



# SPECPOL

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## The Question of South American Drug Routes



**Committee:** SPECPOL

**Topic:** The Question of South American Drug Routes

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## Summary



South American Drug Routes refer to the networks used to transport illicit narcotic substances from source to global drug markets. The primary drug transported is cocaine and marijuana (Cannabis) from where it is grown & cultivated in Latin America (Mainly in Peru, Bolivia and Colombia in the cocaine trade due to high levels of coca harvesting) to regions where it is sold such as North America and Europe.

The networks used involve a mix of land, air and sea routes, but the primary routes are land to sea routes whereby cocaine is transported to a port or means of sea transport where it will continue its journey out of South America from there. The sea routes are especially prevalent with an estimated 90% of cocaine produced in the Andean region being transported by sea at some point, especially in specially designed vessels called “Narco Submarines”. The export and trade of narcotics, in particular cocaine, is a lucrative business but has contributed to growing crime and violence, health issues, and political instability.

This issue has wider reaching solutions, root causes, and consequences than South America, with a mix of lax or compromised border enforcement and mixed levels of attempted interdiction by participating, transit or receiving states alongside drug cartels having large, underground networks of power and intimidation to keep operations running. It is exacerbated by the growing demand for the drug within North America and Western Europe which only helps to expand the production and transportation of narcotics by drug cartels.

*This research report will focus on Cocaine (and in part Cannabis) as these are the main drugs transported along these routes. Please note that this research report aims to give an overview on this issue and is not intended to include every minor detail; it is highly recommended by the author that you research this topic further given its very complex nature.*

## Origins, Importance & Overview of Routes:

The routes exist for the primary purpose of transporting the key, processed ingredient for narcotic substances (For example the white cocaine powder) to Western or otherwise international markets with the first major drug network emerging from Colombia in the 1970s and 1980s because of the Medellín Cartel’s mass exportation of cocaine to the US.

The Drug routes can be classified into 3 main pathways:

- The Caribbean route (Previously used for US export, now major European and West Africa export route)
- The Pacific route (Colombia, Peru & Ecuador main exit ports for US/Mexico and Asia/Oceania export)
- The Atlantic route (For African and European export)

Most routes start in Colombia, Bolivia and Peru, with most of the cocaine for the United States and over half of the cocaine found in Europe believed to have originated from Colombia, fuelled mainly by a large coca economy within Colombia and large underground criminal organisations which exert tight and well-managed control over supply chains making it difficult to dismantle them. Combined with other socio-economic circumstances in the country, such as an increase in the proportion of youth turning to crime and decreasing security aid from the United States of America [US] which was “designed to support security and counternarcotics”, there is an increasing global demand for cocaine, fuelling current supply chains.

Routes do not necessarily flow directly from the country of origin, however, due to increasing patrols in areas like Colombia’s Coastline, drug traffickers have been forced to diversify their routes including through the Caribbean. Any kind of drug trafficking often relies on corruption and impunity which is offered at large in the Caribbean due to its low interdiction capacity. This is especially so at ports whereby it has been reported that criminal groups have been able to infiltrate operations, allowing them to introduce cocaine to shipments bound for Europe. Whilst trafficking goods via container ships and on the sea (Such as via specially designed submarines like ‘Narco Submarines’) is the most used method, other methods include using drug mules or small, privately-owned aircraft.

Most cocaine that flows via South American Drug routes is inbound to Western Europe or the US; however, it does take separate routes depending on target market. For US export, cocaine flows generally from Colombia to Mexico or Central America and then onwards by sea or land to the US. However, for European export, Peru and Bolivia are the main countries as well as the Caribbean with cocaine being transported via ‘Island Hopping’ or through European overseas territories. The Caribbean appears particularly attractive for European export due to low interdiction capacity and weak governance making it easier to smuggle illicit substances. Moreover, overseas territories of European countries (Such as the United Kingdom, France and the Netherlands) within the Caribbean and on the coast of South America can include some unique benefits including direct trading links with Europe and a common language alongside in the case of the French territories, the common currency of the Euro. Africa also appears to be growing in importance as a transit country for the drug trade between South America, Europe and beyond.



