When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best ... They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists’, so said President-elect Donald Trump when announcing his candidacy for president in June 2015.

In the same speech, Trump made his most notorious promise: ‘I will build a great, great wall on our southern border. And I will have Mexico pay for that wall’. A month later, after the escape of Mexican drug lord Joaquin ‘El Chapo’ Guzmán, Trump tweeted that ‘Mexico’s totally corrupt gov’t looks horrible with El Chapo’s escape—totally corrupt’.

Mexico – its people and its government – was the object of some of Trump’s most virulent attacks during his presidential campaign. Yet, once in office, he will not be able to dismiss the country’s interests so readily. Mexico is the US’s neighbour and one of its closest allies in Latin America, a fact that Trump seems to recognise (albeit not explicitly) – it was the only foreign country he visited during his campaign. The economies of the US and Mexico are part of the North American Free Trade Agreement – trade between the two countries totalled $583 billion last year – and they have long been working together to tackle the region’s security issues.

The most important of these is organised crime. And if Trump enacts two of the main policies he threatened during his presidential campaign – significantly heightened security along the US–Mexico border and mass deportations – then the scale and impact of organised crime in the region will get worse, not better.

Trump has no political experience and therefore no political record, and he is perhaps the most capricious president-elect in US history. As such, it is unusually difficult to predict what his policies might be once he is inaugurated on 20 January. However, there are two areas where Trump has been consistent, and both of them affect Mexico and the fight against organised crime: he wants to build the ‘great, great wall’ and he wants to deport undocumented migrants.

Trump may be tempted to row back from these pledges now that he has won the election. But given that these were at the centre of his campaign, any attempt to do so might invite the wrath of his support base. In any case, Trump does not appear to be interested in reneging on these particular pledges. In an interview for CBS’s 60 Minutes, filmed a few days after the election, Trump confirmed that, alongside healthcare and taxes, the wall and deportations would be his main priorities, although he acknowledged that some of the wall might end up being more of a fence.

What will be the consequences of these policies for Mexico and, specifically, for organised crime in the region?

First, there is the ‘great, great wall’ and the beefed-up border security that goes with it. According to security analyst Alejandro Hope, this will likely reduce the number of crossing points for trafficking drugs, which will make the remaining crossing points more valuable, leading to turf wars.

These turf wars are likely to be particularly intense because many of the older and larger organised crime groups (OCGs), such as the Gulf cartel and the Tijuana cartel, have splintered into smaller factions. This is a result of the ramping-up of the war on drugs by Felipe Calderón, Mexico’s president from 2006 to 2012. As well as significantly increasing the resources allocated to the security forces, Calderón favoured large-scale federal operations against OCGs and pursued the ‘kingpin’ strategy, which sought to kill or capture the top-level leadership of Mexico’s OCGs – 22 out of 37 major organised crime figures suffered this fate during his presidency. More OCGs will likely lead to more competition for turf, which, in turn, will lead to more violence. It is worth remembering, as noted by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime’s 2016 World Drug Report, that there is no automatic link between violence and drug trafficking; violence comes when there is a need to resolve disputes.

So the wall may lead to a new spate of turf wars along the border. But this violence may be mitigated by the fact that drug trafficking across the US–Mexico border will likely decrease
in the next few years because of a fall in demand for illicit marijuana from Mexico, which is the drug that currently dominates the cross-border trade. This will happen despite Trump’s wall, not because of it.

At the same time as American voters chose Trump, four states voted to legalise the use of marijuana for recreational purposes, including California, the US’s most populous state, with some 40 million people. There is more demand in the US for marijuana than any other illicit drug, with the 2014 National Survey on Drug Use and Health estimating that there were 22.2 million current users aged twelve or older (compared with 4.8 million who used other illicit drugs), representing 8.4% of the population aged twelve or older. The number of users has been rising steadily; in 2011 it was at 7%. Despite this, the amount of marijuana being trafficked over the border during the same period decreased from 2.5 to 1.9 million pounds. The reason was the drop in demand for foreign-grown marijuana; as US states began to legalise the drug, a homegrown industry took root. Now that 20% of US citizens live in states that have legalised the drug, the demand for marijuana from Mexico will continue to fall.

As US states began to legalise marijuana, a homegrown industry took root

This is in contrast to the US demand for heroin from Mexico, which will likely continue to increase over the next few years. The leading public health organisation in the US, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, has described the US as being in the throes of a ‘heroin epidemic’, with use among 18–25 year olds more than doubling during the last decade. However, despite this epidemic, the size of the heroin market is still tiny in comparison to the marijuana market, and there are more than 50 times the number of marijuana users than there are heroin users. As such, heroin-trafficking will not have a significant impact on drug-trafficking overall. But neither the decrease in marijuana-trafficking nor the increase in heroin-trafficking will have anything to do with Trump’s wall; the only likely effect of the wall on organised crime will be to spark new turf wars.

