

# William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies

## *Results of the Perry Center Threats Survey for Latin America*

**Professor Pat Paterson  
February 24, 2025**

# Problems in Latin America today



**Government and societal collapse in Venezuela**

**Slow economic recovery from Covid-19 pandemic**

**Forced migration**

**Violence in Mexico, Brazil, and Ecuador**

**Corruption and violent gangs in Central America**

**Democratic crisis in Peru**

**Poverty and inequality**

**Climate change effects accelerating**

# **Impetus - WJPC Topics of Interest**

**Civil-Military Relations**  
**Corruption**  
**Counter Drug Strategy**  
**Counterinsurgency**  
**Counterterrorism**  
**Critical Infrastructure Protection**  
**Cybersecurity**  
**Defense Economics**  
**Defense Governance**  
**Defense Institution Building**  
**Demobilization, Disarmament, and Reintegration (DDR)**  
**Drug Policy**  
**External Actors (China, Russia, Iran)**  
**Foreign Policy**  
**Hemispheric Security and Defense**  
**History of Western Civilization**  
**Homeland Security**  
**Human Rights**  
**Interagency Coordination**  
**International Cooperation**  
**International Humanitarian Law (IHL) or Law of Armed Conflict**  
**International or Regional Organizations (OAS, UN)**

**International Policy**  
**International Security**  
**Migration**  
**Military History**  
**Military Sociology**  
**Military Strategy**  
**Ministries of Defense**  
**Nation Building**  
**National Security Studies**  
**Organized Crime**  
**Private Security**  
**Rule of Law**  
**Security and Defense Education**  
**Security Sector Reform**  
**Stability Operations and Peacekeeping Ops.**  
**Terrorism**  
**Transitional Justice**  
**Transnational Security**  
**Transnational Organized Crime**  
**U.S. Foreign Policy toward Latin America**  
**U.S. National Security Decision-Making Process**



# Today's agenda – Results of the Perry Center Threats Survey for Latin America

**Question: *What are the most dangerous security threats in the Western Hemisphere?***

- Background and impetus
- What are not threats in Latin America?
- What surprised us?
- The most dangerous threats.
- What this means for the U.S.?



# Traditional Missions of the Armed Forces

- Homeland Defense
- Protection of National Territory
- Protection of Sovereignty
- Border Protection
- Public Order
- Natural disasters
- Counter-Insurgency
- Counter-Terrorism
- Peacekeeping Operations (PKO)





# New Missions of the Armed Forces

- Domestic law enforcement (traditionally a police role)
- Counter-organized crime (cartels, *maras*, and gangs)
- National development
- Cyber security
- Environmental support
- Critical infrastructure protection.
- Prison Control
- Food security
- Forest fires
- Epidemic outbreaks
- Electoral support
- Mitigating Climate change



# Methodology

**Survey open for 30 days and completed early 2023.**

**Responses from 638 responses in 28 countries.**

## **Acknowledged problems:**

**Conflating all countries together does not provide valid results; different countries perceive different threats.**

**Organized crime includes a number of illegal activities that were also on the list: weapons and human trafficking, money laundering, drugs trafficking.**

**Perry Center graduates are normally government-friendly and US-friendly; we need to hear from ALL sectors of ALL societies.**



## Question for the audience:

*In your opinion, what is the most dangerous security threat in the Western Hemisphere?*





# What are **not** considered threats?



# What surprised us? **Natural disasters.**

**Natural disasters were rated lower than expected (11%).**

Prone to geologic disasters (earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanoes, landslides) and meteorological disasters (hurricanes, floods, severe rainfall, droughts, forest fires, and landslides).

The Pacific Ring of Fire.

Civilian-led government responses in most countries. Well-developed HADR and civil defense systems.

Armed forces frequently respond with lift, communications, SAR, and medical assistance.

HADR is one of the top priorities of the U.S. Southern Command.





# What surprised us? **Russia and China.**

**China (13%) and Russia (8%) were not perceived as threats.**

**Great power competition (vs China and Russia) is the centerpiece of the U.S. National Security Strategy (Dec 2017) and U.S. National Defense Strategy (2018).**

**Russia supporting “malign actors” (Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia).**

**China buying influence in region by purchasing land, building infrastructure, and offering loans. No strings attached?**



**Russian warship in Caracas, VEN 2013**



**China-Latin America Summit, 2017**

Ref: US Dept of State INR, “Latin Americans Generally Positive Towards U.S., China,” 11 Mar 2021; Pew Research Center, “U.S. is seen as a top ally in many countries – but others view it as a threat,” 05 Dec 2019.



# What surprised us? **Climate Change**

**Threat of climate change was perceived lower than expected (31%).**

According to the U.S. government, climate change is an “**existential threat.**”

The Pentagon refers to it as a "threat multiplier" and a "catalyst for conflict."

Climate change does not cause conflicts directly. But it can generate natural disasters that contribute to the social and economic stress that creates conflicts.

## Examples:

Droughts → Mass migration

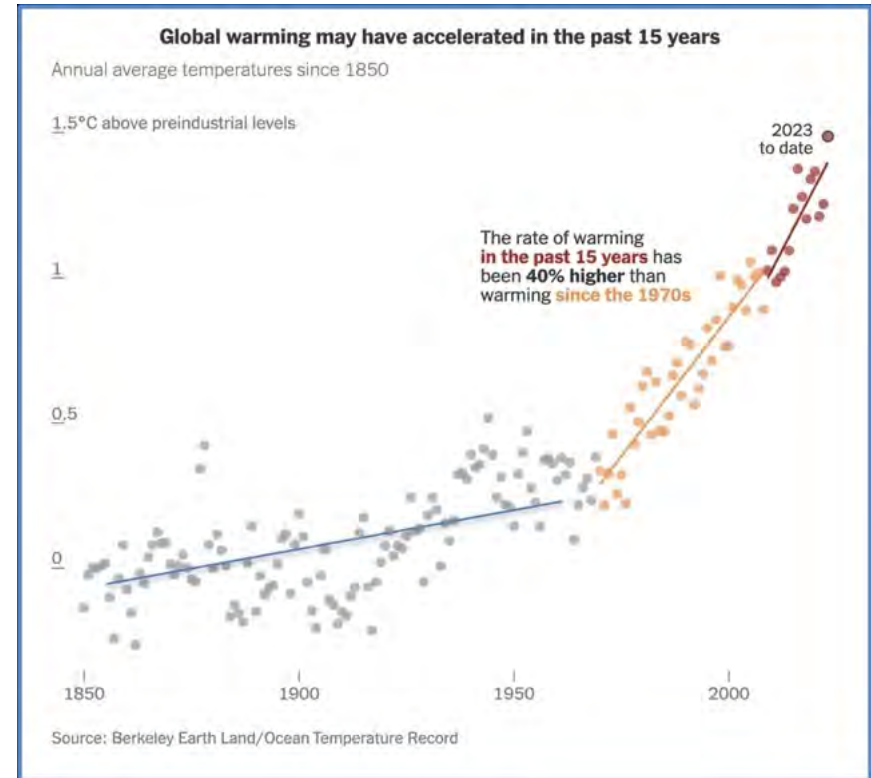
Forest fires and floods → internally displaced persons

