



William J. Perry Center *for* Hemispheric Defense Studies

Latin America & the Caribbean

Prof. Arturo C. Sotomayor

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

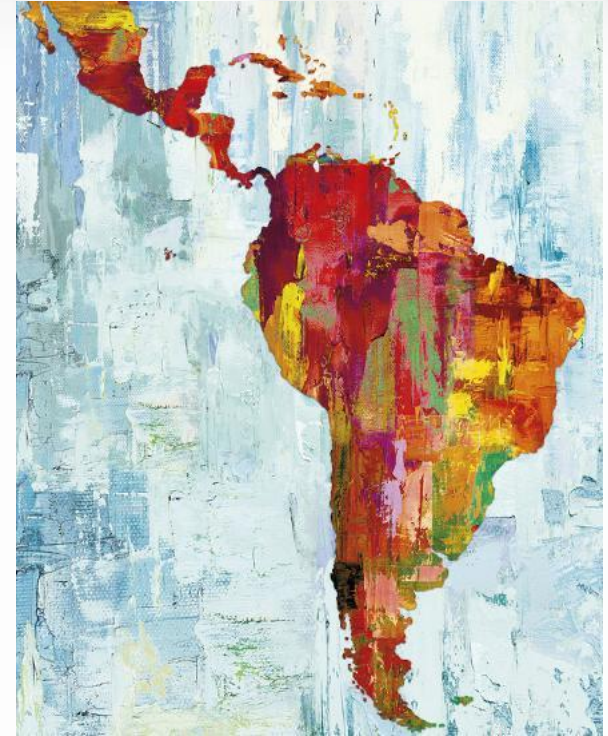
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08/11/2026

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?



What is Latin America?

- Geography
- Territory
- Set of countries

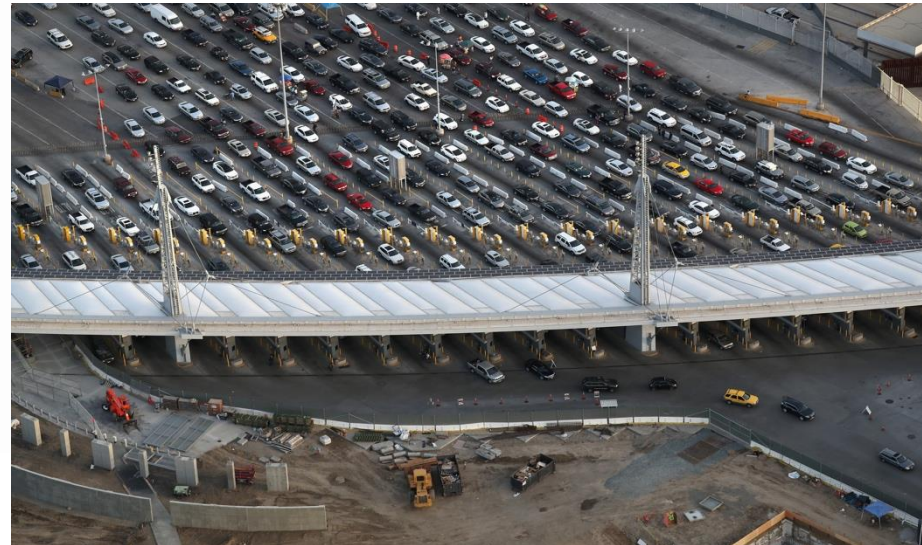


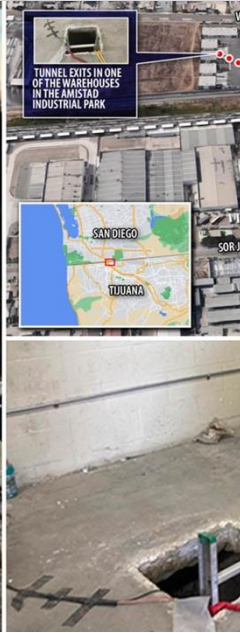
59 port entries between Mexico and the US: World's busiest border

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





What is Latin America?

- Territorial border
- Borderline between legality and illegality



What is Latin America?

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

Images: NASA Earth Observatory



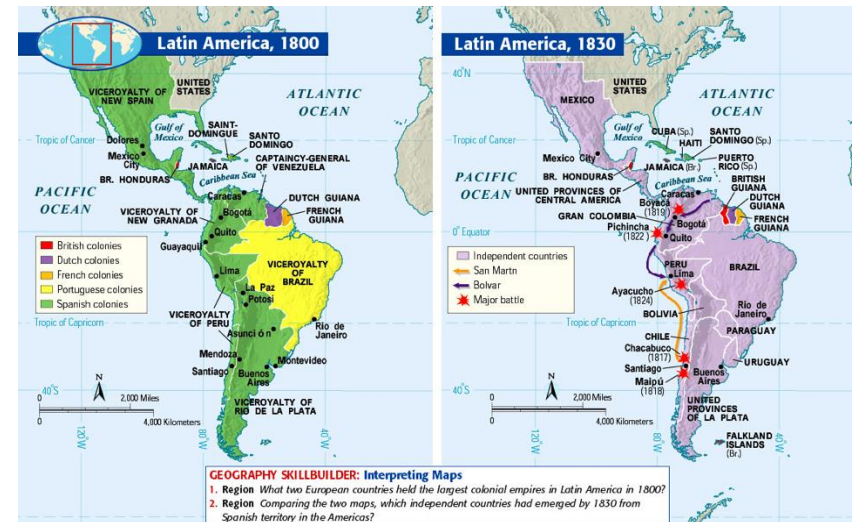
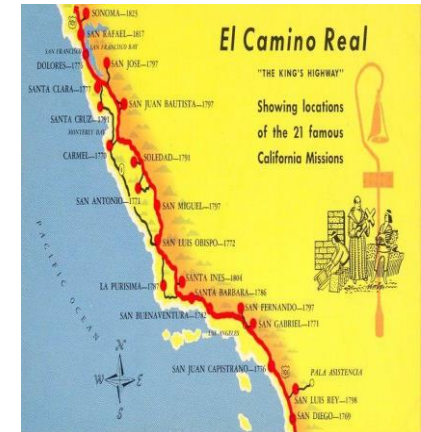
Not all you
see in a
map is Latin
America



Latin America?

