



William J. Perry Center *for* Hemispheric Defense Studies

Latin America & the Caribbean

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**Presentation for the Capstone Executive Spouse Development Course,
National Defense University**

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05/11/2026

Lecture outline: Four Puzzles for Discussion

- What is Latin America and the Caribbean?
- Common perceptions and misperceptions about Latin America
- Why Latin America matters for U.S. national security?



Puzzle 1: What is Latin America?

- Geography
- Territory
- Set of countries

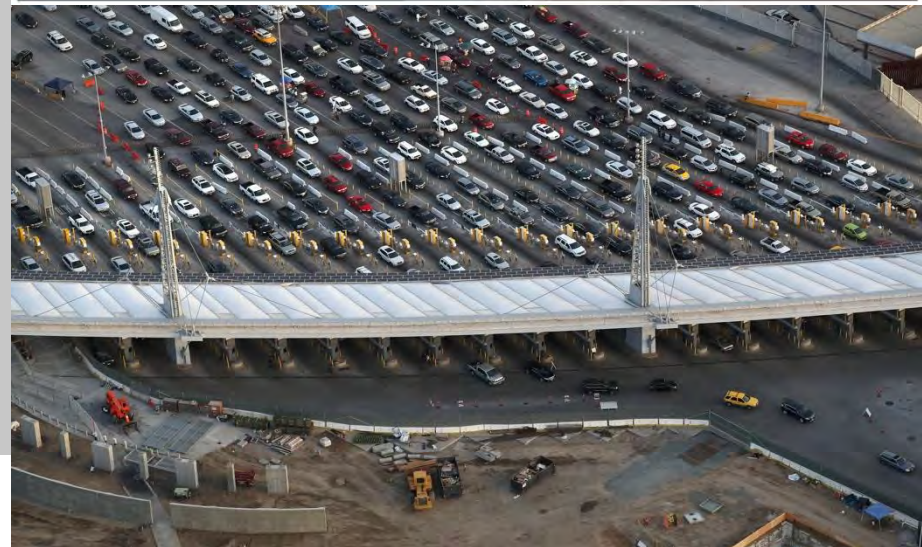


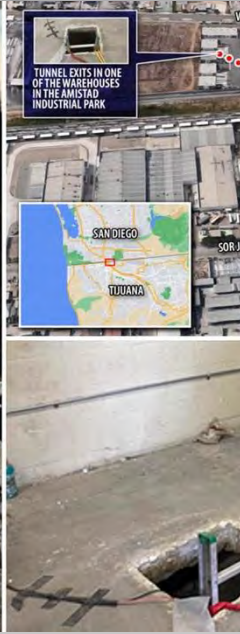
59 port entries between Mexico and the US: World's busiest border

Source: "5 Misconceptions about the U.S.-Mex

- The border is 2,000 miles
- San Ysidro Port of Entry (United States–Mexico): over 69 million crossings per year (with daily movement of about 70,000 vehicles and 20,000 pedestrians northbound)
- In 2023 alone, the Laredo-Nuevo Laredo border reported some 8.2 million personal vehicles and handled over **3 million truck crossings** from Mexico
- Over 35% of the North American trade (legal) takes place in one of these borders

Locations of Official U.S. Land Ports of Entry on the U.S.–Mexican Border





Puzzle 1: What is Latin America?

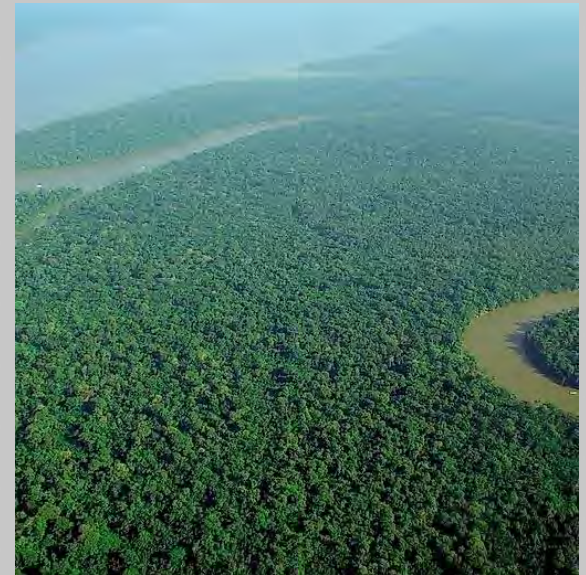
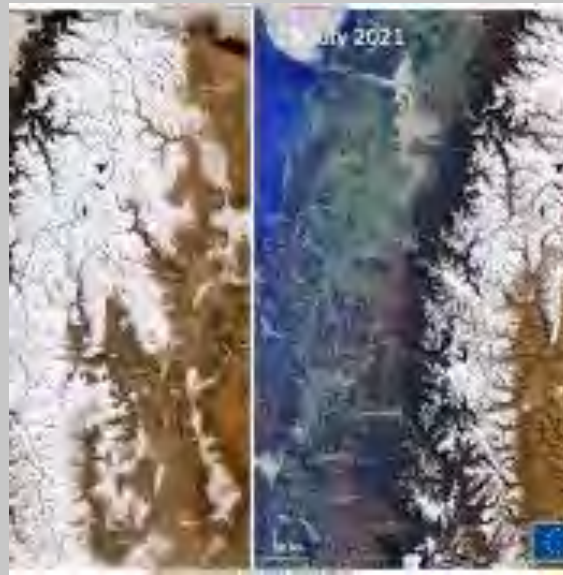
- Territorial border
- Borderline between legality and illegality



Puzzle 1: What is Latin America?

- **Complex borders**
 - Historically fluid
 - Porous
 - Evolving

Images: NASA Earth Observatory



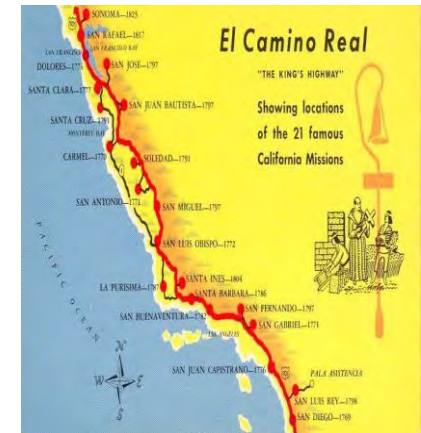
Puzzle 1:
Not all you
see in a
map is Latin
America



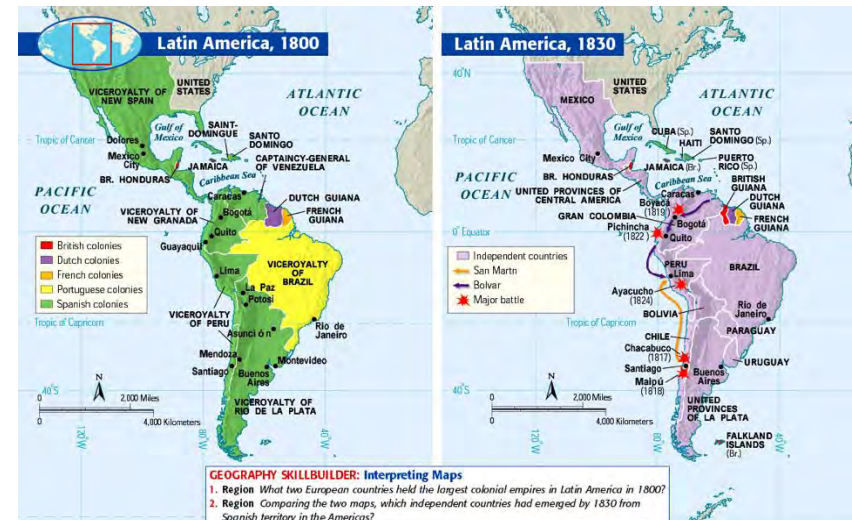
Puzzle 1: What is Latin America?

WHAT IS IT?

