

# A WORLD OF HARM

**HOW U.S. TAXPAYERS FUND THE  
GLOBAL WAR ON DRUGS OVER  
EVIDENCE-BASED HEALTH RESPONSES**



**DRUG  
POLICY  
ALLIANCE.**



**HARM REDUCTION  
INTERNATIONAL**

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**INVEST  
IN JUSTICE**

The Divest/Invest campaign calls on governments and donors to divest from the unjust drug war and invest in programmes that prioritise community, health and justice. It calls on donor countries to stop using money from their limited development aid budgets for narcotics control, which often violates human rights and undermines health and development goals. It demands that donors and governments to be transparent about their national and international spending on drug policy.

Learn more at <https://www.investinjustice.net/>

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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# ACRONYMS

## **ADACS**

ANTI-DRUG ABUSE COUNCILS (PHILIPPINES)

## **BJMP**

PHILIPPINES BUREAU OF JAIL MANAGEMENT AND PENOLOGY

## **CBDR**

COMMUNITY-BASED DRUG REHABILITATION

## **CNP**

COLOMBIAN NATIONAL POLICE

## **DEA**

DRUG ENFORCEMENT ADMINISTRATION (U.S.)

## **DOD**

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE (U.S.)

## **DOJ**

DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE (U.S.)

## **FAA**

FOREIGN ASSISTANCE ACT (U.S.)

## **FATAA**

FOREIGN AID TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY ACT (U.S.)

## **FBI**

FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION (U.S.)

## **IACHR**

INTER-AMERICAN COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS

## **IARC**

INTERNATIONAL AGENCY FOR RESEARCH ON CANCER

## **IATI**

INTERNATIONAL AID TRANSPARENCY INITIATIVE

## **ILEAS**

INTERNATIONAL LAW ENFORCEMENT ACADEMIES (U.S.)

## **INL**

BUREAU OF INTERNATIONAL NARCOTICS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT, STATE DEPARTMENT (U.S.)

## **INCSR**

INTERNATIONAL NARCOTICS CONTROL STRATEGY REPORT (U.S.)

## **JWIPS**

JUDICIAL WIRE INTERCEPT PROGRAMS (U.S. DEA)

## **LGU**

LOCAL GOVERNMENT UNIT

## **ODA**

OFFICIAL DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE

## **OECD**

ORGANIZATION FOR ECONOMIC COOPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT

## **PDEA**

PHILIPPINE DRUG ENFORCEMENT AGENCY

## **SDGS**

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

## **SIU**

SENSITIVE INVESTIGATIVE UNIT (U.S. DEA)

## **UN**

UNITED NATIONS

## **UNODC**

UN OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME

## **USAID**

U.S. AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

## **WHO**

WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

## **VU**

VETTED UNIT (U.S. DEA)



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The role of the United States in exporting the destructive war on drugs to other countries is unparalleled. Since 1971, the U.S. has spent more than a trillion dollars on the war on drugs, prioritizing law enforcement responses and fueling mass incarceration within its borders.<sup>1</sup> It has also played a leading role in pushing and funding punitive responses to drugs internationally. This has continued despite growing evidence that such approaches don't work to achieve their stated aims (ending drug use and sales) while having devastating effects on rights and health, including mass criminalization, disease transmission, repression, and displacement.<sup>2</sup>

This report demonstrates how U.S. assistance has supported and expanded destructive and deadly anti-drug responses in low- and middle-income countries around the world.<sup>3</sup> It also presents new follow-the-money data analysis on U.S. international drug control spending by various government departments and budgets. This includes official development assistance (ODA) intended to support poverty reduction and other global development goals.

**Three case studies – Colombia, Mexico, and the Philippines** – and interviews from them help to reveal the damage done by this spending.

Finally, this report closes with recommendations to start repairing this damage and center the needs, rights, and health of communities instead.

## KEY FINDINGS:

### **The U.S. government spends more on international “counternarcotics” activities than it does on education, water supply, sanitation, and women’s rights in low- and middle-income countries.**

Almost \$13 billion of U.S. taxpayer money has been allocated to “counternarcotics” activities internationally since 2015, by various government departments and from various budget lines.<sup>4</sup>

To help put this figure in perspective, this is more taxpayer money than the U.S. government spent over that decade on primary education or water supply and sanitation in low- and middle-income countries around the world.

It is also more than the total amount of U.S. foreign aid over that decade for all of Southern Africa or Central America – and about 300 times the total amount of U.S. foreign aid over that decade for women’s rights organizations in low- and middle-income countries around the whole world.

### **Funding meant to end global poverty is going to “counternarcotics” activities. A growing amount of this “counternarcotics cash” has even come from the same U.S. official development assistance budgets that are supposed to help end global poverty and support other sustainable development goals while doing no harm.<sup>5</sup>**

No international aid donor has spent more on “narcotics control” than the U.S. (contributing more than half of the about \$1 billion in official development assistance that has been spent on this controversial sector since 2013).<sup>6</sup>

At least \$9 million of this U.S. official development assistance for “narcotics control” was spent in six countries which have the death penalty for drug-related offenses.

The U.S. spent more official development assistance on “narcotics control” over the decade examined than on many other sectors, including anti-corruption organizations, labor rights, and ending violence against women.

Despite U.S. commitments to international aid transparency, it is often hard or impossible to decipher how exactly its official development assistance on “narcotics control” has been spent; numerous records have information redacted.

### **Funding for “narcotics control” and “counternarcotic activities” has resulted in human rights abuses, rising HIV rates, aerial fumigation with toxic chemicals, and militarized responses in various regions. Damaging effects internationally have included:**

- Human rights abuses and rising rates of HIV in the Philippines, where millions of dollars from USAID have supported “forced rehabilitation” of people who use drugs amidst a drive to expand “drug-free communities.”
- Ongoing struggles for truth and justice in Colombia, for communities that were displaced or who suffered health consequences of U.S.-funded crop destruction activities, including aerial fumigation with toxic chemicals.
- “An enormous amount of repression” in Mexico, where the U.S.-supported war on drugs is increasingly militarized, making it harder for civil society to hold the government accountable for these activities and their impacts.





# THE UNITED STATES HAS HISTORICALLY PLAYED A LEADING ROLE IN THE GLOBAL WAR ON DRUGS, LEVERAGING ITS POWER AND FUNDING TO ENSURE COMPLIANCE WITH DRUG PROHIBITION MANDATES.

"The war on drugs is a war on us," explained a group of young people who use drugs in low- and middle-income countries in a 2024 article for an academic journal.<sup>7</sup> Many governments have been "imposing racist, classist, and prohibitionist drug policies through a continuum of violence that encompasses physical and structural assaults." Funding for responses to drugs that are rooted in health and human rights, including harm reduction programs, is sorely lacking (and undermined by criminalization and stigma). The article concluded with calls to action, including that:

**"Financial resources, including international donor and domestic funding, must be shifted from punitive law enforcement and drug supply reduction approaches towards supporting a continuum of community-based, evidence-informed online and on-the-ground harm reduction programs, including peer-to-peer information generating and sharing programs and advocacy networks, take-home naloxone programs, drug checking services, and drug consumption spaces."**

**THERE IS NO SINGLE COUNTRY THAT COULD HAVE AS MUCH IMPACT WITH SUCH A SHIFT IN FUNDING AS THE UNITED STATES, WHICH IS THE FOCUS OF THIS REPORT.**

The rise of the U.S. as a new imperial power in the 20th century was crucial to the construction of a new international consensus against drugs, enshrined in the UN's 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, which calls them a "serious evil."<sup>8</sup> Beginning in 1968, President Nixon's anti-drug campaign was used to vilify communities that were deemed "enemies of the State," namely Black and brown people and those opposing U.S. military action in Vietnam. The racist underpinnings of the U.S. drug war persist to this day, with Black people incarcerated at five times the rate of white people.<sup>9</sup> The lifetime likelihood of imprisonment among Black men born in 2001, although lower than previously, remains four times that of their white counterparts.<sup>10</sup>

U.S. support for drug enforcement internationally includes financial, material and technical assistance. The U.S. drug war bureaucracy is expansive, involving numerous agencies of the government,<sup>11</sup> including the Department of Defense (DOD), Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), National Security Agency (NSA), State Department, Department of Homeland Security, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), as well as the infamous Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), under the Department of Justice (DOJ). By 2023, the DEA had 93 foreign offices in 69 countries.<sup>12</sup>



Photo by: U.S. Department of State (IIP Bureau)

**AROUND THE WORLD, U.S. TAXPAYER MONEY HAS SUPPORTED FOREIGN POLICE UNITS; PURCHASED SURVEILLANCE AND OTHER EQUIPMENT; AND HELPED TO DEVELOP PUNITIVE DRUG LAWS AND ANTI-DRUG PUBLIC AWARENESS AND EDUCATION CAMPAIGNS.**

In Myanmar, for example, the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL) funded "the development of creative drug awareness campaigns" (without disclosing further details); helped to establish the country's first national drug control policy; and built the capacity of its Drug Enforcement Division (in partnership with the U.S. DEA).<sup>13</sup> Such activities extend U.S. influence beyond law enforcement to also influence public attitudes and policy in line with a prohibitionist moral consensus.