- **Transnational history**

- Pre-Hispanic civilizations
- Common colonial heritage
- Similar path towards independence



What is Latin America?

Latin America as an idea and a political community

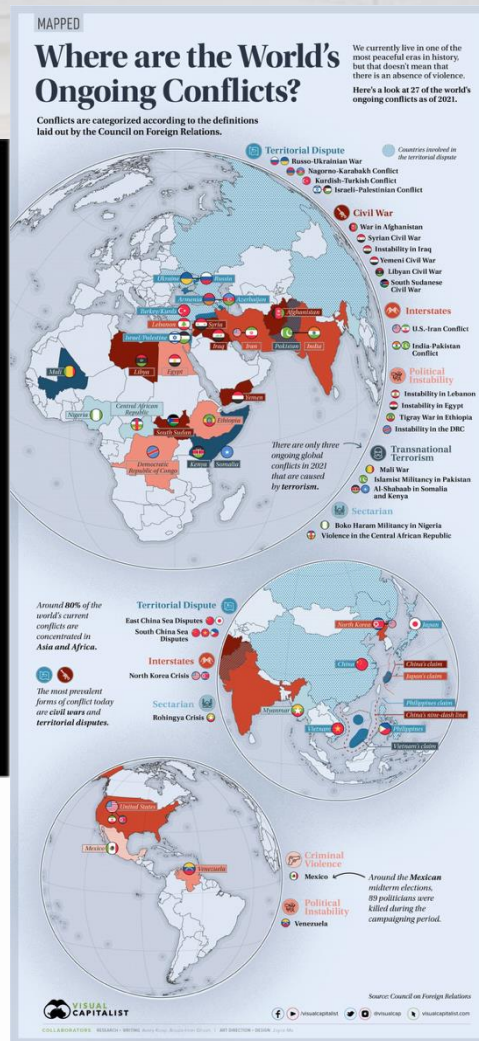
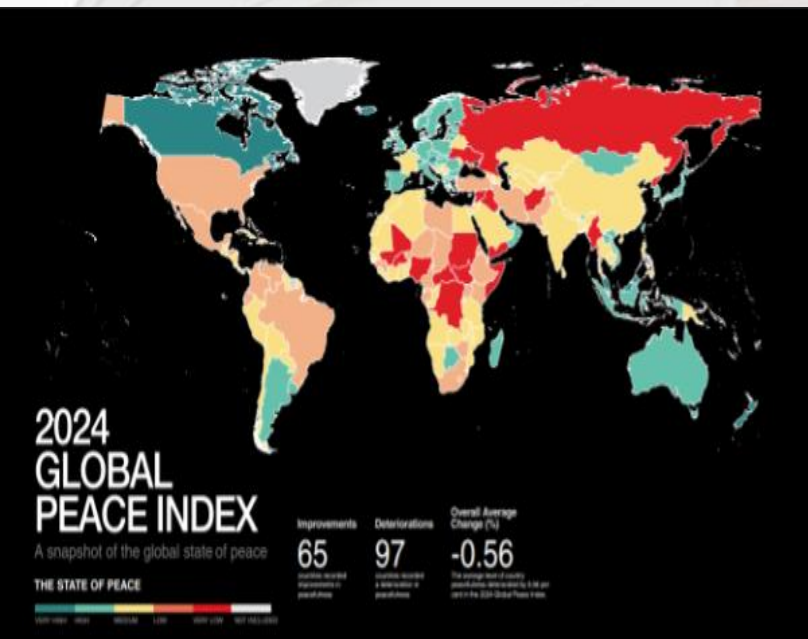
- Conceived by people who perceive themselves as part of a collective group
- It is not simply restricted to nations, it is a supranational movement
- Common ideas:
 - Bolivarianism
 - Republicanism
 - Anti-colonialism
 - Anti-imperialism



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

- Violent
- Borderless/immigrants
- Poor
- Underdeveloped





Puzzle 1: Peaceful but Violent

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

Negative peace:

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

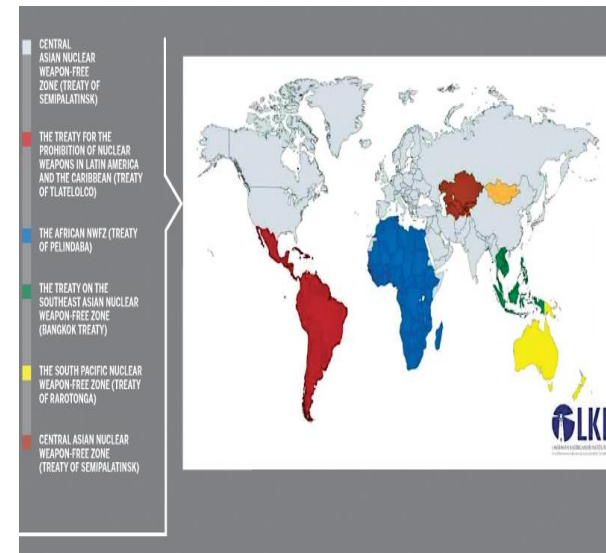


Puzzle 1: Peaceful but Violent

- 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

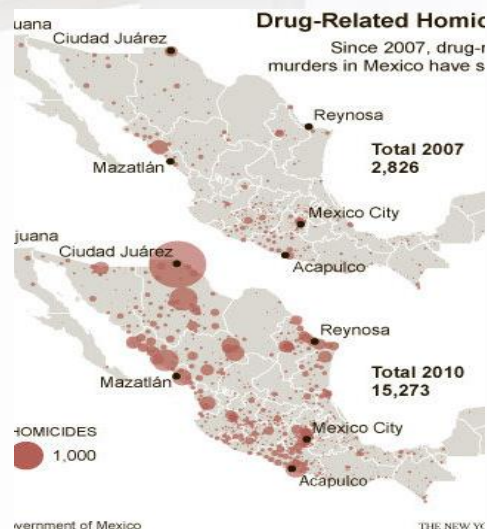


Puzzle 1: Peaceful but Violent

Domestic and political violence

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





Puzzle 1: Latin America, peaceful but violent: State generated violence (political violence), drug related violence, urban violence and gang-related or youth violence.



Puzzle 2 Latin America: Peaceful but Violent

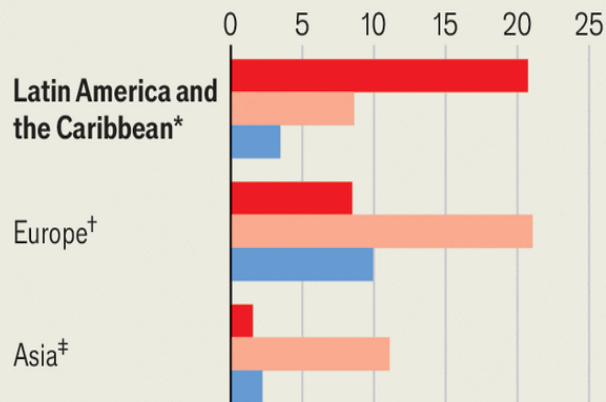
Source: "Global
Study on
Homicide," UN
Office on Drugs
and Crime, 2019;
Economist 2024

A deficit of justice

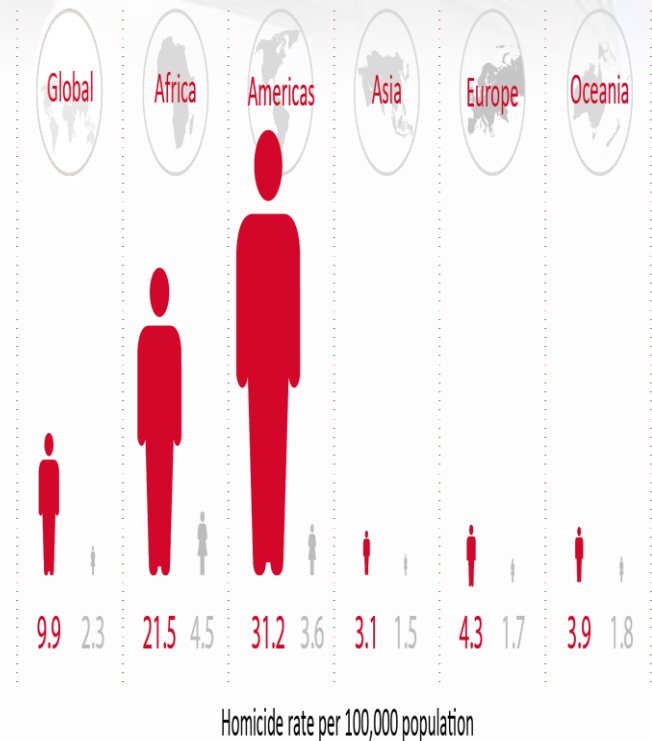
2

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



Political violence

Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED), 2025

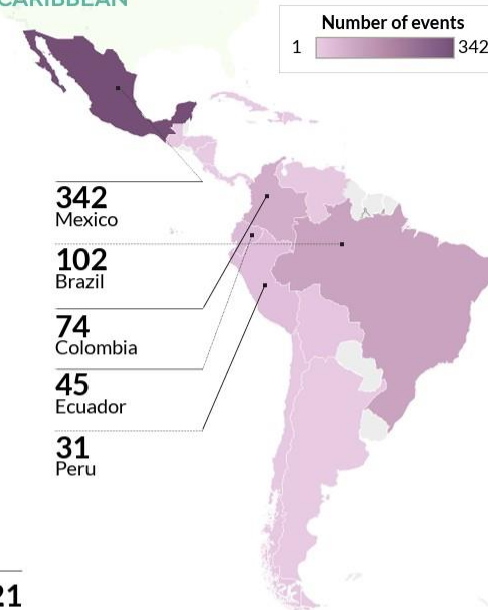
- **Political violence** in Latin America can be defined as the use of force or intimidation to achieve political goals, typically involving state actors, insurgent groups, or both. It encompasses a wide range of actions, including coups, guerrilla warfare, state repression, and terrorism, all aimed 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.

