Abstract: Drugs, immigration, and border policy are intrinsically linked in the context of the United States-Mexico divide. However, there are often misunderstandings that border policy and immigration from Mexico are the root causes of a ‘drug epidemic’ in America. This paper dispels these misconceptions by exploring the diverse sources of illicit narcotics and examining the ideologies, government policies, and underlying domestic issues that comprise this epidemic.

Drug use and abuse in the United States is a complex, yet prevalent issue that impacts a high percentage of the American population. Among Americans aged twelve and older, an estimated 49.2 percent have used illicit drugs during their lifetime as of 2014, and 16.7 percent have used illicit drugs in the past year. Policies aimed at curbing drug abuse share close links with immigration and border policies, especially in the context of U.S.-Mexico relations. From the American public and political figures alike, there has been a heightened sense of ‘crisis’ incorporating these three factors, a fear that drug abuse in the U.S. can be directly attributed to inadequate border policing and an inability to control an influx of unauthorized immigrants. Iowa Republican Congressman Steve King went so far as to declare that “for every [immigrant] who’s a valedictorian, there’s another hundred out there who weigh a hundred and thirty pounds – and they’ve got calves the size of cantaloupes because they’re hauling seventy-five pounds of marijuana across the desert.” Such remarks are not only xenophobic but also stereotype Mexican immigrants as solely responsible for a much larger set of issues. To do so is an inaccurate and


dangerous simplification of an issue that connects multiple places, and involves an ever-growing number of global actors. This paper explores the complexities of the connections between the U.S. ‘war on drugs,’ immigration policy, and border policing as it relates to the U.S.-Mexico divide, and the wide-reaching impacts of this relationship.

Firstly, it is crucial to note from where, if not from Mexican immigrants, drugs are entering the United States. This paper looks at four drugs of consequence in the U.S.: marijuana, cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine. It is also important to examine the ideologies, as well as social and geographical imaginations surrounding drugs, immigration, and border policy. As a way of thinking about keeping illicit drugs out of the U.S., these ideologies have shaped public and political views on both borders and immigrants. As well, these views carry over to official government policy that aims to combat drug use and abuse in America. Certain policy covers drugs specifically, like the Combat Methamphetamine Act (2005), while others, like Operation Gatekeeper (1994) focus on extralegal immigration and smuggling of contraband, including illicit drugs. Even with such policies in place, high levels of drug abuse remain common across the U.S. It is necessary to address the root causes of drug abuse at various scales; the cases of Oelwein and Ottumwa, Iowa offer two specific examples of conditions under which a ‘drug epidemic’ is possible. It is only by examining American ideologies and policies, specific circumstances of a ‘drug epidemic,’ and drug sources that immigration, border policing, and drug use can accurately be linked.

Sources of Illicit Drugs

There is often a misconception of Mexican immigrants as the perpetrators of America’s drug epidemic. If not via immigrants, how are illicit drugs entering the United States? The answer to this question has changed over time, with myriad actors employing numerous tactics to smuggle drugs into the U.S. Benson and Decker’s 2010 survey of thirty-four ‘high-level’ smugglers determined that drugs presently come from a wide array of locations: Colombia, Peru, Venezuela, Panama, and Mexico were among the long list of countries of origin, though some drugs are grown or produced in the United States as well.4 Although “Mexico has now become the

main supplier of illicit narcotics to the United States,” it is Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs), rather than immigrants, that are at the helm of this highly sophisticated smuggling hierarchy. Over time, the U.S. Border Patrol has increased its technology aimed “to detect unauthorized crossers,” and although these measures may prevent some, an estimated 92 to 97 percent of extralegal border-crossers will attempt to cross the boundary until they are successful.

Smuggling methods vary by circumstance and include planes, water vessels, cars and SUVs, and commercial transport vehicles. “Most of the cocaine, heroin, foreign-produced marijuana, and foreign-produced methamphetamine available on American soil are moved into the U.S. through the land” boundary shared with Mexico. However, according to the fifth respondent in Benson and Decker’s survey, drug smuggling organizations “constantly change [their] routes.”Marijuana, cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine reach American consumers in very distinct, often changing, ways.

Marijuana is the most commonly used drug in the United States, in large part due to its widespread availability and steady demand. As of 2014, 44.2 percent of Americans aged twelve and

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8 Ibid., 242, 246.
10 Ibid., 244.
12 Ibid.
older reported that they had used marijuana during their lifetime. Most marijuana that ends up in the U.S. is imported from Mexico through “subterranean tunnels, shipment containers, and hidden compartments in personal vehicles.” In one specific example, the Sinaloa Cartel, based out of Guerrero on the Mexican Pacific coast, exports its marijuana derivatives directly to U.S. ports of entry in Brownsville, McAllen, and Laredo, Texas. Marijuana is also produced domestically, both illegally and in states where the drug has been legalized; however, this comes with associated risks. Butane extraction, a process by which marijuana concentrates are removed from the leaf, “has resulted in numerous explosions and injuries, particularly on the West Coast, where production is most common.” In San Diego, for example, almost half of 30 seized extraction labs “were identified after an explosion or fire.” These risks are merely a cost for drug producers and smugglers, who are able to profit from America’s most “widely available and commonly used and abused illicit drug.” Rather than being trafficked by immigrants, marijuana is predominantly imported by sophisticated Mexican DTOs, with certain instances of domestic production as an exception.