The use of U.S. official development assistance (ODA) – commonly called "foreign aid" – for war on drug activities is particularly controversial. Official development assistance is defined by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which monitors these flows, as "government aid that promotes and specifically targets the economic development and welfare of developing countries."<sup>14</sup> The U.S. is the world's largest ODA donor, and how it spends this money is important to people and governments around the world. The use of some of this money for "narcotics control" activities undermines other U.S. aid-funded development work, including on HIV. Despite U.S. commitments to international aid transparency, many of these spending records contain redactions making comprehensive monitoring and accountability difficult or impossible tasks.<sup>15</sup>

Created by President John F. Kennedy in 1961, USAID is the U.S.'s lead agency for international development and humanitarian efforts.<sup>16</sup> It describes its mission as advancing peace and prosperity "on behalf of the American people," providing assistance to "save lives, reduce poverty, strengthen democratic governance, and help people emerge from humanitarian crises and progress beyond assistance."<sup>17</sup>



## **"WHOLE OF GOVERNMENT" APPROACH TO WAR ON DRUGS**

A vast and complex global network of U.S. government agencies, programs, and activities has been developed in the ongoing "war on drugs." This report focuses on actors and activities that are funded through or in partnership with the State Department.

**The 2023 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report by the State Department described a "whole of government approach" to drug control and a strategy of deep collaboration and "capacity building" with counterparts in other countries.<sup>18</sup>**

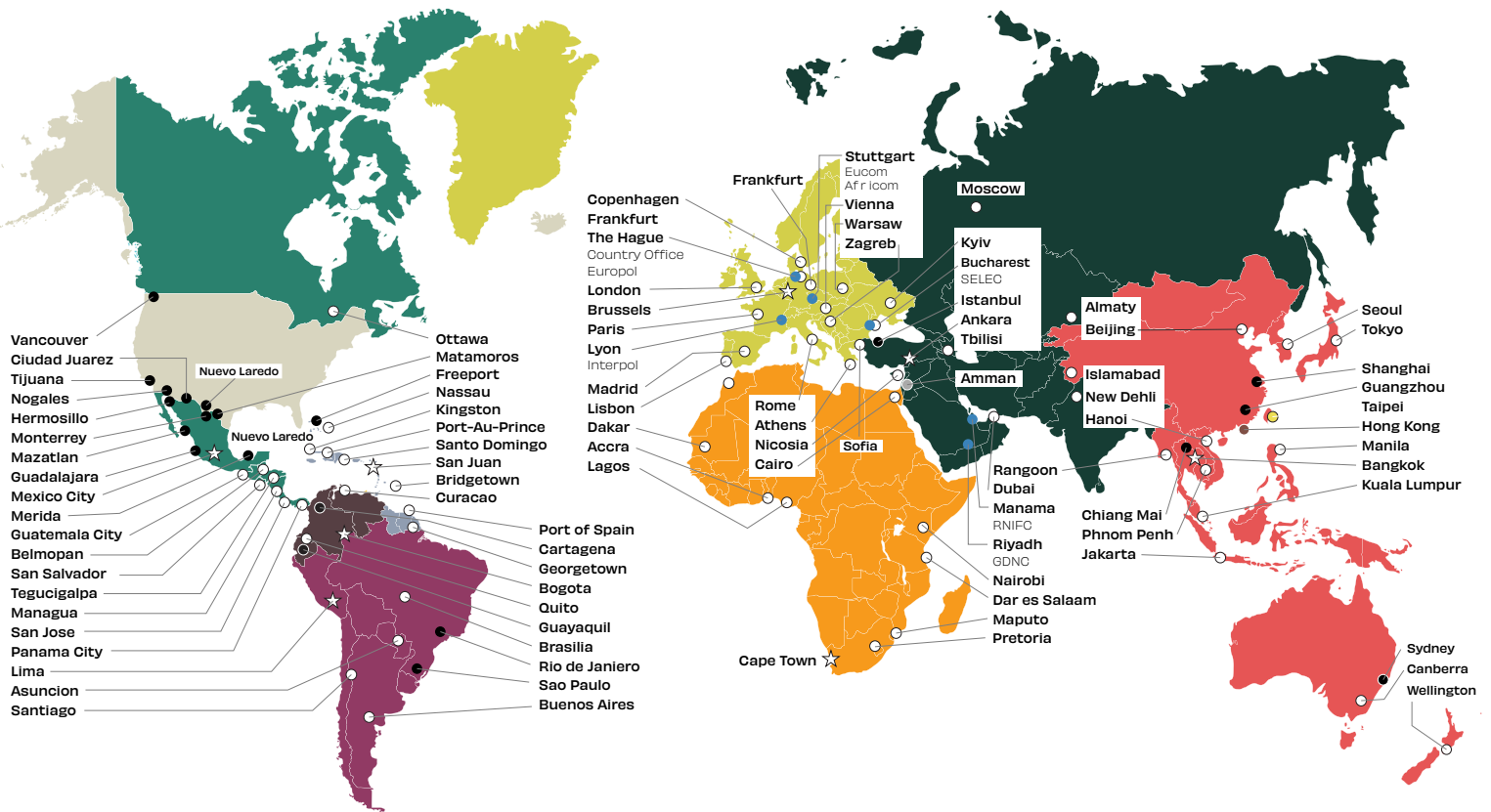
Some of these programs involve collaboration with international organizations such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC); others are implemented by U.S. agencies including the DEA, the FBI, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (part of the Department of Homeland Security), and the U.S. Coast Guard. Still others "draw trainers from host country partners that have themselves been the recipient of U.S.-funded programs."<sup>19</sup>

The INL's international capacity-building infrastructure includes regional training centers called International Law Enforcement Academies (ILEAs), at which U.S. law enforcement experts train local criminal legal sector officials. The 2023 report stated: "Since its inception in 1995, the ILEA program has grown to six facilities in Botswana, El Salvador, Ghana, Hungary, Thailand, and the United States (New Mexico).

It has provided training to more than 70,000 students from over 100 countries."<sup>20</sup> The INL also funds the DEA's so-called "Sensitive Investigative Unit" (SIU) and "Vetted Unit" (VU) programs globally, which "train, equip, build the capacity of, and support specialized counternarcotic units within partner nations' police forces... to develop and share intelligence."<sup>21</sup>

These SIU and VU programs are run by the DEA's Office of Foreign Operations through its "International Impact Section." Both types of units undertake activities such as investigative operations, surveillance, destruction of drug production laboratories, and interdiction of drug shipments. But SIUs are "elevated" VUs that the DEA deems to have demonstrated success and are given more training, including at the DEA Training Academy in Quantico, Virginia, as well as dedicated budgets from the agency. The vast majority of these units are in Latin America, although there are some in Africa too.<sup>22</sup>

# DRUG ENFORCEMENT AGENCY'S GLOBAL INFRASTRUCTURE <sup>23</sup>



## LEGEND

93 Foreign Offices in 69 Countries  
8 Foreign Regions

- Africa
- Andean Region
- Caribbean
- Europe Region
- Far East Region
- North & Central Americas Region
- Middle East Region
- Southern Cone Region

- ☆ Regional Office
- Country Office
- Resident Office
- Future Office
- DEA Presence
- Taipei, Taiwan Narcotics Liason Office
- Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Office

# RELEVANT U.S. LEGISLATION AND INITIATIVES EXPORTING THE WAR ON DRUGS ABROAD

**Title 22 of the U.S. code** enables the U.S. government to provide security assistance programs ranging from defense equipment, education, training, and other services to eligible foreign governments with the aim to advance U.S. national security interests.<sup>24</sup>

**The International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR)** from the State Department is an annual report mandated by Congress. Among other things, it's required to report on countries designated by the president as major illicit drug producing or drug transit countries (the "Majors List").<sup>25</sup>

## **The Majors List:**

The Foreign Relations Authorizations Act of 2003 prohibits U.S. aid, with some exceptions possible, from going to countries on "the Majors List."<sup>26</sup> This list identifies major drug transit or producing countries that are deemed to have failed to make substantial efforts to follow international "counternarcotics" agreements. Tying U.S. aid to following prohibitionist and punitive approaches to drugs is another way in which U.S. spending has been used to undermine public health and human rights responses abroad. It is an example of what researchers from Chatham House and the International Institute for Strategic Studies described as "diplomatic blackmail" by international donors that threaten recipients with cuts if they don't "comply with the donor's counter-narcotic policies."<sup>27</sup>

## **The U.S. FAA and the UN Drug Convention:**

The U.S. Foreign Assistance Act (FAA) from 1961, amended in subsequent decades (1970s, 1980s) requires reports on the extent to which each country that received U.S. assistance has "met the goals and objectives of the United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances ('Drug Convention')." This convention requires signatories to outlaw and punish all forms of illicit drug production, trafficking, and drug money laundering; to control chemicals that can be used to process illicit drugs; and to cooperate in international efforts to meet these ends. The U.S. FAA specifies actions to evaluate foreign countries on, including asset seizure, extradition, law enforcement cooperation, precursor chemical control, and demand reduction.<sup>28</sup>

## **Bans on the use of federal funds for needle and syringe programs:**

The U.S. has prohibited federal funding for the purchasing of needles and syringes in the context of programs for people who inject drugs for decades, despite overwhelming evidence that increasing access to sterile syringes saves lives. Such a ban was first introduced by Congress in 1988. In 2009, Congress lifted the prohibition by removing language in President Obama's budget proposal that would have maintained it. However, Congress then reinstated the ban two years later, in December 2011.<sup>30</sup>

## LIVES AND RIGHTS AT STAKE

Punitive drug laws and policies have failed to stop the use or sale of drugs. They have, however, violated human rights and resulted in poor public health outcomes around the world. It is now hard to overstate how widely this has been recognized. In 2023, for example, a UN Human Rights Office report condemned a “disproportionate use of criminal penalties [that] discourages people who use drugs from seeking treatment and feeds stigma and social exclusion”.<sup>31</sup> A previous UN report, summarizing a decade of “knowledge acquired and produced by the UN system,” concluded that:

**“If not based on human rights standards and a solid evidence base, drug policies can have a counterproductive effect on development. Abusive, repressive and disproportionate drug control policies and laws are counterproductive, while also violating human rights, undercutting public health, and wasting vital public resources.”<sup>32</sup>**

Previous studies have also connected U.S. drug control funding to specific human rights abuses around the world. A report published by Harm Reduction International, for instance, showed how \$400,000 was pledged by the U.S. government in 2012 to support drug addiction treatment in Laos, including at a notorious treatment center that “holds most people against their will!”<sup>33</sup> A child who had spent six months in that center told Human Rights Watch: “Some people think that to die is better than staying there.”<sup>34</sup> Human rights concerns have also been documented by parts of the U.S. government itself. A 2021 audit by the U.S. Office of the Inspector General found that many of the DEA’s so-called Sensitive Investigation Units (SIUs) and Vetted Units (VUs) were operating outside of formal structures and adequate oversight. Consequences included civilian deaths during an operation in Honduras.<sup>35</sup>

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**“There have been critical incidents in Mexico, Honduras, Colombia, and Haiti involving DEA-supported foreign law enforcement units... [and] civilian deaths, corruption and compromised intelligence.”**

*– 2023 Report Commissioned by the DEA*

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With so much money involved in war on drug activities, conditions for corruption are created. Along with human rights violations, in some cases government, military, and police officers have used U.S. “counternarcotics” funding for personal gain.<sup>36</sup> A 2023 report commissioned by the DEA in response to the above-mentioned inspector general audit – which was co-authored by a former DEA administrator – also acknowledged that there “have been critical incidents in Mexico, Honduras, Colombia, and Haiti involving DEA-supported foreign law enforcement units, including incidents which involved civilian deaths, corruption, and compromised intelligence.” It said there had also been “several recent instances of individual misconduct by DEA personnel assigned to DEA’s foreign offices,” although it shirked responsibility by claiming this reflects “the uniquely difficult circumstances under which the DEA operates overseas.”<sup>37</sup>

## POLICY CONTRADICTIONS

The vast resources going into punitive and prohibitive responses to drugs contradict and undermine other important work being done to promote evidence-based health responses, including:

- PEPFAR (President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief), which is implemented by various U.S. government agencies and overseen by the U.S. Department of State. With a multi-billion dollar budget each year, PEPFAR is the second largest international funder of harm reduction services and programs for people who use drugs, after the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (to which the U.S. government is also the largest donor).<sup>38</sup>
- USAID works to support a "comprehensive package of services and approaches" for HIV among what are recognized as "key populations," including people who use drugs, and structural interventions, including those addressing stigma and discrimination. It has funded harm reduction programs in several countries (albeit with the significant limitation of a ban on the use of federal funds for needle and syringe programs – see page 13).<sup>39</sup>
- The tabling by the U.S. government of a historic international resolution on overdose prevention and harm reduction at the March 2024 UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs, which passed despite opposition from Russia and China.<sup>40</sup>
- Recent positive shifts within the U.S. in terms of domestic investment in harm reduction programs and services in response to the overdose crisis.<sup>41</sup>

**These initiatives and developments that uplift health and harm reduction are at odds with the evidence detailed in the following sections of this report about the U.S.'s ongoing and leading role in funding punitive "narcotics control" and "forced treatment" projects around the world.**



Photo by: U.S. Embassy Namibia

# **FOLLOWING THE MONEY**

**How much U.S. taxpayer money has gone into the various war on drug activities under the State Department and related agencies?**

**How much of this money has come specifically from official development assistance (ODA) budgets, which are supposed to support poverty reduction and other global development goals?**

This section answers these questions using primary sources including annual National Drug Control Budgets published by the Executive Office of the President and ODA spending data and activity information submitted by the U.S. government to the OECD.

ODA spending figures are presented in current prices for comparability with other budget figures in this report.



# U.S. TAXPAYER FUNDING FOR THE DESTRUCTIVE GLOBAL WAR ON DRUGS

Annual National Drug Control Budgets, which include tables on international funding, are prepared and published by the Executive Office of the President of the United States.

## Figures extracted and analyzed from these documents show:

- For fiscal year 2025, the president requested \$1 billion for international “counternarcotics” activities. Almost half of this request was to be received and spent by the DEA (\$480 million); the second largest planned intermediary for this spending was to be the State Department’s INL bureau (about \$350 million).<sup>42</sup>
- Over the decade between 2015–2024, a total of almost \$13 billion of U.S. taxpayer money was allocated to “counternarcotics” activities internationally.
  - To help put this figure in perspective, this is more taxpayer money than the U.S. government spent in a decade on development assistance for primary education (more than \$8 billion) or water supply and sanitation (almost \$4 billion) in low- and middle-income countries around the world.<sup>44</sup>
  - It is also more than the total amount of U.S. development assistance over a decade for all of Southern Africa (over \$8 billion) or Central America (almost \$7 billion) – and about 300 times the total amount for women’s rights organizations in low- and middle-income countries around the world (less than \$43 million).<sup>45</sup>
- These documents show that USAID has also been a consistent, although comparatively smaller, spender of U.S. drug control international funding over the years – accounting for between \$50 million and \$80 million of the total each year since 2019 and in budgets for 2024 and 2025.<sup>46</sup>
- The format of these documents’ tables changed from 2019; previously, they had displayed funding under (and a roughly even split between) the Department of Defense, Department of Justice, and Department of State.

## U.S. DRUG CONTROL INTERNATIONAL FUNDING (FY 2015 - 2025, IN MILLIONS)<sup>47</sup>

YEAR	TOTAL	DEA	INL	USAID	DOD	OTHER AGENCIES
<b>2025</b>	\$1,032.3 (requested)	\$484.6	\$348.1	\$59.0	\$120.3	\$20.3
<b>2024</b>	\$938.6 (continuing resolution)	\$476.1	\$285.7	\$65.5	\$93.0	\$18.3
<b>2023</b>	\$945.7 (final)	\$476.1	\$285.7	\$65.5	\$100.0	\$18.4
<b>2022</b>	\$918.4 (final)	\$470.1	\$296.3	\$70.9	\$63.7	\$17.4
<b>2021</b>	\$1,256.5 (final)	\$464.4	\$420.3	\$53.2	\$272.6	\$46.0
<b>2020</b>	\$1,263.6 (final)	\$473.8	\$425.4	\$53.5	\$233.2	\$77.7
<b>2019</b>	\$1,283.0 (final)	\$464.9	\$412.5	\$78.5	\$283.3	\$43.8

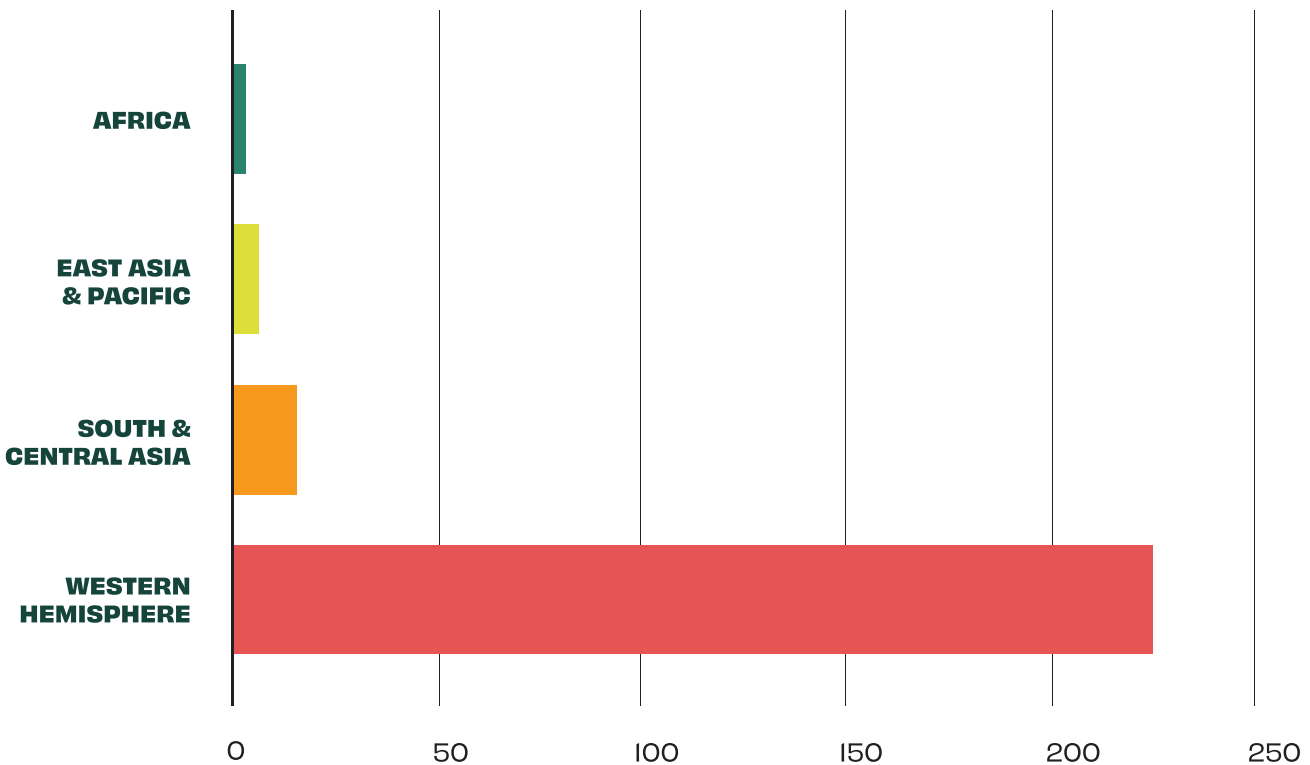
**U.S. DRUG CONTROL INTERNATIONAL FUNDING (FY 2015 - 2025, IN MILLIONS) CONT.**