LATIN AMERICA & THE CARIBBEAN

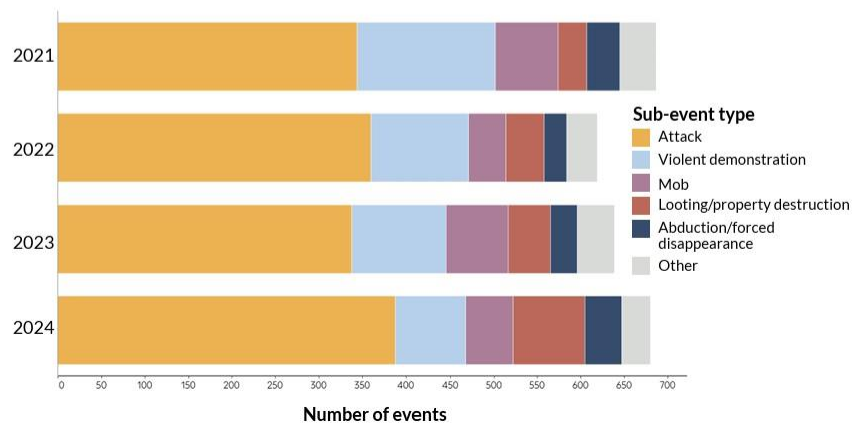
Situation in 2024

680
events
recorded

6%
increase
compared
to 2023



Evolution since 2021



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**).



The Economist

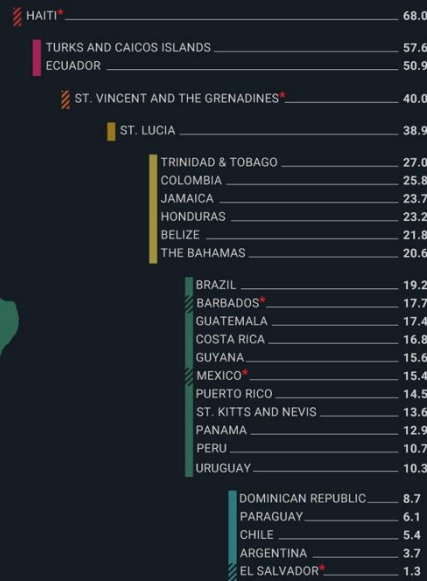


Homicide: Complex, non-linear, and heterogenous

Data from: Insight Crime and Americas Quarterly

2025 Homicide Rates in Latin America and the Caribbean

HOMICIDE RATE (PER 100,000)

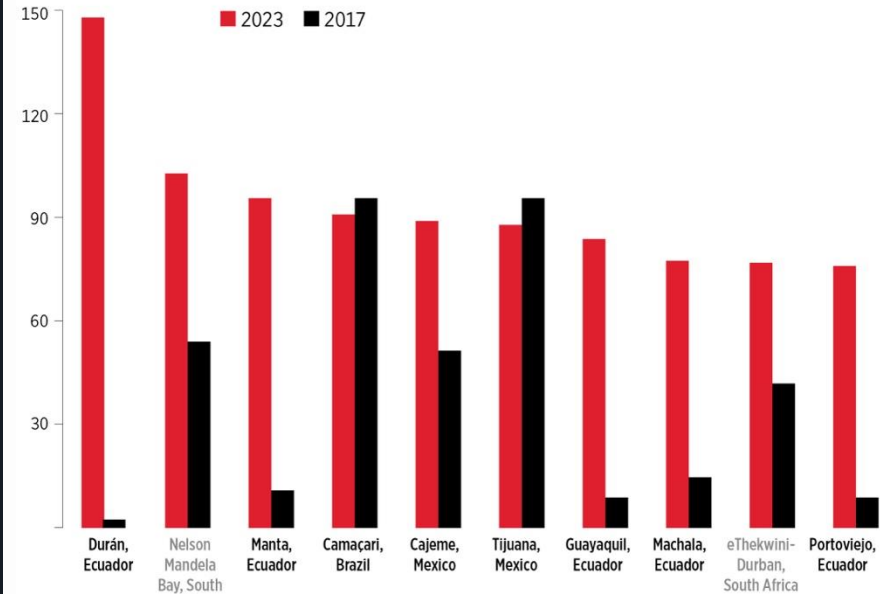


*Data for these countries is either preliminary, unreliable, incomplete, or measures homicides in a way that it is not possible to compare homicide rates with other countries. See the country's section in the text and the "Notes and Methodology" section for more information.

Updated March 12, 2026

Latin American cities register among the world's highest homicide rates

HOMICIDE RATES PER 100,000 PEOPLE



SOURCE: IGARAPÉ INSTITUTE HOMICIDE MONITOR (MAY 2024)

AQ



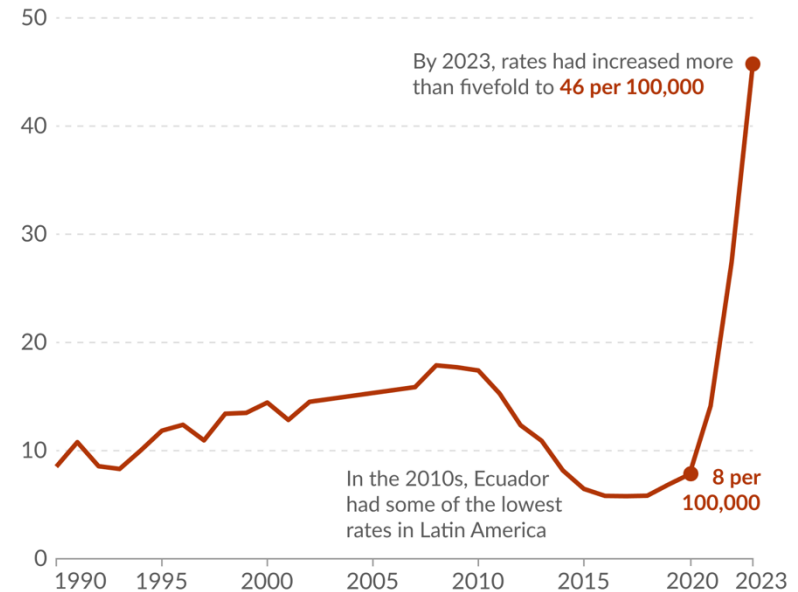
Drug related violence in Ecuador

- 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 drug routes.

