

U.S. Drug Policy and Supply-Side Strategies: Assessing Effectiveness and Results

La política antidrogas de Estados Unidos y las estrategias de control
de oferta: una evaluación de su efectividad y resultados

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ABSTRACT

The illegal drug trade in North America continues to prosper despite a 45-year war on drugs. Border enforcement is a key U.S. policy tool for preventing the flow of illegal drugs, and the U.S.-Mexico border has become the frontline in the war. Several scholars have questioned the ability of states, with their inflexible bureaucracies, tight budgets, and electorates, to effectively stop drug trafficking networks, which have considerable advantages, including flexibility, transnational connections, and market forces on their side. This article uses statistical data to determine if border enforcement along the southern U.S. border influences the illegal drug supply.

Key words: border enforcement, drug trafficking, war on drugs, U.S.-Mexico border

RESUMEN

El tráfico ilegal de drogas en Norteamérica sigue prosperando a pesar de una guerra contra las drogas de cuarenta y cinco años. La seguridad fronteriza es una estrategia clave de Estados Unidos para la prevención del tráfico de drogas ilegales. Algunos académicos han cuestionado la capacidad de los Estados, limitados por sus burocracias inflexibles, presupuestos restringidos y electorados, para detener efectivamente las redes del narcotráfico, las cuales cuentan con ventajas significativas, entre ellas una gran flexibilidad, conexiones transnacionales, así como con el apoyo de las fuerzas del mercado. Este artículo utiliza información estadística para determinar si la seguridad fronteriza a lo largo de la frontera sur de los Estados Unidos afecta la oferta de drogas ilegales.

Palabras Clave: seguridad fronteriza, tráfico de drogas, guerra contra las drogas, frontera México-Estados Unidos.

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INTRODUCTION

The U.S. government relies on interdiction, including border inspections and border patrols, to disrupt the flow of drugs. In the practical sense, interdiction can be referred to as “seizure of drugs and smugglers as they travel from the source countries to the United States” (Reuter, Crawford, and Cave, 1988: 7). Border enforcement is a key component of interdiction efforts. Accordingly, the size and budgets for agencies in charge of it have increased considerably. For example, between 1993 and 1997, U.S. Customs Service funding earmarked for the southwest border grew 72 percent, and the size of the U.S. Border Patrol doubled between 1993 and 2000 from 4 000 to over 9 000 agents (Andreas, 2000: 51). The number of border patrol agents has continued to grow, reaching a historic high of over 21 000 in 2013 (U.S. Customs and Border Inspection, 2014). In the past nine years, investment in border security has exceeded U.S.\$100 billion, and, from 2004 to today, the Border Patrol has more than doubled its number of agents.¹ The number of Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers, ICE agents and other federal law enforcement agents (including U.S. Marshals and Drug Enforcement Administration officials, among others), and various state and local law enforcement agents deployed to U.S. borders has increased significantly in the past few years. Congress has also massively expanded spending on fencing, infrastructure, and technology to secure the border.

This expansion in border enforcement is especially the case along the 2000-mile U.S.-Mexico border where, since the end of the 1990s, more U.S. Border Patrol agents were stationed in Brownsville, Texas, than along the entire 4 000-mile U.S.-Canadian border (Andreas and Nadelmann, 2006: 168). Presently, the number of “boots on the ground” along the Southwest border stands at more than 18 500 Border Patrol agents (U.S. Customs and Border Inspection, 2014); interdiction policy complements this. Actually, interdiction policy and border enforcement focus on the supply side of the drug problem and are designed to increase the price of drugs, which is thought to reduce availability and demand. Notable and highly visible interdiction efforts along the U.S.-Mexico border, such as Operation Hard Line and Operation Brass Ring, as well as the involvement of the U.S. military, are all part of an effort to reduce the supply of drugs reaching their illicit market in the United States. The policy focuses on the border, the so-called source of the problem.

In spite of all the resources devoted to interdiction efforts on the border, questions about their effectiveness have been raised for the past couple of decades. In 1989, a General Accounting Office report to the Senate argued that interdiction had failed,

¹ 2004 is the first year for which complete CBP data are available.

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