Uti Possidetis Juris is a customary doctrine in international law that requires emerging states to presumptively inherit their pre-independence boundaries.



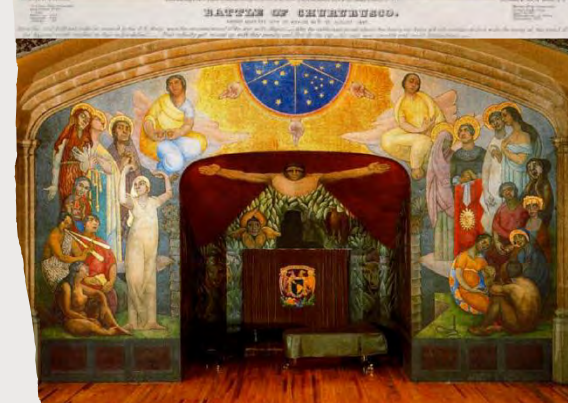
- **Transnational history**
 - Pre-Hispanic civilizations
 - Common colonial heritage
 - Similar path towards independence



Puzzle 1: What is Latin America?

Latin America as an idea and a political community

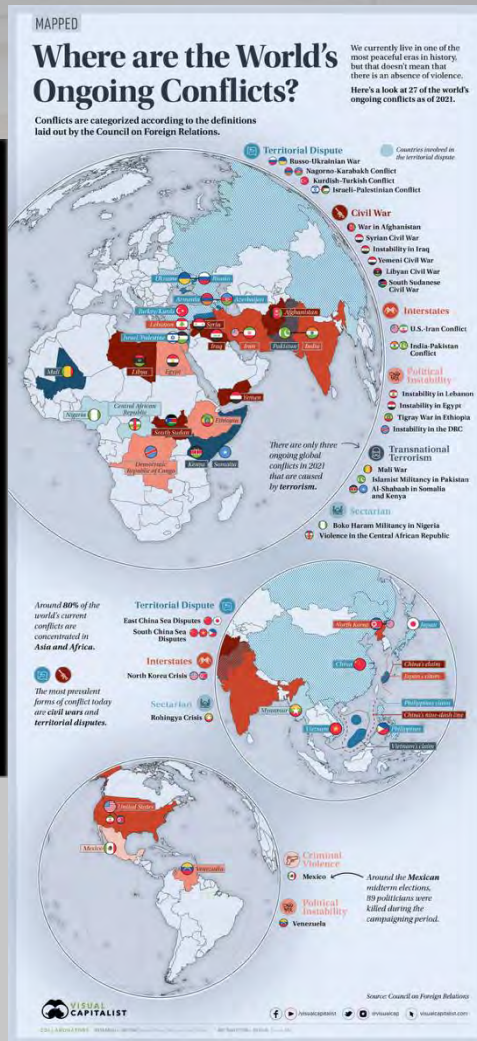
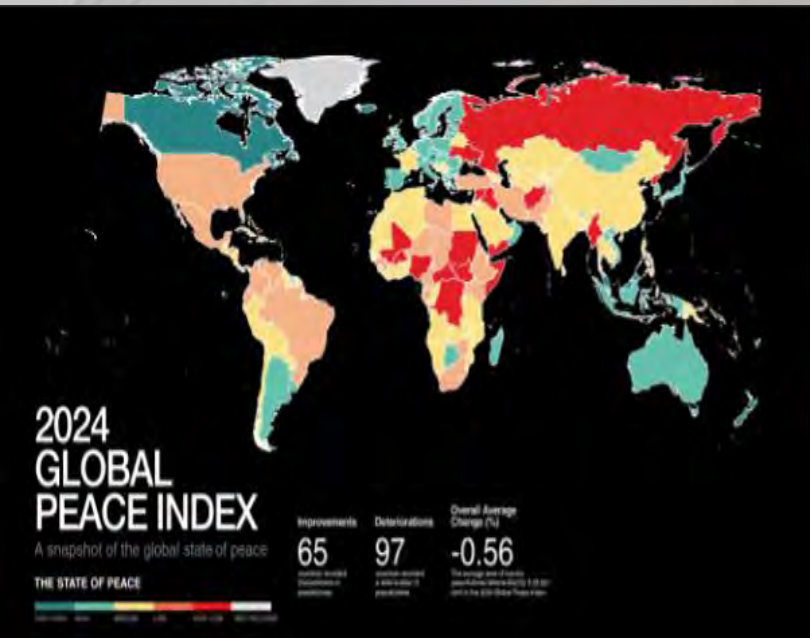
- Conceived by people who perceive themselves as part of a collective group
- It is not simply restricted to nations, it is a supranational movement
- Common ideas:
 - Bolivarism
 - Republicanism
 - Anti-colonialism
 - Anti-imperialism



Common beliefs: Latin America from a U.S. lens

- Violent
- Poor
- Underdeveloped
- Borderless/immigrants



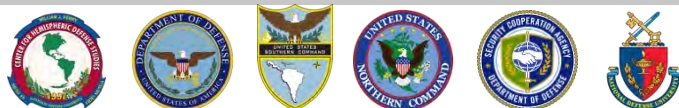


Puzzle 2: Peaceful but Violent

Source: Global Peace Index 2024, Institute of Economics and Peace

Negative peace:

- No war between neighboring states
- Low levels of interstate conflict
- Few border disputes are militarized
- Military budgets are relatively low

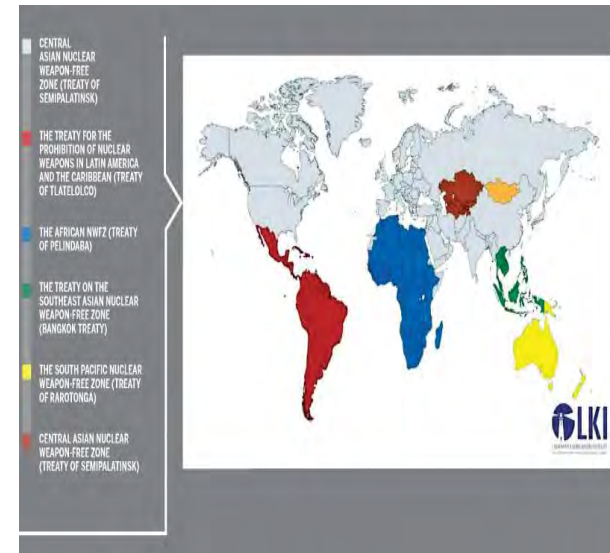


Puzzle 2: Peaceful but Violent

- Border disputes resolved via courts (judicial settlement)
- Nuclear, biological and chemical weapons are banned by treaty
- Third-party mediation and electoral monitoring are common

Map: Economist 2024

Images: OPANAL 1968, OAS mission in Bolivia 2024



Puzzle 2: Peaceful but Violent

Domestic and political violence

- Coups
- Insurgency
- **Revolution**
 - Social revolutions
 - Land reform (peasants)
- Regional rebellions
- Caudillo wars



Homicide: Complex, non-linear, and heterogenous

Data from: Insight Crime and Economist

2024 Homicide Rates in Latin America and the Caribbean



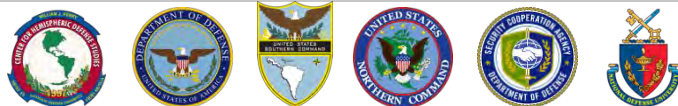
Murderous municipalities

Homicides per 100,000 people, 50 highest cities*



Sources: Igarapé Institute; United Nations

*With population of 250,000 or more †2022



Puzzle 2 Latin America: Peaceful but Violent

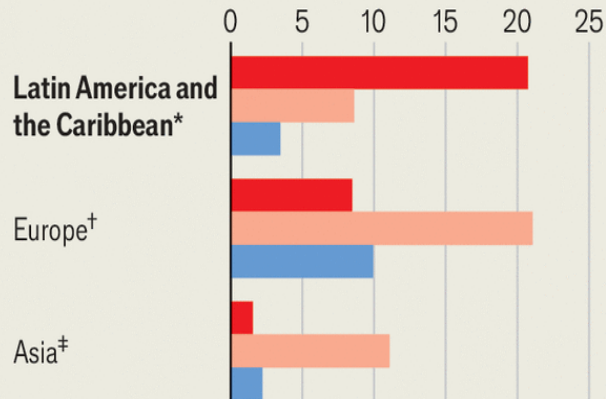
Source: "Global Study on Homicide," UN Office on Drugs and Crime, 2019; Economist 2024

