

BUILDING BETTER BORDERS IN LATIN AMERICA

Illegal trading and the violence that can accompany it is a scourge along Latin America's borders, but researchers from across the region are working together to find ways to combat the problem

POSTED BY BRIAN OWENS ON OCTOBER 18, 2016

Throughout much of Latin America, borders can be dangerous places. Smuggling, drug running and human trafficking are lucrative businesses — the United Nations estimates that the illegal drug trade in the region is worth \$450 billion a year — and those that control it are not afraid to use violence to protect their investment.

It's the people who live near borders that have to deal with the consequences of this violence, says Fernando Carrión, a researcher at the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences in Quito, Ecuador. "Border towns suffer from murder, robbery and insecurity, which hinders local development and integration between countries," he says.

Carrión is interested in what makes these illegal economies work, and how countries can work together to dismantle them. Supported by the International Development Research Centre, he is leading a project to map and study the underlying political economy of illegal trading and violence in Latin American border regions, and come up with ways to combat and prevent it.

"We want to not only study violence and national security issues, but also to think deeper and learn what the underlying causes are," says Markus Gottsbacher, the IDRC staffer handling the project, adding that what reporting is done on the topic is "rather superficial."

Carrión and his colleagues felt it would be too dangerous and expensive to do their research directly in the border regions, so they study newspaper and magazine reports, journal articles and national crime statistics from the past 10 years, looking for patterns that they can develop into a comprehensive picture of the illegal economies of the border regions. But that doesn't mean their work is without risk. "When you're studying illegal markets, regardless of where one is, you face risks," says Carrión. "It involves revealing the ways the smugglers operate, which can affect their interests. So our research requires us to have security when we do travel to those areas."

Using public media sources such as newspapers helps the researchers develop a fuller picture of the situation than if they relied solely on government data, adds Carrión, because reporters will often look beyond the local level when chasing a story. "Usually the information on these issues is handled by the respective countries," he says. "The journalistic sources allow us to discover the logic of events, through the behaviour of the various actors."

Carrión has found that the development of the illicit economy in border regions comes from the lack of integration between countries, creating what he calls "complementary asymmetries" in economic and legal policies. "Two countries with different economic policies generate, via smuggling, illegal economies," he says.

But the problem is rarely confined to a single border between two nations. The issue is global, as what is being smuggled — drugs,



A man peers through a hole in a wall that separates Tijuana, Mexico, from the United States. Throughout Latin America, border cities such as Tijuana are often dangerous places where illegal activity, such as drug trafficking and the violence that can accompany it, creates havoc for residents. (Photo: Alfonso Caraveo/Archivo Colef)

guns, people, to name but a few — are fed into international illegal economies. "The whole system is connected to global matters," says Gottsbacher. To try and develop an understanding of the international dimensions of the problem, Carrión's project involves researchers and policymakers from eight Latin American countries: Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico and Peru.

The goal is not just to unravel what is happening at the borders, but also to design projects to help improve the situation. To help fight the violence associated with illegal border economies, Carrión and his colleagues are helping to strengthen international ties and cooperation in the region. "It's very difficult for a single country to take on all of these problems," he says.

They are working with Ecuador's attorney general to create a South American International Criminal Court, fostering the development of the Latin American Organisation of Border Cities and creating a network of institutions and researchers in the region who can share ideas and solutions. "You need good allies at the national and regional level to deal with these issues," says Gottsbacher.

All of their projects are focused on what Carrión calls the "positive agenda" — looking for ways to improve cooperation, integration and understanding between people across borders, rather than a heavy-handed law and order approach. "This project tries to improve border governance with less focus on national security issues," says Gottsbacher, "and more on how to collaborate in positive terms."

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READING AS THINKING

Answer the following in complete sentences.

1. Summarize the article. Make sure that you are including the essential ideas and supporting details.

2. a) Who suffers the greatest consequences from the illegal trading and violence?
b) Choose one word that you think best describes what it is like for these people and defend your choice.

3. Look at the picture and answer the following by placing key words in the boxes below.

WHAT DO
YOU SEE?

WHAT DO
YOU FEEL?

WHY DO YOU THINK
THE IMAGE WAS CHOSEN?

4. a) Why can't the research be completed in the border zones?
b) What resources are the researchers using to develop a fuller picture of the problem?

5. Should border patrol be a global issue? Your answer should include reasons for your judgement.

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6. Rewrite the title of the article for two new audiences.
- The citizens of the border towns who are experiencing the greatest threat.
 - The criminals who are making a business of smuggling, drug running and human trafficking.

7. Predict the next steps for this project and create a vision statement. A vision statement outlines the future direction of a project. Create a clear and concise statement. It must show what the project hopes to accomplish in the future.

8. In the article, Carrión speaks about the “positive agenda” of the projects. What does this mean?

9. The article quotes Gottsbacher, who says, “This project tries to improve border governance with less focus on national security issues and more on how to collaborate in positive terms.” Paraphrase the quote. Paraphrasing occurs when you write something in your own words, while keeping the same meaning.

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Think-Pair-Share

10. *Think*

Choose one of the following:

- a) Smuggling
- b) Drug running
- c) Human trafficking

Critically examine the issue by reflecting on how a youth who becomes involved in this activity changes the path of their life.

