

Drug Policy in Latin America

Greg Weeks

Professor of Political Science

Associate Dean for Academic Affairs

UNC Charlotte

Spoiler: It's Not Going So Well

Sadly, this talk will be very similar to
lectures I gave when I started in 2000

Where the “War on Drugs” Started



“I have done an in-depth study of drug abuse and Communist brainwashing techniques and I am right in the middle of the whole thing where I can and will do the most good”

Admitting Failure is a Critical Step

- Ronald Reagan in 1986: “From the beginning of our administration, we've taken strong steps to do something about this horror. Tonight I can report to you that we've made much progress.”
- Drug “czar” John Walters in 2008: “Our policy has been a success—although that success is one of Washington's best kept secrets.”
- Western Hemisphere Drug Policy Commission in 2020: “Our collective failure to control either drug abuse or drug trafficking has exacted an enormous human toll.”

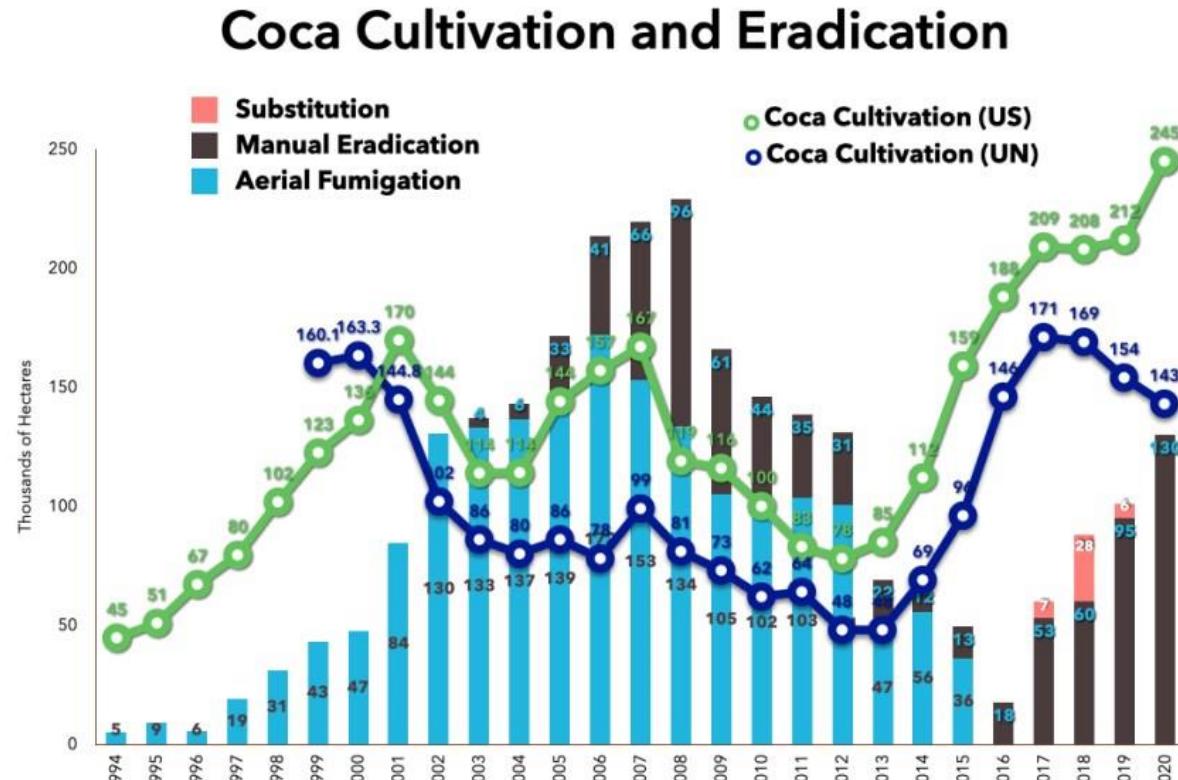
The Basics of Drug Policy

1. People take drugs
2. Prohibition increases risk & price
3. That leads to transnational organized crime
4. U.S. labels it a national security threat & uses force
5. Use of force leads to resentment & backlash in Latin America
6. Drug production constantly shifts because of #1 and #4
7. New drugs emerge
8. Organized crime innovates because #1 stays the same

Imagine living in a rural area and looking up to see this



Supply Will Meet Demand (Colombia)



Sources: U.S. Department of State <<http://1.usa.gov/1eAAutY>>, White House <<http://bit.ly/39s5mNd>, <http://bit.ly/32zexYK>>, UNODC <<http://bit.ly/2n3zKc5>, <http://bit.ly/2kQXnFK>, <https://bit.ly/2Uuq2YP>>, CGFM <<http://bit.ly/2HAEfJ>>, Defense Ministry <<http://bit.ly/2J4jqdr>>.

What's Been Going Wrong?

- Drug consumption remains stubbornly high
 - the pandemic made this worse
- Growth of Latin American middle class leads to greater drug consumption
 - e.g. Chileans consider drug trafficking as most important national security threat
- Eradication pushes rural populations into more poverty
- Use of Latin American militaries leads to violations of human rights
- Prisons fill up, which creates new problems
- High levels of government corruption and collusion

The view from Latin America

- Public opinion varies widely
 - urban versus rural, for example
 - ideology also matters
- Considerable support for marijuana legalization
- Small but growing support for decriminalization of other drugs
- Governments resisting U.S. demands in different ways
 - e.g. Bolivia, Venezuela, El Salvador

Looking to the Future

- From the article: “it is important not to overstate the prospects for drug-policy change in the future.”
- However, there is growing recognition at high levels that policies should change.
- It is necessary to overcome bureaucratic inertia, public opinion, and a punitive mindset.
- Focusing more on treatment has reduced some of the human toll.
- How can the U.S. provide viable economic alternatives?

Thank you!



CHARLOTTE | COLLEGE OF
LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCES