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Motivations of Youth Engaged in International Drug Smuggling Through the Perceptions of Law Enforcement in San Diego County

Gabrielle Suzanne Smyth
Walden University

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Walden University

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Gabrielle S. Smyth

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Walden University
2022

Abstract

Motivations of Youth Engaged in International Drug Smuggling Through the Perceptions
of Law Enforcement in San Diego County

by

Gabrielle S. Smyth

MA, Walden University, 2021

MA, National University, 2007

BS, National University, 2005

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Criminal Justice

Walden University

March 2022

Abstract

The use of illegal narcotics in the United States is an epidemic that requires significant and measurable results. Not only are illegal drugs crossing from Mexico into the United States a threat to public safety, but the involvement of juveniles is also becoming increasingly dangerous. Since early 2018, the Drug Enforcement Administration's (DEA's) San Diego Field Division has seen a disturbing trend of Mexican cartels increasingly recruiting juveniles from high schools in southern San Diego County to smuggle drugs through the ports of entry. The theoretical framework utilized in this study was social learning theory. The logical connection between social learning theory and the examination of juveniles' motivations to smuggle narcotics internationally from Mexico into the United States is that juveniles are influenced by the behaviors of those around them. This study used a generic qualitative approach to explore, through the perceptions of law enforcement officers, the motivations of juveniles between the ages of 14 and 17 in San Diego County who smuggle drugs from Mexico into the United States. Findings indicated the primary motivation of juveniles between the ages of 14 and 17 in San Diego County who smuggle narcotics from Mexico into the United States was for monetary gain; the second motivating factor was notoriety. The results of this study have the potential to create positive social change by providing insights into the motivations of juveniles who smuggle drugs from Mexico into the United States in San Diego County. This study may contribute to positive social change, creating awareness within the communities regarding juvenile drug smuggling in San Diego County, which can create insights for the betterment of not only San Diego County, but all border towns within the United States.

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Dedication

The lowest common denominator of all trafficking and smuggling victims is their vulnerability, which may depend on a set of variables deriving from the fact that a person has no physical, material, social, or psychological resources with which to resist the blandishments of traffickers/ smugglers. Such vulnerable personas are desperate to escape from dire socioeconomic and socio-political circumstances.

—Andrea Di Nicola, “Trafficking in Human Beings and Smuggling of Migrants”

This dissertation attempts to acknowledge and validate numerous “truths” about juveniles involved in international drug smuggling. These truths are difficult to understand, but essential to make a positive social change. Juveniles are easily influenced by those around them, and the thrill of easy money and notoriety within a social surrounding can become appealing. This study is dedicated to all the students who attend school along the southern border in San Diego County, to those who have been caught smuggling drugs, and to those who have not been caught yet. I hope this study can shed light on this phenomenon which affects all border towns, not just in San Diego.

This study is dedicated to my son, McDaniel, who attended school in San Diego County and informed me of the drugs on his campus, which were unknown to parents. This study is dedicated to my stepdaughter Vivien, who will attend these same schools. This study is dedicated to those with no voice when it comes to drugs, peer pressure, and illicit activities; this dissertation is my attempt to provide the insight and tools necessary to overcome these challenges in our communities. This study aims to lessen the use of

juveniles when it comes to Mexican cartels recruiting juveniles to smuggle drugs from Mexico into the United States.

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I would like to start my acknowledgments with my husband. He stood by and watched the grueling efforts put forth during the last three-plus years. I would like to sincerely thank him for his support during this time. I would like to thank Crystal Edwards for taking the time to read my proposal before submitting it. I would like to thank Briana Quinn for always answering the phone when I called to vent, and to Dawn Enright Saunders for her continued positive support. I would like to thank Brandy Jackson for her random drop-ins that brought new perspectives in the midst of frustrations. Friends and family are what make the world, my world, go round!

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The urgency of the drug epidemic in the United States requires significant and measurable results (Ahmad et al., 2020). Not only are illegal drugs crossing from Mexico into the United States a threat to public safety, but the use of juveniles is also becoming increasingly dangerous (DEA, 2019). The U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) reported an increase in narcotics crossing the international border and statistics showing an international drug smuggling problem. In 2019 alone, CBP seized 89,207 pounds of cocaine (up from 51,592 pounds in 2018); 5,427 pounds of heroin (up from 5,205 pounds in 2018); 289,529 pounds of marijuana (down from 299,419 in 2018); 68,585 pounds of methamphetamine (up from 57,440 pounds in 2018); and 2,545 pounds of fentanyl (up from 1,895 pounds in 2018; CBP, n.d.).

Since early 2018, the DEA's San Diego Field Division has seen a disturbing trend of Mexican cartels recruiting juveniles from high schools close to the border in San Diego County to smuggle drugs through the ports of entry (DEA, 2019). Agents have arrested numerous juveniles who have had drugs strapped on their bodies attempting to cross from Mexico into the United States (DEA, 2019). The Mexican drug trafficking organizations target students who cross the border daily, living in Mexico, but attending high school in San Diego (Davis, 2018). In 2018, an arrest was made at San Ysidro High School (San Diego County) when a student brought 11 pounds of methamphetamine to the High School (U.S. Attorney's Office, 2018). In January of 2020, four individuals (one adult and three juveniles ages 14 and 16) were apprehended smuggling and transporting methamphetamine; one juvenile had 3.31 pounds of methamphetamine strapped to his

body under his clothes (CBP, 2020a). The backpacks they were carrying contained another 50.71 pounds of methamphetamine collectively. Another incident occurred in July of 2020, when a juvenile smuggled six pounds of methamphetamine into the United States and was caught transporting the narcotics (CBP, 2020c). These examples show there is a progressive problem in San Diego County where more and more juveniles are becoming involved in international drug smuggling.

The information this study provides is important because it will highlight a phenomenon which affects the Southwest border, more specifically, in San Diego County, in California. Through resources available (in the English language), I was unable to find any studies regarding this topic. Through an extensive literature review, I was not able to find scholarly literature on juveniles used for international drug smuggling from Mexico into the United States in San Diego County. Illuminating this phenomenon is essential; international drug smuggling does not only affect the juveniles involved in San Diego County, the smuggling of dangerous drugs affects those throughout the country who transport, distribute, and partake in their use.

The results of this study could help bring awareness to the communities surrounding the United States–Mexico border. The results of this study can inform policy makers to readdress the San Diego District Attorney’s Juvenile Justice programs regarding international drug smuggling for the betterment of the juveniles in San Diego County.

Background

Drugs crossing from Mexico into the United States are a threat to public safety and the use of juveniles is becoming increasingly dangerous, especially in San Diego County (DEA, 2019). Juveniles may be exploited because they represent an inexpensive, easily recruited workforce who can absorb the risks related to street-level sales and are considered disposable (Coomber & Moyle, 2012). Peer groups play an important role in shaping many important decisions made by juveniles. Lupton et al. (2002) found there has been a change from sporadic exploitation, likely from within family and friendship networks, to more widespread and systematic exploitation employing techniques of coercive control of juveniles. Studies of the use of juveniles to smuggle narcotics across borders in Europe were used as examples for this study because there are not currently any studies on the use of juveniles to smuggle drugs internationally from Mexico into the United States.

Findings from a study by Little and Steignberg (2006), examining the psychosocial correlation of urban juvenile drug dealing, suggested that community, family, and peer factors were the most robust correlations of juveniles' frequency of drug dealing; looking further into this could potentially provide insight (if similar) to juveniles smuggling narcotics from Mexico into the United States. Shook et. al (2011) explored the drug dealing behaviors of youthful offenders who sold drugs and examined differences between these offenders and those who do not sell drugs across various measures. This study found drug dealing is not tied solely to economic motivations but is connected to substance use patterns; juveniles who sold drugs were also engaged in delinquent

practices (Carvalho & Soares, 2016; Dowdney, 2003; Sergi, 2016). There have not been any studies to confirm this is true in regards to international drug smuggling or the juveniles who smuggle drugs internationally. This study did not look at drug use as a variable for the study (Shook et. al., 2011).

Vilalta and Martinez (2012) investigated the predictors of hard narcotic dealing crimes among Mexican students and found that 3.5% of the students surveyed admitted to having been involved in a drug-dealing crime of an illegal substance different from marijuana. For this study, or future studies, I could use the results of “predictors,” and programs could be created to target the population smuggling and dealing drugs from Mexico into the United States. Further research could include students who smuggle drugs from Mexico into the United States, and not just within Mexico.

Studying the criminogenic thought process of juveniles can be an integral part of creating a program tailored for San Diego County’s juvenile justice rehabilitation programs, specifically geared toward juveniles who have been arrested smuggling drugs internationally, not solely drug rehabilitation programs for drug use or addiction. The information I gathered in this study shed light on the culture (social surroundings) of juveniles involved in international drug smuggling. With the lack of current research, this study was essential to highlight juveniles’ motivations in getting involved in international drug smuggling for the Mexican drug trafficking organizations. In doing this, the surrounding communities, schools, agencies involved, and juveniles themselves will gain an understanding of the risks involved in international drug smuggling and Mexican Drug Cartels.

Based on the above information, I explored the motivations of juveniles, through the perceptions of law enforcement officers, to smuggle drugs from Mexico into the United States in San Diego County. This study was completed through the lens of law enforcement officers who work on the Southwest border in San Diego County who have arrested at least one juvenile attempting to smuggle drugs between 2017 and 2021. Although researchers have investigated Mexican cartels (Argomedo, 2020; Bunker, 2010), drug trafficking organizations (Hunt, 2019), and drug smuggling (Bunker, 2010; DEAs Strategic Intelligence Section [SIC], 2021) in general terms, the use of juveniles and their motivation to smuggle drugs internationally from Mexico into the United States in San Diego County has not been explored. This study explored their motivations through the perceptions of the law enforcement officers who made the arrests.

Problem Statement

Mexican cartels often recruit juveniles to transport drugs for them as “couriers” or “mules.” The juveniles are lured into international drug smuggling enticed with money or notoriety and told they will not face consequences if they are caught. The peers influence many important juvenile decisions, especially delinquent choices (Bayer et al., 2009). The reality is that juveniles who become involved with drug trafficking organizations in San Diego can face very serious consequences. Drug trafficking can involve transporting, selling, administering, or giving a controlled substance to another person; all are considered delinquent behavior.

Since the mid-2000s, the drug war in Mexico has gained increasing attention in both the mass media and scholarly and policy publications in the United States (Bunker,

2010). Still, the available literature does not include the role and motivations of juveniles involved with Mexican cartels and smuggling narcotics internationally. The problem that was addressed through this study is the criminogenic thought process of juveniles used to smuggle narcotics internationally from Mexico into the United States in San Diego County, illuminating their motivations through the perceptions of justice workers. There are currently no published studies on the criminogenic thought process of the juveniles involved in international drug smuggling from Mexico into the United States. As noted by Sanchez (2020), “despite the hyper-visibility of crime in and across Mexico, academic production involving grounded, bottom-up, community-based research with those directly experiencing criminalization in the country is limited at best” (p. 392). This is an increasing problem at the Southwest border, specifically in San Diego, California.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore, through the perceptions of law enforcement officers, the motivations of juveniles to smuggle drugs from Mexico into the United States in San Diego County. For this study, I approached law enforcement officers who have been involved in the arrest of at least one juvenile attempting to smuggle drugs from Mexico into the United States in San Diego County. I created an interview questionnaire to gain an understanding of this phenomenon. As I interviewed the law enforcement officers, I requested that they not search their reports from juvenile arrests, but answer the questions based on their perceptions from the interviews they have been a part of.

This study is unique because it addressed an under-researched area of Mexican cartels using juveniles to smuggle narcotics from Mexico into the United States, specifically in San Diego County. The purpose of this study was not solely to increase knowledge of juveniles' involvement in drug smuggling, but to understand the motivation of why they participate. This study can assist in creating positive social change through recommending strategies for combating the phenomenon of juveniles smuggling narcotics across the international border and their involvement with drug trafficking organizations. This can be done through educational programs and policy and sentencing changes in the juvenile justice system.

Research Question

The following research question was developed to illuminate the phenomenon of juveniles' motivation to smuggle drugs from Mexico into the United States in San Diego County: What are the perceptions of law enforcement officers regarding the motivations of juveniles between the ages of 14 and 17 in San Diego County who smuggle narcotics from Mexico into the United States?

Theoretical Framework for the Study

This qualitative study is rooted in social learning theory. Cognitive psychologists such as Bandura (1969) proposed this theory to understand human nature. Social learning theory emphasizes the importance of observing and modeling behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions (Bandura, 1977). The logical connections between social learning theory and the examination of juveniles who smuggle narcotics internationally from Mexico into the United States, is that juveniles are influenced by the behaviors of those

around them. Social learning theory suggests people engage in either criminal or noncriminal behavior based on the social environment and that people are influenced by how others reward or model behavior. Juveniles in the midst of growth (i.e., ages 14–17) are influenced by those around them, both their social and familial environments.

Social learning theory highlights the importance of observing and modeling the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others (Yun & Kim, 2015). Thus, it focuses on learning by observation and modeling. Social learning theory is a general theory that offers an explanation of the acquisition, maintenance, and change in criminal and deviant behavior that embraces social, nonsocial, and cultural factors operating both to motivate and control criminal behavior and both to promote and undermine conformity (Yun & Kim, 2015). Social learning theory explains that social environments can lead to conforming and criminal behavior. The probability of criminal or conforming behavior is a function of the balance of these influences on behavior during any given situation (Akers & Jensen, 2006). According to Akers (1998), social learning theory proposes that individual conformity and deviant behavior are products of a learning process, operating in a context of social structure, interactions with significant others, and situation. The difference between conformity and deviance is the direction of the process in which these mechanisms operate. (p. 50)

Juveniles who make delinquent choices influence their peers (Dishion, Spracklen, & Patterson, 1996). This phenomenon occurs when one juvenile demonstrates “rebellious behavior,” such as drug smuggling, and the group elevates them in notoriety (Dishion et al., 1996). The juvenile smuggles drugs, does not get caught, does not “get in trouble,”

and makes thousands of dollars. Then, other juveniles in the group begin to emulate the behavior, further strengthening the delinquent act (Dishion et al., 1996), and recruiting others to join them; they now have notoriety and money. Juveniles are influenced by their peers and their culture; this has the potential to lead into criminal behavior. Looking at drug trafficking organizations and their use of juveniles, this study solely focused on the social aspect, not the rational choice.

Nature of the Study

This was a qualitative study to explore the motivations of juveniles, through the perceptions of law enforcement officers, to smuggle drugs from Mexico into the United States in San Diego County. One of the more popular areas of interest in qualitative research design is the use of interviews; interviews were used for this study. Interviews provide in-depth information pertaining to participants' experiences and viewpoints of a particular topic, in this case, the motivations of juveniles to smuggle drugs internationally from Mexico into the United States in San Diego, through the perception of law enforcement officers who made the arrest. This study describes and provides background information on Mexican cartels, drug trafficking organizations, and the use of juveniles for international drug smuggling.

The purpose of using qualitative interviewing for this study was to collect data that illuminated, in as much detail as possible, the juvenile's experience of the phenomenon of interest (drug smuggling) using the professional opinions of law enforcement agents and officers who have worked (or have experience in) juveniles drug smuggling cases. For this study, I analyzed information from 2017–2021 on juveniles

arrested attempting to smuggling narcotics from Mexico into the United States, including approximate age, citizenship (if possible), proximity from border to school (if possible), monetary gain, and type of narcotic(s) seized. In doing this, I was able to better understand the profile of individuals recruited to smuggle narcotics from Mexico into the United States, in a broad sense. After documenting necessary biographical and demographic information, I created a qualitative coding system of the responses of the law enforcement officers. The respondents answered the interview questions and informed the research question for this study. The responses were transcribed into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for easy viewing, coding, and analyzing. The purpose of doing this was to explore the motivations of juveniles, through the perceptions of law enforcement officers, to smuggle drugs from Mexico into the United States in San Diego County.

As stated, the information for this study was collected using data from agents and officers involved in the juvenile justice system in San Diego County. Interviewing these individuals assisted in the understanding of the criminogenic thought process and motivations of juveniles involved in international drug smuggling without ever approaching a juvenile. I took the interview responses, summarized them by section, documented the responses in an Excel spreadsheet, and used a coding technique to decipher and analyze the responses about the motivations of juveniles to smuggle narcotics internationally from Mexico into the United States.

Definitions of Terms

The following definitions are provided to ensure uniformity and understanding of these terms throughout the study.

County lines drug dealing: “a new, and rapidly evolving, drug supply model which sees urban drug dealers cross police borders to exploit provincial drug markets” (Windle et al., 2020, p. 1).

Criminogenic: A system or situation causing (or likely to cause) criminal behavior.

Exploitation: The act of taking advantage of something; the act of taking unjust advantage of another for one’s own benefit (Black’s Law Dictionary, 2009).

Justice worker: For this study, the term *justice worker* will be used to describe officers and agents who have been involved in the apprehensions and arrests of juveniles attempting to smuggle drugs internationally from Mexico into the United States, specifically at the San Ysidro and Otay Mesa Ports of Entry.

Mexican drug cartel: A drug cartel is any criminal organization with the intention of supplying drug trafficking operations; they range from loosely managed agreements among various drug traffickers to more formal drug trafficking organizations. Mexican cartels are “increasingly responsible” for producing and supplying drugs to the United States (Ostrosky et al., 2015; Infobae, 2021).

Plaza: A drug trafficking organization’s territory (Dulin & Patino, 2020).

Out of town dealers (OTD): Those who move from a large urban area and travel to smaller locations (such as a county or coastal town) to sell Class A drugs; specifically, crack cocaine and heroin; gangs (National Crime Agency [NCA], 2017).

Assumptions

In this study, I assumed there is a need to better understand the motivations of juveniles for being involved in international drugs smuggling. It was furthermore assumed that ongoing exploitation of juveniles is an issue that needs to be further researched. For this study, I assumed the participants were honest and open in their responses during the interview. I also assumed that generic qualitative inquiry was the best possible tool to illuminate the research problem of juveniles' motivations for being recruited by Mexican cartels to smuggle narcotics internationally.

The second primary set of assumptions made in this study related to my involvement in law enforcement related to international drug smuggling, as a special agent within the Department of Homeland Security. These assumptions are from experience working international drug smuggling cases, but not particular to juveniles. These assumptions include that Mexican drug cartels are using kids as decoys to move drugs from Mexico into the United States and that American juveniles are being recruited to smuggle drugs, not just Mexican juveniles. It is assumed that juveniles smuggle drugs from Mexico into the United States for monetary gain. It is assumed that juveniles also smuggle drugs from Mexico into the United States for notoriety (i.e., to "be cool" or "fit in"). The last assumption was that juveniles smuggle drugs from Mexico into the United

States because there appear to be no repercussions for breaking the law (lenient sentences if caught).

It is assumed that the reader is aware of rational choice theory. Rational choice theory assumes that the choice to commit a crime arises out of a logical judgment of cost versus reward (Becker, 1968; Zhao et al., 2021). Juveniles have immature brains that cannot fully comprehend consequences, they are more influenced by their emotions than logic, and individuals who commit crimes often lack information or the perspective to make a sound judgment (Zhao et al., 2021). In other words, the historical understanding of rational choice assumes a totally rational person is making the choice, but juveniles are not wholly rational, nor have they formed the ability to make rational choices. Do benefit-related variables outweigh cost-related variables, or vice versa, when making a rational choice? The question concerns the cost and benefit-related variables when juvenile offenders make their decisions in association with delinquency (i.e., smuggling narcotics); however, that is not the goal of this study, so social learning theory was used.

Limitations

Limitations are factors that are sometimes out of the researcher's control which can affect the study itself or the study's results (Patton, 2015). A major concern in this particular study was protecting the juveniles' information (Maxfield & Babbie, 2018); however, the information of the juveniles was not known to me and therefore could not be shared in this study. This study analyzed the data regarding the juveniles' drug smuggling events, but personal identifying information was not included. The last issue could have been the lack of respondents for the study. One secondary issue stemming

from the last, was receiving this information using the job title within the Department of Homeland Security. These were minimized as this study asked for perceptions.

Scope and Delimitations

The general purpose of this study was to analyze the motivational thought process of juveniles smuggling narcotics from Mexico into the United States, from the perception of justice workers in San Diego County. This study used agents and officers who have worked narcotic cases involving juveniles. I contacted the agents and officers in a personal setting outside of the workplace. The area of interest were the San Ysidro and Otay Mesa Ports of Entry in San Diego County. This study only used cases where the juvenile was caught smuggling or has previously smuggled narcotics from Mexico into the United States and was arrested. The data used for this study was from 2017–2021, and the age range of juveniles was 14–17 years of age at the time of smuggling. No juvenile was approached for this study; the information came from the professional perceptions of agents and officers who had made arrests.

Some of the contextual issues regarding this study included removing researcher bias from the study, as I am a law enforcement officer in San Diego County, and generalizability and/or transferability (i.e., looking at other border towns). I asked agents and officers involved in the juvenile justice system questions that allowed me to understand the criminogenic thought process of the juveniles before, during, and after the smuggling attempt to illuminate their motivations. The agents and officers interviewed in this study had knowledge of the juvenile justice system and the behaviors of juveniles who have been arrested at the Southwest border in San Diego County.

Significance of the Study

The results of this study provide insight into the phenomenon of the motivations of juveniles to smuggle drugs internationally from Mexico into the United States for Mexican drug trafficking organizations. With the information gained through this study, juvenile justice policies and academic prevention courses could be created or modernized to ensure the current trends in juvenile drug smuggling are decreased throughout the southwest border. Currently, there is a lack of academic research regarding Mexican cartels using juveniles to smuggle narcotics and juveniles' roles and motivations to smuggle narcotics from Mexico into the United States.

The results of this study are expected to provide insight into the culture of international juvenile drug smuggling; this insight could provide a positive shift in culture on the San Diego and Tijuana international border. In providing the latter, the motivations and criminogenic thought processes of juveniles will be illuminated and positive social change in the communities surrounding the international border in San Diego County can occur. If the information gained through this study can assist in the deterrence of juvenile drug smuggling, the culture and motivations within the surrounding communities can change for the betterment of all.

Positive Social Change

Positive social change results in improved human and social conditions; when we create change in ourselves, we help guide those around us, which in turn, changes communities, which in turn changes nations, which could create a global impact. One of the best definitions of social change I have come across is from Verma (n.d.): "Changes

in the culture are accompanied by social changes. The main cause of social change is the cultural factor. Culture gives speed and direction to social change and determines the limits beyond which social changes cannot occur” (p. 1). Walden University is focused on inspiring and celebrating the remarkable achievements of community members who continue to make a difference by addressing challenges where they live, in their professions, and the world around them. I choose Walden because this university is focused on social change and what that means to each person individually and during times, collectively. Creating change is more than words; it is creating a culture of change within ourselves and our communities.

Creating Change

Something meaningful, justified, and impactful is the phenomenon of juveniles being used by the Mexican Cartels to smuggle illicit narcotics from Mexico into the United States. This problem not only affects our border schools and students (in San Diego), but the narcotics being smuggled into the United States are being trafficked through San Diego with final destinations throughout the country. While the phenomenon I sought to explore solely affects border towns (for this study, San Diego County), the narcotics beings smuggled affect the entire nation. The goal with this study, and research going forward, is to positively impact and change organizations’ culture I am a part of for the better.

Summary

The U.S.–Mexico international border is the world’s busiest land crossing, and according to World Atlas (2019), San Ysidro (in San Diego County) port of entry is the

busiest border crossing in both the United States and the western hemisphere. In 2018, this port of entry saw 9.4 million pedestrians and 14.5 million personal vehicles carrying 25.2 million passengers (World Atlas, 2019). San Ysidro is followed by El Paso, and then Otay Mesa, which is also in San Diego County. This border creates an environment where Mexican cartels recruit individuals of all ages and nationalities to smuggle drugs.

This study looked at the use of juveniles aged 14–17 in San Diego County, California. The cases in San Diego County show there is a rise in juveniles becoming involved in international drug smuggling. In 2018, before the end of the fiscal year, at least 70 juveniles had been arrested at the Port of Entry trying to smuggle methamphetamine, cocaine, heroin and deadly Fentanyl into San Diego County (USAO, 2018). Juveniles are being used by “dangerous, organized criminals” and do not fully understand the danger they are putting themselves in nor do they understand the harm and devastation to potential drug users (USAO, 2018). In February of 2018, a 17-year-old in El Centro CA was arrested attempting to smuggle 41 packages of methamphetamine with a total weight of 36.08 pounds and an estimated street value of \$119,064 USD (CBP, 2018a). In March 2018, two juveniles (ages 16 and 17) were arrested in Tucson AZ attempting to transport 135 pounds of marijuana worth an estimated \$111,000 USD (CBP, 2018b). In August 2018, a 17-year-old girl was arrested with a half-pound of methamphetamine in Nogales AZ (CBP, 2018c). In September 2018, a 17-year-old from Tucson was arrested for smuggling cocaine (CBP, 2018d). In December 2018, in Nogales AZ, a 16-year-old was arrested attempting to smuggle over one pound of heroin taped to his back; the estimated value was \$28,000 USD (CBP, 2018e). In September 2019, in

Nogales AZ, a 16-year-old was arrested attempting to smuggle a quarter pound of fentanyl hidden in his groin. Shortly after this arrest, an 18-year-old girl was arrested with a half of a pound of fentanyl hidden in her groin (CBP, 2019a). In December 2019, in El Centro CA, two 17-year-old girls were arrested with narcotics hidden and strapped to their bodies; in total, agents found seven packages (four contained cocaine and three contained pills with fentanyl). The total weight of the cocaine discovered was 2.46 pounds and .78 pounds of fentanyl pills, with an estimated value of \$61,500 (CBP, 2019b). In January 2020, a 14-year-old was arrested with three packages of methamphetamine strapped to his body with a total weight was 3.31 pounds (CBP, 2020a). In June 2020, in Yuma AZ, a 17-year-old was arrested attempting to retrieve multiple packages of methamphetamine dropped from a drone that crossed from Mexico into the United States (CBP, 2020b). The total weight of methamphetamine was more than 12 pounds and had a street value of approximately \$26,000 USD (CBP, 2020b). In July 2020, in El Centro CA a juvenile was arrested attempting to smuggle 6 pounds of methamphetamine with a street value of \$11,400 USD (CBP, 2020c). Also, in July, another juvenile was arrested attempting to smuggle 29.9 pounds of methamphetamine (within two backpacks) with a street value of \$67,275 USD (CBP, 2020d).

The southern border, between Mexico and United States, creates an environment where Mexican Cartels recruit juveniles to smuggle dangerous drugs, this research study attempted to find the reason for juveniles' involvement; their motivation to agree to smuggle drugs from Mexico into the United States in San Diego County. Although there are numerous data points involved in understanding the trafficking of illicit drugs into the

United States from Mexico, these data are often estimated, incomplete, and imperfect.

This study used agents and officers who work on the international border and have been involved in the arrests of juveniles for international drug smuggling. Using information from this study, policy makers involved in the juvenile justice system can better understand the motivations of the juveniles who smuggle drugs Mexico into the United States, from the perception of law enforcement officers, and create programs to assist in the understanding and prevention of juvenile drug smuggling at the Southwest border, specifically in San Diego County, California.

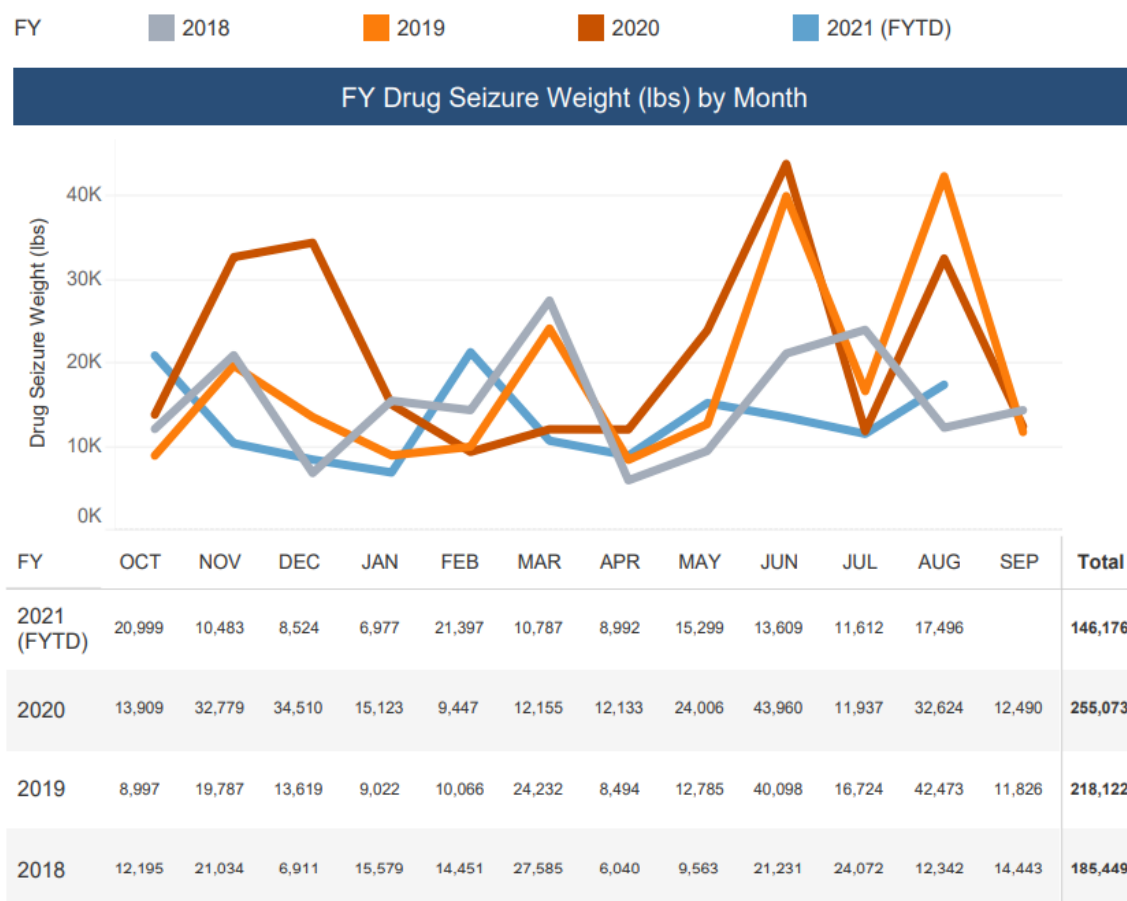
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Mexican cartels, specifically drug trafficking organizations, have developed into versatile organizations that cooperate intermittently but maintain their independence. Drug trafficking organizations operate worldwide and employ sophisticated technology and financial savvy. Mexican cartels are in the business of bribing government officials and currently take advantage of weak border security (National Security Council, n.d.). Along the U.S.–Mexico border, new trafficking routes emerge when there are takeovers of new cartel territories (DEAs SIC, 2021). Due to the enormous profits associated with drug trafficking, the illegal trade also finances other transnational criminal organizations and activities. The ability of the U.S. government to stop illicit drugs is hindered by the size and power of the international narcotics business (DEAs SIC, 2021; National Security Council, n.d.; Zill & Bergman, 2014). Drug production, smuggling, transportation, and distribution have matured into a sophisticated business structure with estimated earnings of between \$300-\$400 billion dollars worldwide (Frontline, n.d.).

According to CBP (2021), as of September 15, 2021, 146,176 pounds of (unspecified) drugs have been seized at the international border in San Diego County (592,794 pounds nationally; see Figure 1). This means that 25% of all narcotics seized were attempting to be smuggled through San Diego County, more specifically San Ysidro and Otay Mesa Ports of Entry.

Figure 1

Drug Seizure in San Diego County 2018–2021 Highlighting FY2021 with 146,179



Note. FY = fiscal year; FYTD = fiscal year to date. From *Drug Seizure Statistics*, by Customs and Border Protection, 2021 (<https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/drug-seizure-statistics>). In the public domain.

According to Zill and Bergman (2014), international drug smuggling is the most profitable business, even compared to some of the largest corporations and automotive companies. Once a regional problem involving a customer base of a few million, the illegal drug industry is now a worldwide enterprise with tens of millions of consumers

spending hundreds of billions of dollars on drugs annually (Zill & Bergman, 2014). Currently, the United States is the single largest marketplace for illegal drugs (Ahmed et al., 2021; Zill & Bergman, 2014). Losses in the Mexican cartel drug business, through drug seizures, are rarely catastrophic, though. The United Nations estimates that current drug interdiction efforts intercept approximately 23.5% of cross-border shipments (Zill & Bergman, 2014). More than 75% of drugs are successfully smuggled into the United States and are transported throughout the nation and are within the communities.