<b>YEAR</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>DOD</b>	<b>DOJ</b>	<b>STATE</b>	<b>OTHER AGENCIES</b>
<b>2018</b>	\$1,465.1 (final)	\$459.6	\$471.0	\$492.3	\$42.2
<b>2017</b>	\$1,494.2 (final)	\$488.7	\$466.6	\$500.9	\$38.0
<b>2016</b>	\$1,524.9 (final)				
<b>2015</b>	\$1,643.0 (final)				

Separate budget documents from the involved departments contain further detail on where and how international drug control funding is to be spent. For instance, the U.S. Department of State's 2023 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR) showed that Latin America was

budgeted to receive more than half (\$225 million) of the total \$375 million for "counternarcotics" requested by the department and its agencies (including INL and USAID). Colombia was to be the largest single country recipient (\$115 million).<sup>48</sup>

**REGIONAL RECIPIENTS OF STATE DEPARTMENT "COUNTERNARCOTICS" FUNDING (IN MILLIONS; FY 2023 BUDGET REQUESTS)<sup>49</sup>**



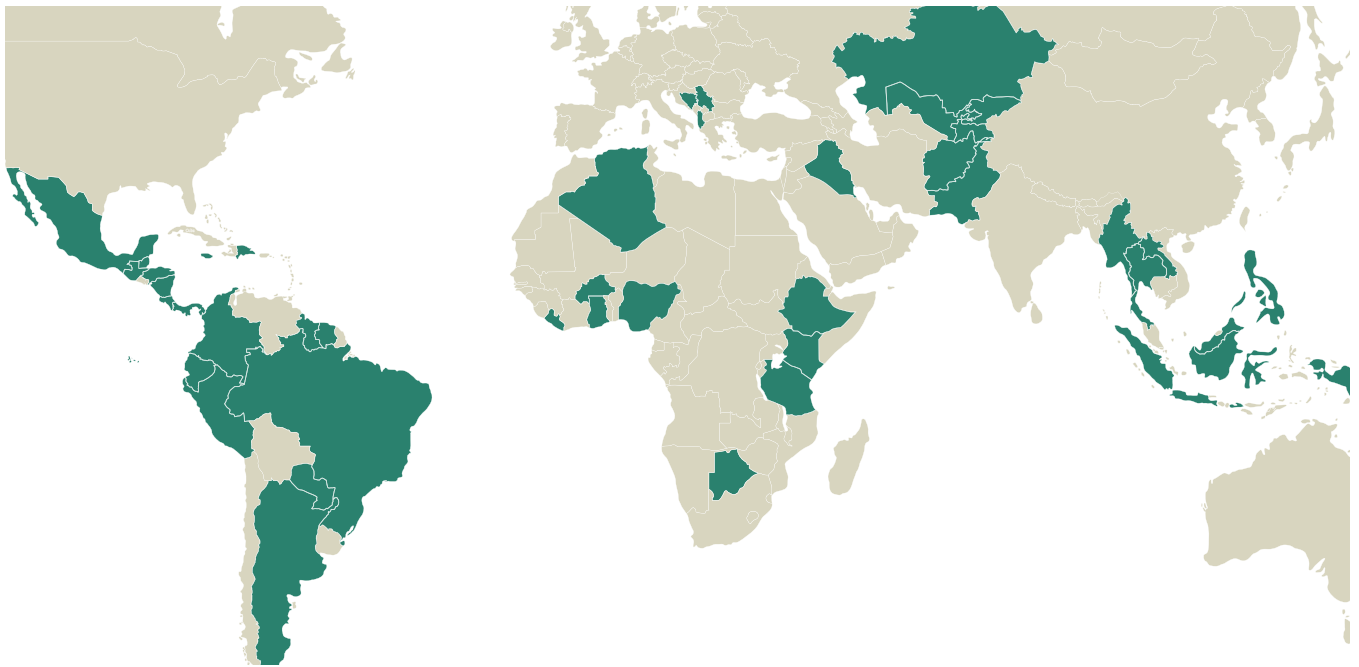
## U.S. OFFICIAL DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE FOR "NARCOTICS CONTROL"

As described above, official development assistance (ODA) is a specific funding source intended to support the economic development and welfare of developing countries. ODA donors are not supposed to use this funding for military assistance or for projects that prioritize their own national security or commercial interests. This is why it is particularly controversial that some U.S. ODA is used for war on drugs activities.

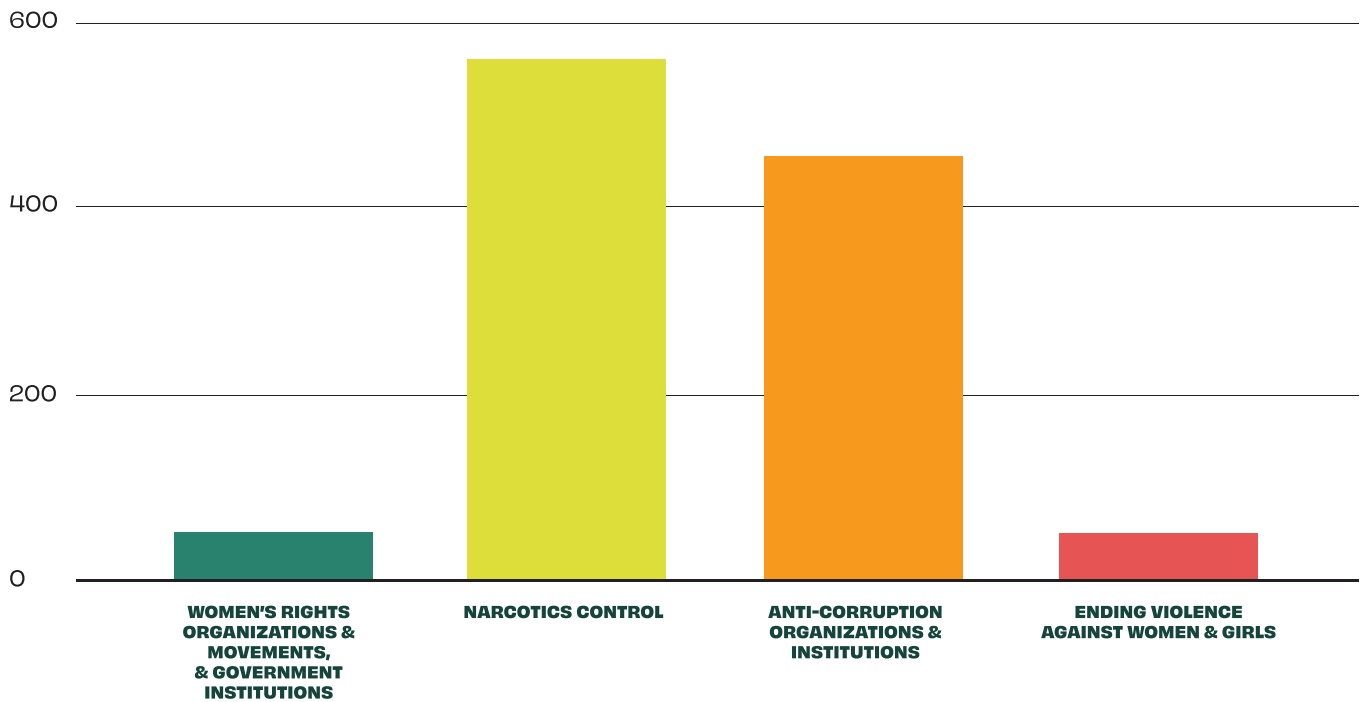
### According to the latest OECD figures on ODA spending (which were last updated in July 2024, and which cover up to the end of calendar year 2022):<sup>50</sup>

- Aid donors (led by the U.S.) spent almost \$1 billion of their ODA on "narcotics control" projects in dozens of developing countries over the decade 2013-2022.
- No donor contributed more to these "narcotics control" budgets than the U.S., which reported spending almost \$600 million of its ODA on these activities over the decade (in addition to the many other millions the U.S. spent over this period on drug enforcement through other budgets, as described above).
- While this is a small percentage of total U.S. ODA (which was \$52.8 billion in 2022 alone), it exceeds spending over the decade on many other sectors, including "anti-corruption organizations and institutions" and "ending violence against women."<sup>51</sup>
- Controversially, the U.S. has been increasingly classifying drug control spending as ODA: in 2020, it counted just over \$30 million like this; in 2021 that figure was \$309 million (and while it dropped to \$106 million in 2022, this was still higher than earlier years).<sup>52</sup> It is unclear why this is occurring, since no explanations are readily available.
- No developing country received more "narcotics control" ODA from the U.S. than Colombia (which received \$156 million of the total over the decade), followed by Afghanistan (\$46 million), Mexico (\$27 million), and Peru (\$25 million).
- Profit-making companies are also benefiting from this ODA spending on "narcotics control." The top "channel" for this spending has been private companies ("private sector institutions," receiving \$244 million over the decade) followed by the governments of countries funded (\$202 million), and then multilateral organizations such as UNODC (\$77 million).