The second Trump policy that will affect Mexico is mass deportations. In the post-election 60 Minutes interview, Trump promised that on becoming president he would immediately deport the ‘probably 2 million, it could be even 3 million’ undocumented migrants (of 11 million) he claims have criminal records. In fact, this pledge is misleading, since it seems to refer to the 1.9 million non-citizens convicted of crimes – ‘non-citizens’ is a category that includes undocumented migrants, but also many others who are in the country legally, such as those who are on temporary visas. The Migration Policy Institute estimates that only 820,000 of these non-citizens are undocumented migrants.

It is also worth noting that President Barack Obama similarly promised to deport only those undocumented migrants who were ‘criminals, gang bangers, people who are hurting the community’, yet the majority of those he did deport either had no criminal record or had committed only minor infractions, such as traffic violations, or immigration-related crimes, such as illegal entry. An April 2014 New York Times investigation found that only 20% of the 2 million people Obama’s administration had deported since 2008 had been convicted of serious crimes. In the two years since this percentage has not changed.

Obama has deported more people from the US during his administration than were deported during the whole of the twentieth century

So it is likely that Trump’s mass deportations of what he calls the ‘drug dealers [and] gang members’ will result in the deportation of millions of people who are neither. Still, when it comes to deportations Trump intends to outdo Obama, who has deported more people from the US during his administration than were deported during the whole of the twentieth century. To do so, Trump will have to expedite deportation
proceedings to an unprecedented level. This could have two effects, both of which would play into the hands of OCGs operating in the region.

First, some migrants could be sent back into the arms of the very gangs they were fleeing in the first place. Perhaps they fled their homes because they witnessed a gang crime, or refused to pay protection money or let their sons be recruited. Such people would have justifiable grounds for asylum in the US. However, as noted by a 2014 Human Rights Watch report, in recent years the pressure on US immigration officials to expedite the deportation process has led to many migrants with justifiable grounds for asylum being deported. Trump’s plans to massively increase the numbers who are deported will likely lead to the expulsion of many more migrants with legitimate claims to asylum, migrants who will be forced to return and face the gangs they thought they had escaped.

A 2014 report found that homicide rates among adolescents were higher in El Salvador and Guatemala than in any other countries in the world

Second, an expedited process may lead to more children being deported – and it is children who are most vulnerable to becoming victims or members of gangs. A July 2016 report by the International Crisis Group notes that adolescents are particularly vulnerable to trafficking. It cites the sex industry along the Mexico–Guatemala border, which is supplied in large part by adolescent migrants. As members of gangs, adolescents in Central America are exposed to exceptional levels of violence, with a 2014 survey by UNICEF, Hidden in Plain Sight: A Statistical Analysis of Violence Against Children, finding that homicide rates among adolescents were higher in El Salvador and Guatemala than in any other countries in the world.

Why might more children be deported under a Trump presidency? At the moment, those who were brought to the US before their sixteenth birthday and have been in the country since 15 June 2007 can gain deportation relief and work visas under the 2012 Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) programme. Since it came into effect, the Department of Homeland Security has approved DACA applications for more than 700,000 people. Yet DACA was ordered by Obama as an executive action, and so it can just as easily be cancelled by Trump. And there will be significant pressure on him to do so. This year, 26 – mostly Republican – states successfully blocked Obama’s attempt to expand DACA.

There is a wider point here. As long as the violence continues in Mexico and, especially, in the ‘northern triangle’ states of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras – where 150,000 people have been killed since 2006 in crime-related violence – people will continue to flee and seek entry to the US. Trump’s promise to strengthen border security and make it more difficult to become a US citizen will push increasing numbers of undocumented migrants into the embrace of the OCGs who control the trafficking networks.

So Trump’s key policies on Mexico will likely exacerbate, not solve, the problem of organised crime in the region. Trump’s wall could spark new turf wars along the border. And it will not be the solution to reducing drug trafficking, which will be achieved by falling demand for Mexican-grown marijuana. If Obama’s record is anything to go by, Trump’s mass deportations will likely see millions of migrants deported who are not serious criminals, some of whom will be sent back to face the gangs they escaped; others will be children who are especially vulnerable to becoming victims or members of OCGs. In short, Trump’s key policies will embolden those he is most concerned about: the ‘rapists’ who are ‘bringing drugs’ and ‘bringing crime’.

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