Lack of profits → protests and lack of legitimacy of the government

Urbanization → unemployment and socioeconomic stress

Excess heat → overloaded electrical system and blackouts

Depleted food sources → health crisis

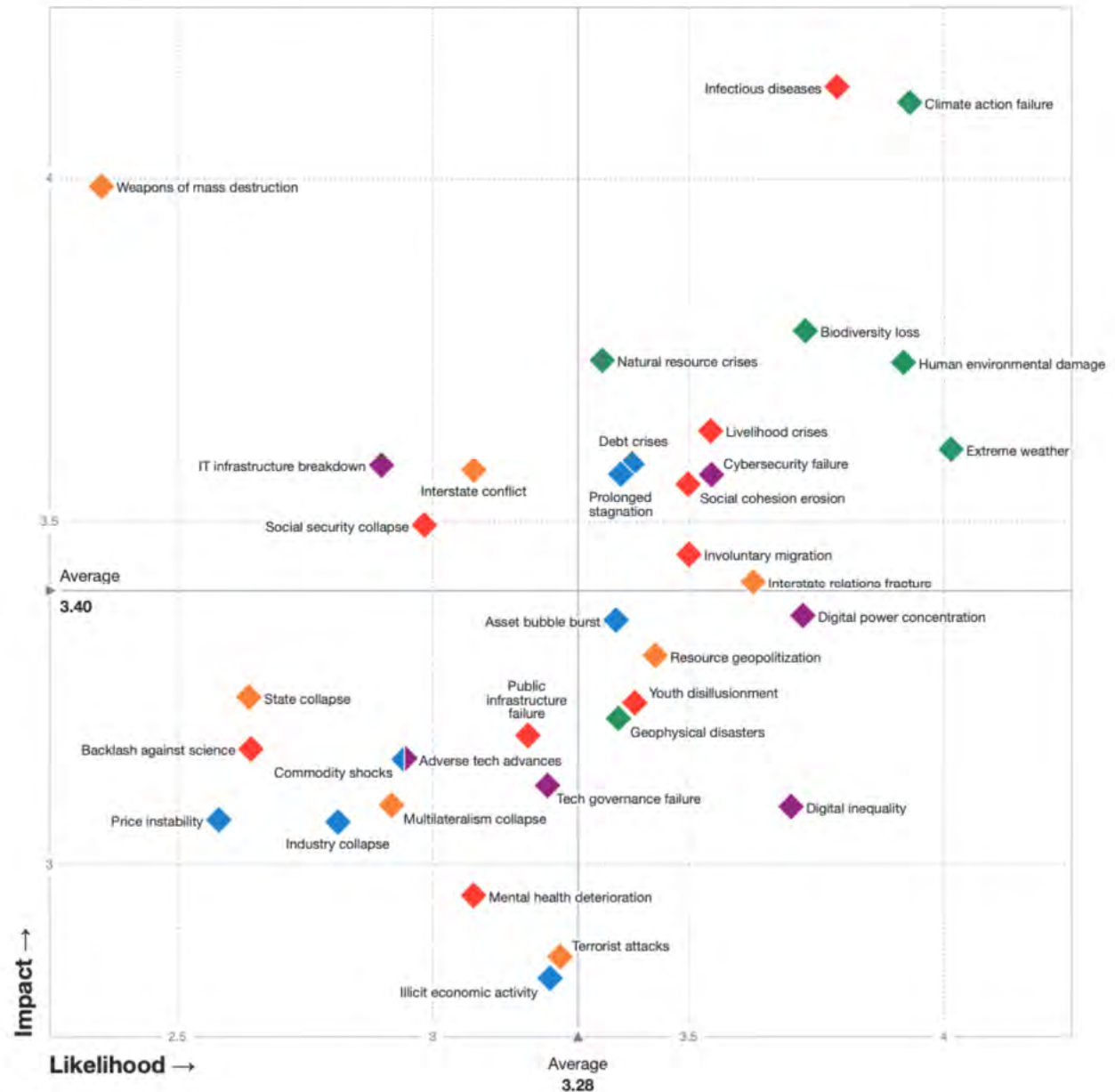


# Global Risks Landscape

How do respondents perceive the impact ↑ and likelihood → of global risks?

## Climate Change

According to some studies, climate change risks (such as climate action failure and extreme weather) are considered the most destructive of all global threats.



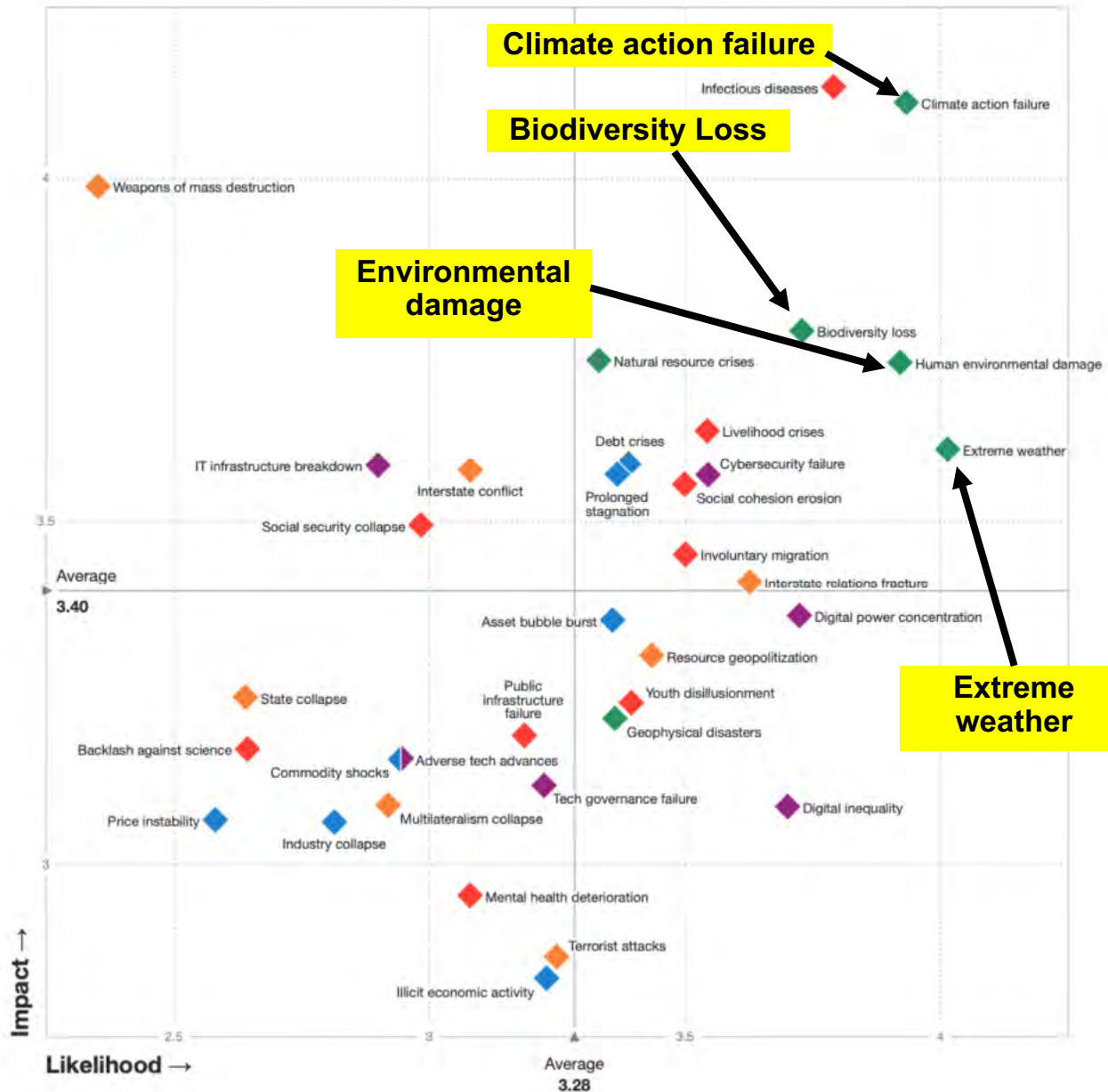
Source: Global Risks 2021, World Economic Forum, Link: <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-risks-report-2021>