**2013-2022 RECIPIENTS OF U.S. ODA FOR "NARCOTICS CONTROL"**



**U.S. ODA FOR "NARCOTICS CONTROL" VS. OTHER SECTORS, 2013-2022 (IN MILLIONS)**



Some of this U.S. ODA spending (at least \$9 million) was allocated to six countries that have the death penalty for drug-related offenses (Indonesia, Iraq, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, and Thailand), despite this being a violation of international law.<sup>53</sup> More than \$1 million of U.S. official development assistance in 2021, for example, was spent on “narcotics control” projects in Indonesia. That same year, a record of at least 89 people were sentenced to death in that country over drug-related offenses.<sup>54</sup>

While the U.S. has made commitments to transparency in its aid spending, it is difficult to decipher how its ODA for “narcotics control” has been used. In many cases, there is very little detail in project records submitted about this spending to the OECD. Many include the words “information redacted;” sometimes it’s noted that redactions are to protect the health and security of implementing partners “and the national interest” of the U.S. This is despite the fact that the development of recipient countries – not the security or commercial interests of donors – are supposed to be the priorities of ODA spending.<sup>55</sup>

The state of the records means that there is very little transparency and therefore little accountability as to how the funds are used.

**DESPITE THESE REDACTIONS AND LIMITED DETAIL, HOWEVER, PROJECT-LEVEL “MICRODATA” FOR 2022 U.S. ODA SPENDING PROVIDES SOME LIMITED EXAMPLES OF HOW FUNDING WAS USED, INCLUDING:**

**IN KENYA:**

“Disbursement of stipends to members of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration’s Sensitive Investigative Unit (Information Redacted) Program.”

**IN ECUADOR:**

“Shredders,” “Satellite phones,” “Bulletproof Vest,” “Tactical Equipment,” and “Curtains for JWIP Information Redacted INL DEA.”

**IN TAJIKISTAN:**

“Strengthening Tajikistan Anti-Drug Community Coali” [sic] and “Capacity building of the Drug Control Agency.”

**IN MEXICO:**

“Precursor Chemical Flow Study,” “Mexico Forensic Laboratories,” and “Vehicles for Mexico Canine Units.”

**IN COLOMBIA:**

“Law Enforcement Scholarship Program,” “Construction of Kennels,” and “Colombian National Police Wounded Warrior Assistance.”

Many other project records contain only very brief descriptions of seemingly mundane costs, such as TV and magazine subscriptions, "bottled water delivery," the printing of business cards, car repair, and janitorial services.

While a few project records mention "health," **not a single one contained the words "human rights" or "harm reduction."** <sup>56</sup>

**ANALYSIS OF PROJECT RECORDS FOR U.S. ODA FOR "NARCOTICS CONTROL"**  
 (DATA SUBMITTED BY THE U.S. TO THE OECD)

	<b>NUMBER OF RECORDS</b>
<b>Total for 2022</b>	<b>844</b>
With <b>"DEA"</b> in titles / "long description" sections	<b>67 / 63</b>
With <b>"INL"</b> in titles / "long description" sections	<b>276 / 322</b>
With <b>"information redacted"</b> in titles / "long description" sections	<b>295 / 404</b>
With <b>"health"</b> in titles / "long description" sections	<b>3 / 3</b>
With <b>"harm reduction"</b> in titles / "long description" sections	<b>0 / 0</b>
With <b>"human rights"</b> in titles / "long description" sections	<b>0 / 0</b>

The OECD data also reflects the U.S.'s collaboration with the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), which was the "channel" for about 20% of U.S. ODA for "narcotics control" in 2022 (almost \$21 million out of the total \$106 million for that year). Records of funded projects where the UNODC is named as the "channel of delivery" contain minimal detail such as: "capacity building of the Drug Control Agency" (in Tajikistan); "Drug Abuse Survey Assistance" (Uzbekistan); "to prevent diversion of precursor chemicals used in the manufacture of drugs" ("regional and unspecified"); and "to disrupt international production and trafficking of synthetic opioids" (location also "regional and unspecified").

Separate UNODC budget documents show that most (84%) of its projected 2024-2025 income is "special purpose" (earmarked) income. The expected total is \$677 million, led by contributions from the U.S. (\$240 million), European Union (\$97 million), Germany (\$47 million), and Japan (\$36 million).<sup>57</sup>

How UNODC spends this money is largely unclear, however. Notably, it does not publish up-to-date, detailed spending information anywhere and is not a publisher to the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI), despite its receipt and use of ODA money.<sup>58</sup>

Several U.S. government branches publish to IATI, which can provide more up-to-date (though not necessarily comprehensive) information than OECD records. As of mid-November 2024, IATI data contained more than 200 records of U.S. ODA spending on "narcotics control" in 2023, covering a total of over \$130 million.<sup>59</sup> Most of this total was for projects in Colombia (almost \$40 million), followed by "developing countries, unspecified" (almost \$39 million). Overall, private sector entities appeared as the primary "receiver organizations" of this spending, though most were unnamed. Other recipients included the UNODC and the U.S. Army. There is, however, again minimal detail in these records; many of their fields contain short, vague text or redactions.

The U.S. had already (as of mid November 2024) published to IATI over a thousand records of budgeted ODA expenditures for 2024 and 2025. Such current and future-looking data is a main advantage of IATI data. However, none of these records were under "narcotics control" projects. This does not mean that no such funds will be spent, just that they cannot be monitored in the same way as other U.S. ODA; there are no IATI records of U.S. budgets (only spending) under "narcotics control" for 2022 or 2023 either.<sup>60</sup> This is a significant gap in U.S. aid transparency on a particularly concerning "sector!"



# CASE STUDIES

**What are the effects of this spending on communities, rights, and health around the world?**

**Who suffers negative consequences, and who meanwhile benefits from the status quo?**

This section looks at these key questions through three case studies – on the Philippines, Colombia, and Mexico – featuring additional analysis, recent interviews, and detail. These examples reveal how this spending connects U.S. taxpayers to harms including “forced rehabilitation,” rising rates of HIV, and waves of repression; and how the main beneficiaries of this spending include profit-making private companies.





## CASE STUDY

# PHILIPPINES

# PHILIPPINES

Former president of the Philippines Rodrigo Duterte infamously oversaw a bloody anti-drug campaign. He called for extrajudicial killings of people who use and sell drugs, which happened en masse.<sup>61</sup> Thousands of killings were attributed to the Philippines National Police.<sup>62</sup> Many other people “surrendered” to authorities to avoid being captured or killed. Duterte’s war on drugs was internationally condemned. Human Rights Watch warned that foreign aid to the Philippines could end up supporting “mass unlawful violence.”<sup>63</sup> In the U.S., some senators called for a review of aid to the country.<sup>64</sup>

**However, funding from America continued to flow.**

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## **MILLIONS FROM USAID FOR “FORCED REHABILITATION”?**

“RenewHealth” was a five-year, multimillion-dollar USAID Office of Health project that began in 2019 – while Duterte was still president – and was due to end in May 2024.<sup>65</sup> The private contractor that implemented the project (called University Research Co, LLC, or URC), says on its website that it was launched in response to Duterte’s “campaign against illegal drugs.” But it was not in opposition to this campaign: rather, it aimed to help the government provide “treatment” to people who surrendered with “low to mild severity of [drug] use” through “Community-Based Drug Rehabilitation (CBDR).”

This is problematic because “there are no voluntary community-based programs,” explain advocates

from NoBox Philippines, a civil society group advocating for drug policy reform. In an interview for this report, they said, “There are programs in communities and cities, but most of the people going there are mandated or threatened.” They described how the context has remained hostile even after Duterte left government in 2022, and how harmful practices have continued, including the production of “watchlists” of people who are suspected of drug use, paired with “ongoing surveillance,” including coerced drug tests and “forced rehabilitation,” where “most of the individuals, if not all, are being forced into these programs.” Forced treatment goes against international drug treatment and human rights guidelines.<sup>66</sup>

Another page on the USAID contractor's website says the funded program particularly serviced plea-bargainers – people convicted of drug use who could be released from prison after completing a “rehabilitation” program.”<sup>67</sup> A 2023 annual report on the project acknowledged that “the direct beneficiaries of RenewHealth interventions [were] the LGU [local government unit] Anti-Drug Abuse Councils (ADACs).”<sup>68</sup> These councils assist law enforcement in “clearing” and other operations against illegal drugs.<sup>69</sup> According to an assessment from the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, they conduct “monitoring” of people who use drugs – including coerced drug tests, financial investigations, and, in some cases, incarceration without due process.<sup>70</sup>

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**“There are no voluntary community-based programs. There are programs in communities and cities, but most of the people going there are mandated or threatened.”**

– *NoBox Philippines*

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## **ANTI-DRUG ACTIVITIES UNDER DIFFERENT NAMES AND BUDGETS**

According to the latest OECD data on official development assistance (ODA), the Philippines received \$615,000 of U.S. ODA for “narcotics control” in 2022. No U.S. ODA for the country was categorized under this sector in the preceding several years (since 2015).<sup>71</sup> Duterte was still president for the first six months of 2022, and as described above, harsh anti-drug policies have continued after he left office.

Meanwhile, the multi-million dollar 2019–2024 RenewHealth project was also funded by ODA. However, it appears to have been coded differently: Under other sectors, including “human rights,”

“social protection,” and “democratic participation and good governance.” An IATI record for the project showed over \$10 million in spending under it by November 2024.<sup>72</sup> This reflects how spending specifically coded to “narcotics control” is likely just part of the aid money that the U.S. is giving to anti-drug efforts.