Homicide rates in Ecuador have increased steeply in the last few years

Our World in Data

Annual number of deaths from homicide per 100,000 people.



Data source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2025)

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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”



\$15,000,000

FOR INFORMATION LEADING TO THE ARREST AND/OR CONVICTION OF



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



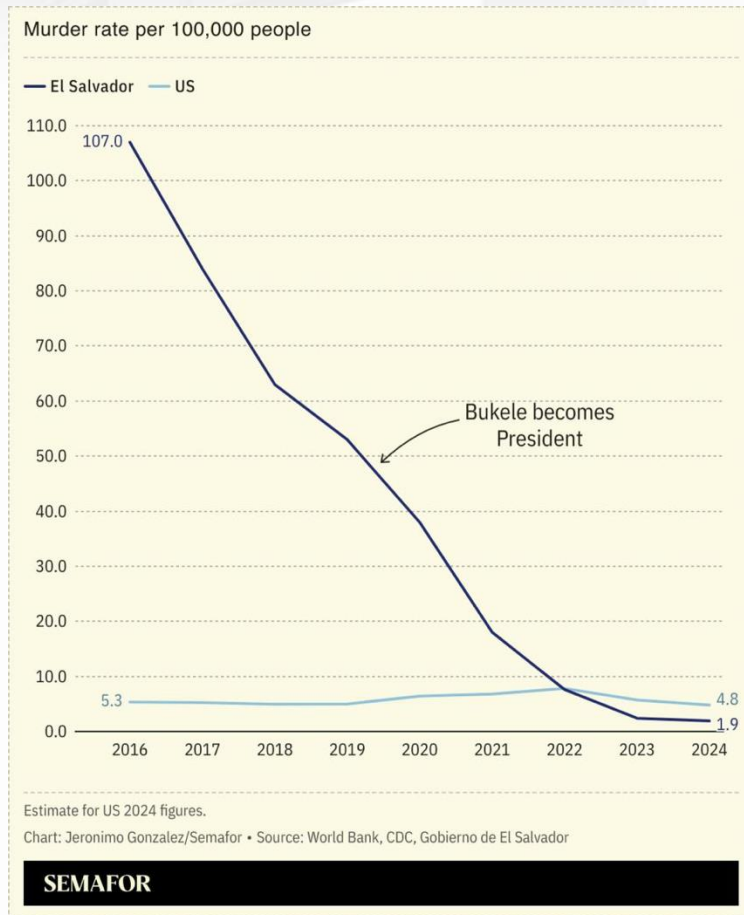
U.S.-Mexico SOF Cooperation

- **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**



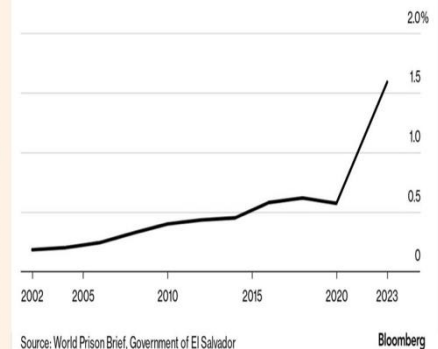
El Salvador's model: pros, cons, and lessons for the future

Source: Jeronimo Gonzalez, World Bank, 2024



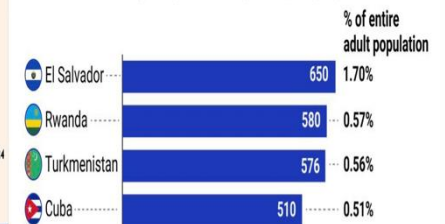
El Salvador Has Jailed 1.6% of its Population

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



How does El Salvador's prison rate stack up?

Countries with the highest prison rates per 100,000 people



Puzzle 2: Immigrants and migrants

Transnational movements: society and demographics

- Demographically heterogeneous
- Marked by historical diasporas: European, Japanese, African, Middle East
- 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.



Americans Helping Americans Abroad

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

How Many Americans Live Abroad?

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



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 29 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%



Intra-regional migration in Latin America

Source: International Migration Institute and UNHCR



Venezuela's sprawling LatAm exodus

Which Latin American countries are home to the most Venezuelan migrants and refugees?



of refugees & migrants
195K 1.74M

Subscribe to our global politics newsletter Signal at gzeromedia.com
Source: UNHCR

GZERO



Puzzle 3: Latin America is poor



Puzzle 3: Some parts of Latin America and the Caribbean are poor

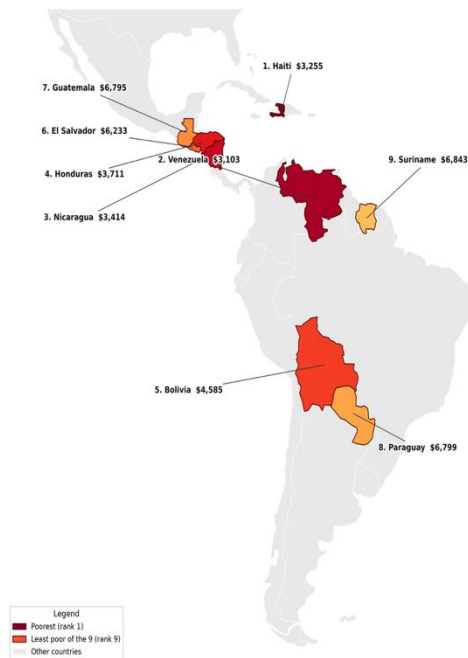
Puzzle 3: Latin America is dirty poor

Sources: International Monetary Fund. *World Economic Outlook Database*, April 2026. Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund, 2026 and World Bank. *Macro Poverty Outlook: Latin America and the Caribbean*. Washington, DC: World Bank Group, April 2024