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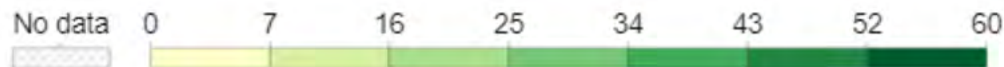
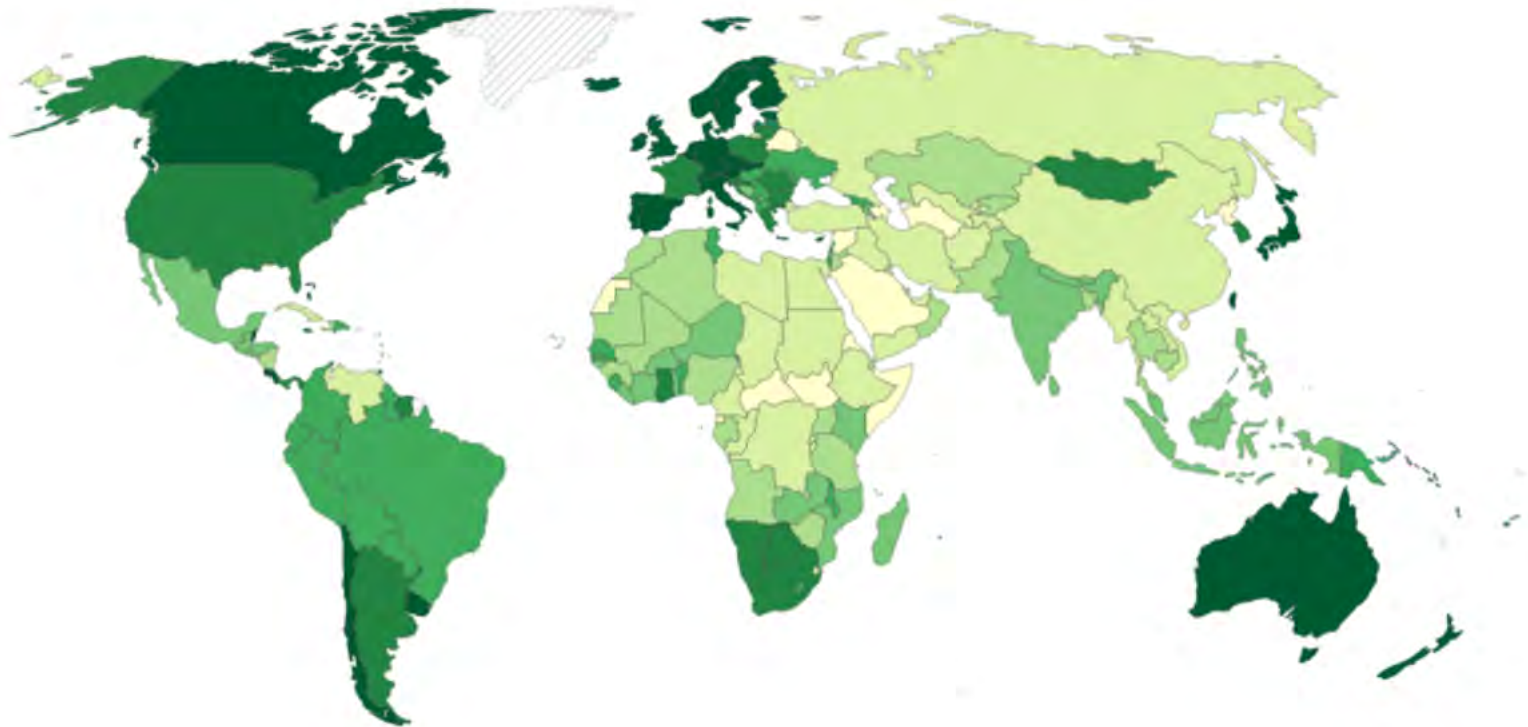
Source: Global Risks 2021, World Economic Forum, Link: <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-risks-report-2021>



# The 5<sup>th</sup> biggest threat – **democratic backsliding (41%)**

## Civil liberties, 2021

Based on the assessment and rating by Freedom House (2022). It captures the extent of freedom of expression and association, the rule of law, and personal autonomy. Higher scores indicate more liberties



**17 consecutive years of democratic retreat around the globe.**

# The 5<sup>th</sup> biggest threat – **democratic backsliding (41%)**

**Reduction of civil liberties and political rights.**

**Populism from both sides of the political spectrum**

**Increased corruption and frustration with democratic practices.**

**Fraud and waste of taxpayers' investments.**

**Government institutions that are unable to enforce or collect sufficient tax revenue.**

**Inability of Justice departments to resolve crime and corruption.**



**17 consecutive years of democratic retreat around the globe.**

## The 4<sup>th</sup> biggest threat – **Poverty and Inequality (47%)**

**Good news!** According to the UN, 42 percent of the population (214 million) lived in poverty in 2002. By 2013, this percentage had dropped to 24 percent (142 million); 72 million people in the region escaped living in income poverty.