A deficit of justice

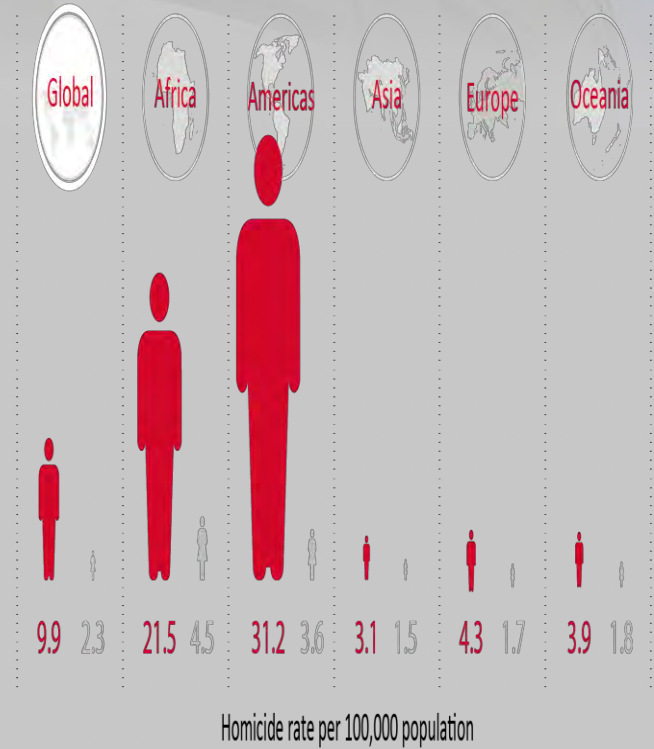
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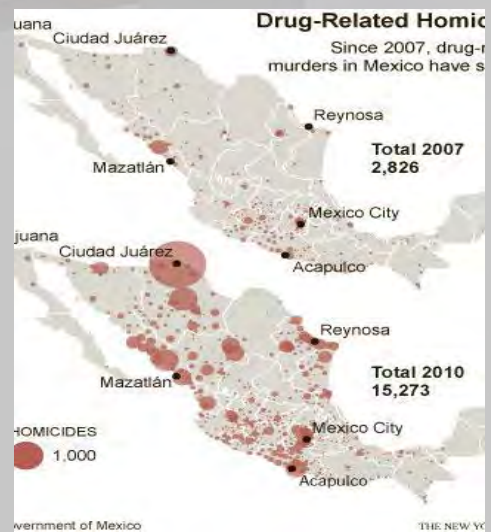
Rates per 100,000 people, 2021 or latest available

- Victims of intentional homicide
- Judges or magistrates
- People convicted of intentional homicide

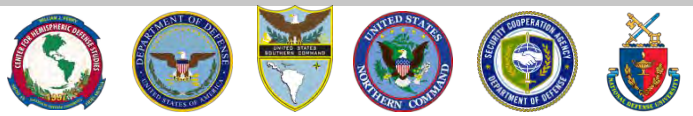


Source: UNODC *20 countries †35 countries ‡10 countries



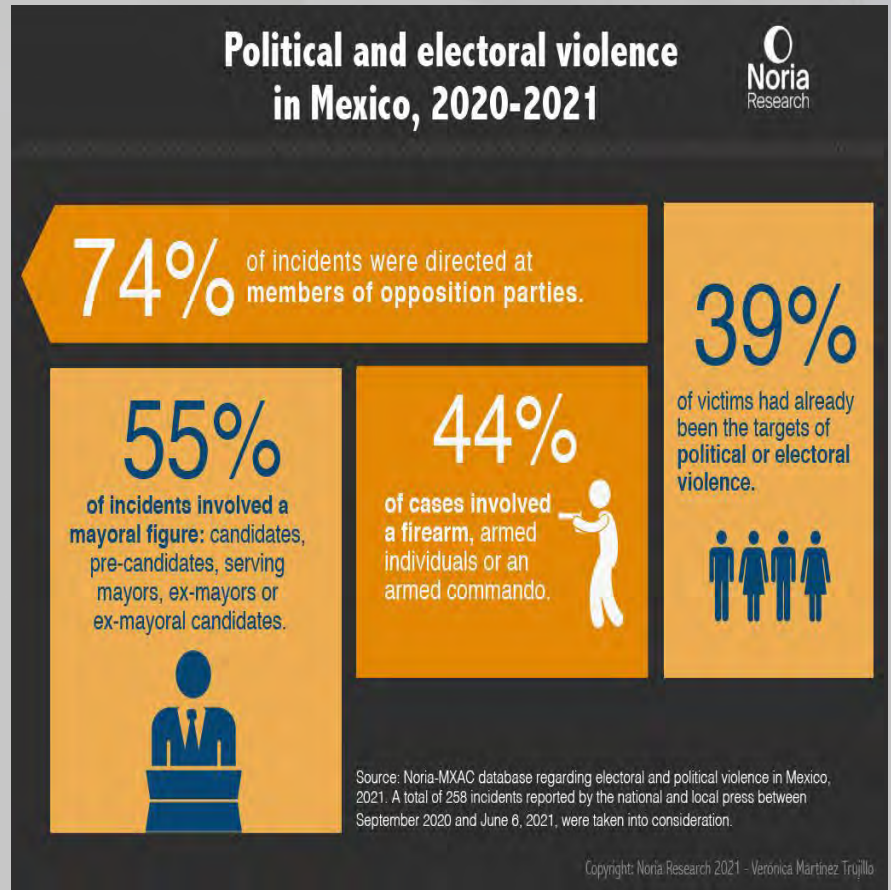


Puzzle 2 Latin America, peaceful but violent: State generated violence (political violence), drug related violence, urban violence and gang-related or youth violence.outh violence (gangs)



Political violence

- Political violence in Latin America can be defined as the use of force or intimidation to achieve political goals, typically involving state actors, insurgent groups, or both. It encompasses a wide range of actions, including coups, guerrilla warfare, state repression, and terrorism, all aimed at influencing or maintaining power structures within a country. This form of violence is often rooted in ideological conflicts, socio-economic inequalities, and the struggle for political control, and has been a recurring feature of Latin American politics throughout much of the 20th and early 21st centuries.



U.S.-Mexico SOF Cooperation

- **Success**
 - Official objective was achieved: capturing El Mencho, Jalisco Nueva Generacion
 - U.S. provided key intelligence information, which ensured success of Mexican SOFs
 - Demonstrates effective cross-border intelligence cooperation without U.S. “boots on the ground”



The reward poster features a red header with the Department of State seal on the left, the word "REWARD" in large white letters in the center, and the Department of Justice Drug Enforcement Administration seal on the right. Below the header, the amount "\$15,000,000" is displayed in large red font. Underneath, the text "FOR INFORMATION LEADING TO THE ARREST AND/OR CONVICTION OF" is written in black. Three mugshot-style photographs of a man with dark hair and a mustache are shown in a row. Below the photos, the name "Nemesio Rubén Oseguera Cervantes" is written in red, followed by "a/k/a 'El Mencho'" in red.