The impact of the narcotics trade on the Caribbean and on South America is not to be underestimated, with the cocaine trade causing a significant decrease in the region's stability and security, exacerbating pre-existing corruption as well as causing an increase in violence. A trend which can also be seen in the countries whereby the drugs are imported with an increase in cocaine use fuelling a growing epidemic of health and social stability issues in Europe with the relatively recent spike and growing use of cocaine with the issues caused being comparable or even on par with the US.

## Who this topic affects:

In general, this topic is starting to have an on-mass effect on many due to the knock-on effects of the cocaine trade on recipient countries. However, a few **key** parties affected include:

- Countries receiving narcotics transported and their residents, such as:
  - o North America (Canada & United States)
  - o Western Europe (Especially Belgium, The Netherland and Spain due to them being the main points of entry)
  - o Australia
  - o Central & South America
  - o *And more*
- Countries acting as transits for the narcotics:
  - o Central America
  - o The Caribbean
  - o Africa
- Countries supplying narcotics:
  - o Colombia
  - o Bolivia
  - o Peru
- Those otherwise involved in the supply chain, including:
  - o Coca farmers (Some may be forced into it, whilst other may voluntarily join due to a more stable or greater income)
  - o Drug mules
  - o Pilots of Narco Submarines
  - o Port workers or compromised officials involved in allowing the supply and distribution of the substances

## Current attempts to address the topic:

Due to the prevalence and effectively global impact of the issue, many of the attempts to address this issue have involved various levels of international co-operation with some examples including:

- Operation Martillo
  - o A U.S., European, and Western Hemisphere effort targeting illicit trafficking routes in coastal waters along the Central American isthmus.
- Operation Panama Express
  - o An Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force (OCDETF, A US body aiming to combat transnational organised crime and reduce the availability of illicit narcotics in the US) whose aim is disrupt and dismantle transnational criminal organizations involved in large scale drug trafficking, money laundering, and related activities.
- The EU Roadmap to fight drug trafficking and organised crime
  - o A roadmap with 4 focus areas including increasing the security and customs practices at EU ports to better prevent criminal infiltration and enhanced co-operation with international law enforcement agencies including information sharing and join-operations to help 'confront the global threat'
- The UK and Ecuador joining forces to tackle the cocaine trade

- The UK intends to work with Ecuador (Which is where most of the UK's cocaine transits through) to 'deepen security ties and [to] work [together] to disrupt cocaine trade at source' to help prevent the drug from entering the UK and Europe. The partnership aims to protect communities in both countries 'by stopping drugs at source'.
- The Colombian Government paying farmers to uproot crops of coca and replace them with others
  - The Colombian Government is paying farmers to replace their Coca crop, the main ingredient in Cocaine, with other alternatives such as tea and coffee to reduce the supply of the drug and thus the knock-on effects of its production. It has been met with mixed attitudes and concern over its effectiveness in areas where criminal groups have large control/in conflict areas.

Other harsher measures include the 'war on drugs' whereby law enforcement agencies have attempted to aggressively target the drug cartels or gangs involved, often resulting in increased violence and homicide rates. Some of the countries who have attempted to adopt such strategies include:

- El Salvador
- Brazil
- Peru
- Bolivia

The above are only a few examples of the many attempted solutions to this issue, however it should be noted that the most successful attempts to combat this issue have involved international co-operation.

## Relevant UN Legislation:

The UN has two main articles of legislation which countries can operate under to conduct naval activities to combat drug trafficking via the sea. These are the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS, articles 27 and 108) and the United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances in Article 17 which establishes the limitations in the prosecution of vessels that are related to drug trafficking.

### *Article 27 subsection (d) of United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea:*

The criminal jurisdiction of the coastal State should not be exercised on board a foreign ship passing through the territorial sea to arrest any person or to conduct any investigation in connection with any crime committed on board the ship during its passage, save only in the following cases: (d) if such measures are necessary for the suppression of illicit traffic in narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances.

