

Systemic violence in drug markets

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Abstract Even without the protection of the state and courts, illegal drug markets are generally peaceable. However occasionally specific markets exhibit high levels of violence. This essay examines the sources that might generate such violence, some internal to organizations (successional and disciplinary), some between organizations (territorial or transactional) and others between drug dealers and the state or its representatives. Particular attention is given to the extremely high rates of killing in the high level Mexican drug markets in 2007–2008 and what motivates the variety of targeted victims, including innocent parties and corrupt officials. The other episode examined in detail is the US crack market in the 1980s. The emphasis here is on the youth of the participants, the value of the drug itself and the intensity of law enforcement.

The markets for illegal goods and services operate without the usual protections against fraud and violence offered by the court system. The state instead of attempting to facilitate transactions, aims to disrupt them. Contracts cannot be enforced through written documents and the legal system; agreements are made hurriedly, sometimes in ambiguous code, and orally¹. Territories cannot be allocated through bidding for desirable locations, since there is no enforceable ownership of property for these purposes. All these factors can lead to violence for a variety of purposes.

Yet illegality itself is insufficient to generate high levels of violence in a market. Bookmaking, notwithstanding the drama of the film *The Sting*, was a generally peaceful affair; bookies were more likely to die in bed than on the battlefield of competition. Prostitution, though frequently unsightly and sometimes a nuisance, generates generally modest levels of violence.² Even for some drugs the markets

¹The bookmaking business has certainly generated written records; but that is more central to the business itself, which involves the extension of credit and usually numerous near-simultaneous transactions between any one buyer and seller.

²A recent paper by Levitt and Venkatesh [15] on prostitution in Chicago mentions the role of pimps in protecting women against violence from customers (while inflicting some themselves) but generally suggests it is at the margins of the activity and not an element of competition.

Peter Andreas and Joel Wallman made helpful suggestions. The discussion of US markets is adapted from MacCoun et al. [16].

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generate little violence; marijuana in general does not spark much injury as the result of competitive or transactional disputes.³

However, some drug markets are clearly very violent; many participants are at risk of being killed or seriously wounded by others in the same business, either as buyers or sellers, and there are shootings of innocent bystanders. The Mexican drug markets, primarily involving shipments to the U.S., have had high levels of violence for two decades and, since the election of President Felipe Calderon, have seen simply extraordinary levels. In the first ten months of 2008 there were estimated to be almost 4,000 homicides related to drug trafficking in Mexico [6]. The US crack market was particularly prone to market-related violence when it emerged in the 1980s.

Violence related to drugs is an important source of the public fear about drugs such as cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine in the United States. The upsurge of violent crime in the 1980s was regularly attributed to the growth of the crack markets in that decade and played a role in the development of the draconian penalties for possession or sale of that drug. The popular memory is selective; the fact that violence declined much more sharply than crack use in the following decade did not change the impression that the sale of crack was ineluctably associated with high levels of market violence. The drug-related wars in Colombia and Mexico have been prominently reported in the U.S. press and have helped reinforce the view that drugs cause violence.

This brief essay explores the sources of violence in drug markets, in particular those that result from the workings of the market itself rather than from the drugs, the “psychopharmacological effects” in Goldstein’s [9] tripartite division. The first section presents a theoretical discussion of the sources of violence. I then use that framework to examine first what is known about the source of violence in Mexico’s high-level markets and then the high level of violence that characterized the domestic U.S. crack market during the 1980s. The emphasis is on identifying the specific drivers of violence but there is no claim to formal hypothesis testing.

Competitive and internal violence

Violence in illicit drug markets can be classified in many ways. Most attention has been given to violence generated by competition among sellers. Less attention has been given to violence within selling organizations, though the older literature on organized crime and illegal markets reported a great deal on this (e.g., [2]).

Criminal organizations are hindered in their internal as well as external transactions by lack of access to the civil courts. Employment contracts cannot be enforced except privately; thus a dispute about responsibilities of a subordinate can quickly escalate to a violent conflict. Managerial succession is complicated by the specificity of reputation within the organization. A promising mid-level manager cannot readily provide evidence of performance to another potential employer; as a consequence higher-level managers get weaker market signals and may withhold deserved merit increases. This gives incentives to lower-level agents to use violence for upward mobility.