REWARD
INCREASE OF UP TO

\$15,000,000

FOR INFORMATION LEADING TO THE ARREST AND/OR CONVICTION OF



Nemesio Rubén Oseguera Cervantes
a/k/a “El Mencho”



U.S.-Mexico SOF Cooperation

- **Questions/Concerns**
 - Kill vs. capture and detain
 - Strategic challenges of decapitation: initial operation was not violent (deaths), but the aftermath saw retaliatory violence (74 casualties, 250 roadblocks across 20 cities, major disruptions in Guadalajara and Puerto Vallarta)
- **Lessons for future SOFs initiatives**



The 2026 World Cup: an opportunity to showcase the North American region, and a security challenge

- Biggest party in the world is coming to town!
 - U.S. Mexico and Canada are co-hosts: Atlanta, Boston, Dallas, Houston, Kansas, L.A, Miami, NYC, NJ, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Seattle, Mexico City, Guadalajara, Monterrey, Toronto and Vancouver
 - Expected visitors: 5.5 millions tourists
 - Expected revenue: \$7.5 Billion
 - Audience watching: 6 billion around the world
 - Matches: 104



Drug related violence

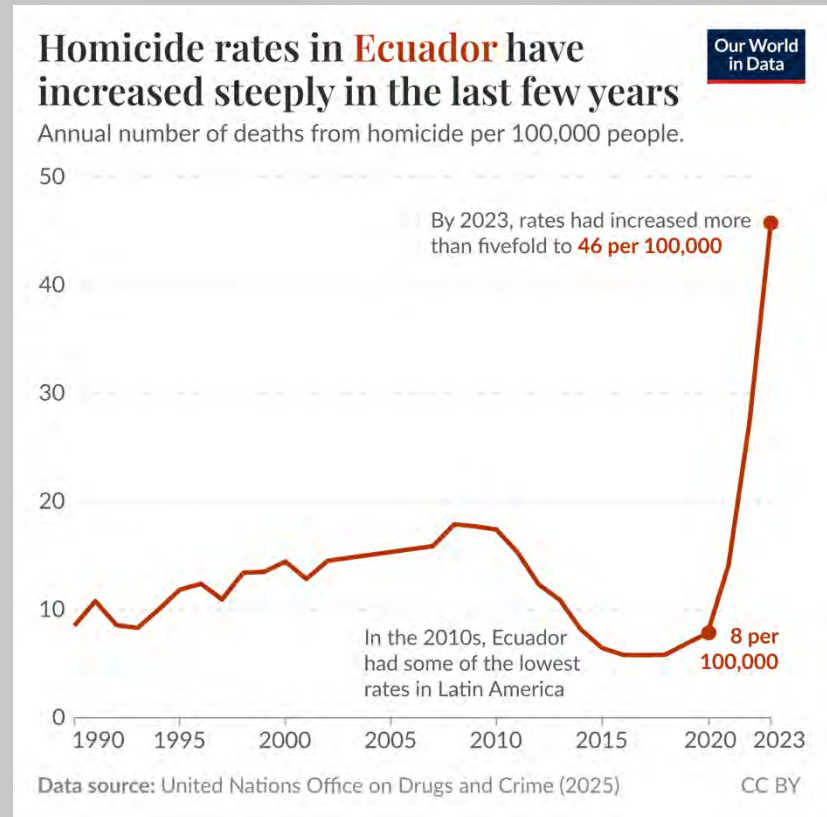
Source: The Economist 2022

- Violence perpetrated by transnational criminal organizations (TCOs)
- Transnational organized crime refers to those self-perpetuating associations of individuals who **operate transnationally** (globally, across borders) for the purpose of obtaining power, influence, **monetary and/or commercial gains**, while protecting their activities through a pattern of **corruption, violence** or while protecting their illegal activities through a transnational **organizational structure** and the exploitation of transnational commerce or communication mechanisms (**adaptability**).



Drug related violence in Ecuador

- Ecuador has transitioned from a peaceful transit country to a **major global cocaine logistics hub**: 70% of the world's cocaine passes through Ecuador, utilizing its ports, porous borders, and the US dollar economy, which simplifies money laundering.
- The country is experiencing a massive surge in violent, drug-related crime driven by local gangs (Los Choneros, Los Lobos) **allied with Mexican** and European cartels.
- The crisis is characterized by soaring homicide rates, prison massacres, and systemic corruption, largely stemming from control over key Pacific.



Haitian crisis: political, gang violence, and urban crime

- Overt involvement of gangs in politics (G9 and Family), controlling 90% of the capital
- Lack of elected officials and resigning officials (political crisis)
- No rapid international force to de-escalate violence (long history of failed UN peace missions).
- There will be elections in Haiti in August and December of 2026



Civilian perceptions and concerns today

Source:

Data from Latinobarometro 2024 survey, graphic developed by Latinometrics

What are the biggest policy issues in Latin America?

Data from the Latinobarómetro 2024 survey reveals the region's top concerns

Share:

Top 3 Issues Across Latin America

#1
Crime & public safety
19.1%

#2
Economy & finance
18.1%

#3
Unemployment
7.6%

Highlight Country: None

Sort by Issue: None

What are the biggest policy issues in Latin America?

Data from the Latinobarómetro 2024 survey reveals the region's top concerns

Color Scale: Less More

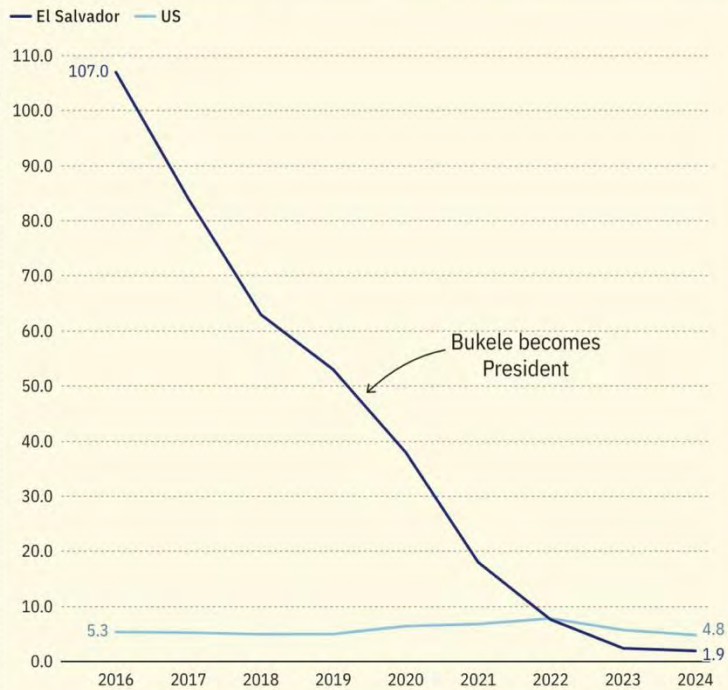
	Total	Argentina	Bolivia	Brazil	Chile	Colombia	Costa Rica	Rep. Dominicana	Ecuador	El Salvador	Guatemala	Honduras	Mexico	Panama	Paraguay
Crime & public safety	19.1%	8.8%	0.8%	9.7%	40.9%	14.2%	30.3%	23.8%	48.6%	4.2%	16.9%	11.8%	17.4%	9.9%	15.2%
Economy & finance	18.1%	31.9%	39.6%	6.7%	9.6%	11.7%	10.1%	22.3%	12.3%	40.6%	15.7%	15.1%	13.0%	12.4%	10.5%
Unemployment	7.6%	10.8%	3.7%	8.2%	5.8%	12.3%	6.5%	1.5%	9.6%	5.7%	2.1%	10.0%	4.1%	14.8%	18.3%
Politics & governance	7.6%	11.0%	8.8%	10.6%	3.6%	9.6%	3.4%	1.2%	7.5%	0.4%	0.8%	9.4%	0.7%	1.2%	11.9%
Corruption	7.2%	5.5%	6.2%	4.4%	5.5%	19.2%	5.6%	3.8%	7.5%	0.5%	13.6%	6.6%	3.5%	10.7%	9.4%
Healthcare	4.0%	0.4%	1.7%	21.4%	4.9%	4.8%	0.8%	1.8%	0.3%	2.4%	0.7%	3.8%	0.7%	5.1%	10.4%
Poverty	3.9%	4.1%	4.8%	1.6%	1.2%	2.1%	2.8%	2.8%	0.8%	7.4%	10.7%	7.1%	12.3%	2.5%	2.2%
Education	3.4%	5.0%	1.1%	9.7%	1.7%	2.5%	1.7%	4.4%	1.3%	1.6%	1.3%	3.1%	1.3%	3.5%	4.8%
Job instability	3.1%	—	6.3%	—	0.4%	0.1%	3.4%	3.3%	0.3%	8.0%	3.8%	11.5%	2.2%	4.7%	—
Low wages	1.9%	3.9%	1.8%	0.8%	0.8%	0.1%	1.9%	1.3%	—	4.1%	2.4%	0.6%	6.7%	2.1%	0.3%
Inflation & rising prices	1.6%	4.7%	4.5%	1.2%	1.7%	1.6%	0.4%	1.8%	—	0.7%	2.7%	0.6%	3.4%	0.4%	0.3%
Income inequality & social injustice	1.5%	0.8%	2.5%	3.5%	0.8%	1.0%	1.0%	0.7%	0.3%	0.8%	1.9%	0.7%	4.2%	3.0%	1.5%
High cost of living	1.4%	0.2%	3.7%	0.2%	0.8%	0.5%	0.6%	1.7%	0.1%	1.6%	3.3%	—	8.6%	0.4%	—
Food shortages	1.0%	0.5%	0.8%	2.7%	—	0.5%	0.3%	1.2%	0.1%	2.3%	2.0%	1.7%	1.7%	1.7%	0.2%
Violence & gangs	1.0%	—	0.1%	0.3%	1.0%	4.2%	1.7%	0.4%	0.8%	0.5%	2.5%	1.7%	1.2%	0.9%	—