### *Article 108 of the same convention states:*

1. All States shall cooperate in the suppression of illicit traffic in narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances engaged in by ships on the high seas contrary to international conventions

### *Article 17 subsections 3 and 4 of the United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances establishes that:*

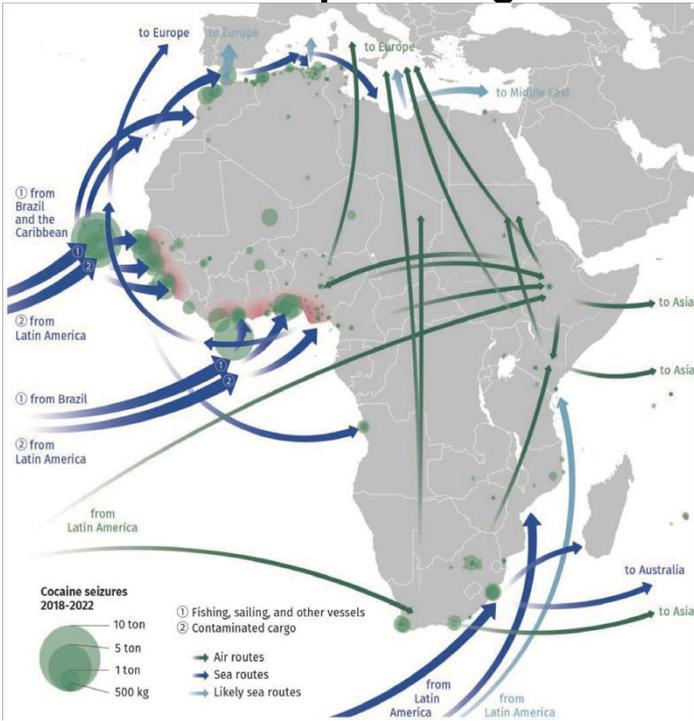
3. A Party which has reasonable grounds to suspect that a vessel exercising freedom of navigation in accordance with international law, and flying the flag or displaying marks of registry of another Party is engaged in illicit traffic may so notify the flag State, request confirmation of registry and, if confirmed, request authorization from the flag State to take appropriate measures in regard to that vessel.

4. In accordance with paragraph 3 or in accordance with treaties in force between them or in accordance with any agreement or arrangement otherwise reached between those Parties, the flag State may authorize the requesting State to, inter alia: a) Board the vessel; b) Search the vessel; c) If evidence of involvement in illicit traffic is found, take appropriate action with respect to the vessel, persons and cargo on board.

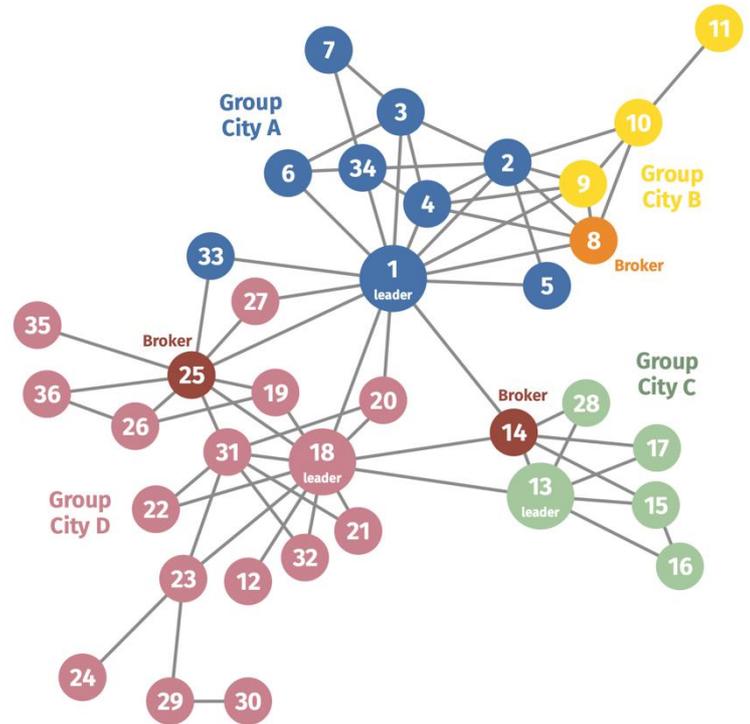
2. Any State which has reasonable grounds for believing that a ship flying its flag is engaged in illicit traffic in narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances may request the cooperation of other States to suppress such traffic.