Increase in middle class rising from 108 million people in 2002 (21% of population) to 202 million people in 2013.

Better access to health care, improved education, less economic marginalization, better upward mobility, lower unemployment rates, more skilled laborers.



Luxury living near Rio de Janeiro



Large middle classes in many Latin American countries.



# The 4<sup>th</sup> biggest threat – Poverty and Inequality (47%)

**Bad news!** Latin America is still the most unequal region in the world (as measured by Gini Coefficient).

The Central American nations of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, for example, have 30-50 percent of their populations living in poverty (less than \$4 per day).

Mexico has the 14th largest economy in the world but 40% of its citizens live below the poverty line.

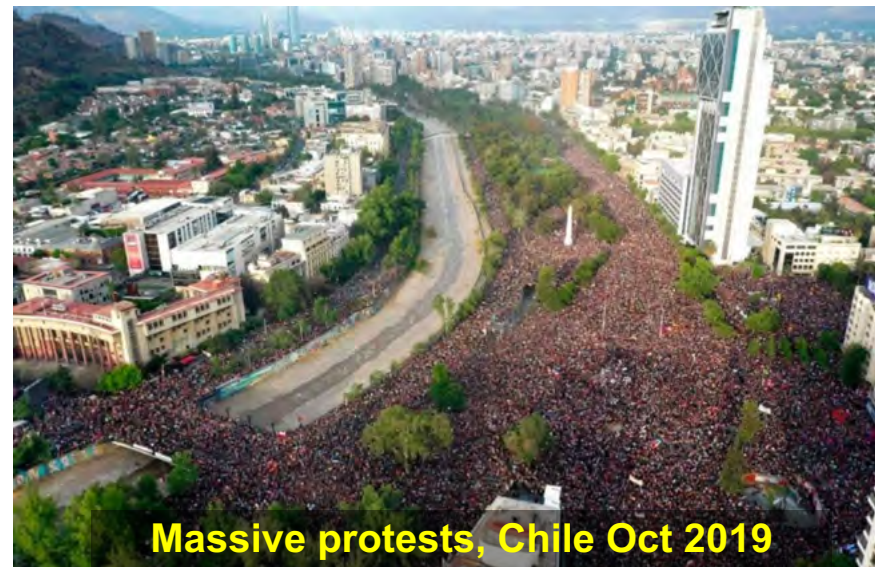
“Youth bulge” and the “*ni-ni*’s.” Nearly 1/3 of kids 15-24 have no employment and no education. Disenfranchised youth vulnerable to gang recruitment for prestige.

Frustration with high costs of living have boiled over in many countries.

Covid-19 will exacerbate already existing economic and social problems.



Informal economic sector, Mexico



Massive protests, Chile Oct 2019

# The 3<sup>rd</sup> biggest problem - Corruption (53%)

*“Using public office for private gain.”*  
Transparency International.

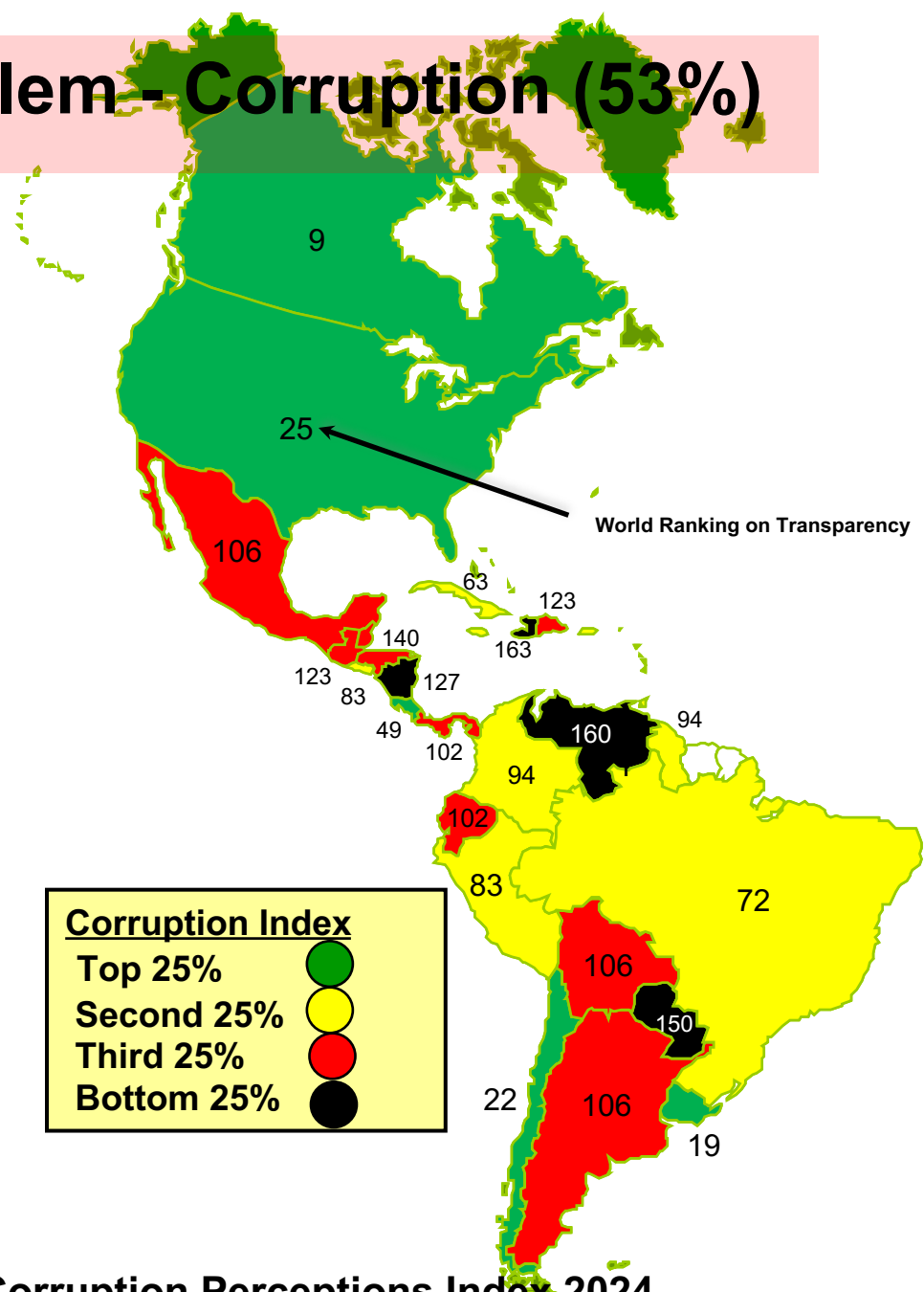
Corruption is the most *intractable* problem in Latin America.

2/3 of all the countries in Latin America score lower the 50 on Transparency International’s annual index.