El Salvador's model: pros, cons, and lessons for the future

Source: Jeronimo Gonzalez, World Bank, 2024

Murder rate per 100,000 people



Estimate for US 2024 figures.

Chart: Jeronimo Gonzalez/Semafor • Source: World Bank, CDC, Gobierno de El Salvador

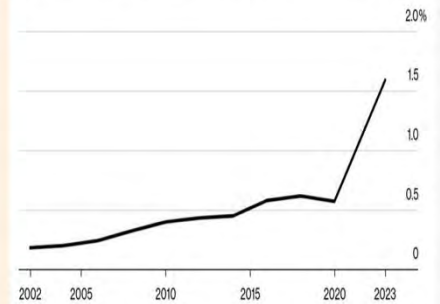
SEMAFOR

El Salvador Became Safer Than the US in 2023



El Salvador Has Jailed 1.6% of its Population

The country has the world's highest incarceration rate, triple that of the US

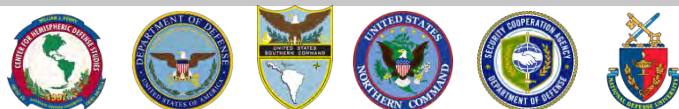
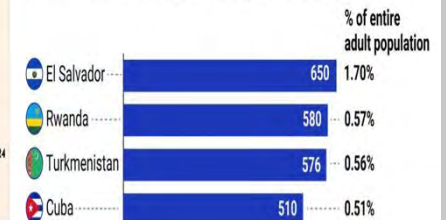


Source: World Prison Brief, Government of El Salvador

Bloomberg

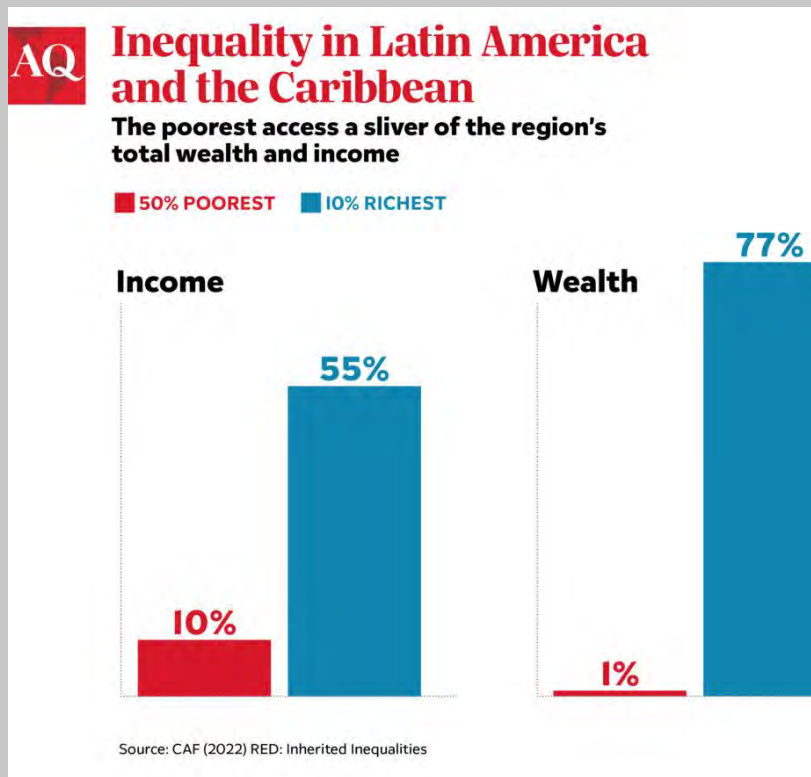
How does El Salvador's prison rate stack up?

Countries with the highest prison rates per 100,000 people



Latin America is poor and underdeveloped

Wealth is abundant, but poorly distributed



Immigrants and migrants

Transnational movements: society and demographics

- Demographically heterogeneous
- Marked by historical diasporas: European, Japanese
- Shaped by immigrants and emigrants

Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean



Migration trends: a tale of two nations

- U.S. government sources frequently cite approximately 1.6 million American citizens living in Mexico as of 2025.
- Mexican census data from 2020 counts just under 800,000 U.S. citizens, reflecting a more conservative estimate compared to U.S. figures.
- Some organizations and research groups place the expat population in Mexico at slightly over 1 million but below 2 million (AARO, 2024)
- Both government and independent sources agree that Mexico is the most popular expat destination for Americans worldwide.

The screenshot shows the AARO website with the following content:

ASSOCIATION OF AMERICANS RESIDENT OVERSEAS
Since 1973

Americans Helping Americans Abroad

Advocacy ▾ Issues ▾ AARO Health Insurance ▾ Living Abroad ▾ Membership ▾ Events ▾ About AARO ▾ Contact Us ▾

Home > / Living Abroad > / How Many Americans Live Abroad?

How Many Americans Live Abroad?

By Doris L. Speer, AARO President
Updated: October, 2024

HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT YOUR HEALTHCARE?

As an American living or working overseas, you need healthcare coverage.

European Benefits Administrators, AARO'S partner and a world-recognized specialist in custom-designed health care plans for expatriates, can help you choose the right coverage for you and your family.

For further information:
Contact Johanna ROWLEY
Tel: +33 (0) 1 44 20 62 10
Email: aaro@european.com
www.europeanbenefits.com

Mr. Pinto estimates that the following are the 10 most populous countries:

Country	Number of Americans in 2023
Mexico	1,182,346
Canada	1,050,898
United Kingdom	325,321
Israel	281,137
Germany	238,652
Australia	218,216
South Korea	129,499
France	117,462
Japan	111,021
Spain	108,684

[Please note that, while tables in this document show numerical results down to the individual person, the specific numbers are estimates and not exact counts.]