The DEA (2019) reported that drugs crossing from Mexico into the United States are a threat to public safety and the use of juveniles is becoming increasingly dangerous, especially in San Diego County, California. The problem addressed through this study was that, currently, there are no published studies on the motivations of the juveniles involved in international drug smuggling from Mexico into the United States. My aim was to discover the motivations of juveniles who are used to smuggle narcotics internationally from Mexico into the United States in San Diego County through the perception of justice workers.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to improve the understanding of the criminogenic thought process of juveniles to become involved in smuggling narcotics across the international border in San Diego County. Juveniles being used to smuggle narcotics from Mexico into the United States is a problem that is affecting the border towns of San Ysidro and Otay Mesa in San Diego County. Social learning theory was used to form the theoretical framework for this qualitative study. The logical connection between social learning theory and the examination of juveniles who smuggle narcotics

internationally from Mexico into the United States is that the behaviors of those around them influence juveniles.

Numerous studies have attempted to understand the causes of youth involvement in drug trafficking organizations. Literature on the recruitment of juveniles for criminal activities has focused on three factors as potential explanations: social, psychological, and economic (Comunale et al., 2020). Ostrosky et al. (2012) argued that juveniles are attracted by the culture of organized crime and the experience of having money. Currently, there is an abundance of literature that describes the likelihood of being recruited for criminal activity at a young age is also positively associated with notoriety, problems at school, drug use, and low socioeconomic conditions (Arsovska, 2015; Carvalho & Soares, 2016; Silva & Urani, 2002). In this regard, growing up in a socioeconomically deprived neighborhood, either in Tijuana or San Ysidro, has the potential to facilitate recruitment into a drug trafficking organization (Carvalho & Soares, 2016; Decker & Chapman, 2008; Sergi, 2016; Van San & Sikkens, 2017). In classic criminological studies, researchers have attempted to use environmental perspectives on crime to understand the relationships between culture, behavior, deviance, and control strategies (Carvalho & Soares, 2016; Dowdney, 2003; Sergi, 2016). Some studies have shown that family ties can enable juveniles looking to join criminal organizations since family members and close friends are easier to trust (Arsovska, 2015; Little & Steingberg, 2006; Sergi, 2016).

For organized crime and criminal organizations, to include Mexican cartels and drug trafficking organizations, there are various degrees of hierarchical organization to

minimize the risk of apprehension or arrest. This chapter will explain the organizational structures of Mexican cartels and their roles as drug trafficking organizations to include their use of juveniles to smuggle narcotics from Mexico into the United States. With the lack of literature on juveniles smuggling drugs along the southwest border, I used county lines as a means of illuminating why juveniles are involved in this phenomenon and their criminogenic thought process.

Literature Search Strategy

My objective in this study was to better understand the motivations of juveniles who agree to smuggle drugs internationally. For this dissertation, I conducted a literature search using several sources of information, starting at Walden's online library. Articles were accessed by using the following search terms: *Why do Mexican Cartels use Juveniles, Juveniles smuggling drugs, Juveniles Trafficking drugs, International Drug Smuggling, Mexican Drug Cartels, Statistics of Smuggled Drugs, Department of Homeland Security, San Diego, Drug Enforcement Administration, Crime and Cartels, Territorial Claims, Qualitative Studies Kids Selling Drugs, Juveniles and Drug Trafficking, AND Drug Smuggling, Qualitative Studies AND Drugs AND Juveniles*. Also, through the Walden online library, I used the following databases and search engines: *Criminal Justice Database, SAGE Journals, Bureau of Justice Statistics, FindLaw, Homeland Security Digital Library, Customs and Border Protection (Department of Homeland Security), Drug Enforcement Administration (Justice Department), California Department of Justice, California Attorney General's Office, Google Scholar, and*

Google. I continued to search for up-to-date information and research on this topic throughout the process.

Theoretical Foundation

Social learning theory was chosen for this qualitative study because it is a general theory that explains the acquisition, maintenance, and change in criminal and deviant behavior that embraces social, nonsocial, and cultural factors operating both to motivate and control criminal behavior and both to promote and undermine conformity (Akers, 1998; Akers & Jensen, 2006; Bandura, 1977; Smith-Cunnien, 2004; Yun & Kim, 2015). The logical connection between social learning theory and the examination of juveniles who smuggle narcotics internationally from Mexico into the United States is that juveniles are influenced by the behaviors of those around them.

Social Learning Theory

Cognitive psychologists such as Bandura (1969) proposed this theory to understand human nature. Social learning theory emphasizes the importance of observing and modeling behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions (Bandura, 1977). Social learning theory highlights the importance of observing and modeling the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional responses (Yun & Kim, 2015). Thus, it focuses on learning by observation and modeling. Social learning theory suggests that people engage in either criminal or noncriminal behavior based on the social environment, and individuals are influenced by how others are rewarded. Thus, it focuses on learning by observation and modeling. Social learning theory is essentially the same learning process of social structure, interaction, and situation, leading to conforming and (potentially) criminal

behavior. The probability of criminal or conforming behavior is a function of balancing these influences (Akers & Jensen, 2006), for example, to smuggle or not to smuggle.

Akers proposed social learning theory in criminology by reformulating and reinterpreting Sutherland's differential association theory by combining it with social learning theory (Akers & Sellers, 2009; Smith-Cunnien, 2004). According to Akers (1998), social learning theory proposes that

individual conformity and deviant behavior are products of a learning process, operating in a context of social structure, interactions with significant others, and situation. The difference between conformity and deviance is the direction of the process in which these mechanisms operate. (p. 50)

As initially argued by Akers et al. (1979), behavior is acquired both through direct conditioning and through imitation or modeling of others' behavior, shaped by the consequences of the behavior. Akers argued that social learning theory could explain serious offenses, such as homicide, gang violence, and heavy drug use, as well as more trivial misdemeanors, such as traffic violations, truancy, and various minor juvenile delinquencies.

Organized crime scholars have considered criminal associations either as "illicit enterprises" (Paoli, 2002; Von Lampe, 2008), therefore responding to rational choice models and theories (Von Lampe, 2011), or as social entities, therefore responding to social theories and social behaviors within organizational studies (Edwards & Levi, 2008; Kleemans & de Poot, 2008). Looking at drug trafficking organizations and their use of juveniles, this study solely focused on the social aspect, not the rational choice. When

focusing on criminal associations, researchers can investigate people's relationships within an environment by concentrating on criminogenic elements and the interactions and relationships among individuals within a criminal group (Sergi, 2015). Juveniles in the midst of growth (i.e., ages 14–17) are influenced by those around them, both their social and familial environments.

Relationship Between Culture and Environment

Many scholars have argued that organized crime is a topic beyond objective measure. It is difficult to be impartial when there is corruption within different entities associated with criminal organizations. It is challenging to conduct dependable empirical research on an entity concealed within the criminal enterprise (Arsovska, 2015; Sergi, 2015). Rarely can law enforcement officers and researchers observe the activities of a criminal group directly, therefore, both entities remain skeptical about the reliability and validity of the data collected (Arsovska, 2015). Criminological theories have, on occasion, approached the study of organized crime, including Mexican cartels and drug trafficking organizations, by referring to the study of the organization's environment (Sergi, 2015). It is necessary to reflect on these approaches to understand how to have criminological thinking within an organizational environment (2015). Generally speaking, organized crime is understood either by focusing on the criminal activities committed by the criminal groups or the structures and networks these groups adopt within their environment (Obokata 2010; Paoli & Fijnaut 2006). Criminological theories have attempted to link the environment and its characteristics to the formation of drug trafficking organizations studies.

A significant body of empirical research has suggested that gang involvement, as affiliates or active members, can negatively impact juveniles in multiple ways. These negative impacts can include diminished educational attainment and increased likelihood of both offending and victimization (Curry et al., 2013). Pyrooz et al. (2014) estimated that gang members are twice as likely as non-gang members to be both an offender and victim of crime; this is the case with members of Mexican cartels and the juveniles involved in the drug trafficking organizations. Combining knowledge from different criminological sources and approaches is a complex task without encountering contradictions and dilemmas (Sergi, 2015). Studies have linked the environment to the existence of drug trafficking organizations, either through the social or economic links among individuals, groups, and criminal activities (2015). Therefore, as previously stated, there is a logical connection between social learning theory and the examination of juveniles who smuggle narcotics internationally from Mexico into the United States.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables

To understand the importance of drug smuggling, more specifically the motivations of juveniles to smuggle drugs, one must understand the detrimental aspects of illegal drug use. This literature review briefly highlights the use of illegal narcotics in the United States as an epidemic that requires significant and measurable results. Public health officials have called the current opioid epidemic the worst drug crisis in U.S. history (Bosman, 2017). In 2019 alone, a total of 70,630 drug overdose deaths occurred in the United States, approximately one half of them were from synthetic opioids manufactured in Mexico (Mattson et al., 2021) and smuggled through the Southwest

border. Fentanyl and other highly potent synthetic opioids continue to be the most lethal category of illicit substances misused in the United States.

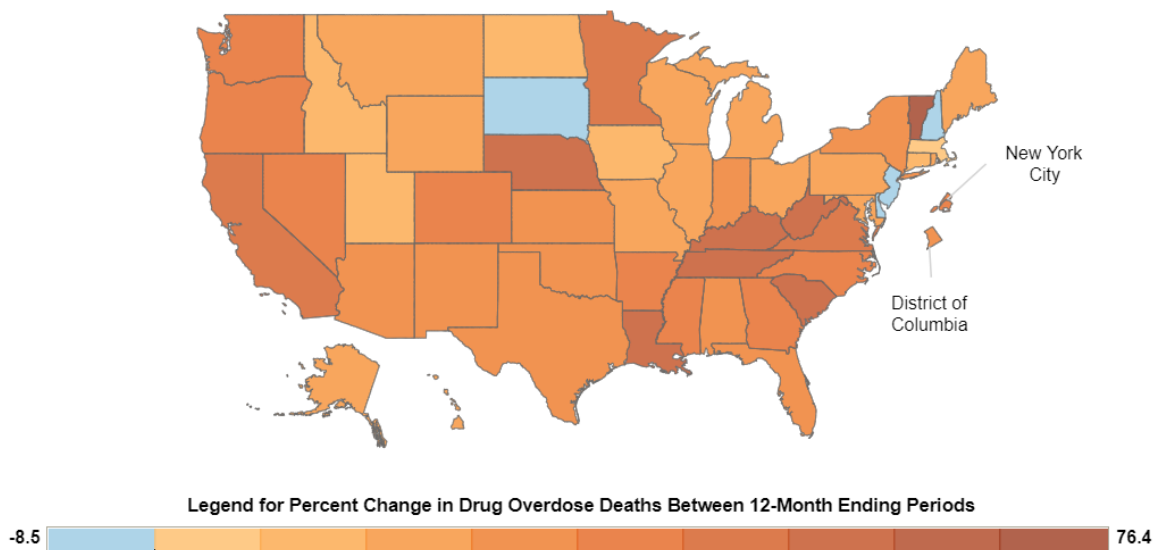
The key variables discussed throughout this literature review include drug overdose resulting in death, organized criminal organizations, drug transportation corridors, the most significant drug trafficking organizations, the structure of a Mexican cartel, demographics of members of a drug trafficking organizations, County lines as a reference of juveniles smuggling drugs from Mexico into the United States, adverse childhood experience, juvenile drug smuggling in San Diego County, and demographics of juveniles arrested for drug-related offenses.

Drug Overdose Resulting in Death

The map in Figure 2 highlights the drug overdose deaths from 2020-2021, there was an average of 30.4% increase (Ahmad et al., 2021).

Figure 2

Drug Overdose Deaths February 2020 to February 2021 (CDC, 2021)



From Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021, August 5). *CDC's Wide-ranging Online Data for Epidemiologic Research*

(<https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/deaths>). In the public domain.

After marijuana became decriminalized in some cities throughout the United States, Mexican cartels shifted away from marijuana grows and started to increase their cultivation of poppies; hence the rise in the production of black tar heroin (Ortiz, 2019). To compete with the Asian production and transportation of heroin, Mexican cartels started infusing fentanyl into its products to increase potency, which effects the current opioid overdose epidemic (2019). Opioids, mainly synthetic, are currently the main cause of drug overdose deaths in the US; the synthetic opioid-involved death rate has increased by 1,040% (from 2013–2019; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021). According to the CDC (2021), in 2019, there were 49,860 drug overdose deaths involving opioids, 36,359 involved opioids laced with fentanyl. The escalating drug overdose epidemic in the United States requires urgent action. Action can include prevention and response strategies to combat drug smuggling at the southern border, including the disruption and dismantling of drug trafficking organizations.

Organized Criminal Organizations

The past 30 years have witnessed an unprecedented rise in organized crime around the globe (Basu, 2021). This rise, coupled with the increasing intricacies of organized crime, poses significant and evolving challenges for law enforcement authorities (2021). Mexican Cartels have evolved beyond the size and power of the

American mafia from the Prohibition Era, and they are integrated into the Mexican political culture and bureaucracy (Ortiz, 2019).

Modern criminal organizations have adopted a networked structure, shifting away from the traditional hierarchical structure (Arsovska, 2015; Basu, 2021; Carvalho & Soares, 2016; Dowdney, 2003; Sergi, 2016). After September 11, 2001, the security increase at the United States and Mexico international border led drug trafficking organizations to diversify into internal drug distribution cells that required control over micro-territories (Argomedo, 2020). Evolving networked structures make it difficult for authorities to apprehend individuals associated with each network and, consequently, disrupt the network's operations (Basu, 2021). Mexican Cartels have reached a significant level of logistics regarding their structural organization and functioning.

Mexican cartels and drug trafficking organizations continue to control profitable smuggling corridors across the southwest border. These drug trafficking organizations maintain the greatest drug trafficking influence in the United States, with continued signs of growth (Bunker, 2020). Mexican cartels and drug trafficking organizations increase their criminal influence by creating organizational alliances with other Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs). Mexican cartels and drug trafficking organizations work in conjunction with transnational gangs, United States based street gangs, prison gangs, and Asian money laundering organizations (2020). The drugs are transported throughout the United States, after crossing in through Mexico. The Mexican cartel and drug trafficking organizations transport these drugs through transportation routes and distribution cells managed (or influenced) by their organization within the inner cities of

the United States. As shown below, there are drug transportation corridors throughout the entire nation.

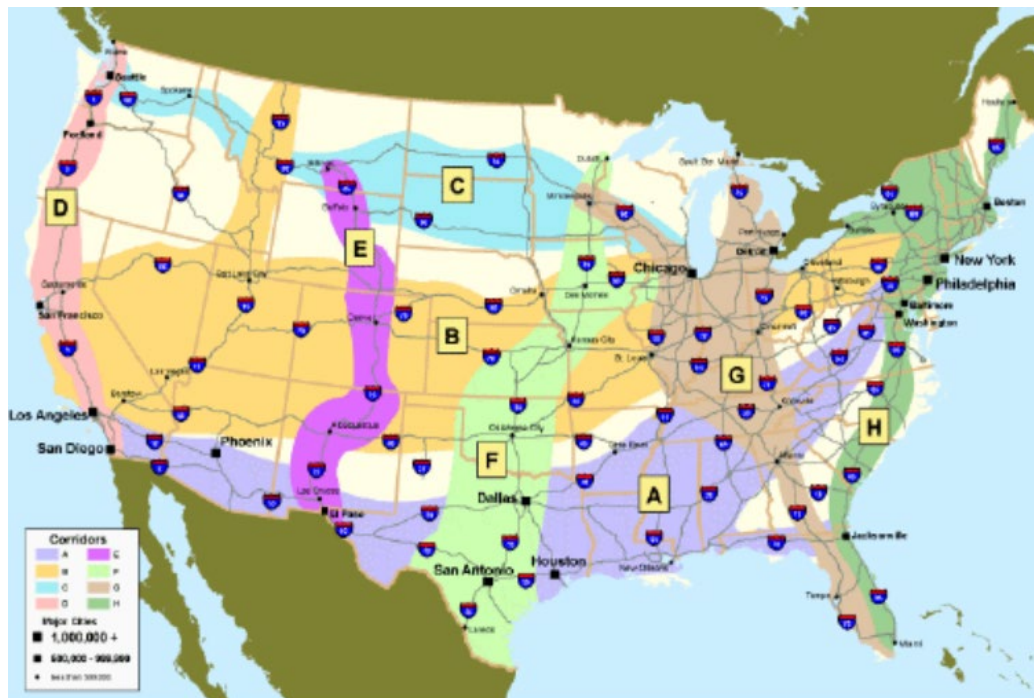
Drug Transportation Corridors

Mexican drug trafficking organizations transport the majority of illegal drugs into the United States from Mexico across the southwest border. The most common method of smuggling drugs is through passenger vehicles through the Ports of Entry. As mentioned, San Diego County has two of the three busiest land borders in the United States. Once the drugs are smuggled into the United States, research shows almost every interstate and highway in the US is used by drug trafficking organizations to transport illegal drugs.

