuses on the right to privacy as preserved by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (1966). The state is only justified in interfering with an individual's private life if the interference is proportionate, necessary and pursues a legitimate aim. However, I do not consider it proportionate or necessary to punish persons who consume and possess drugs for personal usage and pose no harm to others. This intrusion undermines the right to privacy, autonomy and relates to human dignity.

5.2. Securitization in Latin America and the Caribbean

Drug trafficking and its accompanying crimes are considered a primary threat to

citizen security and U.S. interests in Latin America and the Caribbean. In recent years, the issue has become securitized, leading governments to adopt more punitive approaches in combating the drug trade.

The concept of securitisation per the Copenhagen school has influenced the development of counternarcotic policies across LAC (Buzan, Wæver, & De Wilde, 1998). Security is defined in a militaristic sense whereby a matter in contention is presented as 'an existential threat to a referent object' which is usually the state. This concept was expanded to include political, economic, environmental and social considerations and correspondingly, new referent objects such as national sovereignty, national economies, species and habitats and collective identities (Emmers, 2013). I posit that the issue of drug trafficking has been securitised across the region as demonstrated by El Salvador's '*Mano Dura'* policies, Mexico's 'War on drugs' and the 2011 State of Emergency in Trinidad and Tobago.

Securitization comprises a security act and an accompanying political act. This entails the need for extraordinary security measures to repel a threat (security act) and a political decision to phrase the issue in particular manner in order to convince a target audience of its inherent danger (political act). Language has been consistently used as a tool facilitating securitisation. In the case of El Salvador, this is demonstrated in the depiction of the criminal enterprises of the 'maras' and the government's *Mano Dura* policies. For example, the political speeches of former President Flores featured images of the tattooed faces of the '*mareros*' or gang members who were depicted as 'enemies of the people' in order to construct gangs and their members as a threat to civil society (Hume, 2007). The quote below exemplifies this approach:

"Criminal gangs have descended into dangerous levels of moral degradation and barbarism. We have all known cases of decapitations, mutilations, satanic acts and dismembering committed against minors, old people and defenseless women. It is time we freed ourselves from this plague." (Francisco Flores)

In 2015, the Salvadoran Supreme Court classified gang members as 'terrorists' (Martinez, 2024) thereby reinforcing the idea that drug crimes aim to destroy the identity of the state. In Mexico, the issue was framed as *'guerra contra el narcotráfico'* or war on drug trafficking in order to conjure ideas that the groups involved in the drug trade were engaged in warfare against the state. This use of language frames the issue as more similar to a civil war than a legal issue. In many instances, military personnel have altered crime scenes to present people as 'fallen criminals' despite the lack of evidence to confirm they were involved in the drug trade. Furthermore, the coordinator of the office against homicides of the Special Attorney against Organized Crime, dependent of the Office of the General Attorney, Miguel Angel Guerrero Castro, would declare:

'We're not talking about honorable people (that is killed), but one that is dedicated to the sale and consumption of drugs... With all due respect to the parents of the victims, we are seeing that people are not honorable' (Comisión Mexicana de Defensa y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos (CMDPDH), 2015).

In Trinidad and Tobago in 2011, the government enacted a state of emergency in response to the issue of drug trafficking. During a televised address to the nation, Prime Minister, Kamla Persad Bissessar gave the following quote:

'The nation will not be held to ransom by marauding gangs of thugs bent on creating havoc on our society. The limited state of emergency in hot spots across Trinidad and Tobago is merely part of a larger aggressive reaction response by the government' (BBC News, 2011).

Again, the choice of language depicts the country itself as a victim of gangs involved in the drug trade. In all situations, politicians utilise language to construct the idea that the activities of gangs involved in the drug trade pose an existential threat to the identity of the nation and implicitly distinguishes ordinary citizens (in group) from those involved in the drug trade (out group).

Following the securitization of the issue through language, the states often impose militaristic ideas of law and order in order to repel the 'threat.' El Salvador, instituted a 'state of exception' which involved increased patrols by the military and police, immediate imprisonment of suspected gang members (Rodgers & Muggah, 2009) or *mareros* and treating minors equivalently to adults (Peetz, 2011). The Supreme Court imposed cumulative sentences, effectively functioning as life imprisonment. Furthermore, "illicit association" was also criminalised which is expected to impact as many as 450,000 people who have connections to gangs (Rosen, Cutrona, & Lindquist, 2023). The current regime imprisoned approximately 79,000 people, constructed the largest prison in the LAC region and indicated that the government will desist in recording extrajudicial killings (Bishop, 2023).

Similarly, in Trinidad and Tobago, The Anti-Gang Act (2021) prohibits membership in criminal gangs and gang-related activities. Suspects detained under the law may be held without bail for up to 120 days pending the filing of certain charges. Authorities detained 450 suspects during the state of emergency pursuant of this act yet prosecutors failed to present sufficient evidence of gang activity in most cases (United States Department of State, 2011). There were reports of abuse by police and military authorities and courts made several awards in cases on the grounds of wrongful arrest and imprisonment and use of excessive force (Richards, 2011).