It's a question of numbers, relatively speaking

Country	Total Population (2025)	Subgroup (persons)	Subgroup % of Population
United States	347 million	Mexican origin: 11 million	3.17%
Mexico	132 million	US citizens: 2 million	1.52%



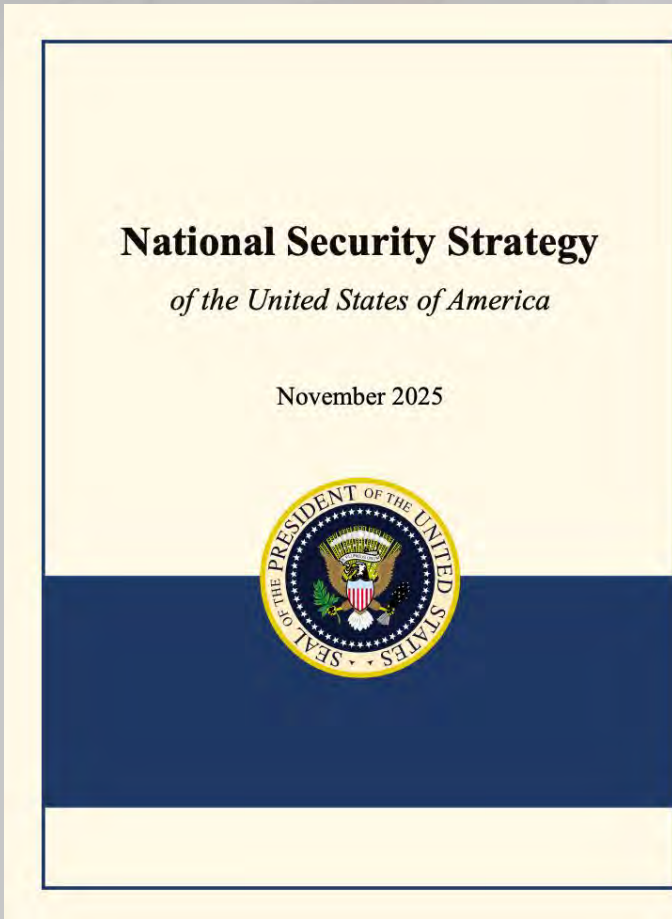
Why Latin America matters to the U.S.?

- Trade
- Critical minerals
- Geopolitical relevance
- Fentanyl



Western Hemisphere is now a top national security issue

Prepared by
Kayla Haas
Dec 2025



NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY of the United States of America

1. IDENTIFY WHAT WE WANT ENDS

First and foremost, preserve the United States as a sovereign, independent republic that secures the natural rights and well-being of its citizens.

- Protection of our people, economy, and way of life
- Total control of our borders and infrastructure
- The world's strongest military, deterrent, and economy
- A culturally confident, prosperous, and united nation

From and in the world:

- A stable Western Hemisphere free of hostile influence
- A free and open Indo-Pacific with secure sea lanes and supply chains
- A strong, self-confident Europe that upholds Western security
- A Middle East not dominated by any adversary or threatened by energy chokepoints
- Global adoption of U.S. technology, standards, and strategic advantage

2. ASSESS WHAT WE HAVE MEANS

World-leading assets, resources, and advantages, including:

nimble political system	large, innovative economy	leading financial & capital markets
world-class tech sector	most powerful military	extensive alliance network
favorable geography & resources	unmatched soft power	willpower and patriotism

Domestic agenda means:

restore culture of competence	strategic energy dominance	reindustrialization
tax and regulatory freedom	investment in tech and science	

3. IDENTIFY HOW WE GET THERE STRATEGY

Principles:

- America First focus on core national interests
- Peace through strength as the basis of deterrence
- Respect for sovereignty and a bias against intervention
- Fairness and flexible realism in dealing with all nations
- Primacy of the nation-state over transnational bodies
- Maintain regional and global balance of power
- Promotion of competence and pro-worker economic policy

Priorities:

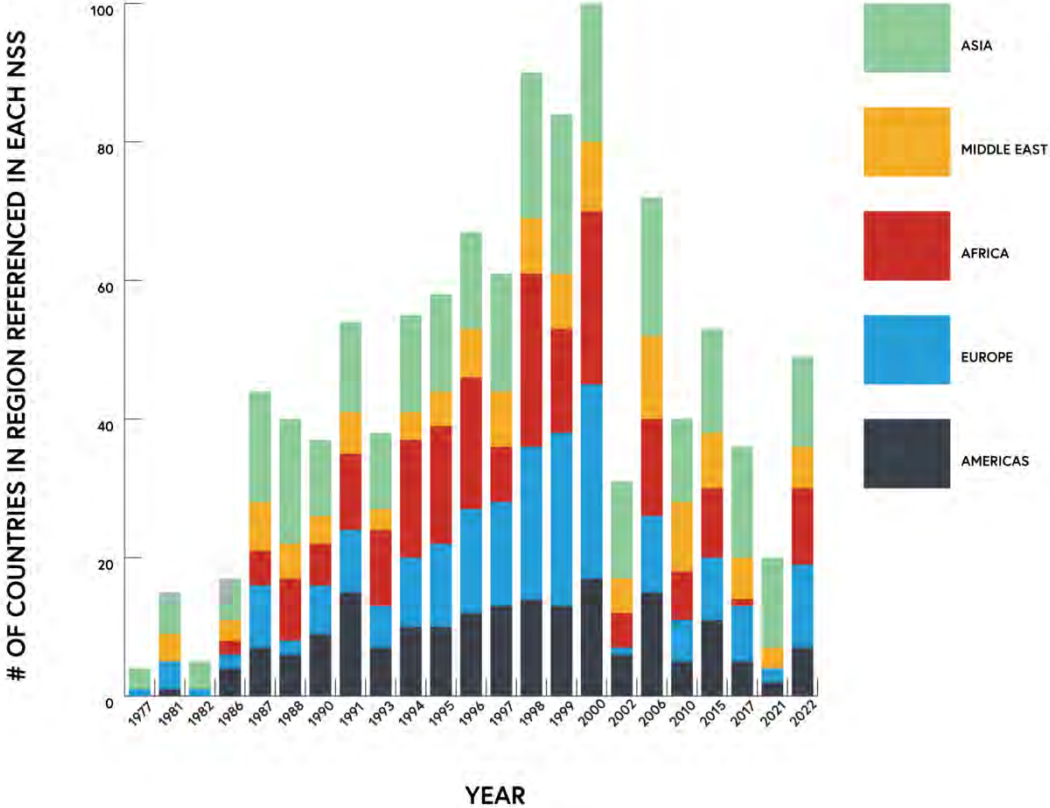
- End mass migration and secure the border
- Protect core rights and civil liberties
- Shift defense burdens to capable allies
- Use peace deals to realign regions
- Rebalance trade and secure supply chains
- Reindustrialize, strengthen defense production
- Ensure dominance in energy, financial and capital markets

Regions:

- Europe:** Restore stability, empower sovereign defense, and enforce fair economic practices.
- Middle East:** Shift burdens, build peace
- Indo-Pacific:** Compete economically with China while strengthening deterrence to prevent regional conflict.
- Africa:** Partner with capable states, shift to investment, and secure critical resources.
- Western Hemisphere:** Enforce Monroe Doctrine



Natinal Security Strategy: Pre-2026
Chin, John J., Kiron K. Skinner, and Clay Yoo. "Understanding National Security Strategies Through Time." *Texas National Security Review*, September 2023.