Once the drugs are crossed from Mexico into the United States, they are transported to distribution centers and market areas throughout the country. Every highway intersection provides alternate routes to drug markets. However, analysis of seizure data from 2006 revealed eight principal corridors through which most illegal drugs and drug proceeds are transported (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

US Drug Corridors (National Drug Intelligence Center, 2006)



From the National Drug Intelligence Center 2006

(<https://www.justice.gov/archive/ndic/pubs11/18862/transport.htm>). In the public domain.

This section highlights the corridors that enter from Mexico into the United States in San Diego County, CA. These are important to note to understand the influence the Mexican drug trafficking organizations have moving from Mexico into the United States in San Diego County and their ability to transport throughout the entire country.

Corridor A: West-East Corridor

This corridor begins in southern California and extends through the Southwest, Southeast, and Northeast Regions (National Drug Intelligence Center, 2006). The

southern branch of the corridor extends from Interstate 8 near San Diego (CA) to I-10 in central Arizona, which extends east and ends in Jacksonville (FL) (2006). The northern branch of the corridor begins at I-10 near Los Angeles (CA), which connects with I-20 east of El Paso (TX), which connects with I-30 in Dallas (TX), which connects with I-40 in Little Rock (AR), which connects with I-81 east of Knoxville (TN), which extends northeast and terminates north of Syracuse (NY) (2006).

Corridor B: West-East Corridor

This corridor begins in southern California and extends through the Southwest, Pacific, West Central, Great Lakes, and Northeast Regions (National Drug Intelligence Center, 2006). The primary routes along this corridor are Interstates 15, 40, 70, and 80. Interstate 15 extends from San Diego, California, to the Montana-Canada border and intersects with I-40 in Barstow, California, I-70 in west central Utah, and I-80 in Salt Lake City, Utah (2006). Interstate 40 intersects with I-44 in Oklahoma City (OK), which intersects with I-55 in St. Louis, Missouri, which terminates in Chicago, Illinois (2006). Interstate 55 provides access to I-80/I-90 in Chicago, which continues to the Northeast Region. Interstate 70 extends to the Northeast Region. Interstate 80 begins in the San Francisco Bay area in California, extends east, and terminates in New Jersey (2006).

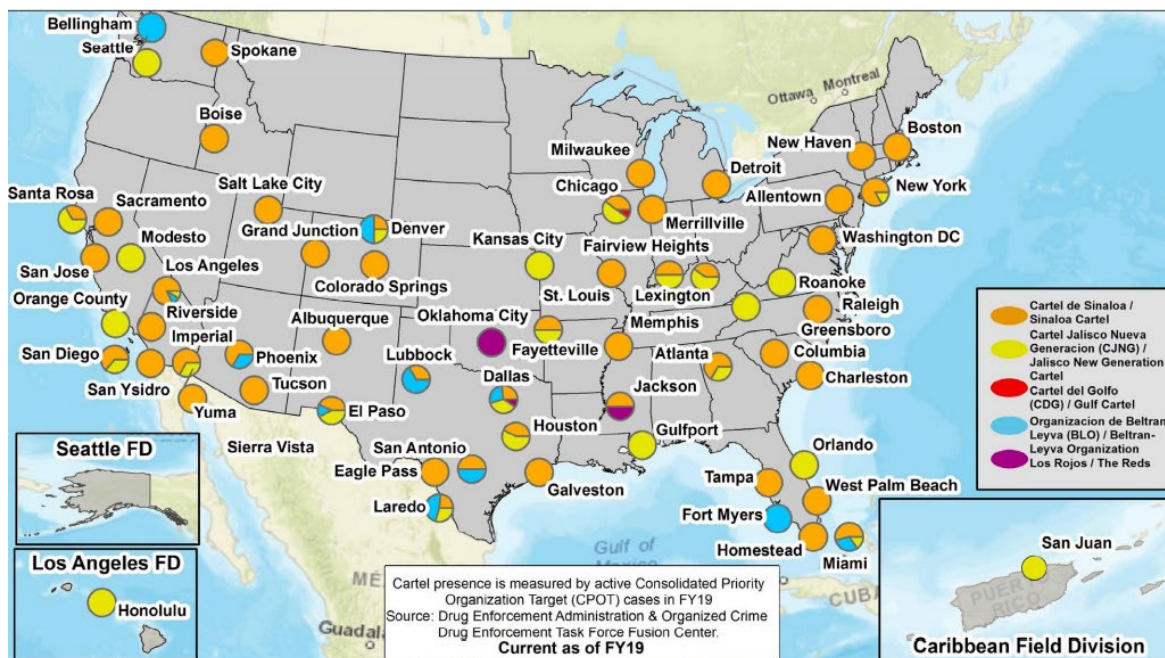
Corridor D: West Coast Corridor

This corridor begins in southern California and encompasses I-5 as the primary route (National Drug Intelligence Center, 2006). It extends from the international border at San Diego (CA) to the Washington-Canada border at Blaine (WA) (2006). Figure 4

depicts which Mexican cartels has influence in each region of the United States encompassing the nine major drug trafficking organizations.

Figure 4

U.S. Areas of Influence of Major Mexican Drug Trafficking Organizations Organized by Individual Cartel (DEAs SIC, 2021)



U.S. area of influence of Mexican Drug Trafficking Organizations. From DEA (2021). (<https://www.dea.gov/documents/2021/03/02/2020-national-drug-threat-assessment>). In the public domain.

Most Significant Mexican Drug Trafficking Organizations Active in the United States

The DEA's SIC (2021) considers the following nine Mexican drug trafficking organizations as having the greatest drug trafficking impact on the United States:

Sinaloa Cartel

Sinaloa Cartel is one of the oldest and most established drug trafficking organizations in Mexico. The Sinaloa Cartel has is in 15 of the 32 Mexican states and controls drug trafficking activity throughout Mexico (DEAs SIC, 2021). Additionally, the Sinaloa Cartel maintains the most extensive international presence compared to any other Mexican cartel or drug trafficking organization (2021). Sinaloa Cartel exports, transports, and distributes wholesale amounts of fentanyl, heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine, and marijuana into and throughout United States (2021). Sinaloa Cartel primarily imports these drugs into the United States through the southwest border, to include primary crossing in San Diego County (2021).

Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG)

The Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación, also referred to as Jalisco New Generation Cartel, formed in 2010 and is considered the strongest and most aggressive competitor to the Sinaloa (BBC, 2019). CJNG and the Sinaloa Cartel are currently the two most dominant drug trafficking organizations in Mexico (DEAs SIC, 2021); as of June 17, 2021, the United States Department of Justice stated, CJNG is the “largest drug threat in the United States (Mexico Daily Post, 2021). CJNG has a significant presence in 23 of the 32 Mexican states with most of its growth and territory being in central Mexico and strategic locations along the international border between Mexico and the United States (2021). CJNG also has influence over the busiest port in Mexico, the Port of Manzanillo, and utilizes that influence for the distribution of large quantities of drugs (2021). CJNG’s rapid expansion of its drug trafficking organization is characterized by the cartel’s

inclination to engage in violent conflicts with the Mexican government security forces and rival cartels. CJNG is currently the most dangerous drug trafficking organization (BBC, 2019; DEAs SIC, 2021).

Beltran Leyva Organization (BLO)

The Beltran-Leyva Organization was once powerful group and, despite the deaths or arrests of various leaders in recent years, continues to function throughout Mexico in a less structured manner than the cartel historically operated (DEAs SIC, 2021). BLO relies on its loose alliances with larger cartels for access to drug smuggling corridors along the southwest border (2021).

Los Zetas and Cartel del Noreste (CDN)

Los Zetas and their most prominent faction, Cartel del Noreste, have a presence in northeastern Mexico; they smuggle the majority of their illicit drugs through the southwest border in the areas of Laredo and Eagle Pass, Texas; and the Mexican states of Coahuila, Nuevo Leon, and parts of Tamaulipas (DEAs SIC, 2021). This group was founded by corrupt members of an elite unit of Mexico's special forces (BBC, 2019).

Guerreros Unidos (GU)

Guerreros Unidos is a cartel based in the Mexican state of Guerrero. Its presence in the region creates a high degree of violence (DEAs SIC, 2021). GU was originally a splinter group from BLO, but has created a working partnership with the CJNG and uses the same transportation networks to move drug shipments into the United States and to return drug proceeds back to Mexico (2021).

Gulf Cartel

Gulf Cartel is one of Mexico's oldest criminal groups and its roots can be traced back to the 1980s (BBC, 2019). The Gulf Cartel holds its power base in parts of the Mexican state of Tamaulipas and in the state of Zacatecas; they also have alliances with CJNG members working in that region of Mexico (DEAs SIC, 2021). The Gulf Cartel focuses its drug trafficking activities by transporting narcotics into the United States near the McAllen and Brownsville, Texas (2021).

Juarez Cartel and La Linea

The Juarez Cartel and the faction unit La Linea are two 'once powerful groups' and, although not as expansive as other cartels, continue to impact the United States through their drug trafficking activities (DEAs SIC, 2021). These cartels' greatest territorial influence is in the state of Chihuahua near the southwest border between Ciudad Juarez and El Paso, Texas (2021).

La Familia Michoacána (LFM)

La Familia Michoacána's organizational base is in the state of Michoacán, Mexico. The group's operational capacity has degraded recently due to cartel feuding and successful law enforcement operations; they also have ties to the CJNG (DEAs SIC, 2021).

Los Rojos

Los Rojos is a splinter group of BLO, similar to GU, generating violence in the Mexican regions where they are active (DEAs SIC, 2021). The group's leadership rotates more regularly than other cartels due to frequent arrests of members (2021).

The Sinaloa Cartel maintains the widest influence within Mexico and the United States, and CJNG continues to be the drug trafficking organization with second-most widespread domestic influence (DEAs SIC, 2021). All nine listed Mexican cartels maintain drug distribution cells throughout the United States that either report directly to Cartel leaders in Mexico or report indirectly through intermediaries within the organization (2021). The cartels dominate the drug trade influencing the United States market (CBP, n.d.; DEAs SIC, 2021).

Structure of a Mexican Cartel

The main goals of a cartel and its organizational structures (hierarchy) are the production, trafficking, and commercialization of illegal drugs, protecting their present territory, and increasing monetary gain by illegal activities (Ostrosky et al., 2015). One cell of the organization is the drug trafficking cell, and although drug trafficking organizations may vary in size, they share a hierarchical structure (2015). Cartels are managed by money launderers who may own an enterprise and profit from illegal investments, or have the professional skills to create fictitious enterprises that run and generate profits derived from drug trafficking (2015). Individuals with public duties (policemen, mayors, municipal chairpersons, governors) may become corrupt and provide “protection” to cartels (2015), enabling the continuance of illegal activities without the fear of repercussions. All corners of Mexican society have been exposed to violence (Morris, 2013). Mexico’s ongoing cartel violence and drug war has led to more murders and disappearances than some international wars (Ortiz, 2019). Mexico has

suffered more than 250,000 homicides and at least 30,000 disappearances since 2009 (Morris, 2013; Ortiz, 2019).

One of the main reasons Mexico's drug trafficking organizations shifted into a state of conflict was the freedom of cartels to move into and claim new territories (Dulin & Patino, 2020). Before 2006 (when Calderon was voted into office), peace was sustained through 'mutually beneficial arrangements between the government and drug trafficking organizations in which certain activities were tolerated' (Dulin & Patino, 2020). Territories were divided among the few powerful drug trafficking organizations, and each respected the others' territory (Dulin & Patino, 2020); this is no longer the case (Rios, 2015; Sabet, 2010). In recent years, most of the affected territories drug trafficking organizations are fighting for are along the Mexico and United States international border (Garcia, 2010). A widening of criminal motivations has accompanied drug trafficking organization expansion; extortion, kidnapping, murder, and rape are commonplace in Mexico (Arsovska, 2015). The age of those involved within the Mexican cartels and drug trafficking organizations are becoming younger and younger and this culture of 'notoriety' is becoming popular to those between the ages of 14 and 17.

Crimes like drug trafficking, human trafficking, and the disappearances of many have generated the interests of researchers, but, critical, empirically-based research on highly politicized criminalized practices is difficult to carry out (Sanchez, 2020). Scholarly explanations of the Mexican drug trafficking organization movement into new territories are scarce (Dulin and Patino, 2020), and there are no official numbers

concerning smuggling and/or smuggling-related convictions in Mexico to include juveniles (McAuliffe & Laczko, 2016; UNODC, 2018a).

Demographics of Members of Mexican Cartels

Mexican cartels, at the higher echelons, are composed of Mexican nationals or United States citizens of Mexican origin (Bunker, 2020). These individuals oversee Mexican drug trafficking organization activity in the United States. United States based drug trafficking organization members, of Mexican nationality, enter the United States legally and illegally and often hide themselves within thickly populated Mexican-American communities; this is how they are able to further their ties within Mexico and throughout the United States (2020). The members operating in the United States can be linked to cartel figures in Mexico, often through familial ties.

Mexican Cartels and drug trafficking organizations have emerged as an attractive lifestyle to juveniles with limited social and economic opportunities (Ostrosky et al., 2015). Currently, there is a rise in the recruitment of juveniles by organized crime in many places globally, not just in Mexico (Comunale et al., 2020). Mexican drug cartels recruit juveniles for the same reasons that armed forces recruit ‘boy soldiers’ in Sierra Leone and Somalia, “their immaturity produces fearlessness” (Burnett, 2009, p. 1). For a juvenile searching for their place in society, cartel membership brings instant respect; this is in similar to county lines in Europe.

County Lines as a Starting Point

County lines are an emerging phenomenon and have only recently begun to receive research attention in Europe. The limited number of academic studies represent a

helpful starting point, but have been limited by relatively small participant numbers (Windle et al., 2020). Published reports by state bodies and the annual NCA intelligence reports are an essential data source; however, they are limited by partiality (Windle & Silke, 2019), and there are significant gaps between police intelligence and drug market realities nationally and internationally (Coomber, 2006; Dorn et al., 1990; Windle & Briggs, 2015).

In January 2017, Councilor Joe Calouri of Islington wrote a letter warning the Home Secretary that the exploitation of juveniles as drug couriers and dealers in County lines drug dealing could be the next ‘grooming scandal’ (Islington Gazette, 2017); emphasizing the need to urgently “work together to safeguard vulnerable young people” (cited in Wright, 2017). In Europe, county lines have been characterized as a gang problem (Her Majesty’s (HM) Government, 2016; NCA, 2016), and while Windle et al. (2020) recognize the frequent involvement of gangs in county lines activity, they have substituted gangs with the term ‘out-of-town dealers’ (OTD). In the three regional drug markets visited by Coomber and Moyle (2018), OTD were described as being part of larger groups or organizations, often referred to as ‘gangs,’ ‘firms,’ or ‘crews’ (Windle et al., 2020). While there were observations of supply hierarchies, these dealers were identified by respondents as “loosely structured entrepreneurial groups of similarly ranking friends, family or acquaintances” (Windle et al., 2020). While OTD is within the higher levels of the county line’s structure, they largely remain anonymous, using the model of compartmentalizing as to keep anonymity, below these OTD (within the higher-levels of the county line’s structure), are ‘laborers’ or ‘subcontractors’ who accept the

majority of the risk associated with street-level activities (Windle et al., 2020). This structure mirrors drug smuggling and trafficking in the United States, where each level is compartmentalized to keep anonymity (DEAs SIC, 2021).

Since 2016, the NCA (2016, 2017, 2018) have surveyed police forces in England and Wales on the presence of county lines in their areas to show the increase in county lines. In 2016, 83% of law enforcement reported county lines activity, rising to 88% in 2017 and 100% in 2018 (Windle et al., 2020); this is extreme growth in a short period of time. While the spread of this phenomenon is alarming, the systematic use of “predatory recruitment and exploitation” of juveniles is alarming and causes concern (HM Government, 2016; NCA, 2015, 2016; Windle et al., 2020). Currently, there is minimal information regarding the time when the exploitation of juveniles became an integral element of the county lines model (Windle et al., 2020); much like the use of juveniles in Mexican cartels and drug trafficking organizations.

In the recent past, research regarding the use of juveniles in some drug markets were known, but, before the emergence of county lines, most often juveniles were only used to transport drugs (Lupton et al., 2002). Windle et al. (2020) suggest there has been a change from “sporadic exploitation” (likely from within family and friendship networks) to more widespread and systematic exploitation engaging in intimidation within the social circle (2020).

Although juveniles have been used for street-level roles in the drug market, there is a new role where there is systemic targeting of juveniles (Moyle, 2019) to transport drugs across regional borders (Windle et al., 2020). Research has identified the

exploitation of drug addicts, juveniles with welfare needs, 'looked after' children and children of parents, or mental health issues (Coomber & Moyle, 2012; NCA, 2017; Sturrock & Holmes, 2015; Windle & Briggs, 2015b). For the county lines study, police intelligence indicated juveniles targeted for drug smuggling were typically 14- to 17-year-old boys (NCA, 2016; Cohen, 2018) and were often known to child services or Youth Offending Teams (Andell & Pitts, 2018; HM Government, 2016; Windle et al., 2020). While juveniles involved in county lines were often known to child services or Youth Offending Teams, this is not be the (assumed) case for juveniles involved in international drug smuggling in San Diego County. There is a current gap in research regarding the exploitation of juveniles to smuggle drugs internationally and the motivations of the recruiter (within the drug trafficking organization). From my perspective, juveniles recruited to smuggle drugs from Mexico into the United States are not drug users, drug addicts, or those involved in the county's juvenile justice system; the same cannot be perceived for those transporting the narcotics within the United States though.

The main goal for Mexican cartels and drug trafficking organizations is purely monetary, not the risks involved in getting arrested or have drug shipments seized (Spicer, 2019). The use of juveniles being exploited could represent a "cheap, easily recruited workforce who can absorb the risks related to street-level sales and are considered disposable" to the drug trafficking organization (Coomber & Moyle, 2018).

Demographics of Juveniles in County Lines

The demographics of those involved in county lines suggest that most come from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Windle et al., 2020). As such, they were engaging in county lines for either money or drugs may establish a certain level of resilience (Ellis, 2018). This does not mean the juvenile is making a good choice, but they may see this as the only choice. Data obtained from the South East Regional Crime Unit reported between 260 and 300 juveniles were involved in county lines in Hampshire, Sussex, Thames Valley, and Surrey between January and July 2018 (Windle et al., 2020). The overall percentage reported that 86% of the juveniles involved were male; and juveniles from London made up the highest area of origin (Coomber & Moyle, 2018; Robinson et al., 2019). Though 14% of the juveniles linked to county lines by the South East Regional Crime Unit were girls, the overall level of girls' involvement in county lines is currently unknown. Girls have received much less research attention (Windle et al., 2020). The NCA (2018) suggests that only 9% of county lines offenses are recorded for females, which may be associated with gender bias (2018). Girls are less likely to be viewed as offenders, thereby reducing police suspicion, and producing 'fewer opportunities for identification' (NCA, 2018; Windle et al., 2021; Coomber & Moyle, 2018). However, in 2017, nearly 500 girls under the age of 18 were reported as suspected victims of sexual exploitation; this increased from 250 in 2014 (NCA, 2017). The rise in juvenile girl victims has been attributed to the increase of county lines activity (Windle et al. 2020).

Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE)

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention, ACEs are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood and include violence, abuse, and growing up in a family with mental health or substance abuse problems (CDC, 2019). Juveniles involved in county lines may have longer-term impacts associated with experiencing cumulative ACEs (Windle et al., 2020), and the same correlation could be made to juveniles in the US. Reid et al. (2017) found that juveniles who have experienced multiple ACEs are at increased risk of being victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation (2017). Analysis of research shows juveniles recruited in county lines have already experienced a range of ACEs at home or in care (Coomber and Moyle, 2012; NCA, 2017; Robinson et al., 2019; Sturrock and Holmes, 2015; Windle and Briggs, 2015b), and county line involvement underscores the harm already caused by the behavior (Windle et al., 2021).

Research shows that juveniles involved in county lines are involved in visible and high-risk drug markets (Coomber & Moyle, 2018; NCA, 2018; Robinson et al., 2019). From the research, it seems that juveniles do not take into consideration the risks associated with involvement in the drug market, nor are they dissuaded by fear of getting caught. Existing research has recognized that juveniles exploited by county lines are coerced by economic insecurity and/or disruptive and chaotic home lives (Coomber & Moyle, 2012; NCA, 2017; Robinson et al., 2019; Sturrock & Holmes, 2015; Windle & Briggs, 2015b). This is in line with what I had hoped to gain from this study, primarily the need for economic security with social pressure.

Juveniles are lured by money and materialistic things (Windle & Briggs, 2015b), or an organization's culture (Briggs, 2013). When looking at juveniles in Mexico and the United States, they may be drawn to the excitement and status of being associated with a particular illicit organization (Andell & Pitts, 2018; Robinson et al., 2019; Storrod & Densely, 2017) and the notoriety that comes with it.

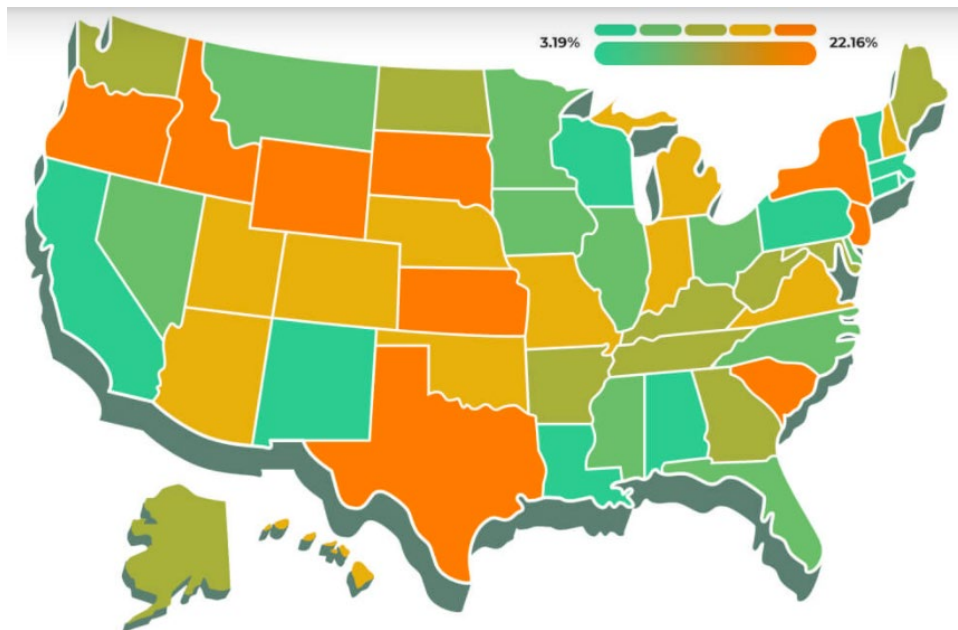
Juvenile Drug Smuggling in San Diego County

Juveniles in San Diego have the potential to become intertwined in the juvenile justice system because of drugs. Whether they were caught with drugs in their school locker or backpack, or suspected of having gotten involved in drug sales or transportation from international drug smuggling, drug involvement is a problem. In 2018, approximately 90,670 juveniles were arrested for drug crimes in the United States; 6,618 of those juvenile arrests were in CA (Puzzanchera, 2020). Due to an increase in juveniles smuggling drugs across the international border, law enforcement partners are working together to inform the community of the dangers of juveniles used to smuggle drugs. The number of incidents in which drugs were seized from juveniles at ports of entry in the San Diego County has increased significantly in recent years.

The map in Figure 5 shows a clear representation of juveniles involved in drug related arrests. These arrests involve the transportation, distribution, and use; it is clear that illegal drugs are a problem throughout the country.

Figure 5

Percentage of Drug Related Juvenile Arrests by State



Juvenile Drug Arrests by State (2019). <https://greenhousetreatment.com/blog/juvenile-drug-arrests/>. Public domain.

Juveniles arrested attempting to smuggle drugs from Mexico into the United States has increased drastically in the recent years. There was a 153% spike in drug seizures from juveniles from Fiscal Year 2016 to Fiscal Year 2017, from 39 to 99 (United States Attorney's Office, 2018). According to the San Diego District Attorney's Office, many of the juveniles caught smuggling drugs were recruited at the local high schools, often by other classmates. Drug trafficking organizations' constant recruiting efforts pose a constant threat to juveniles in San Diego County, more specifically the border towns. Some of the ways drug trafficking organizations recruit juveniles are at school, in class, at after-school functions, camps, libraries, on public transportation, via social media

outlets, and over electronic communications like gaming consoles, text messages, or chat rooms. Recruiters for drug trafficking organizations can be other juveniles, parents, familiar adults, or strangers. Juveniles who cross the border frequently are at a higher risk of being recruited.

Demographics of Juveniles Arrested

These statistics are from 2018, but they will show the demographics of juveniles arrested in the United States for drug related offenses. The ethnicity totals are representative of those agencies that provided ethnicity breakdowns, 12,212 agencies provided data. Of all juveniles arrested in 2018, 61.9% were White, 34.9% were Black or African American, and 3.2% were of other races (Federal Bureau of Investigations, 2018). Of juvenile arrestees for whom ethnicity was reported, 22.7% were Hispanic or Latino (2018). In 2018, of the 67,096 juveniles arrested for drug related offenses, regarding race, 73.5% were White, 22.8% were Black (2018). And, regarding ethnicity, 27.4% were Hispanic, and 72.6% were non-Hispanic (2018). I was unable to identify the gender of those who were arrested. Finding this biographical information could help create a profile of the juveniles targeted by Mexican drug trafficking organizations.

Summary and Conclusion

This study aimed to find the motivation of juveniles who become involved in smuggling drugs from Mexico into the United States in San Diego County. The goal in completing this study is to raise awareness of the issue of juvenile drug smuggling. In doing this, analysis of the results could assist in providing knowledge and resources to juveniles in San Diego County near the international border. When juveniles are given

the knowledge and resources of the dangers of Mexican Cartels and international drug smuggling, I hope they will refuse to smuggle drugs.

The literature review included collecting data from in-depth research of academic literature, an analysis of archived records, open-source governmental reports, and news articles highlighting the current problem along the southwest border, specifically in San Diego County. Although the literature on drug smuggling and drug overdose is in abundance and comprehensive, there are not any studies on the motivations of juveniles to smuggle drugs internationally, specifically in San Diego County. The lack of research presents a gap within the literature. In Chapter 3, I discuss the methodology used to create this study to look at the motivations of juveniles who smuggling drugs internationally through the lens of justice workers in San Diego.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative study was to improve the understanding of the criminogenic thought process of juveniles who become involved in smuggling narcotics across the international border in San Diego, California. In particular, this dissertation explored the motivations of juveniles, through the perceptions of law enforcement officers, to smuggle drugs from Mexico into the United States in San Diego County. This study used the qualitative research method because it can be used to explore a phenomenon, focusing on finding meaning and understanding (Caelli et al., 2003; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015); therefore, it is ideal when attempting to find the motivations of juveniles to get involved in international drug smuggling. Brink and Wood (2001) refer to all descriptive qualitative research as exploratory research. Broadly defined, qualitative research attempts to understand individuals, groups, and phenomena in their natural settings in ways that are contextualized and reflect the meaning that people make out of their own experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Qualitative research is based on the methodological pursuit of understanding the ways that people see, view, approach, and experience the world and make meaning of their experiences as well as specific phenomena within it (2016). Conducting a qualitative study can create social change at all levels.

I used a qualitative research design because it offers flexibility and is not used to prove or test a theory, but to find meaning in a phenomenon. For this qualitative study, I presented interview questionnaires to collect information on juveniles who have been apprehended attempting to smuggle drugs at the international border between 2017–2021,

seeking to understand their motivations. This study is unique because it addressed an under-researched area of Mexican cartels using juveniles to smuggle narcotics from Mexico into the United States, in San Diego County, more specifically, the juvenile's motivations. This chapter will include sections detailing the research design, the role of the researcher, methodology, and issues with trustworthiness.

Research Design and Rationale

For this qualitative study, I examined of the motivations of juveniles arrested attempting to smuggle narcotics from Mexico into the United States in San Diego County. The information for this study was examined through the lens of the agents and officers who have made the arrests. The following research question was developed to shed light on this phenomenon: What are the perceptions of law enforcement officers regarding the motivations of juveniles between the ages of 14 and 17 in San Diego County who smuggle narcotics from Mexico into the United States?

The results of this study have the potential to provide insight into the phenomenon of juveniles being used by Mexican drug cartels to smuggling narcotics from Mexico into the United States, mores specifically their motivations. There is a lack of scholarly research regarding juveniles' roles and motivations to smuggle drugs from Mexico into the United States. The results of this study provide insight into the culture of international juvenile drug smuggling; this insight could provide a positive shift in culture on the San Diego and Tijuana border. Reviewing the literature on Mexican drug cartels use of juveniles to smuggle narcotics from Mexico into the United States illustrates a need for further research; this study was an attempt to fill that research gap.

Role of the Researcher

As the interviewer and primary research instrument, I was responsible for designing the interview protocol, interview guide, selecting participants, and conducting interviews with agents and officers who have arrested juveniles at the Southwest border for international drug smuggling between 2017 and 2021. I acknowledged that the participants may have values and biases that might manifest during the data collection or analysis. I was responsible for disseminating consent forms to each participant. Once the interview questionnaire was received from the participant, it was assumed consent was granted. I transcribed all the data from the interview responses into an Excel spreadsheet for easy viewing and understanding.

An essential piece to this study was acknowledging my personal and professional experience as a law enforcement agent working on the Southwest border, specifically in San Diego County. I acknowledged that my experience could (potentially) impact this study; I removed personal bias from consideration regarding the interview questions and responses but used professional experience as a guide. Also, I did not use my role as a law enforcement officer when making contact with other agents and officers; I approached them based on personal and professional relationships and made contact outside of the workplace in my neighborhood. Also, the interviewees for this study did not include persons in my direct chain of command. There was not any power-based supervisory or instructor relationships involved in this study; all participants were of equal paygrade.

Methodology

Qualitative research is designed to help find the “why” of a phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Finding those gaps can help create social change for the betterment of those involved. Qualitative research design can be complicated depending upon the level of experience a researcher may have with a particular type of methodology (Turner, 2010). This study used generic qualitative inquiry to illuminate juveniles’ experiences being recruited by Mexican cartels to smuggle narcotics internationally to find their motivations. Generic qualitative research, as defined by Caelli et al. (2003), is research that is not guided by an explicit or established set of philosophic assumptions in the form of one of the known qualitative methodologies.

One of the more prevalent areas of interest in qualitative research design is the use of interviews. The purpose of a qualitative interview, for this study, was to collect data that illuminated in detail the juvenile’s experience of the phenomenon of interest (i.e., drug smuggling) through justice workers’ perceptions along the Southwest border. In doing this, the interview participants (i.e., the agents and officers) were able to describe the meaning of this phenomenon in their own words based on their experience related to juvenile drug smuggling. I analyzed the information from 2017–2021 on juveniles arrested smuggling narcotics from Mexico into the United States via open-source governmental databases. I gathered information, including approximate age, gender of juvenile, citizenship (if available), proximity from border to school (if available), monetary gain, narcotic(s) seized, and amounts of narcotic (if possible) from the

interviews with the justice workers. In doing this, I attempted to understand the individuals recruited to smuggle narcotics from Mexico into the United States; to include their country of birth and current city, and proximity to the international border. In collecting this information, those who were selected and agreed to take part filled in the interview questions (see Appendix A) based on their professional perception only; they did not access the data via a government website, and all answers were approximations based on their recollections of previous experience. The goal of this was to ensure anonymity to the juvenile and the officer who provided the information.

After analyzing the information provided from the interviews, I created a qualitative coding system of the juvenile's interview responses, through the perception of the justice worker. This information was collected using data from agents and officers involved in the juvenile justice system in San Diego County, more specifically the San Ysidro and Otay Mesa Ports of Entry. Interviewing these individuals assisted in creating a generic profile to assist in the analyses of the role(s) and motivation(s) of juvenile international drug smuggling without ever approaching a juvenile. I took the interview responses and used coding techniques to decipher and analyze the juveniles' responses to illuminate their motivations and why they agreed to smuggle narcotics from Mexico into the United States.

Participant Selection

In Chapter 1, information regarding the smuggling of narcotics highlighted a problem across the Southwest border, specifically in San Diego County, CA. In Chapter 2, background information was presented regarding Mexican drug trafficking

organizations and the use of juveniles being used to smuggle drugs in different regions to inform the research problem. For this study, to answer the research question, data sources included Port of Entry statistics, DEA statistics, DOJ statistics, and interviews with agents and officers involved in the juveniles' smuggling in San Diego County between 2017 and 2021 from Homeland Security Investigations, DEA, and CBP. The years of experience of each of the participants was not a qualifying or disqualifying attribute; only their cases involving juveniles was qualifying. There was not a minimum arrest requirement as long as there was at least one arrest of a juvenile who was attempting to smuggle drugs.

Instrumentation

The qualitative interview procedure was created by me and is in compliance with Walden University's interview guidelines. The qualitative interview questions (see Appendix A) were created to find the motivations of juveniles to smuggle drugs from Mexico into the United States from the perception of justice workers along the Southwest border in San Diego County. Potential issues that could have arisen using interviews as a data collection method include insufficient sampling of a population, sampling bias and errors due to convenience, and purposive sampling; for this, the population was justice workers along the Southwest border, specifically in San Diego County.

Interviewing

The past 2 decades have seen a considerable increase in the number of studies that employ qualitative research methods (Meho, 2006). This increase has resulted in a shift towards studies that rely on observation and in-depth (or less-structured) interviewing

instead of questionnaires or structured interviewing (Meho, 2006; Patton, 2015). The goals of both observation and in-depth interview methods are to improve understanding of social and cultural phenomena; for this study, I gathered information on why juveniles smuggle narcotics across the international border through the lens of justice workers. Interviews provide in-depth information pertaining to participants' experiences and viewpoints of a particular topic (Turner, 2010). There are various forms of interview design that can be developed to get thick, rich data using a qualitative research perspective (Creswell, 2007). This study's initial design used email as a means for interviewing participants. According to Meho (2006), studies that use email for conducting qualitative, in-depth interview found unprecedented opportunities for qualitative research. While email interviews can be employed quickly, conveniently, and inexpensively and can generate high-quality data when handled carefully (Meho, 2006), email was not used.

For this study, the name, any identifying information regarding the individual and agency of each interviewee was removed from the questionnaire for confidentiality. This study was not created to highlight those involved in the apprehensions and arrests of juveniles, but to highlight the juveniles' motivations for smuggling narcotics.

Procedures for Participation and Data Collection

While the number of participants for this study needed to reach a point of adequacy, and saturation, participants were not selected based solely on convenience. Lincoln and Guba (1985) asserted that redundancy is the primary criterion for purposive studies in contrast to traditional sampling. It is estimated that a sample of 15–25 law

enforcement officers and agents would result in maximization of information, sufficient for answering the research question. The target group for this study were agents and officers who have arrested at least one juvenile aged 14–17, between 2017 and 2021, attempting to smuggle narcotics from Mexico into the United States in San Diego County. This study was based solely on the second-hand data collected from the agents and officers associated directly or indirectly with the Department of Justice, District Attorney's Office, Homeland Security Investigations, DEA, and CBP. Neither I nor the participants in this study made contact with juvenile directly to answer the questionnaire; this study used information from the agents and officers only. No information regarding the juvenile, for identification purposes, was shared with me.

I contacted each justice worker, face to face, to gauge interest in participation. Incorporation of the exact verbiage provided by the Institutional Review Board's (IRB's) Office of Research and Compliance was shared with all participants before the interview questions were hand delivered. Once the interview was received back from the participant, content to participate was assumed. There was an option to follow up each interview response, and for clarification of questions, but no follow-up was requested. I offered open contact throughout this process and allow face-to-face discussion and phone contact if desired by the respondent.

Data Analysis Plan

Secondary data were used to collect the numbers of juveniles apprehended and arrested at the international border between 2017 and 2021 and the amounts of narcotics seized. This study was unique because it addressed an under-researched area of Mexican

cartels using juveniles to smuggle narcotics from Mexico into the United States in San Diego County and highlights the juveniles' motivation. The purpose of this qualitative study was to improve the understanding of the criminogenic thought process of juveniles who become involved in smuggling narcotics across the international border in San Diego, California; what are their motivations?

Coding of Interview Responses

Qualitative research seeks to examine the interconnections in rich, complex data sources. Like quantitative researchers, “qualitative researchers often still find themselves overwhelmed by the amount of data and equally in need of tools to extend their human senses” (Meyer & Avery, 2008). Microsoft Excel can keep information, quantitative or qualitative, and excel has logical functions that can provide significant aid in qualitative analysis (Meyer & Avery, 2008). I used Excel to transcribe the interviews. I used short terms to express certain perceptions to see if the respondents provided the same responses (even if in different word variations). Excel is often viewed as a number cruncher and is therefore associated with quantitative data analysis, but Meyer and Avery (2008) found it helpful as a qualitative tool.

For this study, code words from the interviews were used when deciphering and analyzing the data. A qualitative *code* is often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data (Saldana, 2016). In qualitative data analysis, a code is a researcher-generated construct that symbolizes or “translates” data and thus attributes interpreted meaning to each individual data point for later purposes of pattern detection,

categorization, assertion or proposition development, theory building, and other analytic processes (Vogt et al., 2014).

For this study, the means for collecting, coding, and deciphering data was in an Excel spreadsheet. After receiving the interview responses (both from agents and officers), I inserted them in an Excel spreadsheet as a means to compare and contrast each question for each interviewee and the response(s) provided. I used short terms to express certain codes and commonalities. In doing this, I was able to find commonalities from the respondents, even if in different word variations, as a coded word. I reference verbatim segments of the interview responses for clarity within the body of Chapter 4 to minimize confusion and add credibility. For final data analysis, the interviews were coupled with other forms of data collection, such as border statistics and demographic information, to provide me with a well-rounded collection of information for the study's results (Turner, 2010).

Issues of Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness and validity of this study have been prioritized throughout the process to include topic selection, seeking significance, the literature review, approach, data collection, and will be firmly maintained to its conclusion. In qualitative research though, there is always a possibility of issues regarding trustworthiness. To address any issue of trustworthiness, this study was conducted and adhered to the four major components of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility

Qualitative research produces highly creditable results when incorporated into a study's design (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). For this study, I devoted significant amounts of time, energy, and focus to learn and understand the variables included with the phenomenon of juveniles' motivations to smuggle drugs internationally. Through comprehensive academic research and everyday experience, I created and maintained credibility for this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Rubin and Rubin (2012) noted that credibility is strengthened when a researcher demonstrates that findings are based on information obtained from subject matter experts. Rubin and Rubin (2012) also noted the importance of transparency, including those who participate to be involved in the process of data collection and analysis further insuring credibility.

Transferability

Qualitative research aims to develop relevant statements that may apply or be transferable to a broader context while maintaining its original content-specific richness (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012); the ability to apply results to a wider population. The goal after the conclusion of this study will be transferability.

Transferability of this study to all major border towns across the United States and Mexico border. In doing this, I hope to decrease the use of juveniles in drugs smuggling across the international border targeting their motivations through educational programs.

Dependability

Qualitative research is considered dependable when consistent and stable over time (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Dependability is established through detailed reporting of

the study's processes. This study outlines its processes for collecting, analyzing, and reporting its findings. To check the dependability of this study, my dissertation committee continually monitored the study's progress to ensure there had not been mistakes in conceptualizing the study, collecting the data, interpreting the findings, and reporting results.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the neutrality, or the degree findings are consistent and repeatable (Connelly, 2016). Throughout this study, I maintained detailed records of documents, electronic recordings, observations, and process notes within a folder on a personal laptop computer (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability will be supported using triangulation to address potential biases that are likely to influence this study subconsciously. Confirmability will further be established and maintained through reflexivity. Patton (2015) stated that reflexivity reminds the qualitative researcher to be attentive, conscious of one's perspectives, and undertake an ongoing examination of what is known and how it is known. Reflexivity requires in-depth self-examination of individual thinking patterns and exploring their understandings (Patton, 2015). Through self-examination, I continued to monitor the role and influence over this study's outcomes (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Ethical Procedures

This study's major ethical issue was protecting the vulnerable population, juveniles (Maxfield & Babbie, 2018); in saying that, the information of the juvenile was not disclosed from the respondent therefore was not shared with me. One secondary issue

that could have arisen was receiving this information using the job title within the Department of Homeland Security to obtain information. Before starting this study, I initiated contact with the Homeland Security Investigations' Ethics Department to address this; I also contacted the IRB for guidance in advance to this proposal and study.

To ensure the quality of this study, the research focused on providing 100% anonymity of the interviewees and juveniles they previously arrested and interviewed. The interview specifically defined the term anonymity in an attempt to again avoid bias as well as uphold the highest level of validity and credibility. After the interviews were completed, I thanked each interviewee and offered future contact if desired regarding the interview questions, this study, and this dissertation.

Summary

Chapter 3 has provided a review of the research design that was utilized in the completion of this study as well as offered an explanation as to the research design. Qualitative methodology was selected for this study to explore the motivations of juveniles to agree to smuggle drugs from Mexico into the United States in San Diego County. This chapter restated the research question to be addressed in this study highlighting its significance and purpose. The participant sample was identified and the study was defined; including the instrumentation to be used. Overall, the research was conducted using agents and officers who have been involved or investigated at least one juvenile attempting to smuggle drugs from Mexico into the United States in San Diego County. The process of data collection and analysis was explored, and participant

confidentiality (anonymity) was considered. This study was approved by the IRB; the IRB approval number is 01-13-22-0980833.

Chapter 4 will provide the results of the study.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to improve the understanding of the criminogenic thought process of juveniles who become involved in smuggling narcotics across the international border in San Diego, California. In particular, this dissertation sought to explore the motivations of juveniles, through the perceptions of law enforcement officers, to smuggle drugs from Mexico into the United States in San Diego County. The data collection was centered around officers and agents who have arrested at least one juvenile attempting to smuggle narcotics from Mexico into the United States; there were no other inclusion criteria. There was one research question developed to guide this study to shed light on this phenomenon: What are the perceptions of law enforcement officers regarding the motivations of juveniles between the ages of 14 and 17 in San Diego County who smuggle narcotics from Mexico into the United States?

Chapter 4 includes an explanation of the setting, the relevant demographics of the individual participants, data collection, data analysis, evidence in the study's trustworthiness, and the perceived motivations of juveniles to smuggling drugs from Mexico into the United States in San Diego County. I then discuss the study's findings and answer the research question.

Setting

Interview questionnaires with six justice workers from San Diego County were conducted. All six of the interview questionnaires were filled out by the participants in a 7-day window; the return of the questionnaire from the participants' showed consent was granted. Offering each participant a 7-day window allowed them to choose when they

could fill in the interview questionnaire. This process increased the likelihood that participants would be comfortable and provide complete and rich responses to the questions. Allowing participants to use the time they desired to fill in the questionnaires directly contributed to their comfort by ensuring privacy and safety and the time necessary for accuracy.

Demographics

Participants were six justice workers in San Diego County who have been involved in the arrest of a juvenile attempting to smuggle drugs from Mexico into the United States. All six participants are special agents working in the Department of Homeland Security. The following is a synopsis of the other relevant demographic characteristics of the individual participants for this study.

- Participant 1 has been a law enforcement officer for approximately 7 years and has worked over 100 cases involving the smuggling of narcotics from Mexico into the United States; approximately five involved the use of juveniles.
- Participant 2 has been a law enforcement officer for approximately 6 years and has worked approximately 30 cases involving the smuggling of narcotics from Mexico into the United States; approximately three involved the use of juveniles.
- Participant 3 has been a law enforcement officer for approximately 19 years and has worked over 130 cases involving the smuggling of narcotics from

Mexico into the United States; approximately six were involving the use of juveniles.

- Participant 4 has been a law enforcement officer for approximately 10 years and has worked over 100 cases involving the smuggling of narcotics from Mexico into the United States; approximately 86 were involving the use of juveniles.
- Participant 5 has been a law enforcement officer for approximately 14 years and has worked over 100 cases involving the smuggling of narcotics from Mexico into the United States; approximately five involved the use of juveniles.
- Participant 6 has been a law enforcement officer for approximately 25 years and has worked over 200 cases involving the smuggling of narcotics from Mexico into the United States; approximately 15 involved the use of juveniles.

All participants have worked or currently work narcotic cases on the southern border, in San Diego County, involving the use of juveniles to smuggle drugs from Mexico into the United States. To hold the position as a special agent, an individual needs to have at least a bachelor's degree from an accredited college. Also, there are two prerequisite programs at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center in Glynco, Georgia, to become a special agent: the Criminal Investigator Training Program and the Homeland Security Investigations Special Agent Training. These two programs comprise approximately 6 months total training.

Data Collection

For recruitment, I contacted individuals whom I was aware met the inclusion criteria in a personal setting, outside of the workplace, and requested their participation in the study; this was brought up in a casual conversation regarding my current status in my dissertation journey. When the participant told me that they were interested in helping, I delivered the interview questionnaire promptly, within 24 hours. I assumed consent was granted if the participant returned the completed interview questionnaire within the 7-day window (or requested it be picked up). There was no coercion. If I felt hesitation in the initial conversation, I steered the conversation in a different direction (e.g., family, kids, school, holidays, etc.).

For clarification, email was not used for this study. If the participant met the inclusion criteria and agreed to participate, I delivered the questions to them in their preferred manner; all were hand delivered. I requested the responses within 7 days in their preferred method (which was discussed and agreed upon). I acknowledged there was an acceptable risk and acknowledged that it was minimal. For data collection, I did what was necessary to minimize the risks. Since I only recruited individuals who met the inclusion criteria, whom I knew personally and professionally, I did what was possible to initiate conversations regarding any concerns about how volunteering or declining to volunteer could impact the professional and/or personal relationships. This was prioritized and minimized at all costs. Participants have the right to be protected against injury or illegal invasions of their privacy and to preserve their personal dignity; I took all the necessary steps to ensure anonymity in reporting throughout the process. To minimize

the risk for loss of anonymity and ensure confidentiality, I was never given, nor did I request the participant's personal identifiable information. Once the interview questionnaires were returned, the participants were immediately coded as Participants 1–6 in the order in which the questionnaires were received to ensure anonymity. The participants' identities will not be released without the express consent of the participant in advance. With the new recruitment method, not using email, most risks for this study were minimized. Regarding privacy, in recruitment, the conversations were one-on-one with individuals who were aware of my educational desires and dissertation journey; the participants also met the inclusion criteria.

Before conducting this study and starting the IRB process, I reached out to the ethics division in the Department of Homeland Security and received this response:

It was good talking this through with you earlier today. Based on our discussion, you confirmed your intent to pursue research to support your PHD dissertation. You are not being compensated in this quest and this is done to support your academic pursuit for PHD. You indicate that you will need to reach out to law enforcement for research purposes. As I shared with you, you do not need to submit an outside employment request for this activity since it is not compensated and there is no fiduciary duty involved. Regarding your research, since you are not matriculated in this course of study as part of your official duties, as long as you conduct the research in your personal capacity on personal time without leveraging your official position and government resources, there are no ethics concerns.

Based on the preliminary contact with the ethics division, the acceptance of this study from the IRB, and the information received from the interview questionnaires, I did what was necessary to ensure credibility in this study. No unexpected circumstances arose during data collection, and most interview questionnaires were returned within 2–3 days without issue or questions.

Data Analysis

The received interview questionnaires were saved “as is” to ensure the validity of the responses received. After receiving the interview responses, I used an Excel spreadsheet to compare and contrast each question and each interviewee’s response. I used qualitative inquiry codes for this. The qualitative inquiry code was often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigned a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of the verbatim response (Saldana, 2016). The data consisted of the completed interview questionnaires. For this study’s qualitative data analysis, the codes I generated were used to symbolize or translate the received data. Thus, I interpreted each datum’s meaning to find patterns, categorizations, and themes (Vogt et al., 2014). Based on the questionnaire responses, I coded the responses as shown in Table 1.

Table 1*Coded Participant Responses*

Participant	Juvenile cases	Age of juvenile	Motivation	Peer pressure
Participant 1	5	15–17	Money	Yes
Participant 2	3	14–16	Unknown	Unknown
Participant 3	6	15–17	Money	No
Participant 4	86	13–17	Money	Yes
Participant 5	5	16–17	Money	Yes
Participant 6	15	13–17	Money	No

Codes, Categories, and Themes

The codes used from the interviews were as follows: juveniles smuggling, 13–17 years of age, USC, bilingual, money, no regret, not caught, school campus, mass quantities, illicit drugs, dangerous, on their bodies, culturally normal, no consequences, easy, social status, no repercussions, no jail time, no options, this is a problem, society doesn't know, cycle, and impressionable kids. The categories (collection of codes) were money, no repercussions, do not understand the dangers, social status and culturally acceptable, USC, bilingual, can take to school, and 13–17. The themes became the juveniles' motivations for agreeing to smuggle drugs from Mexico into the United States in San Diego County and the demographics targeted for recruitment by Mexican drug cartels (see Figures 6 and 7). Using these codes, categories, and themes, the research question was answered.

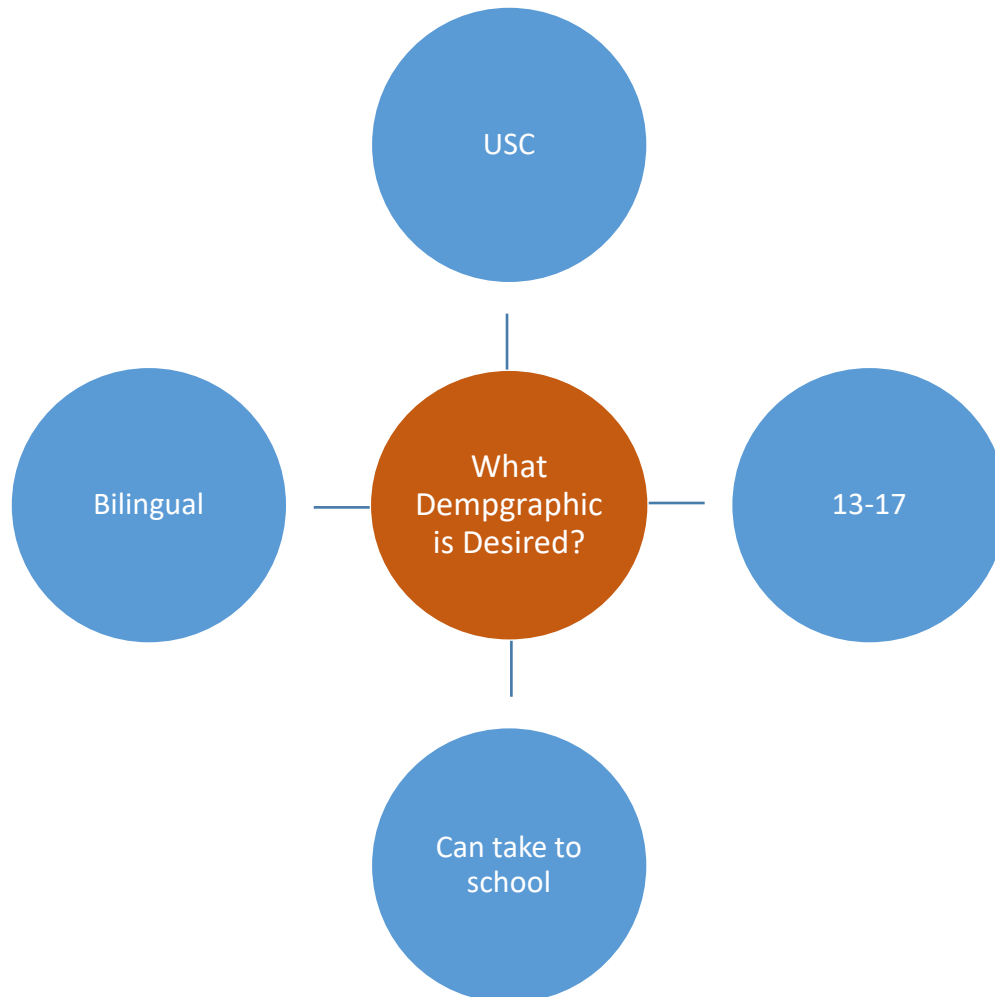
Figure 6

Why Juveniles Smuggle Narcotics



Figure 7

Mexican Cartels' Desired Demographics

**Evidence of Trustworthiness**

A study's credibility is the degree to which its findings accurately represent reality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To enhance this study's credibility, I used the verbatim responses and then sent my preliminary interpretations of the data to the participants; this is recommended in *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design* (Creswell, 2013). To ensure credibility and validity, I communicated my preliminary analysis results with each

participant and asked the participants either to confirm that the interpretation was accurately represented or state the error made by me in analysis; the participants made no suggestions for change as most responses for data analysis were verbatim. In doing this, I enhanced the dependability of the results or the extent to which the same results would be reached if the study were replicated by other researchers using the same procedures in the same context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability is the extent to which the findings from this study would be true in another research context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which, for this study, would be other border towns across the United States and Mexico borders. To allow readers to assess the transferability of the results, descriptions of the participants have been provided, as Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended. Confirmability is the degree to which a study's results are determined by the participants' perceptions rather than by me (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Using the verbatim statements, I ensured the accuracy of the participant's thoughts regarding this study. Evidence of trustworthiness was discussed in depth in Chapter 3 and adhered to for this study.

Results

For this qualitative study, I examined the perceived motivations of juveniles arrested attempting to smuggle narcotics from Mexico into the United States in San Diego County. The information for this study was examined through the lens of the agents and officers who have made the arrests. This research question was developed to shed light on this particular phenomenon: What are the perceptions of law enforcement officers regarding the motivations of juveniles between the ages of 14 and 17 in San Diego County who smuggle narcotics from Mexico into the United States?

Perceived Motivation of Juveniles

Regarding all participants' responses, each perceived the same motivation for why juveniles between the ages of 14 and 17 smuggled drugs from Mexico into the United States: money or monetary gain. All but one participant stated the perceived motivation had something to do with financial gain. One participant did not answer the question about perceived motivation as they were not in the interview room, during the juvenile's interview, for that particular question. Here are snippets from the interview questionnaires regarding the perceived motivations of juveniles to smuggle drugs from Mexico into the United States, from the perception of the law enforcement officers:

Participant 1 stated the perceived motivations were, "It was cool. Got free stuff. Got money." And, when asked if there was a thought of guilt regarding smuggling drugs from Mexico into the United States, the response was "Not really."

Participant 2 did not speak to the perceived motivations, but stated, "Simply put, they view it as a way to make a 'quick buck' without much risk." Regarding remorse, Participant 2 stated, "the one individual I do remember encountering did not seem to show remorse. My professional opinion was that he did not understand the seriousness of the crime that he just committed."

Participant 3 stated the perceived motivation to be "financial gain," and went on to say, "No remorse was shown in any case." Participant 3 also stated,

I believe there is a large subculture within Mexico and a smaller subculture here in the U.S. that romanticizes the narcotics cartels. Large scale traffickers are held up as heroes rather than villains. Many of the juveniles arrested for smuggling live

with or in the same neighborhoods as young adults who are heavily involved in Narcotics smuggling and trafficking.

Participant 4 stated the main reason for juveniles smuggling was “financial gain” and that peer pressure was usually involved. “Many of the juveniles refused to enter into narcotic smuggling conspiracies, but later relented and joined narcotic smuggling conspiracies after experiencing peer pressure.” Participant 4 stated they had made many arrests of juveniles’ being paid to transport large quantities of narcotics to school campuses near the international border. Participant 4 went on to say the arrests involved the transportation via vehicles, backpacks, and bodies (transporting narcotics strapped to their bodies).

Participant 5 stated juveniles smuggle drugs for monetary gain. They agree to do this because of (a) easy fast cash, (b), peer pressure (c) unknown consequences, and (d) status upgrade and the notion of being “cool .” None of the juveniles Participant 5 interviewed showed remorse or regret; they all knew they would not face any juvenile justice repercussions. They were coached to lie and told they would be going home no matter what; they would not go to jail and there would be zero repercussions.

Participant 6 stated juveniles smuggled drugs for the “fast cash.” Participant 6 found that juveniles desired materialistic things such as video game consoles, jewelry, and brand-name clothing. Participant 6 also stated if the juvenile was not smuggling for monetary reasons; it was for “street cred” within a narcotic organization, further stating it was to gain notoriety and popularity or a promotion within the cartel or organization.

Through the lens of justice workers in San Diego County, the number one reason juveniles agree to smuggle drugs from Mexico into the United States, based on this study, is for financial gain. The second perceived motivation is notoriety, to be cool, and the third is peer pressure.

Perceived Desired Demographics of Mexican Drug Cartels

Regarding all participants' responses, the average age of the juvenile was between 15–17. Two participants stated they had arrested a juvenile as young as 13, although this age was outside the study's parameters. Regarding the responses of all participants, the (average) nationality of the juvenile was American Citizen taking the narcotics to a destination within a 6-mile radius of the International Border. Regarding the responses of all participants, most of the juveniles arrested were bilingual, followed by Spanish only. Only a few juveniles spoke English solely (not common).

Professional Opinion of Participants Regarding This Phenomenon

The last question for this study's questionnaire was, "In your professional opinion, why do you think juveniles smuggle narcotics?" Here are the verbatim responses:

Participant 1 said,

I believe that they think it's cool turn off society makes a cool their friends made them believe that they're cool. Also having things like gaming systems and a little change in your pocket helps to. Society romanticizes it and makes it seem cool then when the juveniles her face with the repercussions of your actions they

realize or sometimes don't even realize what they have done. Juveniles are easily impressionable especially from older people who they look up to you.

Participant 2 said,

I feel as though these juveniles are not surrounded with positive support systems which would hopefully divert them away from this activity. Additionally, I feel as though these juveniles are not presented with many other options to make legal income (whether that is needed income for food/housing or disposable income). Finally, the recruiters obviously do not convey the seriousness of the situation to these children should they be apprehended. Simply put, they view it as a way to make a "quick buck" without much risk. It puts children in cyclical situations where they are dealing with drug trafficking organizations who will take advantage of them, hurt them, and put them in situations which will lead them to becoming adult offenders.

Participant 3 said,

I believe the allure of easy financial gain is the main attractor, but the culture also plays a part in it. These kids gain some level of respect and an arrest simply prepares them to move into higher levels within the cartels as they reach adulthood. They know the business and can now recruit other juveniles to perform the same type of criminal activity they did as juveniles. These kids are often recruited by young adults who were doing the same thing when they were juveniles. I believe there is a continuous cycle and I have no idea how you would stop that cycle.

Participant 4 said,

Many of the juveniles lived in economically disadvantaged households. Those motivated by financial gain did so to purchase goods and services unattainable otherwise. Additionally, I've encountered juveniles who participated in narcotic smuggling because it boosted their social status among their peers. Furthermore, I believe we've seen an uptick in juvenile narcotic smuggling due to lack of education on the dangers of narcotic smuggling/trafficking. Many juveniles smuggle illicit narcotics concealed on their bodies. Often these illicit narcotics, including fentanyl, heroin, and cocaine are transported on a public conveyance [bus, trolley, etc.] while still attached to the juvenile. Additionally, there have been documented cases of these narcotics being temporarily stored on school campuses. This smuggling scenario presents the risk of overdose deaths at schools and aboard public conveyances [should a package rupture].

Participant 5 said,

I believe juveniles smuggle drugs because of peer pressure; and the desire to "be cool" and have what others have without having to truly work for it. These kids believe smuggling drugs is "easy money;" in one trip, I have interviewed a child who made \$4,500 each time, and the time he was caught was his 10th time; that means he made over \$40,000 in three weeks for doing nothing more than driving a car with drugs inside. That is disturbing. There is a distorted reality for juveniles regarding school, work, family, money, peer pressure, fitting in, and maturing. I believe juveniles get lost in the hype and lose track of reality and working hard

for things you want. They lose the goal, or end game, and want what is fast and easy without realizing the consequences it could have on their future. It is a vicious cycle, it is a dangerous cycle, it is a cycle that needs to be stopped.

Participant 6 said,

I think juveniles mainly smuggle for personal financial gain. I do believe this is a problem. As long as society continues to go down the path of low consequences for juveniles, they will continue to line up to try and make money for themselves. In my professional opinion, I think normal citizens are aware, but don't want to get involved. The peer pressure used was self-created. They wanted to buy things or fit in by purchasing name brand clothing or jewelry for their girlfriend(s).

Participant 6 also added, "what current rehabilitation programs do you think help curve the use of juveniles in narcotics smuggling? What type of program do you think should be created to help curve the use of juveniles in smuggling activities?"

This is a question that could be further looked into after this current study. The results of this study could help shape programs near the international border to help juveniles say "no" to drug smuggling.

Summary

For this qualitative study, I examined the perceived motivations of juveniles arrested attempting to smuggle narcotics from Mexico into the United States in San Diego County. The information for this study was examined through the lens of the agents and officers who have made the arrests. This research question was developed to shed light on this particular phenomenon: What are the perceptions of law enforcement

officers regarding the motivations of juveniles between the ages of 14 and 17 in San Diego County who smuggle narcotics from Mexico into the United States?

Based on this study and the questions created by me, all but one (86%) of the participants stated the perceived motivation had something to do with financial gain; money. For clarification, the one participant who did not say it was for monetary gain did not answer the question, as they were unsure. Aside from this study's research question, another area of interest highlighted was the desired demographics of juveniles by Mexican drug cartels to smuggle drugs from Mexico into the United States. These were also through the lens of law enforcement officers. The desired demographics according to the answers provided by the participants were (1) United States Citizens, (2) who were bilingual, and (3) who went to school within six miles of the international border. This information can help create a positive social change in the communities surrounding the international border in San Diego County; and all counties near the international border.

Chapter 4 provided the results of this study and Chapter 5 will conclude this dissertation with a discussion, conclusion and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative study was to shed light on the phenomenon of juveniles being used by Mexican drug cartels to smuggle narcotics from Mexico into the United States in San Diego County. For this qualitative study, I examined the perceived motivations of juveniles arrested, attempting to smuggle narcotics from Mexico into the United States, in San Diego County. The information for this study was examined through the lens of the agents and officers who have made the arrests. This research question was developed to shed light on this particular phenomenon: What are the perceptions of law enforcement officers regarding the motivations of juveniles between the ages of 14 and 17 in San Diego County who smuggle narcotics from Mexico into the United States?

After coding the interview questionnaire responses via an Excel spreadsheet, the common themes were highlighted across the cells. The codes used from the interviews were: juveniles smuggling, 13–17 years of age, USC, bilingual, money, no regret, not caught, school campus, mass quantities, illicit drugs, dangerous, on their bodies, culturally normal, no consequences, easy, social status, no repercussions, no jail time, no options, this is a problem, society doesn't know, cycle, impressionable kids. The categories (collection of codes) were money, no repercussions, do not understand the dangers, social status and culturally acceptable, USC, bilingual, can take to school, and 13–17. The themes became the demographics and motivations of why juveniles agreed to smuggle drugs from Mexico into the United States in San Diego County. Based on this, I was able to conclude that the primary motivation of juveniles between the ages of 14 and

17 in San Diego County who smuggle narcotics from Mexico into the United States was for monetary gain; the second motivating factor was notoriety.

Blumer (1933) believed juveniles without financial stability at home sought what others had and were lured by what they wanted. In cultural circles, some people may merely entertain the hope to share the life they see in their friends (Blumer, 1933), others may be envious of it and seek to accomplish what they feel their friends have. In the experiences of criminals, delinquents, and marginal delinquents, the appeal of a life of wealth and ease is particularly well marked and desired (Blumer, 1933); what one sees, one wants. When a juvenile is told they can “make easy money,” they want to make the easy money; especially if it can bring notoriety within their circle of friends. Also, psychologically, juveniles are more impulsive, aggressive, emotionally reactive and vulnerable to peer pressure than adults (Fritz, 2008). This cycle makes juvenile drug smuggling enticing and desirable.

Interpretation of the Findings

Cognitive psychologists such as Bandura (1969) proposed the social learning theory to better understand human nature. Social learning theory emphasizes the importance of observing and modeling behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions (Bandura, 1977). When attempting to understand a juvenile’s behavior, one must first understand the malleability of a juvenile. Juveniles are far from being a finished product, they continue to develop through their teens.

Fritz (2008) found that important biological changes are still taking place in the brains of juveniles and that they are unable to make comprehensive decisions.

Psychologically, juveniles are more impulsive, aggressive, emotionally reactive and vulnerable to peer pressure than adults (Fritz, 2008). Juveniles are the perfect target for Mexican drug cartels looking to smuggle illegal drugs from Mexico into the United States. If a juvenile sees what they think is “cool” and it comes with “free money,” they are enticed to make a bad decision based on perception and not reality.

This qualitative study was rooted in social learning theory. The logical connections between social learning theory and the examination of juveniles who smuggle narcotics internationally from Mexico into the United States is that juveniles are influenced by the behaviors of those around them. Social learning theory suggests that people engage in either criminal or noncriminal behavior based on the social environment and that people are influenced by how others reward or model behavior. Juveniles in the midst of growth (i.e., ages 14–17) are influenced by those around them, both their social and familial environments.

According to the participants of this study, money was the number one reason juveniles were involved in international drug smuggling. This falls in line with social learning theory, because as the participants noted, “several from the same click were doing it.” According to Participant 2,

This is speculative, but ... I believe there is a large subculture within Mexico and a smaller subculture here in the U.S. that romanticizes the narcotics cartels. Large scale traffickers are held up as heroes rather than villains. Many of the juveniles arrested for smuggling live with or in the same neighborhoods as young adults who are heavily involved in Narcotics smuggling and trafficking.