Public perception of the issue is influenced by the securitization of the drug trade, leading to the marginalization of communities (Lambert, 2022). Criminality is constructed through political language and policy which engenders social exclusion (Heide & Villeneuve, 2021). For example, the result of this has led to stigmatization, and a perception that it is a crime in El Salvador to be young and from a marginalized community (Rosen, 2021). Similarly, in Mexico, critics argue that the war on drugs sustain aspects of social and political control as elite classes exclude and criminalise communities as deviant, socially degenerate or politically subversive (Kloppe-Santamaria, 2022).

El Salvador's method of securitization resulted in a dramatic decrease in its homicide rate which moved from 53 per 100,000 people in 2018, to one of the

lowest in the region at 2.4 per 100,000 (The Guardian, 2023). Consequently, countries of LAC have expressed desire to implement similar policies in their own nations (Americas Quarterly, 2023). However, El Salvador's success cannot be replicated without also adopting its constitutional framework and consolidating power in its executive arm (Molinari, 2024). Furthermore, within the social climate of LAC, securitization may have the opposite effect of engendering drug crime in vulnerable communities instead of preventing and mitigating criminal operations. As communities are excluded from wider society, they begin to lose trust in the state and its institutions; preferring to associate with the mores of the deemed 'enemies of the state' instead (Bateson, 2009).

Additionally, securitization may seem like performative acts of a deflection by states through populism and 'law and order' politics (Wojczewski, 2020) rather than a genuine attempt to address causal factors responsible for sustaining the drug trade (Slaven, 2021). Corruption remains a crippling issue in LAC and impacts how the region is able to mobilise its various agents such as the police, arms of state and citizens to develop a coordinated approach to tackling the drug trade (Chainey, Croci, & Rodriguez Forero, 2021). The region's political stability is threatened by drug trafficking as drug operators corrupt officials in business, government, industry. The wealth of cartels gives them power to influence politicians, the police force and the judiciary; affecting the credibility of governments and institutions and their ability to tackle the drug trade effectively.

In addition, it leads to an increased tolerance of corruption which further undermines efforts to combat the drug trade (Bohn, 2012). Political systems exploit marginalised communities who encounter economic and social disenfranchisement and turn to the drug trade for financial and social support. Furthermore, less economically developed countries in the region lack the financial capacity to properly support counternarcotic measures (UNODC, 1995). Additionally, small island states, mainly in the Caribbean lack the human resources to bolster political and security agencies. Thus, states are limited in their capacity to mobilise forces in combating the transnational networks of those involved in the drug trade.

6. Reactions to Law

Criminals or Heroes?

The public perception of drug lords belies their status as dangerous criminals. A salient subject is Jaoquín Guzmán Loera or *El Chapo* who is beloved in his home of Mexico despite being an escaped convicted felon (Los Angeles Times, 2015). Drug lords are often glorified in song or *narcocorridos* which detail their exploits of illicit activity as admirable accomplishments. For example, numerous folk ballads such as *'El señor de las montañas'* (the man of the mountains) praise El Chapo while Griselda Blanco, the lone female drug lord is hailed to be *'La reina de la cocaína'* (the queen of cocaine). Similarly, in Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, the local musical genres include lyrics which exalt violence and

murder. For example, numerous songs such as *'Gun heaven'* by Bounty Killer and *'Ghetto red hot'* by Super Cat give accounts of gang-related violence which has become normalised in quotidian life. In Trinidad and Tobago, a domestic subgenre of dancehall known colloquially as '*Trinibad*' describes life within communities that are heavily impacted and involved in the drug trade. Songs such as '*Rifle war*' by Rebel Sixx, '*Miltant'* by T Man 9, '*Pablo'* (Escobar)" by Prince Swanny and reference gang warfare, drug trafficking and the violence that results from these activities. The genre, reggae, contains numerous references to marijuana which is given cultural and religious reverence (Benard, 2007). This has infiltrated the Caribbean's music in general. For example, *'Kaya'* by Bob Marley, *'Weed is my best friend'* by Popcaan and *'Midnight Cruise'* by Olatunji Yearwood speak marijuana and drug dealing as elements of the region's patrimony.

The blurred line of hero and criminal (Amnesty International, 2010) is exemplified by the events precipitating Jamaica's state of emergency in 2010. The Jamaican government sought to extradite drug lord, Christopher 'Dudus' Coke who was in hiding in his hometown of Trivoli. The neighbourhood stood to defend Coke and as described by the report, 'Hundreds of gunmen, recruited to defend Coke gathered on rooftops and coordinated the erection of sandbags to barricade off the community. They faced off against 800 soldiers and 370 policemen who had gathered. Nearly 70 civilians were killed as they fought to defend Coke (Commission of Enquiry 2016).