Pair

With a partner or in a group, create a short advertisement that you would use to encourage youth living in these countries to not become involved in these illegal activities. Your advertisement may use a medium of your choice. It should be creative, relevant and make an impact. Some platform ideas include: outdoor advertisements, media (such as TV advertisements), social media, print (such as magazines) and others that your class brainstorms.

Share

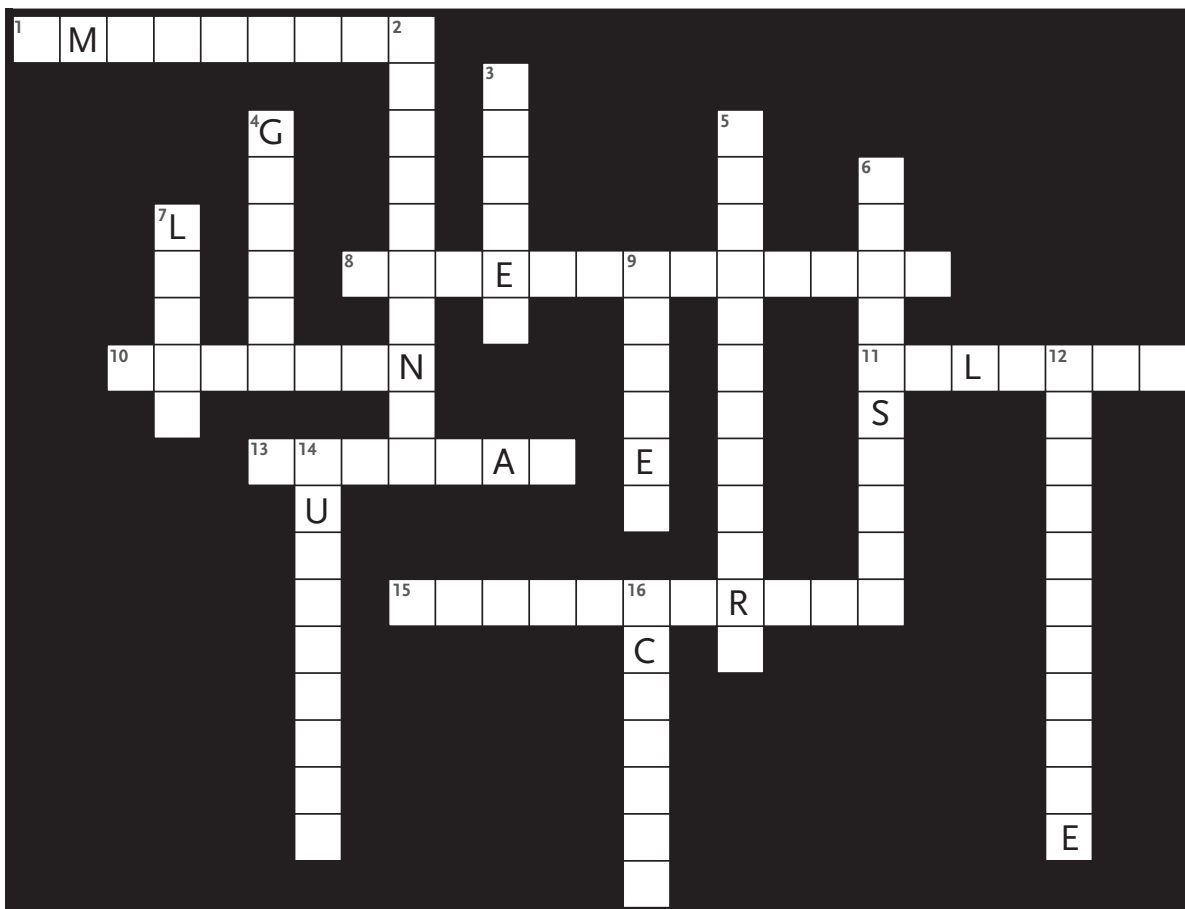
Discuss overlapping themes in the ads and the importance of the issues as a class.

ONLINE

1. Locate Ecuador on [Google Maps](#) and explore the country. Using the quick facts section and other research tools find the following:
 - a. the population
 - b. the borders
 - c. the neighboring countries
 - d. an ocean that borders Ecuador
 - e. the capital city
 - f. Once you have found Quito, read the quick facts and view the photos
 - g. Describe where Ecuador is in relation to Canada
2. Explore the website [Anti-Slavery International](#) to learn more about human trafficking and slavery around the world.
3. Learn more about human trafficking at [InSight Crime](#).
4. Watch the video "[Beyond the Seal](#)" to learn more about conditions that banana workers in Ecuador face.
5. Learn more about drug trafficking in South America via the [United Nations](#).
6. Learn more about Bolivia's role in [drug trafficking](#) in South America.
7. Read this article on [drug trafficking in Latin America](#).
8. Look at the [map](#) that shows drug trafficking routes and gold mining areas. Then watch the video at the bottom of the page.
9. Learn more about the project via the [IDRC](#).

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CROSSWORD:

Across

1. Taking or bringing something illegally and secretly
8. Involving two or more countries
10. One thousand million
11. Unlawful
13. Not legal
15. Two parts that are not the same

Down

2. The way that the border is controlled by the people who run it

3. Boundary
4. Involving the entire world
5. Responsible for making policies
6. The study of data
7. Relating to the people of South and Central America
9. Groups or nations that are associated with another for a common cause
12. Working with another to do something
14. Producing a great deal of profit
16. Quito is a city located in this South American country