

## Key findings

- Although several contraband flows affect the region, the paramount crime issue is cocaine trafficking, the groups empowered by it, and the violence associated with this flow.
- This study finds that while cocaine trafficking has undeniably catalyzed violence in some areas, the security problem in the region is much deeper, rooted in weak governance and powerful sub-state actors.
- Cocaine has been trafficked through Central America for decades, but the importance of the region to this flow increased dramatically after 2000 and again after 2006, due to an escalation in Mexican drug law enforcement. The resulting displacement effect underscores the importance of coordinated strategies to address the entire contraband flow, so that one country's success does not become another's problem.
- The implementation of the new Mexican security strategy in 2006 has disrupted cocaine supply to the United States market, forcing dealers to cut purity and raise prices. These changes have deeply undermined United States demand for the drug, but not yet reduced the violence associated with the flow.
- In response to an increasingly inhospitable environment in Mexico, traffickers have shifted their focus to new routes along the Guatemalan/Honduran border and contesting new "plazas" throughout the region. Displacement to the Caribbean remains a threat.
- The contest today is between longstanding organized crime families that effectively govern the remote areas of the countries in which they operate. In addition to cocaine trafficking, these groups are involved in a wide range of organized crime activities, and manipulate local politics. If cocaine flows abate, they will seek revenues from other forms of acquisitive crime, such as extortion, which may cause violence levels to increase.
- Cocaine has inflamed conflict between these groups, but, regardless of the state of the cocaine trade, they will continue to use violence to control their areas of influence until they are dislodged. Long-term change will require improvement in governance in these underserved regions so that surrogate authorities do not emerge.
- In 2007, UNODC concluded that the *maras* groups (MS-13 and M-18) play very little role in transnational cocaine trafficking. This continues to be the case.
- The Zetas, the *Maras*, and other territorial groups appear to be involved in migrant smuggling, human trafficking, and the firearms trade. This involvement may increase if cocaine revenues decline.
- Addressing transnational flows requires international cooperation. Full implementation of the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its Protocols and the UN Convention against Corruption is critical.
- National police services cannot resolve the organized crime problems of this region alone, because reducing the contraband flows requires tools they do not possess. Development actors must cooperate in a global strategy to address the problems of drugs and illicit markets.
- Addressing the violence is a separate issue. Governments need to develop the capacity to assert control over their entire territories and consolidate democracy through justice.
- Programmes to build capacity among local law enforcement cannot bring about the rapid results required, due to widespread corruption. The temporary use of armed forces for some law enforcement tasks should not delay police development and reform, including the promotion of civilian oversight. The international community should do what it can to supplement local criminal justice capacity.
- Cross-sectoral crime prevention strategies must be explored. Crime affects all aspects of life, and so a multi-agency crime prevention plan, involving the participation of the private sector, should be developed.