NOTE: AI generated image

The 9 Poorest Countries in Latin America & the Caribbean

Ranked by nominal GDP per capita | IMF World Economic Outlook, 2026 estimates

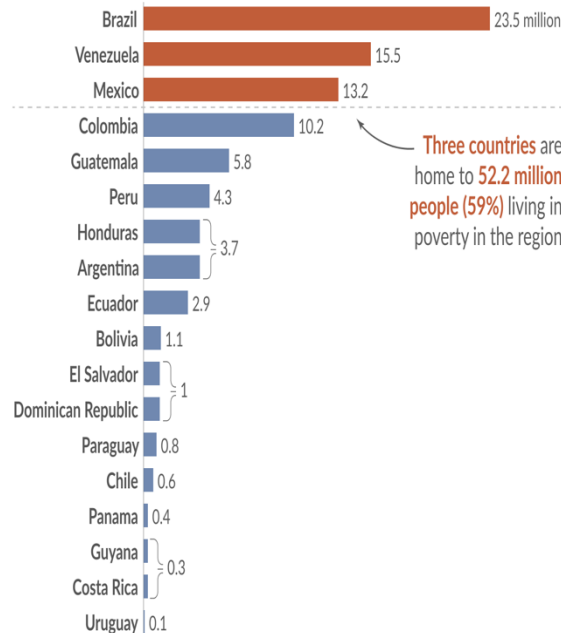


Source: IMF World Economic Outlook (2026); World Bank. Rankings by nominal GDP per capita.

Three countries are home to 59% of people living in poverty in Latin America

Our World in Data

Number of people (in millions) living with less than \$3.65 a day in 2023.



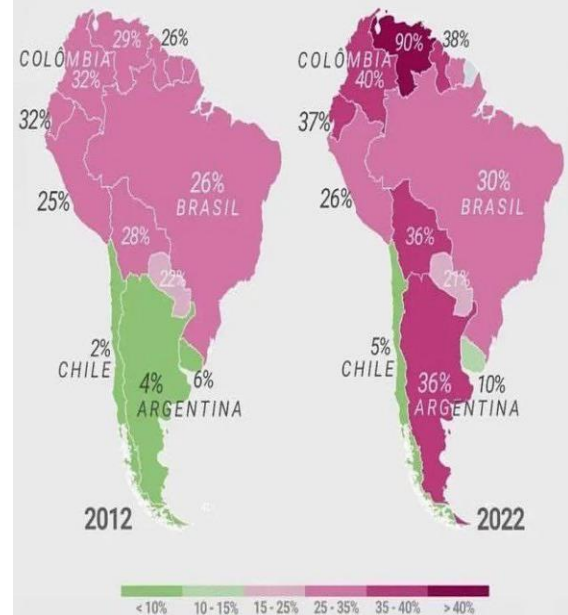
Note: Data in international-\$ at 2017 prices. Data adjusted for differences in living costs between countries.

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Data source: Chang, Evans and Rivas Herrera (2024). Inter-American Development Bank.

Poverty in South America

% Population living with less than US\$ 5.50 per day



Proportion of people living on less than US\$5.50 per day per capita. Approximated values. Sources: World Bank, IPEA, CEPAL, UCAB para Venezuela, CEICData Suriname

Adapted from the Instagram page @latammapas



Puzzle 3: Latin America is rich and wealthy too



Puzzle 4: Latin America is poor and underdeveloped

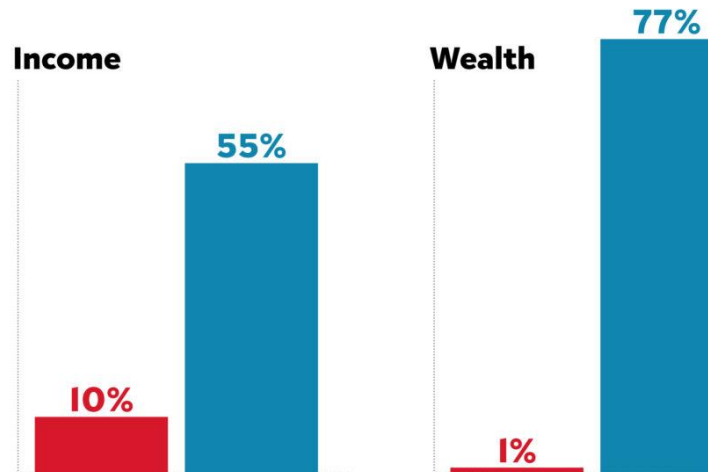
Wealth is abundant, but poorly distributed



Inequality in Latin America and the Caribbean

The poorest access a sliver of the region's total wealth and income

■ 50% POOREST ■ 10% RICHEST



Source: CAF (2022) RED: Inherited Inequalities



Western Hemisphere is now a top national security issue

National Security Strategy of the United States of America

November 2025



NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY of the United States of America

prepared by
Kayla Haas
Dec 2025

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:



Domestic agenda means:



3. IDENTIFY HOW WE GET THERE STRATEGY

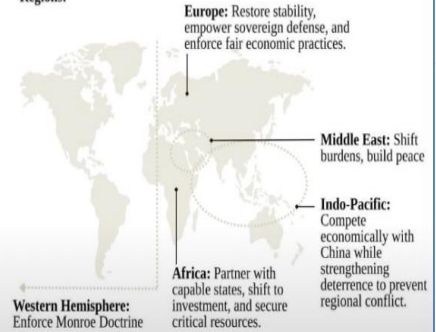
Principles:

- 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:



Why Latin America matters to the U.S.?