Due to these laws, it is difficult to intercept ships involved in drug trafficking without prior authorisation from the country in which they are registered. To combat this, countries have implemented bilateral agreements and legal measures between one another (Such as the US having agreements with the Caribbean and other South American countries) to allow them to intervene to reduce drug trafficking via the ocean.

## Relevant Maps & Diagrams

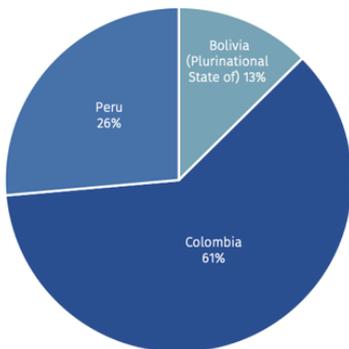


Main cocaine trafficking routes into and out of Africa, 2018–2022 – UNODC Global Cocaine Report 2023

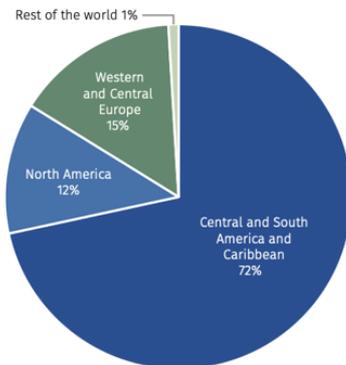


Example of a network of criminal groups involved in the Cocaine Trade/Cocaine Supply Chain – UNODC Global Cocaine Report 2023