Juveniles learn this is the 'way of life' and want what they perceive their friends are rewarded with.

Another question for this study that did not directly affect the research question, was "What are your thoughts on the juvenile justice system in San Diego County?" This question was asked not from the perspective of the juvenile, but from the perspective of the law enforcement officer. These are the responses, which could impact future studies regarding juveniles and international drug smuggling.

Participant 1 stated, "It is lenient." When asked if the San Diego County's 21-day maximum sentence in juvenile hall played a role, the response was, "yes."

Participant 2 stated,

There is no easy answer here. I feel strongly that a mistake (if it is not a very serious one that involves physical injury) made by a juvenile, should not alter his/her life forever. Kids make mistakes. While narcotics smuggling is a serious mistake, I don't think it helps anyone to lock children away in juvenile detention centers for extended periods of time. I also think that these individuals should not simply be cut loose after being apprehended. A dedicated, juvenile offender program that is targeted at providing these juveniles with forms of positive reinforcement is needed. A system where juveniles could "earn" away their sentence by attending counseling sessions, performing community service in narcotics rehabilitation centers and attending mandatory extracurricular activities at school would be much more beneficial than locking that juvenile away in a detention center that rivals an adult prison. Obviously, there would need to be

different levels of constraint placed on the juvenile dependent on the individual's adherence to the program. Some would not comply with the program and would need to be mandated into it. Others would adhere to it and would require less supervision.

Having seen the inside of the juvenile detention center in San Diego, I feel strongly that these juveniles are not getting the services that they need to help prevent them from getting into these situations in the future. These juveniles are at pivotal points in their lives where the proper intervention could keep them from becoming adult offenders. While it is true that a program like this will not keep every juvenile from reoffending, it would help some and that would go a long way. Detention should always be an option if needed. It just shouldn't be the only option.

Participant 3 stated, "It is far too lenient." When asked if the San Diego County's 21-day maximum sentence in juvenile hall played a role, the response was,

Yes, these kids rarely get any time because the Juvenile justice system places an emphasis on rehabilitative justice rather than punitive. I understand these are children but, in most cases, they have already been lost to the streets and Juvenile Detention could prove to be far more constructive and rehabilitative than sending them back into the same environments in which they were easily recruited from in the first place.

Participant 4 stated,

In several cases, the juvenile offenders specifically informed me they were told the worst consequence they could receive was 21 days custody of juvenile hall. Many of the juveniles agreed to smuggle thinking the reward outweighed the risk of 21 days custody.

Participant 5 stated,

there is a serious problem with the juvenile justice system in San Diego County. Juveniles are not being held responsible for their actions, and the system is forcing the parents to be the disciplinarians. Well, the parents are not involved and are acting as the disciplinarian. There are zero consequences for international drug smuggling and that makes this very appealing on many levels. Not only are the juveniles making a lot of money, if and when they are caught, they are not suffering any punitive damage.

Participant 6 stated,

I think some of the rules could be changed. I think more time in custody should be given. The juveniles knowing how little time they get is not enough of a deterrent to keep them from committing crimes. I think it should be a minimum of 90 days, and it should be advertised for all to know. The lack of consequences is what continues to work against the justice system.

Regarding this question, in San Diego County, the juvenile justice system is based on the idea that children and teenagers (juveniles) lack the maturity to make good decisions. From the perception of the justice system, when a juvenile makes a mistake,

the system is intended to rehabilitate the juvenile and try to help them learn to make better choices as they grow and mature into adulthood.

California Juvenile Process

The juvenile justice court process is different than for adults. Juveniles arrested for offenses that would be crimes if committed by adults, like the importation of illegal narcotics from Mexico into the United States, are not charged with importation crime. Juveniles in San Diego County are charged with “delinquency” (County of San Diego Mental Health Services, n.d.). The potential punishment for being found “delinquent” may include probation, deferred entry of judgment, placement in a foster home, group home or probation camp, and/ or commitment to a juvenile detention facility (County of San Diego Mental Health Services, n.d.).

In San Diego County, it is not uncommon for juveniles to be involved in the importation of drugs from Mexico and to end up in the juvenile justice system for that reason. It is a disturbing fact, as shown in the literature review, that drug cartels often recruit juveniles to import and transport drugs for them as mules. As mentioned, the juveniles are lured into this drug culture and lifestyle with promises that they will earn a lot of money and will not face consequences if they are caught because they are underage. As noted with this study, juveniles believe they will not do “hard time” when arrested for the importation of drugs from Mexico into the United States because that is what the Mexican drug cartel told them and that may be what they witnessed from their friends.

This is not just a phenomenon affecting San Diego County, but this affects all border towns. In a study named “Juvenile Drug Trafficking,” an assistant county attorney from the Juvenile Division in El Paso Texas was able to share information similar to what was found in this study.

Juvenile Drug Trafficking El Paso

As cited by Dawson (2021), Josiah Heyman, a professor of anthropology at the University of Texas in El Paso, and author on cross-border smuggling, said,

We don’t really know the scale of juvenile smuggling, including American teens, because data is not published systematically (and maybe not even collected).

Pretty much all the (school) counselors have expressed to me in one way or another that they are aware of the threat that there is recruiting going on in the high schools. Almost all the high schools, and even a good number of the middle schoolers are requested to either sell drugs, or bring drugs in from Mexico, or transport the drugs through the Border Patrol checkpoints into the interior of the country.

From the statistics in El Paso, the demographics of the juveniles arrested smuggling drugs from Mexico into the United States were: first time offenders, United States citizens, between the ages of 13 and 17, primarily male, primarily attended schools along the border highway, and they believed there were not consequences for the importation of drugs (Dawson, 2021). The results from Dawson’s (2021) study in El Paso are similar to those of my study, minus the mention of motivation.

What was shown in Dawson's (2021) statistics is similar to what was found in this research study. As recommended, conducting studies similar to this across the entire international border could provide insight for future educational programs and juvenile justice policies.

Limitations of the Study

The first limitation identified in this study was the number of participants who completed the interview questionnaire. Of the seven questionnaires that were handed out, only six were returned within the 7-day window. One of the factors affecting the number of questionnaires handed out was the inclusion criteria: the law enforcement officer had to have arrested at least one juvenile attempting to smuggle drugs from Mexico into the United States in San Diego County. However, saturation was met. According to Turner (2016), there is no single way to measure significance so reaching saturation is difficult to pinpoint. For this study, all of the participants answered most of the questions with similar responses, just worded differently. When I analyzed the participant responses, I noted the common themes and found no new insights. I did not feel there would be a new insight if I continued to petition participants for this study. One other consideration when reaching saturation comes from Brod et al. (2009): when there are no new perspectives on the research question. I was able to answer the research question with the data received from the six participants. For future studies, the questions from this questionnaire could help inform other research questions.

Reflexivity

According to Malterud (2001), a researcher's background can possibly affect their research, methods, findings, and conclusion. When considering conducting this research study, I spent optimal time pondering the topic, the questions, the possible answers, and the need for this study. In saying that, I did know, both personally and professionally, all of the respondents for this study. I had a basic understanding of international drug smuggling including the increasing use of juveniles to smuggle drugs and my perceived motivation of the juveniles.

Positionality

I am not a part of the juvenile justice system and do not understand that portion of this cycle. For further understanding of the juvenile justice system, a study should be conducted to include the policies (guidelines and punishments) for crimes committed by juveniles, to include international drug smuggling. Conducting a study with those parameters could help determine whether lack of consequences is a motivation for juveniles to be involved in juvenile drug smuggling (i.e., risk versus reward).

I work as an agent within federal law enforcement in San Diego County CA. I have spent the past 15 years investigating illegal drug smuggling to include the arrest of juveniles. I have a vested interest in this study; my son attended 'border schools' from kindergarten through high school, and my daughter is currently attending elementary school at a 'border school.' Knowing there are drugs on these campuses is dangerous for a plethora of reasons and I am acutely aware of the problem.

Future Research

Finding the motivations of juveniles to be recruited could be instrumental in changing the culture of these juveniles. To provide drug awareness to include educational awareness regarding Mexican drug cartels could help decrease juvenile involvement. This study has the potential to open the doors to more research. As I found, in the last 3 months, statistics from El Paso were posted online showing the increased problem of juveniles being used in Texas to smuggle drugs from Mexico into the United States. A study mirroring this one could help find the motivations of juveniles in that area and along the international border in Texas. This understanding and positionality has allowed me to make thought-out recommendations for studies moving forward.

Recommendations

This study was small in nature, but it yielded some very interesting results. My first recommendation for future research would be to expand this study to include as many border town/ counties as possible along the Southwest Border; the United States and Mexico international border. This would strengthen the validity of this study by providing insights into other geographic locations. Data from conducting this study in other locations could provide additional insight into the phenomenon of juveniles smuggling narcotics from Mexico into the United States.

The second recommendation would be to conduct a mixed methods study. For this, future researchers could analyze the biographical data, the environmental data, and then add the qualitative data. In doing this, future researchers could potentially paint a more defined picture of this phenomenon.

The third recommendation would be to conduct the study through the perception of the juveniles that were arrested smuggling narcotics from Mexico into the United States. Conducting a study with the juvenile would shed light on a motivation that is not known by law enforcement. To converse with a juvenile and attempt to understand their motivations and desires could be enlightening. This could also help understand if social learning theory was the proper guideline for this type of study and understanding of the study. The use of juveniles as participants would also allow a researcher to ask follow on questions and allow the participant to explain in details the answers to the questions.

The fourth recommendation, to shed light on this from another perspective, would be to interview school counselors and teachers. As noted in Dawson (2021), “Pretty much all the (school) counselors have expressed to me in one way or another that they are aware of the threat that there is recruiting going on in the high schools.” Creating a study that revolved around the firsthand knowledge of teachers and school counselors could be helpful in creating educational programs for the students they know and teach every day. Creating a study using teachers and school counselors could also shed light on the feelings these juveniles share and show daily in the classroom. Teachers and school counselors would have a perspective no other individual would see.

The final recommendation would be to create a study using the metrics of all stakeholders in this cycle; the juvenile, law enforcement officer, parent, teacher and school counselor, and district attorney or law representative. To create a study involving all stakeholders could help shed light on this phenomenon in perspectives unknown to the current researcher.

These recommendations, for future studies, could allow a more well-rounded response to this study's research question. These recommendations should also help guide future policy makers regarding the juvenile justice system when it comes to the crime of international drug smuggling. This study could also inform educational programs tailored to border towns and the phenomenon of juvenile drug smuggling.

Implications

The results of this study have far-reaching implications for positive social change not only on the border in San Diego County, but the results could positively change every border town within the United States. Positive social change results in improved human and social conditions; when we create change in ourselves, we help guide those around us, which in turn, changes communities, which in turn changes nations, which could create a global impact. One of the best definitions of social change is, "Changes in the culture are accompanied by social changes. The main cause of social change is the cultural factor. Culture gives speed and direction to social change and determines the limits beyond which social changes cannot occur" (Verma, n.d., p. 1).

Walden University is focused on inspiring and celebrating the remarkable achievements of community members who continue to make a difference by addressing challenges where they live, in their professions, and the world around them. Walden is focused on social change and what that means to each person individually and during times, collectively. Creating change is more than words; it is creating a culture of change within ourselves and our communities. Something meaningful, justified, and impactful, is the phenomenon of juveniles being used by the Mexican drug cartels to smuggle illicit

narcotics from Mexico into the United States. This problem not only affects the border schools and students (in San Diego County), but the narcotics being smuggled into the United States are being trafficked through San Diego with final destinations throughout the entire Country. The national drug epidemic is one that affects everyone in some way.

Conclusion

On January 27, 2022, CBP announced Customs officers had seized more than 2,700 pounds of fentanyl in first three months of fiscal year 2022 (Rosas, 2022). Over 100,000 Americans died from drug overdoses between May 2020 to April 2021 (CDC, 2021); this means drug overdoses, from illegal narcotics, surpassed deaths from car crashes, guns, and the flu (Rosas, 2022). The Mexican Drug Cartels are taking advantage of the United States' drug epidemic and their use of juveniles as a means of illegal drug importation. This study highlighted the nation's drug crises, the statistics of United States and Mexico's drug seizures at the border, and pursued the motivations of juveniles to become involved in this cycle.

While the phenomenon this researcher sought to explore solely affects border towns (and for this study specifically, San Diego County), the narcotics being smuggled affect the entire nation. The goal for this researcher, where I live and work, is to be the change I wish to see, especially regarding the education of narcotic smuggling and narcotic use. The primary goal with this study, and research going forward, is to positively impact and change organizations' cultures in which I am a part of for the better. The result of this study yielded that the Participants perceived motivation of juvenile international drug smuggling had something to do with financial gain; money.

The participants perceived 'peer pressure' and 'cultural norms' as a reason juveniles fall into the cycle of international drug smuggling for the Mexican drug cartels.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. How long have you been a law enforcement officer?
 - a. In San Diego County
 - b. Previous duty stations?
2. How many narcotics cases have you worked?
3. How many juvenile cases have you worked?
 - a. how old was the juvenile; or, what grade were they in?
 - b. was the juvenile a USC?
 - c. did they attend school within a 6-mile radius of the international border?
 - d. were they English speaker? Spanish? Or both?
4. Of the juvenile cases, what was the “motivation” for smuggling narcotics?
5. Did the juvenile show remorse or regret?
 - a. if so, was the regret in getting caught, or smuggling the drugs?
6. Was peer pressure involved?
7. On average, how much was the juvenile being paid?
 - a. how many times had they previously smuggled?
 - b. were the drugs ever taken to a school campus?
8. What is the means in which juveniles smuggle?
 - a. vehicle
 - b. backpack
 - c. body carrier
 - d. internal carrier
9. Was coercion involved in any of the cases?
10. Was peer pressure involved?
11. What is a cultural ‘norm’ for the juvenile to get involved; socially acceptable?
12. What are your thoughts on the juvenile justice system in San Diego County?
 - a. could the 21-maximum number of days play a role? Lack of consequences?

12. In your professional opinion, why do you think juveniles smuggle narcotics?

13. In your professional opinion, is this a problem?

a. Why Narcotic smuggling/trafficking is inherently dangerous.

14. In your professional opinion, do you think “normal” citizens are aware of this phenomenon?

15. If there is an important question you feel I missed, please share your thoughts and questions I should add to this questionnaire.

Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions. If you know any other agents or officers who would be interested in partaking in this, please feel free to share the questions and have that individual contact me at gabrielle.smyth@waldenu.edu.

Again, thank you for your support and patience in this interview. Your response means a lot.

Very Respectfully.

Appendix B: Results Spreadsheet

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Time as LEO	7	6	19	10	14	25
# Drug Cases	100+	30	130	100+	100	200+
# Juvenile Cases	5	3	6	86	5	15
Age of Juv.	15-17	14-16	15-17	13-17	16-17	13-17
Citizenship	USC	USC	3 USC, 2LPRs	USC, LPR	USC, LPR	USC LPR
Border School	2 NO 3 YES	Unknown	Unknown	Yes	Yes and No	Yes
English or Spanish or Both	Both	Both	Spanish	Both	Both	both
REASON	Money	NO RESPONSE	Money	Money	Money	Money
Regret?	not really	NO	No	Yes	No	No
Peer Pressure?	Yes	Unknown	No	Yes	Yes and No	No
Amount Paid	Xbox and \$500	Unknown	\$300-\$1200	\$200-\$2000	\$1,000	\$800-1500
Number of Times Smuggled before being caught	between 1 and 8	Unknown	once; CBP found otherwise	up to 20 times	5	more than once
Were drugs taken to school campus?	No	Unknwn	Unknown	Yes	No	Yes
Means of Smuggling?	Back Pack and Body Carrier	Body Carrier	Body Carrier	Vehicle, Back Pack, Body carrier	Body Carrier	Vehides and backpacks
Coercion?	No	Unknown	No	Some; not often	No	No
Cultural Thoughts?	"it was cool"	"not abnormal"	Yes	NO RESPONSE	It was cool	Street Cred
Thoughts on Juvenile Justice in SD County	Yes, a factor: lack of consequences	not getting proper services	To lenient	lenient	lenient	lenient
Professional Opinion, Why?	to be cool, make money, no repercussions	money, not having other options	financial gain	financial gain; social status	social status and money	money and status
Professional Opinion, Normal citizens know?	No	No	No	No	No	Yes/ish
Professional Opinoin, is this a problem?	Yes: juveniles are impressionable.	Yes: dealing drugs cycle	Yes: cycle	Yes: dangerous	Yes: dangerous	Yes, dangerous