In Latin America, only Chile, Costa Rica, and Uruguay score in the top quartile.

Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Haiti are perceived to be the most corrupt countries in the Western Hemisphere.

U.S. has fallen 10 spots (to 25th from 16th) in past few years.



Source: Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index 2024

Link: <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2024/index/nzl>

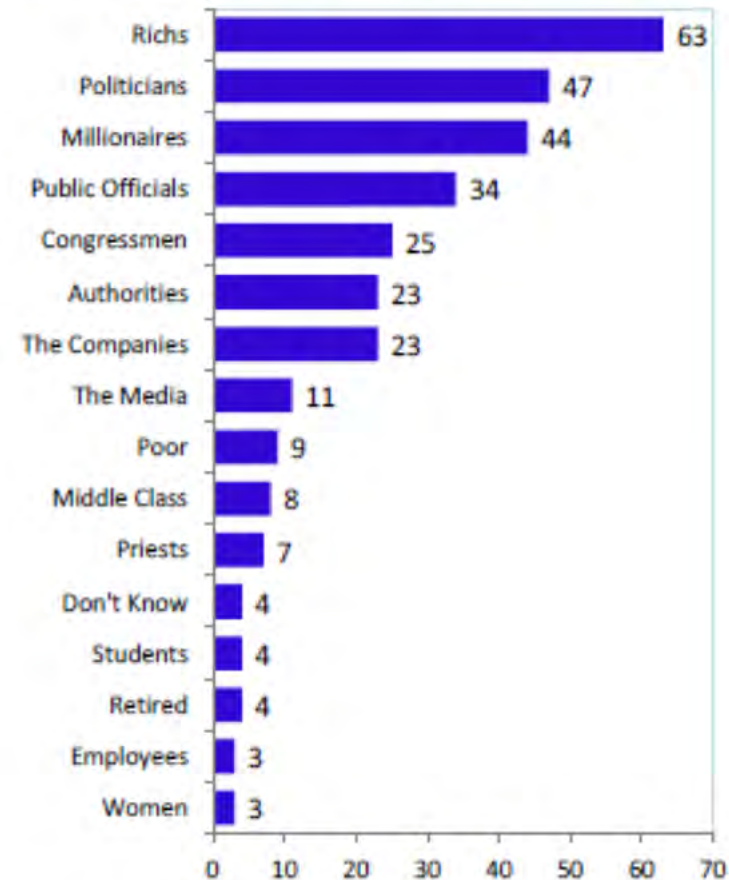
# Types of Corruption Problems

- Clientelism - government officials selectively distribute patronage to trade unions and key leaders in exchange for political support
- “Packing” the courts to improve discretionary power by the President.
- Drafting a new constitution to permit the President to remain in office.
- “Fixing” elections
- Violation of civil rights
- Sub-contracting and price gouging
- Inequalities in the distribution of rights
- Failures of checks and balances
- Disenfranchisement of minorities
- Low governmental accountability
- Rules are made by members of the elite and upper-class with little or no citizen participation.

***“Democracy cannot consist solely of elections that are nearly always fictitious and managed by rich landowners and professional politicians. - Che Guevara, On Growth and Imperialism (1961)***