³ There are occasional reports of systemic violence. For example, in the District of Columbia in the late 1990s it was reported that some street gangs were in violent disputes over the marijuana market [14].

Symmetric to successional violence is disciplinary violence. Managers have reason to fear subordinates who can provide evidence against them; the longer the relationship, the greater the potential for harm from informing, because the subordinate acquires more useful information for that purpose. Thus managers may use violence as a tool for reducing the likelihood of being informed on.⁴ They have more incentive for doing so than do high-level dealers in transactions with low-level dealers because the information about violence will spread more rapidly and completely to lower level employees in a given organization than to a counterpart set of independent low level dealers. There are numerous stories of this kind of “prophylactic” violence in Colombian drug dealing organizations.

Thus the violence in atomistic markets has a narrower set of sources (competition and transactions) than that in markets serviced by larger selling organizations (which also include disciplinary and successional acts). Transactions within an organization rather than between independent agents may have lower probability of generating violence because they are part of longer-term relationships, which, through development of trust, allow for other modes of resolution. Which market form generates greater violence from a given set of participants cannot be determined theoretically, but some of the decline in market related violence in the last two decades in the United States may reflect changes in organizational structure.

High-level trafficking: Mexico 2006–2008

One reason for expecting violence in retail drug markets is that these markets have geographic specificity. Competition can be a struggle for literal “territory,” even if it is only a particularly lucrative street corner; Violators of territorial agreement can be observed because, for efficiency reasons, sales are made at a predictable place and time. However high-level trafficking lacks that specificity; transactions may occur at any place and time; the amounts are large enough and the transactions infrequent enough that the two parties find it more efficient to make prior arrangements rather than rely on intersecting routines for contact. Why then would high level trafficking organizations enter into extended violent conflicts?⁵

One possible explanation is that the groups are competing not for territories directly but for the rights to pay those corrupt officials who control specific channels, such as landing strips in a province of Guatemala. This is consistent with Schelling’s [22] classic conjecture about the U.S. Mafia, namely that organized crime was best thought of as the licensed collector of the rents associated with the franchise held by the corrupt police departments in individual American cities.

⁴ Smith and Varese [23] model the use of coercive violence in markets for Mafia extortion; the model can be applied to intra-organizational violence as well.

⁵ Colombia witnessed almost civil war in the late 1980s, when the Medellín cartel, whose principal business was the export of cocaine, launched a frontal attack on the national government, assassinating the leading presidential candidate in 1989 [26]. That incident followed a long series of killings with a variety of participants and officials as victims. The fight against the state, which is what has attracted most attention, is marginal to the discussion here since it was clearly intended to reduce the risks of traffickers and was characterized by more collaboration than competition among traffickers.

I will draw examples of violence in high-level markets exclusively from the drug trade in Mexico, where there are repeated claims that various “cartels” (Sinaloa, Gulf etc.) fight for control of specific routes.⁶ In particular, there have been high levels of violence since approximately the inauguration of President Vicente Fox in December 2000 and even greater levels since 2006, with the election of Felipe Calderon and his decision to launch a military campaign against the traffickers. The domestic drug market in Mexico remains small⁷, so it seems fair to attribute the vast majority of this violence to the export and trans-shipment trade. Given the recency of the events discussed here, there is no scholarly literature to draw on. Instead I rely on newspaper reports and official documents as sources for description of the character of the violence.

It is hard to analyze the violence without reference to the chronic corruption that has long plagued Mexico’s drug control (and policing generally). There is a history of corruption cases involving high-level officials; the most prominent involved President Zedillo’s senior drug official in 1997, General Jesus Gutierrez Rebollo, who was in the pay of a major trafficking organization. Presidents Fox and Calderon have both attempted to shake up existing arrangements between police and traffickers by firing large numbers of police at the federal level. Notwithstanding the mass firings, major corruption scandals continue to occur. For example, in October 2008, almost two years into President Calderon’s administration and campaign against traffickers, 35 members of the Attorney General’s department were arrested for providing information to traffickers. The scandals continue to involve the most senior federal enforcement officials, such as the head of the federal police. There also have been mass firings of narcotics police at the municipal level, in which literally hundreds of officers have been dismissed at one time for corruption.