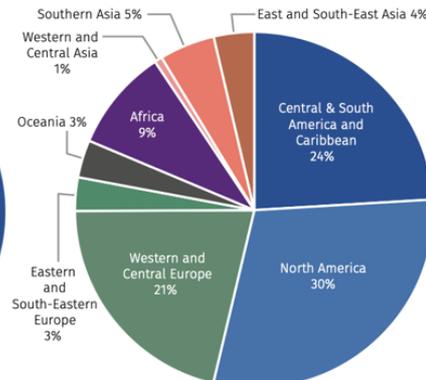
Cultivation of coca bush, 2020



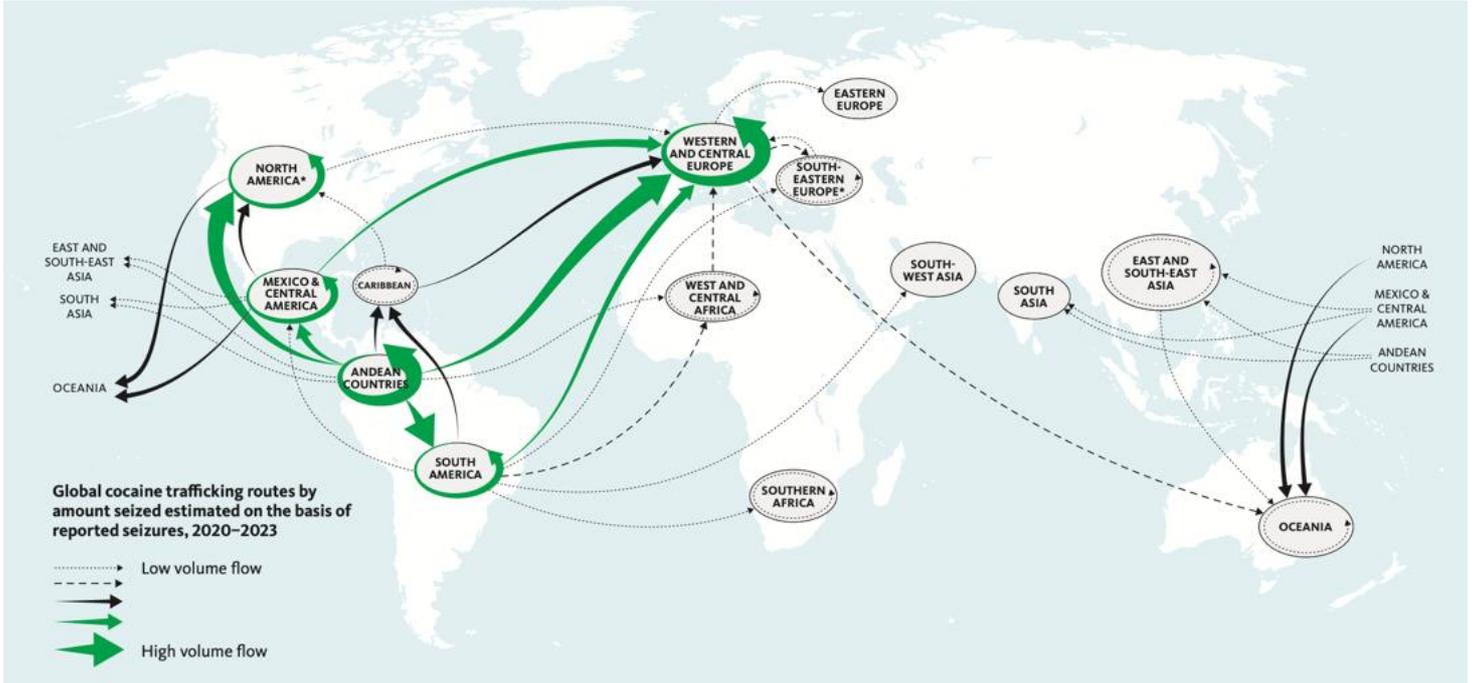
Cocaine seizures, 2020



Cocaine past-year users, 2020



Global Cocaine Market Statistics – UNODC Global Cocaine Report 2023



*Main cocaine trafficking flows as described in reported seizures, 2020–2023 – UNODC*



*Cocaine trafficking flows departing the Americas as described in reported seizures, 2023–2024 – UNODC*

## Definition of Key Terms

**Drug Mule:** someone who personally smuggles contraband across a border for a smuggling organisation.

**Narco Submarine:** a type of custom ocean-going, self-propelled, semi-submersible or fully submersible vessel built by drug smugglers.

**Drug Cartel:** a criminal organization made up of independent drug lords who work together to control the illegal drug trade and maximize profits. They often engage in violent turf wars and are primarily found in Latin American countries.

**Drug Trafficker:** a person involved in the illegal trade of drugs, which includes the cultivation, manufacture, distribution, and sale of prohibited substances. Such activity is often associated with organised crime.

**Drug Trafficking:** the illegal trade of controlled substances, involving their cultivation, manufacture, distribution, and sale. It is a global issue that contributes to organized crime and has significant social and economic impacts.

**Interdiction:** the action of intercepting and preventing the movement of a prohibited commodity or person.

**Latin America:** a region that is generally understood to contain the entire continent of South America in addition to Mexico, Central America, and the islands of the Caribbean whose inhabitants speak a Romance language.

**Andean Countries:** the countries of Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru, which are members of the Andean Community. These nations are linked by the Andes Mountain range that runs along the western part of South America.

**Island Hopping:** in drug trafficking, it is the movement of drugs from island to island typically by a different person each time, typically in go-fast boats (To reduce the change of being detected by maritime patrol) at night with the goal being to reach a large port or airport (E.G: the port of Caucedo in the Dominican Republic).