7. Local Culture and Drug Use

In LAC, the use of particular drugs holds cultural, historical and religious significance. Indigenous people across the region have historically incorporated the use of drugs for medicinal, spiritual and social purposes. For example, indigenous tribes in Guiana, the Pampas, the Andean Altiplano and the Amazonian rainforest consumed psychoactive ingredients such as ayahuasca, cauim, tobacco, mushrooms and coca leaves (Labate & Rodrigues, 2023). To indigenous communities, psychoactive substances hold complex and nuanced understandings that are not easily translated into Eurocentric categories or notions (Metaal, 2014). Similarly, marijuana holds religious and historic importance to the Rastafarian religion and East Indian descendants across the Caribbean. Rastafarianism, a syncretic religion of Jamaican origin, involves the ritualistic use of marijuana as a spiritual practice (Bernard, 2013). Marijuana, known in Sanskrit as *ganja* was brough to Jamaica by Indian indentured labourers (Abel, Sewell, & Eldemire-Shearer, 2011).

Thus, these factors lead to tolerant attitudes to drug use across LAC; provided the drug itself is plant based such as cocaine or marijuana. The demand for marijuana is relatively high in the region as within 13 countries with data, an average 6.3% of the population is classified as regular consumers (UNIDC, 2022). Demand is significantly lower regarding cocaine as within 12 countries with data, an average of 0.91% of the population is considered regular consum-

ers (UNODC, 2023a).

Marijuana use in LAC is an element of youth culture and this issue remains concentrated among males from economically disadvantaged environments (Katz, Cheon, Freemon, & Nuño, 2023). Within the Caribbean, the prevalence of marijuana usage among secondary school students ranged from 3.29% in Suriname to 17.47% in Dominica (UNODC, 2010). The annual prevalence of cannabis use in Jamaica (12.4%) was above the average annual prevalence for the Caribbean (9.76%). In respect to Latin America, marijuana is also the most common drug amongst youth with 11% of students having experienced it. Prevalence ranges from 4% in Peru to 23% in Chile. On average, 2.2% of high school students have tried cocaine, ranging from 1.4% in Peru to 3.5% in Uruguay. Coca paste shows a prevalence of 1.4%, ranging from 0.6% in Ecuador to 2.8% in Chile (UNODC, 2022). In recent times however, there has been a growing trend concerning the use of synthetic drug usage amongst specific population groups. Trends show that drug use increased among secondary school and university students across LAC; although consumption is remains connected to cultural events such as electronic music festivals. The Government of Trinidad and Tobago has expressed concern about perceived increases in the use of MDMA and other synthetic drugs, particularly among youths. As a result, the Government amended the national Dangerous Drugs Act to include MDMA and LSD and ketamine in December 2019 (The Dangerous Drugs (Amendment) Act, No. Act No. 24 of 2019, 2019).

Narcoculture and Gender Roles

Although the drug trade is neither the principal nor most significant factor influencing gender roles in LAC, it is responsible for sustaining various social ills such as gender-based violence, femicide (Miranda & Shanny, 2019), hypermasculinity in the form of machismo culture (Sara-Lafime, 2014) and hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) in the economic and political sectors. Narco-culture is characterised by aggressive heterosexual masculinity, disposed to violence and promiscuity where women are relegated to sex objects for simple use and satisfaction by man (Cabañas, 2012).

The drug trade serves as a conduit for masculine power, status, dominance and capital (Baird, Bishop, & Kerrigan, 2022). Within these environments, gang members or drug dealers exemplify masculinity in the local gender hierarchy, subjugating women, and non-affiliates and positioning them as lesser in status. Women are often sexually objectified and 'emphasized femininities' in relation to male gang power (Messerschmidt, 2019).

Notwithstanding, throughout history women's participation in the drug trade has been recorded in the cultivation, drug mules and sellers (Fleetwood & Leban, 2023). These roles often emphasise traditional feminine gender roles as caregivers and domestic workers. Alternatively, in response to the male hegemony in the drug trade, some women perform gender by adopting masculine traits and

engage in violence in order to gain respect (Grundetjern & Sandberg, 2012).

8. Conclusion

The drug trade imbues many aspects of everyday life in LAC; impacting the region across many formal sectors and informal environments. I do not hold moral judgements as to the nature of drugs but I have experienced how the drug trade has engendered a culture of crime and violence in my region and my country. Consequently, I do not believe that Eurocentric notions of crime in LAC can properly formulate an efficient solution to this issue (Lorca, 2012). LAC must no longer be a passive party in the international community's response to drug crimes. Rather, LAC must be given the dominant voice and power in regulating the impact of the drug trade in our societies.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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