Why the sudden upsurge in violence?

Though there are no authoritative and consistent measures of drug related killings by year, no one doubts that the figures for 2007 and 2008 are very much higher than in previous years. What might have triggered this increase?

Intensified enforcement may be an important factor, working through at least two channels. First, as a result of tougher enforcement there has been considerable turn-over in the leadership of the principal drug trafficking groups; many leaders have been incarcerated (often after extradition to the US⁸) or killed in shoot-outs with the police or military. Working relationships among gangs are probably based on personal rather than institutional arrangements, so that turn-over increases inter-gang conflict. Second, as already suggested, the dismissal of large numbers of corrupt

⁶ The term “cartel” is standard in reporting on Mexican drug trafficking, just as it was for the Cali “cartel” and the Medellin “cartel” in the 1980s. In neither country is it accurate. There is no evidence of an ability to set prices or to exclude entrants. These are best thought of as syndicates, in which a number of otherwise autonomous entrepreneurs often collaborate on specific ventures.

⁷ For example population surveys show low use rates among high school students compared to the United States while there are no indications of a large treatment demand for cocaine, heroin or methamphetamine dependence.

⁸ The United States Department of State [27] reported 83 extraditions to the U.S. in 2007, an increase of 20 over the prior year.

officials creates uncertainty and hence violence as traffickers search for new sources of protection.

The continuing decline of US expenditures on cocaine and heroin might also play a role.⁹ Smaller markets create excess capacity. With a workforce that has few other options with comparable pay, this might trigger an increase in the willingness to use violence to maintain revenues. The violence is different from that in US domestic markets in that a substantial share of the victims are not dealers or customers. The list of victim includes officials, reporters, singers (of narco ballads), and innocent parties (but not merely caught in the cross-fire). Some of the murdered officials are described as corrupt, some are described as zealous opponents of the drug trade. The innocent parties include family members of participants in the trade but others are described as completely unconnected to the trade.¹⁰ While specific attributions may be erroneous, I take at face value that there are some of each kind of victim.

Motivations

The diversity of victims is striking and indicates the variety of motivations for violence in the trade. Remarkably, the gangs often leave notes with the bodies, giving either their own affiliation and/or the motive for the killing [13]. For example, one note left with five bodies in Chihuahua State said, “This is what happens to stupid traitors who take sides with Chapo Guzman” [13]. The claims of responsibility are an important data source for the following analysis. That gangs seek reputation enhancement is suggested by the fact that they pay singers to compose ballads about their feats [13].

I examine here the motivations for killing different kinds of victims. The analysis is necessarily speculative. It assumes that the killings are strategic rather than the result of passion. Undoubtedly some are of the latter kind, given that these are young men, selected for the capacities for violence and in regular contact with a variety of intoxicants. However, the circumstances of many killings, involving elaborate abductions of multiple victims from different places and then killing over a period of time, indicates that some are strategic. I do not provide separate analyses for reporters,¹¹ who may be treated as honest officials for these purposes, or for singers, who presumably are killed by rivals of the gangs about whom the performer is singing [17].

Honest officials The killing of zealous prosecutors and police by dealers is most easily explained.¹² These murders serve to remove knowledgeable and effective

⁹ This is not the paper in which to offer a detailed explanation of this claim. For evidence of the decline from 1988 to 2000, see ONDCP [18].

¹⁰ For example, two grenades were thrown into a crowd in the capital of Michacoa; this was interpreted as an effort by drug dealers to deter the army [3].

¹¹ According to Parra [20] seven Mexican journalists were killed between October 2006 and April 2007, presumably by drug dealers and their associates.

¹² “[Mexico federal police] commissioner, Edgar Millan Gomez, was shot to death outside his home in May [2008]. Investigators have said that Millan Gomez’s crackdown on drug trafficking at the airport may have led to his murder.” [24]

opponents who might capture high-level traffickers. The killings also have a deterrent effect on other prosecutors and police and perhaps increase the reputation of the gang involved both among enforcement agencies and other gangs.¹³ To achieve that deterrent effect among officials, the gang must advertize its connection but may be able to do so in non-public ways, for example, by a phone call to the police; the police may not wish to disseminate that information if they themselves then want to contact the executing gang in order to establish a corrupt relationship.