Meanwhile, beyond ODA, other U.S. government resources and agencies have also supported the Philippines’ anti-drug crackdown, as described below.

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## **ON THE RISE: “DRUG-FREE COMMUNITIES” AND HIV RATES**

The Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) was “modeled after the U.S. DEA” and celebrated its 21st birthday in July 2023. It was created by the Philippines’ Comprehensive Dangerous Drugs Act (legislation the U.S. State Department described as “a major accomplishment”).<sup>73</sup> Anti-drug cooperation continues between multiple agencies of the U.S. and Philippines governments (see table on next page).

This is despite the fact, as the State Department’s 2023 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report acknowledged, “the Philippines is not a significant source or transit country” for drugs entering the U.S.<sup>74</sup>

**U.S. AGENCIES SUPPORTING PHILIPPINES' "COUNTERNARCOTICS" ACTIVITIES <sup>75</sup>**

<b>HOST COUNTRY UNIT</b>	<b>U.S. AGENCIES THAT MENTOR, ADVISE, OR TRAIN THE UNIT</b>
Philippine National Police, Directorate for Human Resources and Doctrines Development	<b>INL</b> , through agreement with the Colombo Plan Drug Advisory Program
Philippine National Police, Directorate for Police Community Relations	<b>INL</b> , through agreement with the Colombo Plan Drug Advisory Program
Philippine National Police, Directorate for Plans and Operations	<b>INL</b> , through agreement with the Colombo Plan Drug Advisory Program
Philippine National Police, Training Service	<b>INL</b> , through agreement with the Colombo Plan Drug Advisory Program
Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency, Preventive Education and Community Involvement Services	<b>INL</b> , through agreement with the Colombo Plan Drug Advisory Program
Bureau of Corrections, Behavioral Modification Program	<b>INL</b> , through agreement with the Colombo Plan Drug Advisory Program
Bureau of Corrections, Directorate for Reformation and Rehabilitation	<b>INL</b> , through agreement with the Colombo Plan Drug Advisory Program
Philippine National Police, Anti-Cyber Group	<b>HSI</b>
Philippine National Police, Anti-trafficking in Persons Division	<b>HSI</b>
Philippine National Police, Operations Management Division	<b>HSI</b>
Philippine National Police, Admin and Resource Management Division	<b>HSI</b>

## U.S. AGENCIES SUPPORTING PHILIPPINES' "COUNTERNARCOTICS" ACTIVITIES (CONT.)

HOST COUNTRY UNIT	U.S. AGENCIES THAT MENTOR, ADVISE, OR TRAIN THE UNIT
Philippine National Police, Luzon Field Unit	HSI
Philippine National Police, International Operations Division	HSI
National Bureau of Investigations, International Operations Division	HSI
National Bureau of Investigations, Cyber Crime Division	HSI
National Bureau of Investigations, Digital ForensicsLab	HSI
Philippine National Police, Internal Affairs Service	ICITAP

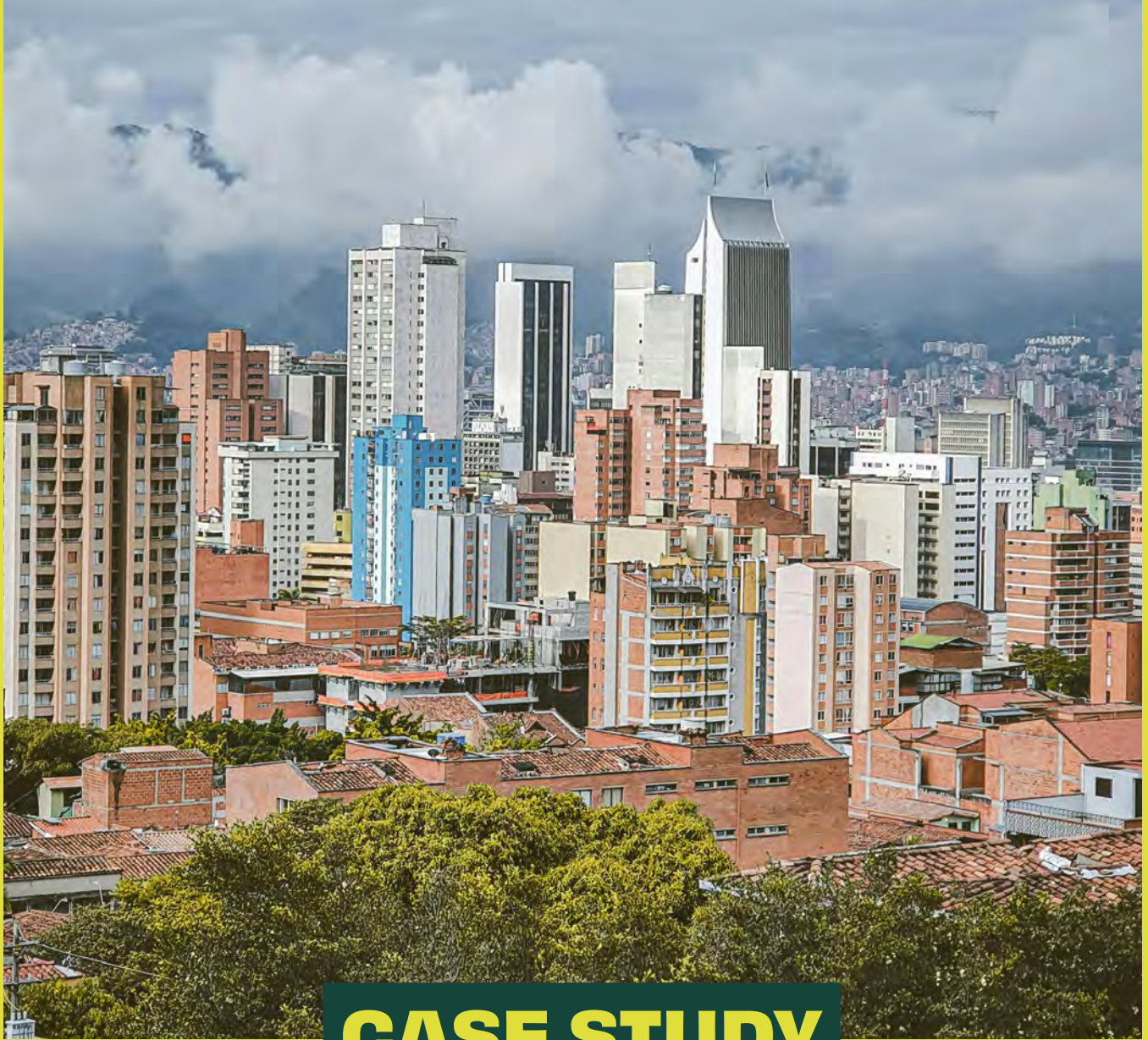
The State Department's report described how its partner PDEA conducted tens of thousands of "counternarcotics" operations in the first eight months of 2022 alone, resulting in the arrests of more than 35,000 people. Tens of thousands of cases for drug-related crimes were also filed in courts, and the government of the Philippines' Barangay Drug Clearing Program increased the number of "drug free communities" ("barangays") in the country from 54% to 62% over the year August 2021-2022.<sup>76</sup> These numbers alone do not present the full picture, as they do not account for human costs and consequences, including long periods of pretrial detention.<sup>77</sup> On average, people are detained in the Philippines for almost a year and a half prior to conviction or acquittal.<sup>78</sup>

The Philippines also saw the largest rise in HIV diagnoses in the Asia-Pacific region over 2010-2021, with a 327% increase in new infections and a 401% increase in AIDS-related deaths.<sup>79</sup> Many of these new infections were among communities facing discrimination, including people who inject drugs.

An estimated 29% of people who inject drugs in the Philippines are living with HIV.<sup>80</sup> Sterile injecting equipment is considered illegal by the Philippines Dangerous Drugs Board and is thus hard to access. Local authorities have enforced such restrictions. In 2009, for example, Cebu City passed rules limiting the sale of syringes without prescriptions. The next year, HIV diagnoses among people who use drugs in the city reportedly jumped from less than 1% to 53%.<sup>81</sup>

**U.S. ODA FUNDING IN THE PHILIPPINES HAS SUPPORTED PUNITIVE DRUG CONTROL, PROLONGED PRETRIAL DETENTION, AND COERCED TREATMENT INSTEAD OF HEALTH-BASED RESPONSES.**

**IN LIGHT OF THE INCREASING RATES OF HIV DIAGNOSES, A MORE EFFECTIVE USE OF U.S. FUNDING WOULD BE TO PROMOTE HARM REDUCTION AND ACCESS TO STERILE EQUIPMENT.**



**CASE STUDY**

# **COLOMBIA**

# COLOMBIA

**American private companies have been the top direct beneficiaries of U.S. foreign aid for "narcotics control" in Colombia,** according to data the U.S. submitted to the OECD. Colombia was the leading recipient of U.S. official development assistance (ODA) for "narcotics control" in 2022, receiving over \$46 million under this category that year, all of which was provided by the U.S. State Department. Strikingly, most of this money (over \$29 million) was spent via private companies from the U.S., more than twice what the Colombian public sector received (\$12 million).<sup>82</sup> The specific companies contracted are not named in the OECD's data. But previously published reports and primary source documents show how the beneficiaries of U.S.-funded "counternarcotics" activities in Colombia have included giant U.S. corporations.