**Go-fast Boat:** a small, fast powerboat designed with a long narrow platform and a planing hull.

**UNODC:** United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, aims to make the world safer from drugs, organised crime, corruption and terrorism

**Coca Plant:** a shrub native to western South America, known for its leaves that contain the psychoactive alkaloid cocaine. Traditionally, coca leaves have been chewed or brewed as tea for their mild stimulant effects and have been used for thousands of years in Andean cultures for various purposes, including religious rituals and labour support.

## Major Countries/Organisations Involved

Due to the global nature of the issue, many countries and organisations are involved, some of note include:

- **Colombia, Peru & Bolivia:** Major countries in the initial supply of Cocaine.
- **Paraguay & Colombia:** Major cultivators of Cannabis (Marijuana) in South America.
- **The Caribbean:** A major transit point for drugs in South American supply chains.
- **United States of America:** One of the main recipients of drugs via South American drug routes & provides one of the greatest demands for cocaine. Also provides security aid to some South American countries to assist in them tackling the drugs trade.
- **Europe:** Another main recipient for drugs outbound via South American Drugs routes
- **Europol:** Law enforcement agency of the European Union involved in tackling the drugs trade within Europe, but they also work with international partners.
- **UNODC:** United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, aims to make the world safer from drugs, organised crime, corruption and terrorism. Provides support to governments in developing policies, conducts research and provides reports on drug trends as well as offering training for law enforcement and criminal justice institutions. All with the aim of combatting drug trafficking, drug abuse and promoting effective criminal justice systems globally.
- **Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force:** a federal organised crime and drug enforcement program in the US with the aim of identifying, disrupting, and dismantling the major organised crime and drug trafficking operations as well as tackling related crimes, such as money



laundering, tax and weapon violations, and violent crime, and prosecute those criminal networks primarily responsible for the US's drug supply

## Useful Links

*The author recommends the following links to help **start** your research for this topic.*

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZmmGg51TfU> (YouTube Video from Documentary Channel fern about 'Narco Submarines' used by drug cartels to transport drugs)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ydnpyYEhP30> (YouTube Documentary Video from YouTube Channel fern about the Cocaine trade and its effects on Europe, starting with a European focus then expanding outward to production & supply)
- <https://www.oxan.com/insights/anti-drug-strategies-will-keep-failing-latin-americans/> (Oxford Analytica Article about Anti-Drug strategies in Latin America)
- <https://features.csis.org/tracking-transatlantic-drug-flows-cocaines-path-from-south-america-across-the-caribbean-to-europe/> (Article from Centre for Strategic and International Studies – CSIS – about Cocaine and its path from South America to Europe)
- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maritime\\_drug\\_trafficking\\_in\\_Latin\\_America](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maritime_drug_trafficking_in_Latin_America) (Wikipedia page on South American Drug Trafficking)
- [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/WDR\\_2025/maps/53A\\_Main\\_cocaine\\_trafficking\\_routes\\_within\\_the\\_Americas\\_by\\_air\\_2023\\_2024.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/WDR_2025/maps/53A_Main_cocaine_trafficking_routes_within_the_Americas_by_air_2023_2024.pdf) (Main cocaine trafficking routes within the Americas, by air, 2023-2024 – UNODC)
- [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/WDR\\_2025/maps/53B\\_Main\\_cocaine\\_trafficking\\_routes\\_within\\_the\\_Americas\\_by\\_land\\_2023\\_2024.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/WDR_2025/maps/53B_Main_cocaine_trafficking_routes_within_the_Americas_by_land_2023_2024.pdf) (Main cocaine trafficking routes within the Americas, by land, 2023-2024 – UNODC)
- [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/WDR\\_2025/maps/53C\\_Main\\_cocaine\\_trafficking\\_routes\\_within\\_the\\_Americas\\_by\\_water\\_2023\\_2024.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/WDR_2025/maps/53C_Main_cocaine_trafficking_routes_within_the_Americas_by_water_2023_2024.pdf) (Main cocaine trafficking routes within the Americas, by water, 2023-2024 – UNODC)
- [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/cocaine/Global\\_cocaine\\_report\\_2023.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/cocaine/Global_cocaine_report_2023.pdf) (UNODC Global Cocaine Report 2023)
- [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/WDR\\_2025/maps/54\\_Cocaine\\_trafficking\\_flows\\_departing\\_the\\_Americas\\_2023\\_2024.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/WDR_2025/maps/54_Cocaine_trafficking_flows_departing_the_Americas_2023_2024.pdf) (Cocaine trafficking flows departing the Americas as described in reported seizures, 2023-2024 – UNODC)
- [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/new-eu-roadmap-steps-fight-against-drug-trafficking-and-organised-crime-2023-10-18\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/new-eu-roadmap-steps-fight-against-drug-trafficking-and-organised-crime-2023-10-18_en) (European Commission press release on the EU's roadmap to fight drug trafficking and organised crime)
- [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/WDR\\_2025/WDR25\\_Special\\_points\\_of\\_interest.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/WDR_2025/WDR25_Special_points_of_interest.pdf) (Special Points of Interest – UNODC World Drug Report 2025)
- [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/WDR\\_2025/WDR25\\_B1\\_Key\\_findings.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/WDR_2025/WDR25_B1_Key_findings.pdf) (Key Findings - UNODC World Drug Report 2025)