In some cases, the killings of honest officials are by corrupt officials whose corrupt earnings have been reduced by the honest official. For example, the head of the federal police was killed in May 2008 by an official who was believed to be taking money for protecting shipments at the Mexico City airport and whom the police chief had removed from that post [24]. The distinction between corrupt police officer and gang member is a fine one but important for public policy purposes.

The mass firings of corrupt officials have certainly disturbed existing corrupt arrangements. Some of the killings may be an effort to punish the new and presumably honest officials who replace those who were protecting traffickers, perhaps intimidation as a prelude to offers of bribes for corrupt arrangements.

Corrupt officials Corrupt officials, primarily but not exclusively police, may be targeted either by those who pay them or those who wish to buy their services. The paying gangs may kill officials who fail to deliver on their promises or who are suspected of betraying their bribers; it may be functional to have an occasional random killing simply to keep others in line. Competing dealers may kill corrupt officials either to persuade other officials to accept payments from them or because they wish to replace one set of officials with another.

Innocent parties The targeted killings of apparently innocent persons [1] is more difficult to explain. It is hard to see the value of such killings if the gang does not claim credit. If gangs claim credit for these, then presumably the acts are reputation enhancing but that raises the question of the audience for the reputation. At least three are possible:

1. Corrupt officials. Assume that corrupt officials have to choose between competing drug gangs offering bribes. The willingness of a gang to kill even the innocent for reputational purposes may increase its “attractiveness,” since refusal to take its offer is now suffused with menace. The fact that so many of the killings are particularly brutal, involving decapitation or torture, is consistent with this; it adds to the sense of dread associated with the gang.
2. Honest officials. Given a choice of gangs to target it is possible that the government, or at least the officials who are at risk, will prefer the less violent since they are less likely to retaliate effectively.
3. Other gangs. Gangs contemplating entering the territory or markets (which may not be geographic) of this gang may be deterred.

¹³ For example, one note stated “We could [sic] give a damn about the federal government and this is proof” [19].

In one recent case, a gang undertook considerable efforts to disassociate itself from a killing for which it had initially been blamed [13]. Assuming that its disclaimer of responsibility is true raises the question of when it is optimal to make such claims. Perhaps they were concerned that this attack, involving throwing grenades into a crowd, was too brutal even for the current situation, though it is hard to see in what way it was more excessive than crucifixion, decapitation, etc. [1].

US crack market violence

I turn now to the crack market in the United States, generally viewed as the most violent of modern US retail drug markets (e.g. [8]). At least four factors may have contributed to this violence:

1. *The youth of participants.* Rates for violent crime peak early, at about ages 18–22. The young are particularly likely to lack foresight and thus engage in violence to settle disputes. The crack market was the first mass drug market in which most of the sellers were very young. It is worth noting that the market for bootlegged liquor, which generated great violence in the 1920s, was dominated by very young men; Al Capone was the dominant gang leader in Chicago by age 22.
2. *The value of the drugs themselves.* The cocaine that fills a plastic sandwich bag may be worth thousands of dollars. The return to sudden, situational violence was very high.
3. *The intensity of law enforcement.* Transactions are conducted under considerable uncertainty as to whether the other party is an informant. Intensified enforcement increases the incentives for violence by raising the risk that the other person may be attempting to gain reduced penalties by providing information to law enforcement.
4. *The indirect consequence of drug use.* More than any other mass market drug, crack use engenders violent behavior, though the technical literature on the causal relationship is cautious on this matter (e.g. [7, 28]). Users are violent and aggressive and this probably encourages more use of violence by dealers themselves.

It is probably the combination of these factors, rather than any one of them, that accounts for the extraordinary violence associated with crack markets in the late 1980s. That violence seems to have fallen substantially, perhaps reflecting principally the aging of participants in crack markets,¹⁴ though violence itself, as well as enforcement, may also have selected out the most violent participants; Caulkins et al. [5] present a model in which violence declines with more intense enforcement as a consequence of selective incarceration. The sharp decline in the

¹⁴ For example, consider the age distribution of patients entering treatment with smoked cocaine (crack) as the principal drug of abuse. In 1992, 30% were aged 26–30; by 2005 this group had fallen to less than 10%. In contrast, the percentage over age 50 had risen from less than 5% to about 20%. [25]

Table 1 Types of illicit drug markets

Dealers	Customers	
	Mostly residents	Mostly outsiders
Mostly residents	Local market	Export market
Mostly outsiders	Import market	Public market

price of drugs that has occurred since the peak of the crack market in the early 1980s [4] may also have reduced violence by reducing the motivation for stealing drugs.