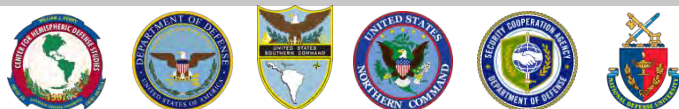
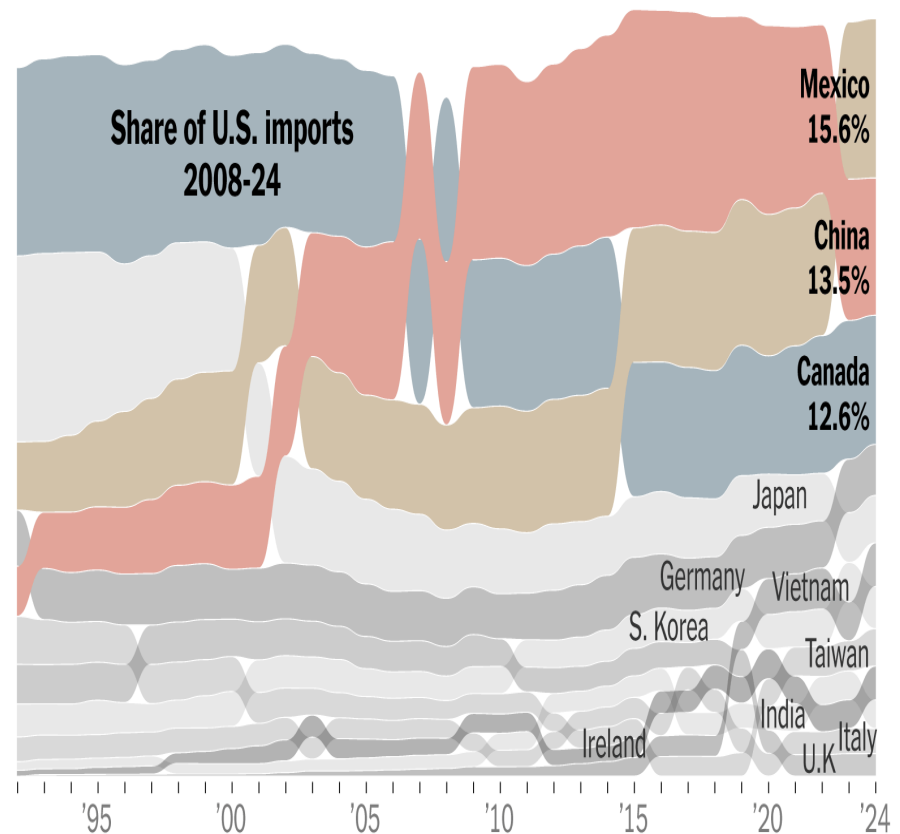
Mexico and Canada are the U.S. largest trading partner

Source: Karl Russell, Lazaro Gamio, and Ana Swanson, "This is How Much the U.S. imports from China, Canada, and Mexico," The New York Times,

Key products imported from Mexico, Canada and China in 2023

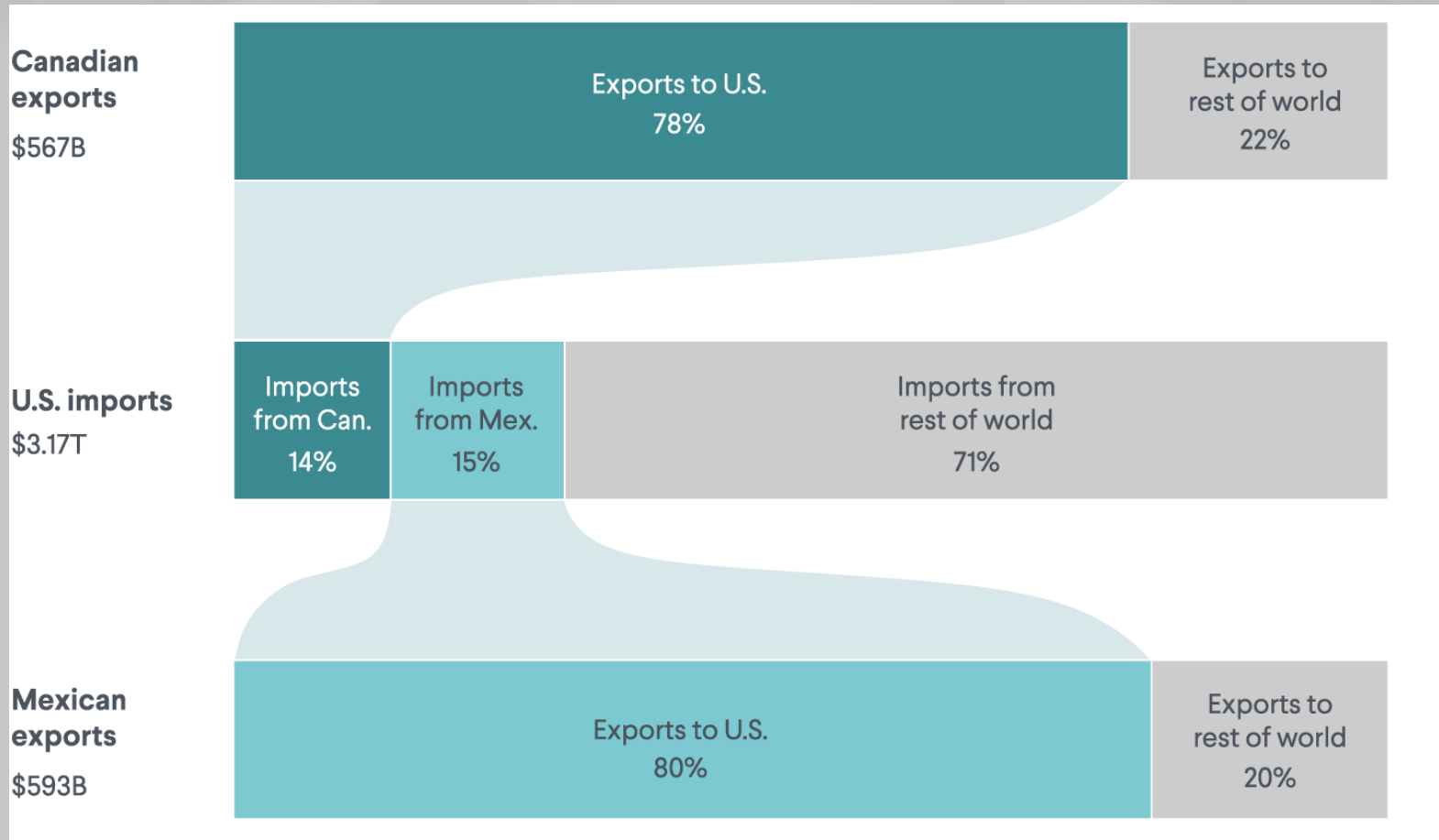
List includes a selection of products where imports from the three countries are more than \$1 billion.

PRODUCTS: TOTAL U.S. IMPORTS	SHARE OF IMPORTS: MEXICO, CANADA, CHINA AND OTHERS			TRADE BALANCE
Crude petroleum \$165.3 bil.	12%	56%	32%	-\$89.1 bil.
Cars \$208.0 bil.	22%	17%	61%	-\$55.6 bil.
Computers \$103.2 bil.	27%	38%	35%	-\$56.6 bil.
Telephones \$117.1 bil.		47%	44%	-\$56.6 bil.
Car parts and accessories \$85.5 bil.	41%	13%	11%	-\$20.9 bil.
Delivery trucks \$43.5 bil.	75%		15%	-\$21.3 bil.
Insulated wire \$29.7 bil.	52%	11%	34%	-\$11.8 bil.
Refined petroleum \$66.2 bil.	19%		74%	+\$31.2 bil.
Electric batteries \$29.3 bil.		53%	42%	-\$14.4 bil.
Video displays \$20.7 bil.	49%	32%	19%	-\$15.5 bil.
Seats \$24.0 bil.	34%	27%	33%	-\$13.5 bil.