Dyncorp, for instance, was a multibillion-dollar private military contractor (acquired by another conglomerate in 2021) that won contracts to carry out aerial fumigation of crops deemed "illicit" under the bilateral U.S.-Colombia "counternarcotics" strategy called Plan Colombia, which was agreed to in 1999 and began the next year. In 2001, Dyncorp was given a \$600 million contract by

the Department of State for aerial eradication activities.<sup>83</sup> In 2002, Dyncorp was awarded another \$84 million for crop fumigation.<sup>84</sup> In total, 16 private companies benefited from U.S. government contracts for "counternarcotics" activities in Colombia in fiscal year 2003 – including other massive defense contractors such as Lockheed-Martin and Northrop Grumman.

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## GLYPHOSATE TRUTH AND JUSTICE: ONGOING STRUGGLES

Plan Colombia has been described as one of the largest U.S. assistance packages ever given to a single country. Over the 15 years of the agreement (2000–2015), the U.S. government invested almost \$10 billion, and the government of Colombia invested \$13 billion in three phases.<sup>85</sup> Crop destruction, including with aerial fumigation using toxic chemicals, was a key part of it. These efforts destroyed not just

coca crops but also other crops grown by small-scale farmers, forcing many to flee their homes and become internally displaced.<sup>86</sup> Crops were sprayed with a mixture including Roundup, a commercial glyphosate-based herbicide, and an additive reportedly not approved for use in the U.S.<sup>87</sup> to make it more lethal to plants.



The U.S. was involved in spraying glyphosate over crops in Colombia under the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations. The Office of Human Rights and Displacement in Colombia estimated that more than 75,000 people were displaced as a result of fumigation programs across 2001 and 2002 alone.<sup>88</sup> Health concerns were raised including by the World Health Organization; its International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) classified the chemical as a “group 2A agent” which is “probably carcinogenic.” In 2015, Colombia officially ended the use of aerial fumigation, and the Supreme Court of Colombia banned glyphosate.<sup>89</sup> Importantly, given traditional uses of coca, Colombian courts have additionally:

**“protected the fundamental right to prior consultation in a case where ethnic communities requested the permanent cessation of the aerial spraying of glyphosate on territories under their authority and sovereignty.**

**This protection also extends to the right to physical, cultural, and spiritual survival of ethnic communities, ensuring their traditional ways of life. Indigenous peoples are recognized as holders of fundamental rights and subjects of special constitutional protection.”<sup>90</sup>**

Some of the people affected by these programs, however, are still living with their consequences, and there are ongoing struggles for truth and justice. These consequences range from the loss of livelihoods and the eradication of subsistence food crops to the pollution of soil and water sources. Studies have also demonstrated connections with skin disorders and miscarriages.<sup>91</sup> In 2022, some of the people affected testified in front of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) in one of several legal cases that are still ongoing.<sup>92</sup>

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## FOREVER A “COMMITTED U.S. PARTNER”?

The current Colombian President Gustavo Petro, who came into office mid-2022, has vocally opposed the “failed” war on drugs that has caused immeasurable bloodshed and pain.<sup>93</sup> Petro, the first leftist president in Colombia’s history, has also pointed to damage to the environment and the Amazon as consequences. (Much of the land sprayed with glyphosate was in the Amazonian region.<sup>94</sup>) Shortly after Petro’s inauguration, he criticized the U.S.’s approach to drugs at the UN General Assembly.<sup>95</sup> The next year, he proposed a new alliance of Latin American countries to pursue an alternative approach, recognizing drug consumption as a public health problem.<sup>96</sup>

Meanwhile, the U.S. State Department continues to call Colombia a “committed U.S. partner” and to present it as a priority country and “source of 97% of cocaine that enters the United States.”<sup>97</sup> The department’s 2023 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report celebrated how “Colombian authorities achieved the second-highest level of non-aerial eradication on record in 2021,” as well as “very high” numbers of drug seizures.<sup>98</sup> It showed how agencies, including the DEA, FBI, and Homeland Security Investigations, are involved in mentoring, advising, or training units of the Colombian police, military, and criminal justice system. For fiscal year 2023, the State Department requested a total of \$115 million for “counternarcotics” activities in Colombia – more than for any other country that year.<sup>99</sup>



## U.S. AGENCIES SUPPORTING COLOMBIAN "COUNTERNARCOTICS" ACTIVITIES <sup>100</sup>

HOST COUNTRY UNIT	U.S. AGENCIES THAT MENTOR, ADVISE, OR TRAIN THE UNIT
Colombian National Police, Antinarcotics Directorate (DIRAN)	DEA
Colombian National Police, Criminal Investigation Directorate (DUIN)	DEA
Colombian National Police (DUIN)	FBI, HSI, DEA
Colombian Prosecutors Office (CTI)	DEA
Colombian Army (COLAR)	DEA
Customs and National Taxes Directorate (DIAN)	HSI
Colombian Navy (COLNAV)	DEA
Colombian National Police, Tax and Customs Management Directorate (POLFA)	HSI

Extradition is another controversial area of U.S.-Colombia "counternarcotics" cooperation. Colombian President Petro has proposed abandoning the practice of extraditing drug traffickers to face charges to the U.S., questioning its effectiveness.<sup>101</sup> The U.S. government considers extradition a key mechanism to deter transnational crime; however, there are many arguments against it, including the fact that cartel members extradited to the U.S. are usually only tried for drug-related offenses, "depriving Colombian victims of justice for [their] other crimes, which often include homicide and various human rights violations."<sup>102</sup> In 2023, Petro's government requested (although the Colombian attorney general denied) the suspension of

arrest warrants for several individuals sought for extradition.<sup>103</sup> As of writing in 2024, the U.S.-Colombia extradition treaty, signed in 1979, was still in force.<sup>104</sup>

**TO CONCLUDE, THE PRIMARY BENEFICIARIES OF U.S. ODA IN COLOMBIA WERE PRIVATE CORPORATIONS, SUBVERTING THE INTENT OF ODA THAT IT NOT BE USED FOR COMMERCIAL INTERESTS.**

**ADDITIONALLY, U.S. FUNDING CONTINUES TO SUPPORT LAW ENFORCEMENT ACTIVITIES IN COLOMBIA INSTEAD OF HELPING TO MITIGATE HARMS OF AERIAL FUMIGATION OR SUPPORTING EVIDENCE-BASED HEALTH RESPONSES.**



**CASE STUDY**

# **MEXICO**

# MEXICO

U.S. foreign aid to Mexico suffers from a lack of transparency and accountability. In contrast to the cases of Colombia and the Philippines, the State Department's 2023 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report provided no details as to which specific U.S. agencies would be involved in training, advising, and mentoring their Mexican counterparts, using a requested total of \$13 million in funding.<sup>105</sup>

**This gap in transparency isn't the only one.**

## RECORDS REDACTED: 75%

Details of U.S. ODA spending on "narcotics control" in the OECD's database is also particularly lacking for Mexico. Of the 165 underlying project records for this spending in 2022 – covering almost \$6 million in total – about 75% (125) contain the words "information redacted" in their titles. Examples: "INL Information Redacted DISPOSAL SERVICES FOR HAZMAT," "INL Information Redacted Replacement batteries for Clan Lab kits," and "INL Information Redacted Transport. SVCs. Biometric Radios SEMAR." The very limited detail that does exist includes references to a "Precursor Chemical Flow Study," "Forensic Laboratories," and "Vehicles for Mexico [sic] Canine Units."

Mexico was the third largest single country recipient of U.S. ODA for "narcotics control" in 2022.<sup>106</sup> While the almost \$6 million it received under this sector amounted to only about 3% of all U.S. ODA for Mexico in 2022 (\$178 million total), it was still more than many other sectors receiving funding, including "democratic participation and civil society" (\$3 million) and "conflict, peace, and security" (\$4 million). It was also 15 times what the U.S. reported spending (\$354,000) of its ODA on "ending violence against women and girls" in Mexico that year.

This is significant, said Paulina Cortez, a Harm Reduction International researcher from Mexico, given the role of the war on drugs in increasing guns and gun violence in the country, including femicides, which are a national crisis.<sup>107</sup> Each day, between 10–11 women are killed in Mexico.<sup>108</sup>



## BROADENING "SECURITY COOPERATION"

While the U.S. and Mexico are "committed to continued collaboration on counterdrug measures," they will need to "redouble" their efforts, said the State Department's 2023 report, which called Mexico "the sole significant source of illicit fentanyl and fentanyl analogues significantly affecting the United States."<sup>109</sup> The U.S.–Mexico Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities, adopted in 2021, committed both countries to broadening their security cooperation. In 2022, the U.S. and Mexico also agreed on a joint action plan to address the manufacture, distribution, and consumption of illicit synthetic drugs.<sup>110</sup>

This is on top of decades of U.S. anti-drug interventions in Mexico, which have failed to achieve their goals of decreasing the availability and use of drugs while having disastrous consequences for communities, human rights, and democracy in the country.