There are, of course, other drug-market characteristics that can also influence the level of violence. Table 1 presents a simple classification of retail markets according to whether buyers and sellers come from the neighborhood or elsewhere. This taxonomy, originally created for purposes of analyzing vulnerability to enforcement [21], may also be useful in the study of violence. Markets characterized by mostly resident dealers and customers are labeled *local markets*. *Export markets* are ones in which residents of the neighborhood sell drugs to non-residents. Markets where mostly non-resident dealers sell to local residents are characterized here as *import markets*. Finally, markets where both sellers and customers are mostly non-residents are labeled here as *public markets* because they tend to occur at large public locations like parks, train or bus stations, and schoolyards.

Each class of market differs in the potential for violence. Local markets, precisely because they involve buyers and sellers who know each other, do not lend themselves to territorial competition. At the other extreme are public markets, in which buyers and sellers cannot readily find each other except at specific locations; the incentives for territoriality are consequently greater.

Transactional violence may also vary in these dimensions. Local markets discourage cheating of buyers, again as a consequence of the ongoing connections between buyers and sellers; a local customer is more likely to effectively spread information about that cheating to other potential customers than is one who has little connection to other buyers. That in turn reduces incentives for violence, this time by buyer against seller.

If this is correct, then the maturation of the crack market will tend to reduce market related violence. This is a consequence of the growing share of all transactions that take place in local markets and thus among participants who are in a continued relationship (indeed web of relationships) that would be imperiled by violence. Moreover, an increasing share of cocaine transactions may, as a result of the dissemination of beepers and cell phones, be occurring in locations (apartments, restaurants, offices) that are agreed upon by the buyer and seller for their mutual convenience. Johnson et al. ([12], p. 191, Table 6.1) report that in New York City in the 1990s, the “seller style” included phone and delivery services as well as freelancers. Poor and incompetent cocaine users still frequently transact in exposed locations, chosen precisely because they facilitate the coming together of buyers and sellers. But the ability to choose locations on the basis of specific situational need not only reduces territorially motivated violence but also reduces the vulnerability of buyers to robbery and other victimization because fewer of them need to congregate at specific locations, which thus become less attractive to predators.

Conclusions

Note again that violence is by no means a common feature of illegal markets, even of markets for illegal drugs. Specific factors are necessary to generate high levels of violence. This essay has discussed the factors that have triggered violence in two markets, the exporting of cocaine, heroin and other drugs from Mexico in the period 2006–2008 in Mexico and the retailing of crack in the 1980s in the USA. The two differ a great deal in the factors that triggered the violence and in the nature of the victims. Whereas in Mexico officials and non-participants have frequently been the targets of killings, people in these categories were hardly ever killed intentionally in the US crack markets. Similarly, whereas enforcement itself has been a major factor in the surge of violence in Mexico, that was not true for the crack markets.

As should be obvious from this account, there is a dearth of both data and well-developed analytic frames for analyzing violence in drug markets. Given the prominence of the Mexican drug market homicides as a national problem, it is striking that there is no evidence of systematic data collection about who is killed by whom for what reasons.¹⁵ For crack markets there are only a few empirical papers on sources of violence, notably two by Goldstein, et al. [10, 11], which are analyses of closed homicide files in New York City from when the market was at its peak for violence.

Precisely because high drug-market violence is restricted in time and space, it has not been the subject of much policy analysis either. However, the variety of sources and, in the case of Mexico, of victims, suggests that this violence is not easy to suppress once it starts. The failure of the massive crackdown by the Mexican government is indicative of that difficulty. Indeed, for a variety of reasons described above, the crackdown itself is probably one of the principal causes of the upsurge of violence. For both policy and intellectual reasons, the subject is worth further exploration.

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¹⁵ This statement reflects conversations with both researchers and officials in Mexico.

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