## GROUPS THAT COMPLY LESS WITH THE LAW

Q. Which of the following groups do you think complies less with the law?



Source: Latinobarómetro 2011

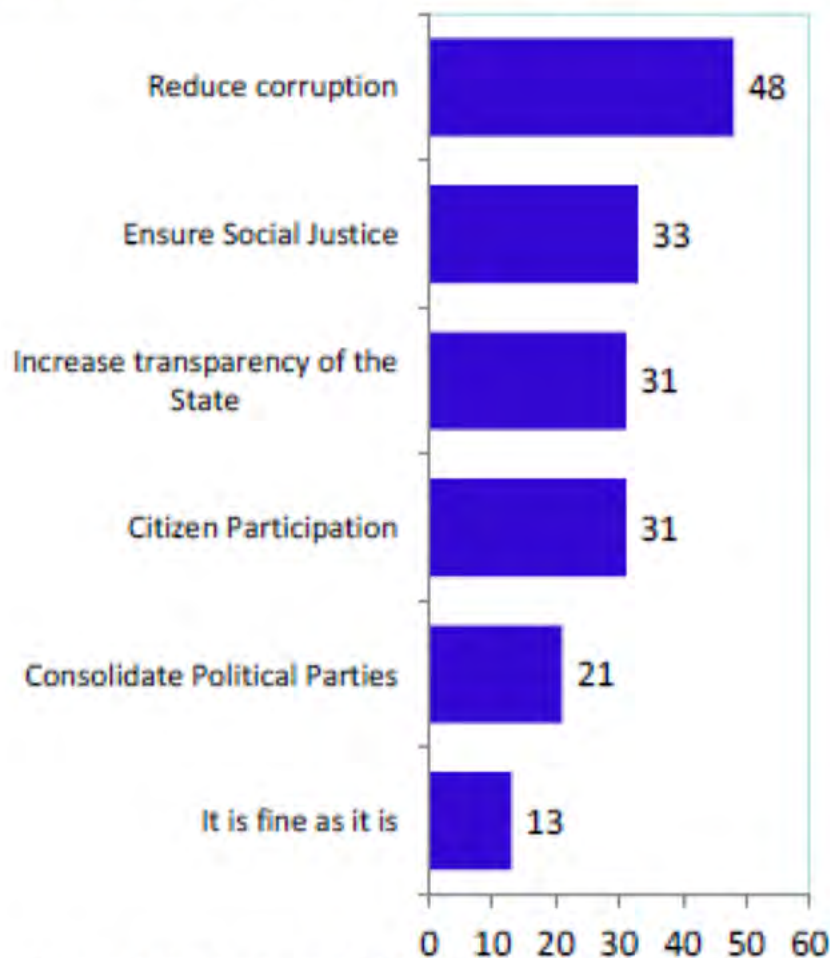


# WHAT IS LACKING TO DEMOCRACY IN COUNTRY

## TOTAL LATIN AMERICA 2011 – TOTALS BY COUNTRY 2011

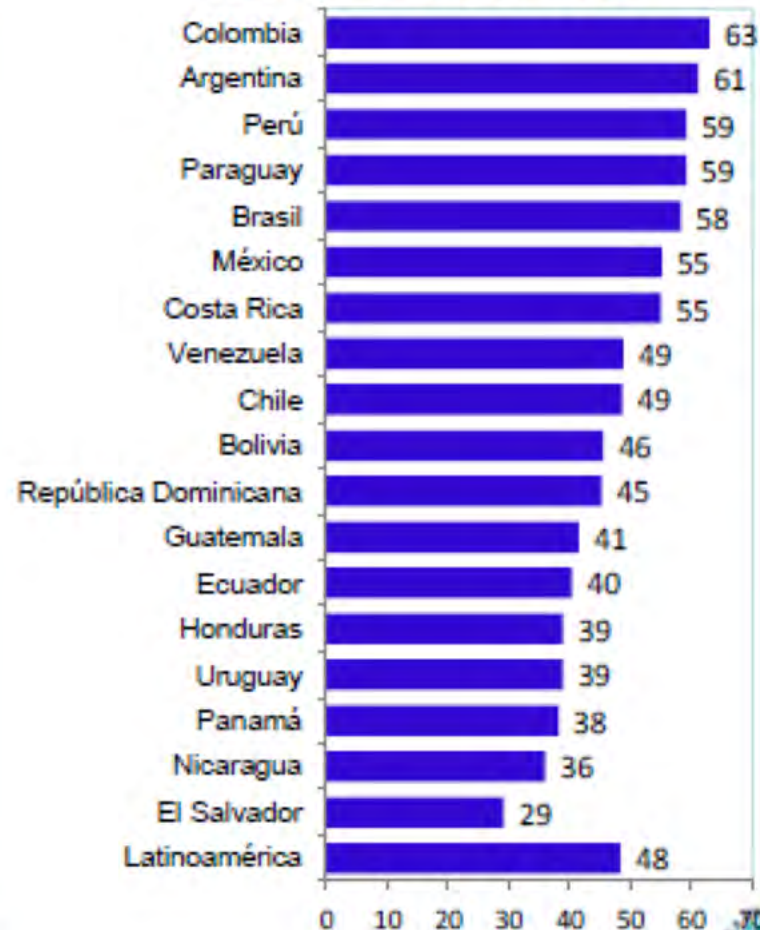
Q. What do you think is lacking to democracy in your country or democracy in your country is good as this?

\*Multiple choice question, totals are higher than 100%



Source: Latinobarómetro 2011

### REDUCE CORRUPTION



***“For my friends, everything; for my enemies, the law.”***  
**President Getulio Vargas de Brasil (1930-1945, 1950-1954)**

# Corruption in México

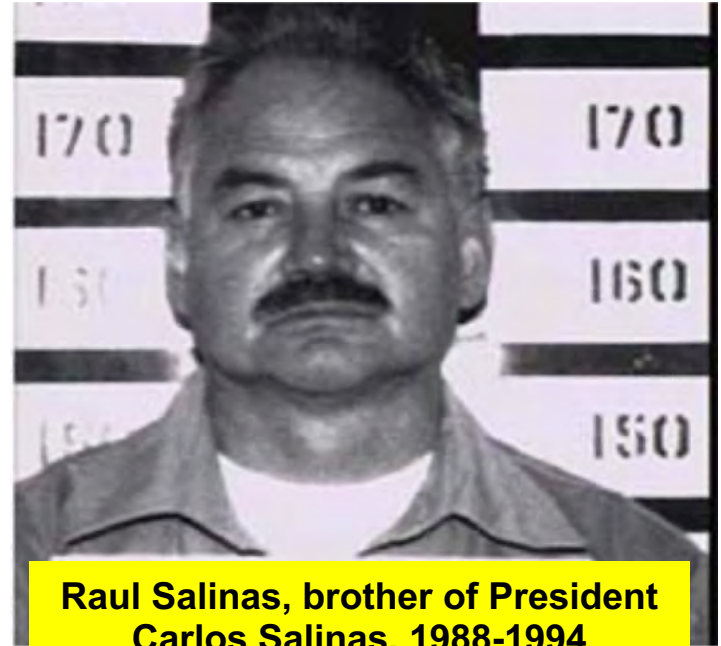
**Long history of corruption in Mexico.**

**Little public confidence in government institutions, police.**

**Before 2000, direct government involvement or tacit agreements with Mexican traffickers.**

**Panama Papers, 2015; Odebrecht Scandal, 2015.**

**14 of 32 state governors have been imprisoned, indicted, or are under investigation for money laundering, fraud, or racketeering.**



**Raul Salinas, brother of President Carlos Salinas, 1988-1994**



**Javier Duarte, former governor of Veracruz, arrested in April 2017.**



**2015-2016, massive protests against corruption and impunity in Mexico.**





# Guatemalan President arrested for corruption, Sept 2015



***A Central American Spring?***



# Corruption Protests in Brazil





# President Dilma Rousseff in Brazil

Petrobras and Lava Jato (Car Wash) scandals exposed in 2014, largest corruption scandal in Brazil's history

\$2.2 billion in bribes and payoffs.

31 Aug, Dilma Rousseff impeached and removed from office. Her successor, Michael Temer, also accused of corruption.

Sept 19, Former President Lula da Silva (2003-2011) indicted for money laundering. Convicted and sent to jail.

Five former presidents, nearly one of every three presidential cabinet ministers, the heads of both houses of congress, two dozen senators, and 42 congressional deputies have been accused of corruption, money laundering, and fraud.





**In Honduras, rigged presidential elections (2017) and brother of President Juan Orlando Hernandez arrested for cocaine trafficking (2018).**



**General Salvador Cienfuegos, Secretary of Defense of Mexico (2012-2018), was arrested at LAX on 15 Oct 2020 on drug and money laundering charges. He was sent back to Mexico a month later and, on 14 Jan 2021, all charges against him were dropped.**





# What does this mean for the U.S.? Caravans of thousands fleeing violence and poverty in Northern Triangle countries





## The 2nd biggest threat: **Economic Problems (59%)**

Examples: unemployment, inflation, supply chain delays, declining remittances, unequal wages).

The “*youth bulge*” and the “*ni-ni's*”. Nearly 1/3 of children aged 15-24 are neither employed nor educated.

Marginalised youth vulnerable to gang recruitment for prestige.



**And the #1 threat in Latin America? (*drum roll*)**

**And the #1 threat in Latin America? (*drum roll*)**

**Organized crime! (73%)**



# The biggest threat – **Organized Crime (70%)**

The combination of poverty, inequality, economic exclusion, and a massive amount of illegal funds through illegal activities produces low-level crime and organized crime groups.

The most violent region in the world fueled by U.S. small arms exports.

Loss of sovereign control of some areas by the government. A criminal insurgency?

Immense amounts of financial profits in an impoverished area.

Police are often part of the problem because of low salaries and poor professionalism.



**U.S. Customs agents killed by Mexican police, 2011.**



**Mexican Marine take control of Acapulco and arrest police officials, Sept 2018.**



# Organized crime groups in Latin America



**Gangs in Haiti**



**First Capital Command group, Brazil**



**Maras in Central America**



**Mexican drug cartels**



# **“Mano Dura” and Kingpin strategies have not worked.**

Most groups are decentralized networks of criminals which are difficult to dismantle. Replacement *capos* spring up in place of the arrested leaders.

Most violence occurs between org crime gangs competing for illegal markets.