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- 5: <https://www.oxan.com/insights/anti-drug-strategies-will-keep-failing-latin-americans/>
- 6: <https://www.rfi.fr/en/international-news/20250603-aiming-a-blow-at-narcos-colombia-pays-farmers-to-uproot-coca> (And in part <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2025/6/3/aiming-a-blow-at-narcos-colombia-pays-farmers-to-uproot-coca>)
- 7: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-and-ecuador-join-forces-to-tackle-cocaine-trade-at-source>



8: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organized_Crime_Drug_Enforcement_Task_Force)  
[53C Main cocaine trafficking routes within the Americas by water 2023 2024.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/WDR_2025/maps/04_Main_cocaine_trafficking_routes_within_the_Americas_by_water_2023_2024.pdf)  
[Maritime drug trafficking in Latin America - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maritime_drug_trafficking_in_Latin_America)  
<https://features.csis.org/tracking-transatlantic-drug-flows-cocaines-path-from-south-america-across-the-caribbean-to-europe/>  
[https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/WDR 2025/maps/04 Main cocaine trafficking flows as described in reported seizures 2020-2023.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/WDR_2025/maps/04_Main_cocaine_trafficking_routes_within_the_Americas_by_water_2023_2024.pdf)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZmmGg51TfU>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ydnpyYEhP30>  
<https://maritime-executive.com/editorials/innovation-in-the-war-on-drugs-narcosubs>  
[https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/cocaine/Global cocaine report 2023.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/cocaine/Global_cocaine_report_2023.pdf)  
<https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/new-modus-operandi-how-organised-crime-infiltrates-ports-of-europe>  
<https://www.europol.europa.eu/crime-areas/trade-in-illicit-drugs>  
<https://www.vice.com/en/article/cocaine-nation-how-did-australians-become-the-biggest-users-in-the-world/>  
[https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/WDR 2024/WDR24 Key findings and conclusions.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/WDR_2024/WDR24_Key_findings_and_conclusions.pdf)  
<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/world-drug-report-2025-maps.html>  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c78n0jmplmro>  
[https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/new-eu-roadmap-steps-fight-against-drug-trafficking-and-organised-crime-2023-10-18\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/new-eu-roadmap-steps-fight-against-drug-trafficking-and-organised-crime-2023-10-18_en)  
[https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/WDR 2025/maps/53A Main cocaine trafficking routes within the Americas by air 2023 2024.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/WDR_2025/maps/53A_Main_cocaine_trafficking_routes_within_the_Americas_by_air_2023_2024.pdf)  
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<https://www.justice.gov/ocdetf/about-ocdetf>  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation Panama Express](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Panama_Express)  
<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/about-unodc/about-unodc.html>  
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/list-of-countries-in-Latin-America-2061416>