- Critical minerals
- Trade
- Geopolitical relevance
- Fentanyl



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



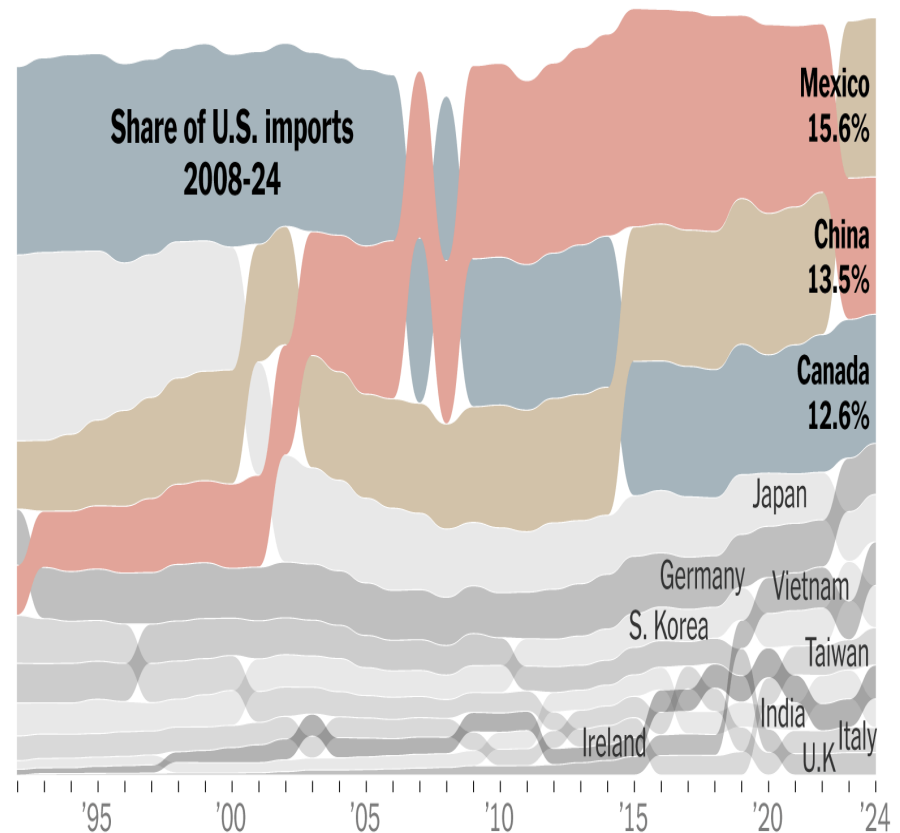
Mexico and Canada are the U.S. largest trading partner

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

Canadian exports

\$567B

Exports to U.S.
78%

Exports to
rest of world
22%

U.S. imports

\$3.17T

Imports
from Can.
14%

Imports
from Mex.
15%

Imports from
rest of world
71%

Mexican exports

\$593B

Exports to U.S.
80%

Exports to
rest of world
20%



The devil is in the details

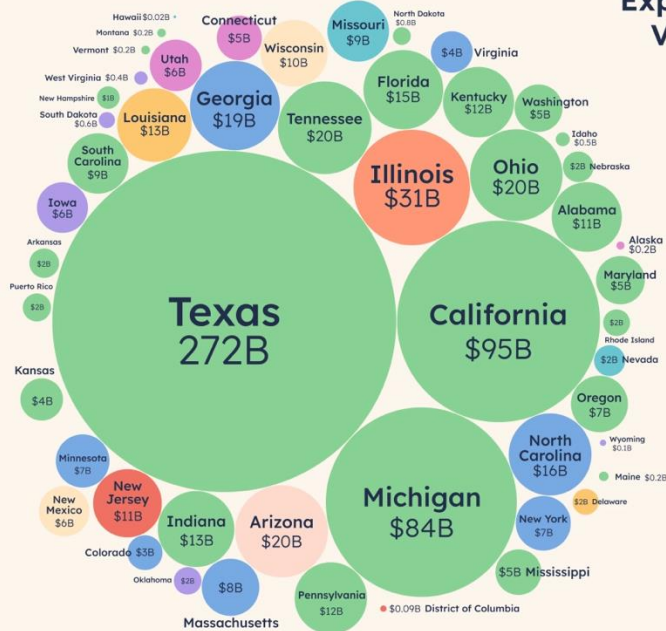
Source: "The trading partner for every state in one map", World Economic Forum, 2021

Which US States trade the most with Mexico?

Export + Import Value (2023)



- Most exported category from US to Mexico
- Agricultural
 - Beverages & Tobacco
 - Computer & Electronics
 - Electrical Equipment, Appliances & Components
 - Non-electrical Machinery
 - Miscellaneous Manufactures
 - Oil & Gas
 - Primary Metal Manufactures
 - Processed Foods
 - Transportation Equipment



Source: trade.gov



Latinometrics +



U.S.-MEXICO FOUNDATION + gm general motors

Each State's Main Import Partner Import Value & Percentage of Total State Imports in 2020



Article & Sources:

<https://howmuch.net/articles/each-states-main-import-partner>
United States Census Bureau - <https://www.census.gov/>

howmuch.net



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.)