Many of the enablers of organized crime groups are common citizens that work on the periphery of the criminal economy by running drug labs, serving as youth messengers, or lookouts.

Other enablers are corrupt government officials who receive bribes or are threatened if they take action.



**The New Generation Cartel of Jalisco (CJNG) in Mexico**



**MS-13 members in El Salvador**



# Militia army in Michoacan, Mexico





# Drug trafficking provides \$30-60 billion per year

Illegal drug markets in Latin America are a \$30-60 billion industry.

Coca is grown in the Andean highlands of Peru, Bolivia and Colombia. Converted to cocaine in the Colombian jungle and in mountain labs.

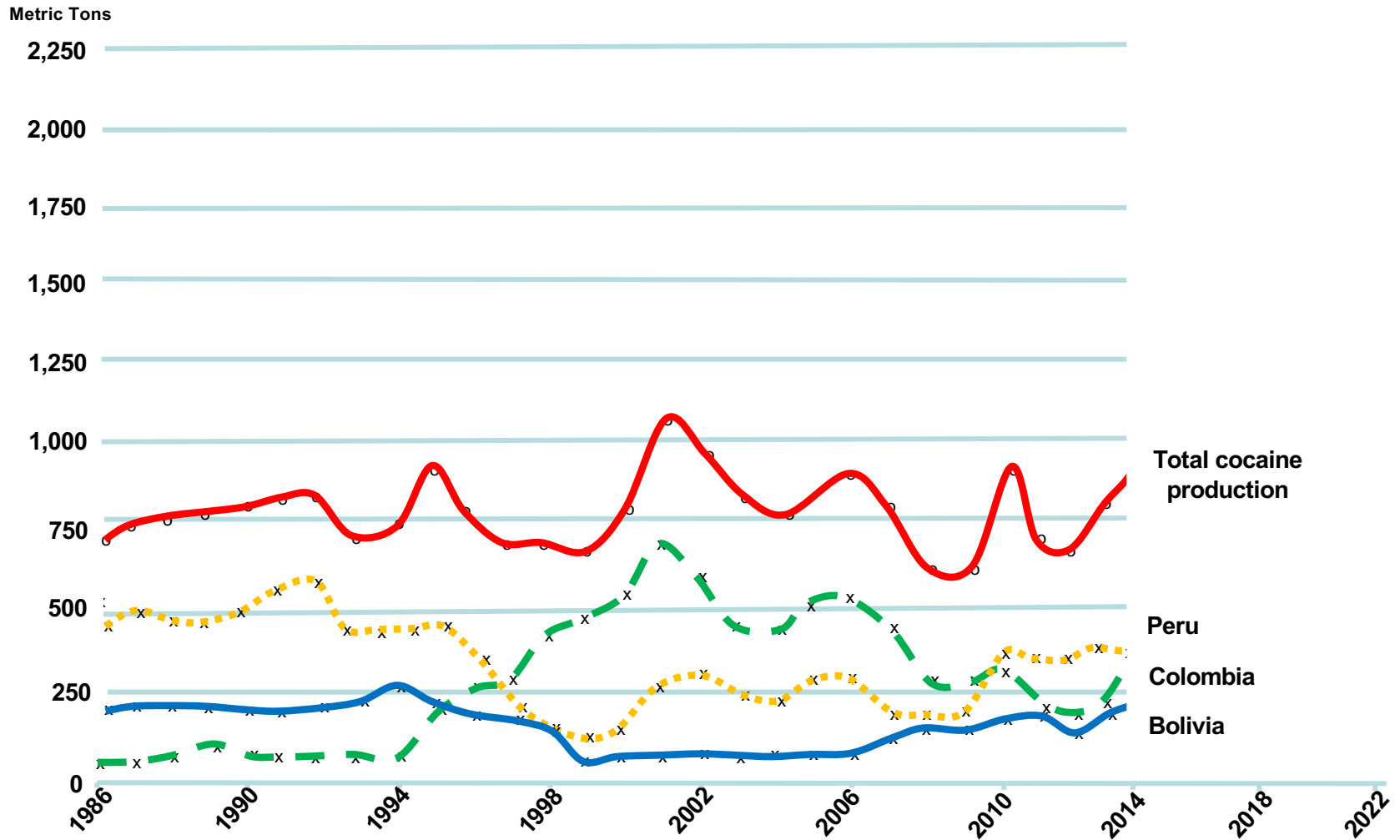
Most Caribbean routes closed in the 1980s. Now shipped north along Central American coastlines to Mexico.

Primary product: cocaine and marijuana. New: heroin, opioids, fentanyl.