Canada and Mexico Are Far More Dependent on the U.S. Than Vice Versa

Source: Shannon O'Neil and Julia Huesa, "What Trump's Trade Policy Would Mean, in Nine Charts," Council of Foreign Relations, February 5, 2025



Economic security is national security

- Latin America has practically everything the world needs
- 30% of world's fresh water sources
- 30% of sugar
- 60% lithium
- 30% copper
- 5% uranium
- 40% coffee



Trade and Strategic Competition

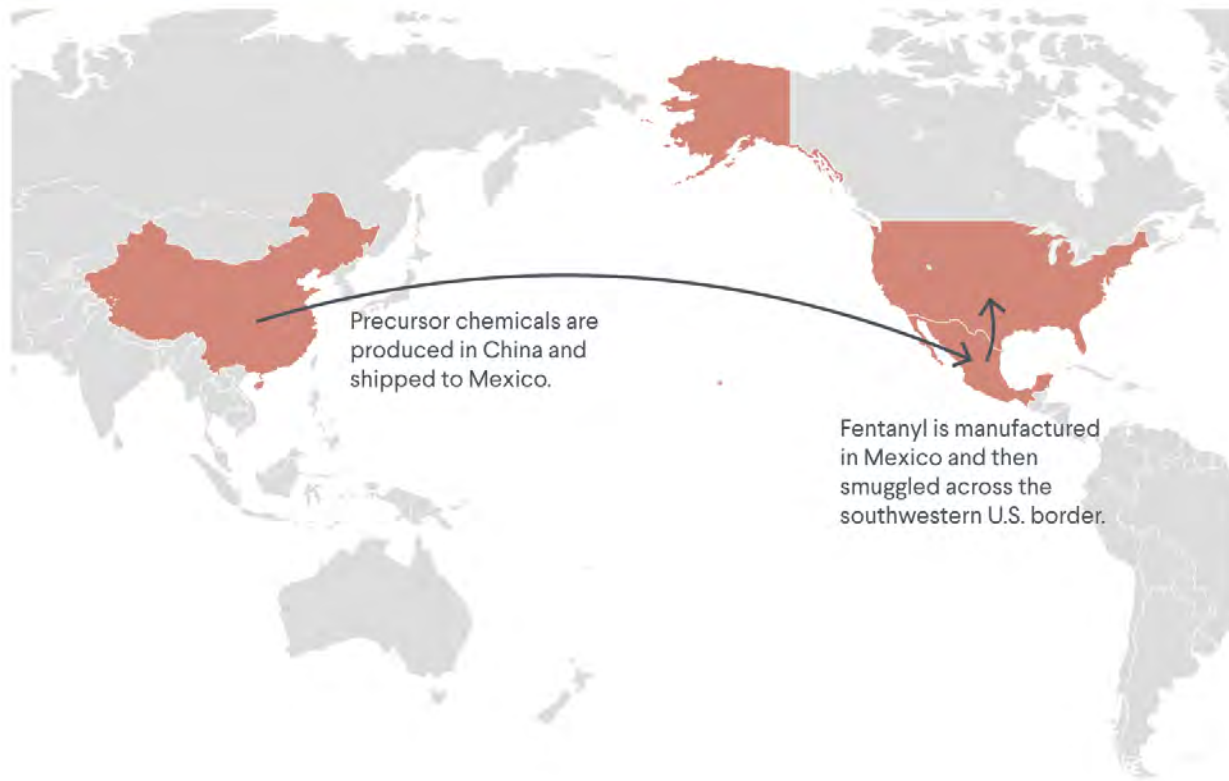
- Largest trading partner over time



- Latin American members of China's Belt and Road Initiative (Michael Stott, "US reluctance on trade deals sends Latin America towards China," *Financial Times*, May 24, 2023.)



The Fentanyl Supply Chain



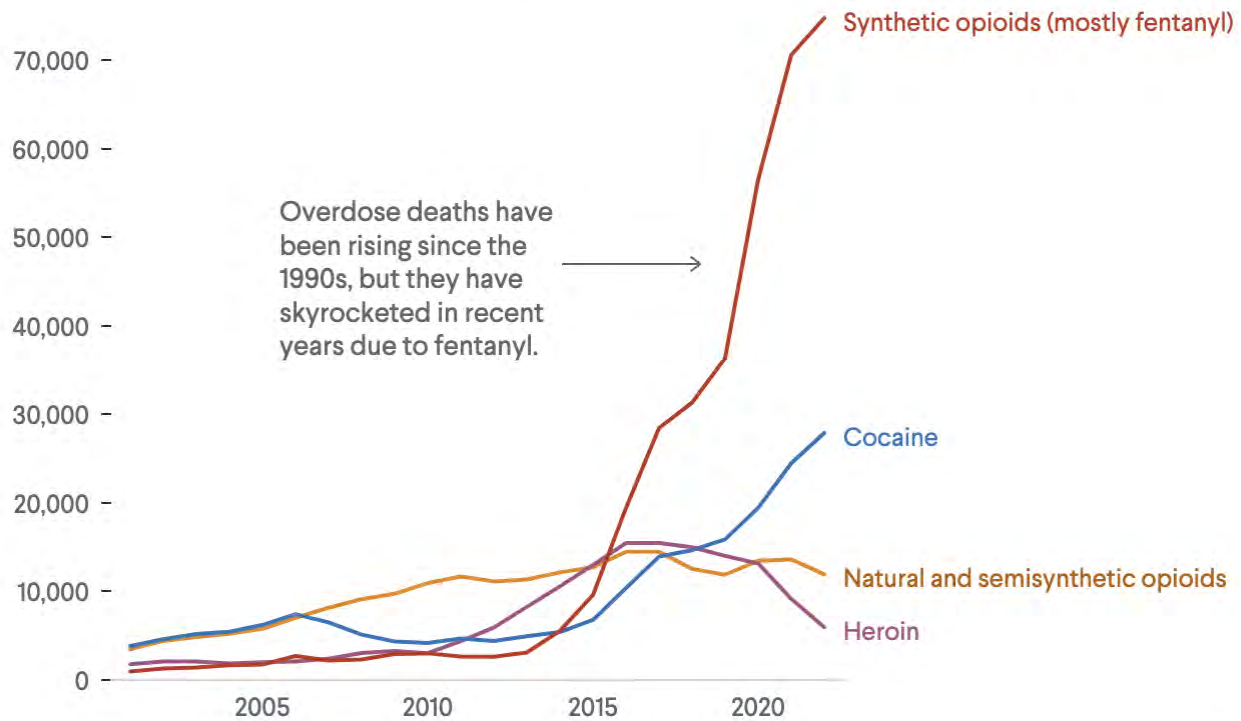
Source: CFR research.

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Driven by Fentanyl, U.S. Drug Deaths Have Skyrocketed

Overdose deaths involving selected drugs, per year



Notes: Deaths may involve more than one drug. "Synthetic opioids" excludes methadone. Data for 2022 is provisional.

Source: CDC.

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In 2019, the U.S. Had More Opioid Deaths Than the Rest of the World Combined

Estimated deaths from opioid-use disorders, 2019



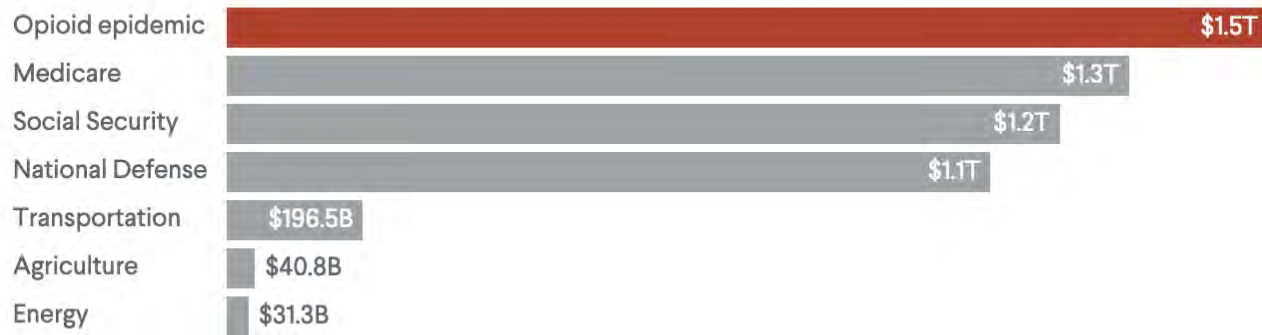
Source: "Global Burden of Disease," Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation.

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The Economic Cost of the Opioid Crisis

Estimated cost of the opioid crisis compared with selected budget items, 2020



Sources: Joint Economic Commission; USAspending.gov.

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Q&A



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