"Violence is the defining feature of Mexico's war on drugs" and is the result of the prohibitionist approach to drugs adopted by successive governments and supported by the U.S., warned a 2019 report from the Human Rights Foundation. Costs and consequences have included murders, disappearances, uninvestigated mass graves, and attacks on journalists, threatening democracy.<sup>111</sup>

### That report concluded:

**"In Mexico, prohibition was an undemocratic strategy from the start, used to persecute political dissidents; going forward, the country should work to pass drug laws that place human rights and reform at the center.**

**Weaknesses in democracy and policy have caused human rights abuses. Democratic strength will resolve them."**<sup>112</sup>

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## "AN ENORMOUS AMOUNT OF REPRESSION"

Increasing militarization is another defining feature of Mexico's war on drugs that has been supported by the U.S. In 2006, Mexican President Felipe Calderón began deploying the army in his "guerra contra el narco."<sup>113</sup> His administration said that organized crime had become a threat to national values and national sovereignty, thus requiring a military response. The next year, U.S. President George W. Bush announced his request to fund a major new security cooperation initiative with Mexico and other Central American countries called the "Merida Initiative."<sup>114</sup> Under this initiative, U.S. security assistance to Mexico rose significantly.<sup>115</sup> Another operation implemented under U.S. direction during that period was dramatically named "Rápido y Furioso" (Operation Fast and Furious); it ran between 2006 and 2011. The U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) allowed the flow of firearms into Mexico to "combat drug trafficking"

and, supposedly, to track the guns to Mexican drug cartel leaders. Many of the guns were never recovered.<sup>116</sup>

Successive Mexican administrations have maintained or furthered the involvement of the military.<sup>117</sup> This, along with the military's increasing involvement in other big projects including the delivery of COVID vaccination programs and the construction of infrastructure like airports, has increased its resources and power. In turn, Paulina Cortez (HRI's researcher from Mexico) said, it has become harder for civil society to monitor anti-drug activities and pursue accountability for them. She also described corruption and "an enormous amount of repression, including of journalists" as key dynamics limiting the availability of up-to-date and detailed information.<sup>118</sup>

The situation has worsened under the most recent government, Cortez added. The administration of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (which began in 2018, and ends in 2024) moved to give more authority to the armed forces so that they would be authorized to carry out a wider range of functions domestically indefinitely. Cortez noted that involvement of the military, including in alleged confrontations with organized crime groups, has led to increased rates of civilian deaths. The military is more lethal, she warned, and increasingly in charge of anti-drug and other activities.

It's a grim conclusion that Rebeca Calzada agrees with. Based in Mexico, she is a project manager at Youth RISE, which mobilizes youth to engage in harm reduction and drug policy reform to promote health and human rights.<sup>119</sup> The administration of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador "turned the

federal police into a new security body with military characteristics," she said. Mexico's next president, Claudia Sheinbaum, who won elections in early June 2024, appears to be "looking to continue this militarization process by giving more civil tasks to the army and giving the entire leadership of the Guardia Nacional to the army," Calzada warned.<sup>120</sup>

**U.S. SUPPORT FOR THE DRUG WAR IN MEXICO HAS HAD DEVASTATING IMPACTS ON COMMUNITIES, CONTRIBUTING TO MILITARIZATION OF LAW ENFORCEMENT, INCREASED VIOLENCE, REPRESSION, AND AN EROSION OF DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS.**

**MORE TRANSPARENCY IS REQUIRED, SINCE GAPS IN INFORMATION ABOUT WHAT U.S. FUNDING SUPPORTS MAKE IT DIFFICULT TO ENSURE ACCOUNTABILITY IN MEXICO.**



# CONCLUSIONS

**The global war on drugs uses and reproduces harmful mechanisms of racial and imperial control and subordination between and within countries worldwide.**

The U.S. government is the largest exporter of the war on drugs, supporting punitive responses in numerous countries with financial and material resources. Drug policy and related activities should be decolonized with power transferred from wealthy countries, led by the U.S., to local communities. Health and justice must be prioritized, and international funding and material support must be reoriented to reflect this.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

From Harm Reduction International and Drug Policy Alliance

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## THE U.S. GOVERNMENT SHOULD:

- Divest from punitive and prohibitionist drug control regimes.
  - *Stop using taxpayers' money to support punitive drug responses around the world, including the use of U.S. foreign aid, which is supposed to help end poverty and achieve global development goals, for "narcotics control" activities.*
  - *Cease using aid as "leverage" and as a means to pressure low- and middle-income countries to adopt or maintain punitive drug responses.*
- Be more transparent about international spending on drug-related activities, regardless of what budget line this money comes from.
- Increase investments in evidence-based and health- and human rights-centered harm reduction initiatives that align with global development and other commitments – including by reorienting funding for punitive and prohibitive responses to drugs.
- Use metrics aligned with global development commitments to evaluate the success of international aid programs.
- Expand access to evidence-based treatment and support harm reduction services, including by ending the ban on using federal funds to purchase syringes, to address drug demand in the U.S.

## CIVIL SOCIETY AND JOURNALISTS IN THE U.S. SHOULD:

- Demand greater transparency in how U.S. taxpayer money is spent.
- Conduct further, in-depth investigations into how U.S. money has been spent on drug control internationally, including how it was justified, any results claimed, and any direct or indirect impacts that may have undermined other goals or aid rules. In addition to identifying harms of this spending, further investigations should also expose who might benefit from it, including private companies that profit off government contracts for international drug control projects.
- Build public awareness on the use and impacts of taxpayer funds to support damaging punitive drug policies around the world.

## U.S. TAXPAYERS SHOULD:

- Demand integrity and transparency in the government's international spending, including that from limited aid budgets.
- Demand that support from public budgets flows to evidence-based and health- and human rights-centered measures, not for punitive drug control abroad.

## **CIVIL SOCIETY AND JOURNALISTS IN RECIPIENT COUNTRIES SHOULD:**

- Demand greater transparency on how U.S. money is used for drug control.
- Conduct investigations into how U.S. money has been spent on drug control in the country context, including how it was justified, any results claimed, and any direct or indirect impacts that may have undermined other goals or aid rules.
- Build public awareness on the use and impacts of U.S. funds to support damaging punitive drug policies.
- Call for a divestment from punitive drug responses and investment in community, health and justice, including harm reduction.

## **THE OECD SHOULD:**

- Solicit and listen to advice from health and human rights experts, as well as people who use drugs, on whether to remove "narcotics control" from their list of categories of spending eligible to be counted as aid.
- Conduct and publish a thorough review of all ODA spent on "narcotics control" so far, whether any spending breached guidance on this category, and including the high level of redactions in this data and the use of national security or other justifications by donors to withhold details about funded projects.
- Increase transparency of all current and previous aid spending, making data and details of projects easier to access, thereby facilitating accountability.



# ANNEXES – Additional Data Tables

## U.S. ODA FOR NARCOTICS CONTROL, TOP 15 RECIPIENTS

IN USD MILLIONS, CURRENT PRICES <sup>121</sup>

RECIPIENT	10 YEAR TOTAL	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
<b>Top 15 Countries, Total</b>	<b>570.375</b>	<b>25.674</b>	<b>22.071</b>	<b>14.177</b>	<b>14.112</b>	<b>13.106</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>22.581</b>	<b>30.145</b>	<b>309.012</b>	<b>106.497</b>
Colombia	<b>156.358</b>	0.381	0.437	0.283		0	0			109.15	46.107
Afghanistan	<b>46.362</b>	1.119	0.296	0.011	0.085				0.08	33.596	11.175
Mexico	<b>27.106</b>		0.117	0.016	0.056					20.987	5.93
Peru	<b>24.919</b>		0.82	0.245						23.824	0.768
Pakistan	<b>12.463</b>									7.763	4.7
Guatemala	<b>10.974</b>		0.149	0.085						10.344	0.396
Panama	<b>10.384</b>		0.17	0.129						9.988	0.097
Costa Rica	<b>5.35</b>		0.069	0.002						4.746	0.533
Honduras	<b>4.708</b>		0.078	0.054						4.573	0.003
Ecuador	<b>4.679</b>	0.05	0.013	0.139						4.071	0.406
El Salvador	<b>4.228</b>		1.734	0.15						2.344	0
Myanmar	<b>4.37</b>				0.09	0.005				4.275	
Tajikistan	<b>2.123</b>	0.062	0.054	0.122	0.135	0.006				0.735	1.009
Kazakhstan	<b>1.958</b>		0.025	0.077						0.011	1.845
Malaysia	<b>1.701</b>									1.701	

## U.S. ODA FOR NARCOTICS CONTROL VS SELECTED OTHER SECTORS (2013-2022)

IN USD MILLIONS, CURRENT PRICES <sup>122</sup>

RECIPIENT	10 YEAR TOTAL	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Primary Education	<b>8240.073</b>	586.186	807.549	700.079	1133.811	1163.41	965.919	893.825	756.016	728.163	505.108
Water Supply and Sanitation	<b>3795.133</b>	442.978	283.509	387.548	374.755	512.887	402.004	374.554	345.782	360.913	310.203
<b>Narcotics Control</b>	<b>570.375</b>	<b>25.674</b>	<b>22.071</b>	<b>14.177</b>	<b>14.112</b>	<b>13.106</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>22.581</b>	<b>30.145</b>	<b>309.012</b>	<b>106.497</b>
Anti-corruption organizations and institutions	<b>442.029</b>	41.671	42.59	31.854	37.08	47.111	60.527	53.649	44.312	34.352	48.883
Labour Rights	<b>235.933</b>							67.025	35.886	50.737	82.285
Women's rights organizations and movements, and government institutions	<b>42.448</b>	8.787	6.877	4.844	3.08	2.887	4.441	3.307	0.511	0.009	7.705
Ending violence against women and girls	<b>42.675</b>				0.157	0.55	1.372	6.461	6.92	6.935	20.28
Participation in international peacekeeping operations	<b>8.692</b>		0.06		0.018	0.018			2.654		5.942

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**DRUG  
POLICY  
ALLIANCE.**



**HARM REDUCTION  
INTERNATIONAL**