Growing demand in Asia, Europe and Africa



## Cocaine production in Andean countries, 1986-2014

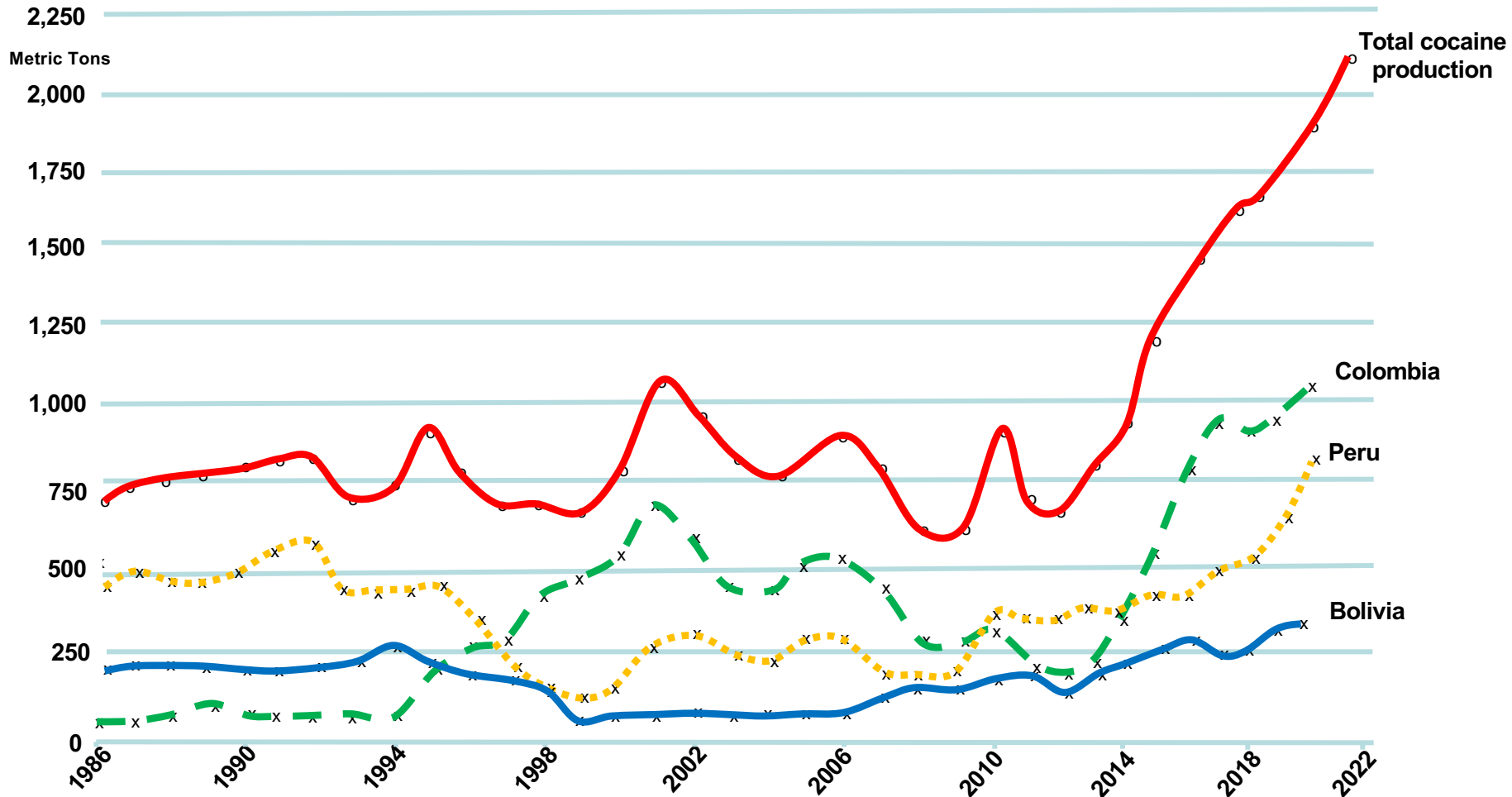


Patrick Paterson and Daniel Chang (May 2022), "The Colombia Coca Bloom, the Mexican Heroin Surge, and the Fentanyl Crisis," *Regional Insight*, William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies.

Link: [https://www.williamjperrycenter.org/sites/default/files/publication\\_associated\\_files/Colombia%20Coca%20Bloom.pdf](https://www.williamjperrycenter.org/sites/default/files/publication_associated_files/Colombia%20Coca%20Bloom.pdf)



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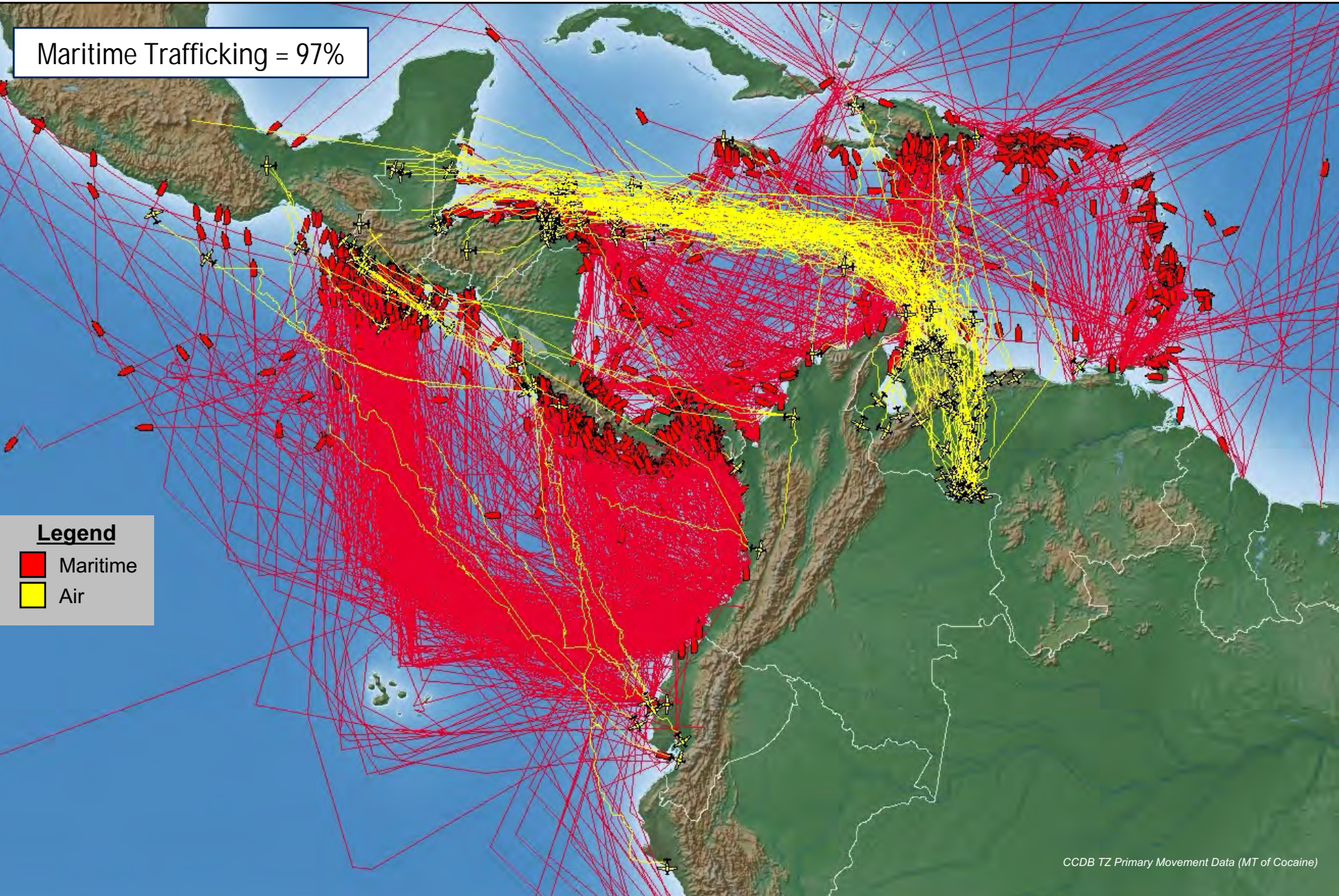


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# Air and maritime smuggling

Maritime Trafficking = 97%





# The destiny – the U.S. markets

**If 95% of drugs reaching the US arrive through Mexico, how does it enter the country?**

# The U.S. – Mexican border



**Every day, 500,000 vehicles enter the US through the US-MX border and 25,000 people cross the pedestrian bridge in Tijuana.**



# Militia armies in Michoacán, Mexico





# Questions?

An aerial photograph of a university campus. In the foreground, a large, well-maintained green lawn is bordered by a curved path and several white flowering trees. A prominent, multi-story brick building with a central tower and arched windows sits in the middle of the lawn. To the right, there is a parking lot filled with cars and a marina with many white boats. The campus is situated on a peninsula or near a large body of water, with a city skyline visible in the background under a clear sky.

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