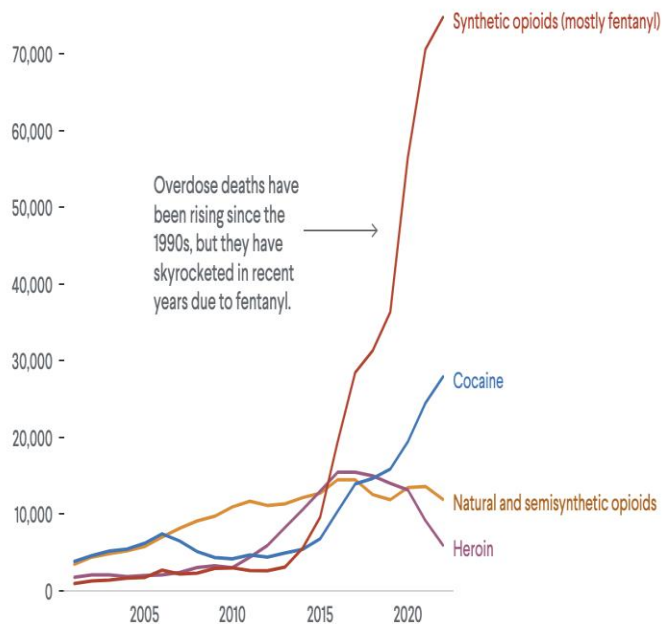


Fentanyl in three images:

Source: Fentanyl and the US Opioid Epidemic , Council of Foreign Relations, October 30, 2025

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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RELATIONS

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

Estimated deaths from opioid-use disorders, 2019

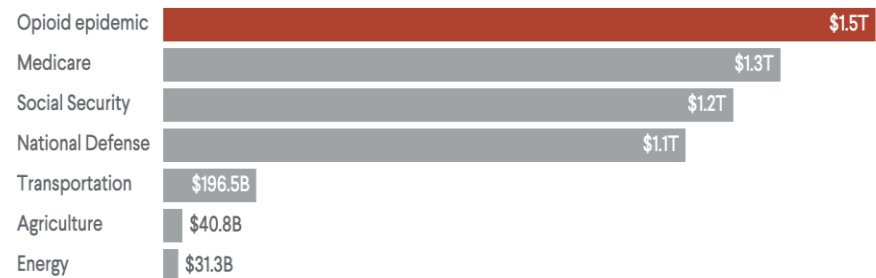


Source: "Global Burden of Disease," Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation.

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The Economic Cost of the Opioid Crisis

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

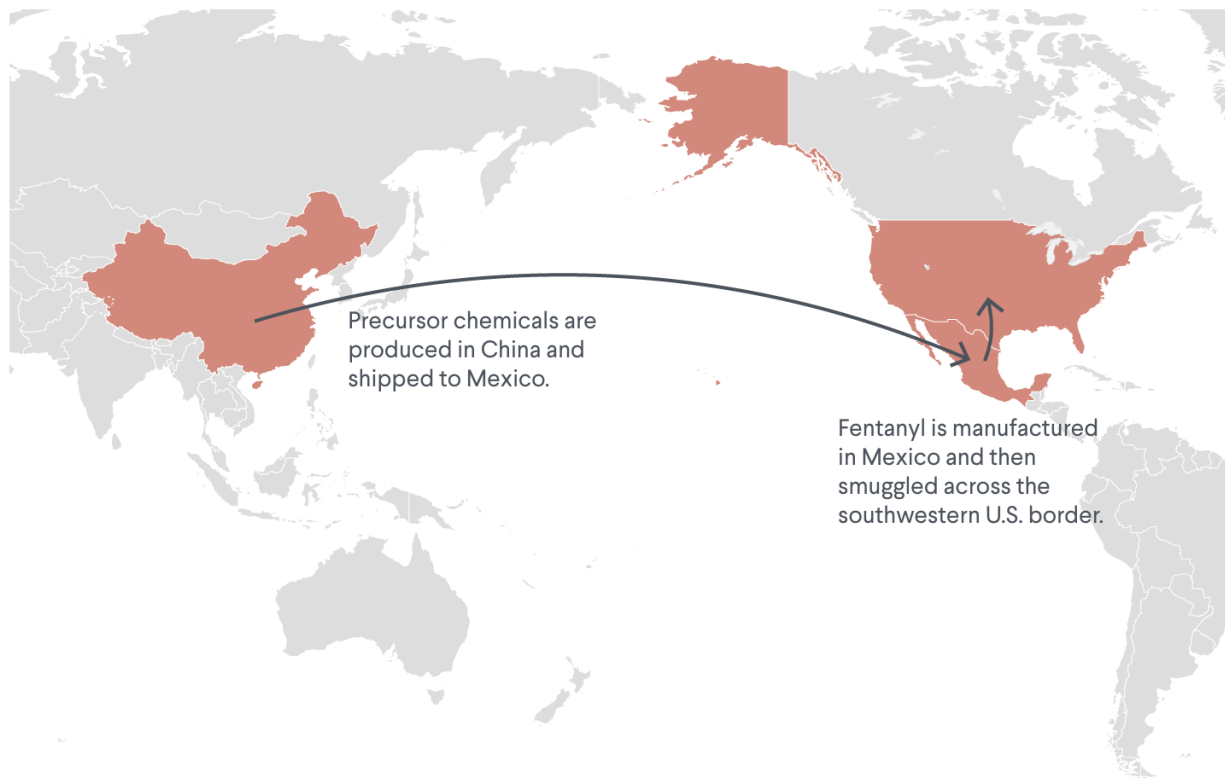


Sources: Joint Economic Commission; USAspending.gov.

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The Fentanyl Supply Chain



Source: CFR research.

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LINCOLN HALL

Q&A



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