Derived from the leaves of the coca plant found in South America, cocaine is a highly addictive stimulant drug that leads to euphoria and increased energy. Approximately 15 percent of Americans aged twelve and older said they had used cocaine in their lifetime. “Most cocaine available in the United States [is] produced in Colombia and smuggled across the” U.S.-Mexico boundary, and to a lesser extent, via the Caribbean. As the respondents in Benson and Decker’s survey indicated, there are large profits to be made in smuggling and selling cocaine, and many

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18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 25.
traffickers are making the switch from lower-profit drugs like heroin and marijuana.\textsuperscript{23} Within Benson and Decker’s sample of respondents, “the mean amount of cocaine with which the smugglers… were caught was 1,136 kilograms,” and their modal age range was from forty to forty-nine years old.\textsuperscript{24} Contrary to widespread belief, Mexico is minimally implicated in the production of cocaine entering the U.S.; because of the coca plant’s origins in South America, the drug is largely produced in Colombia, and only enters the United States via Mexico.

Heroin, an opioid, “is synthesized from morphine, a naturally occurring substance extracted from the seedpod of the Asian opium poppy plant.”\textsuperscript{25} Four geographical areas are responsible for sourcing the world’s heroin supply: Southwest Asia, Southeast Asia, South America, and Mexico.\textsuperscript{26} However, “nearly all heroin… enters the country over the 1,933-mile Mexican border;” larger amounts are concealed in vehicles crossing at ports of entry while smaller amounts are transported by ‘mules.’\textsuperscript{27} Once it arrives in the U.S., different varieties of heroin are distributed across the country, based on their countries of origin. Mexican black tar and brown powder heroin are often found west of the Mississippi River while South American white powder heroin is most prevalent to the east; heroin sourced from Southwest Asia represents only “a small portion of the U.S. heroin market.”\textsuperscript{28} There were more than 300,000 heroin users in the U.S. in 2012, and an increase in overdose deaths, “particularly in the Northeast and Midwest.”\textsuperscript{29} As a result, heroin abuse has become a growing concern among American authorities, who report that “heroin availability is increasing throughout the nation.”\textsuperscript{30}

Methamphetamine is classified as a schedule II drug, among the most highly addictive of its kind.\textsuperscript{31} In 2014, methamphetamine was deemed “the greatest drug threat represented nationally, as

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 134.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 13, 16.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 10.
reported by state and local agencies.” The drug is often initially attractive because it increases energy, and reduces the need to sleep or eat, but it can ultimately have myriad unintended side effects, including psychosis, paranoia, hallucinations, and delusions. Methamphetamine has, perhaps, the most diverse sourcing of ingredients. Its main ingredient is ephedrine, a nasal decongestant found in many cold medications. There are “only nine factories around the world [that produce ephedrine], all of them in India, China, Germany, and the Czech Republic.” The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) reported in 2014 that “the majority of methamphetamine available in the United States is Mexico-produced,” but authorities also frequently encounter small-scale domestic methamphetamine producing labs, also called ‘one-pot’ or ‘shake-and-bake’ laboratories. Additional ingredients in methamphetamine, like ethyl alcohol or anhydrous ammonia, are readily “available, in bulk, at the farmers’ co-op,” and are particularly accessible for those in the Midwest, where the agricultural sector is declining and methamphetamine abuse is high. Reding notes that Mexican DTOs use unauthorized immigrant workers employed in meatpacking plants, fields, orchards, and orange groves across the country as mules to transport methamphetamine to American consumers. While unauthorized immigrants certainly are involved in this drug smuggling supply chain, their role pales in comparison with the major DTOs, who, along with small-scale home cooks, are the major players in supplying the U.S. with methamphetamine, as well as other illicit drugs.

Ideologies & Imaginations

Understanding the link between drugs, immigration policy, and the border, as well as the construction a perceived ‘national crisis,’ requires an understanding of multiple framings of the

35 Ibid., 47.
36 Ibid., 113.
border region as a dynamic space and process. A number of ideologies and imaginations have emerged regarding immigrants and borders, especially in relation to drugs, an extension of this perceived crisis. The first important geographical and social imagination is the discrepancy between a boundary and a border, two concepts that are crucial for understanding the division between the United States and Mexico. In strictly conceptual terms, a boundary is a line drawn in the sand, a physical demarcation of the point where one sovereign entity ends and another begins. Along some parts of the 2,000-mile U.S.-Mexico boundary, this division is demarcated using natural landforms, such as the Rio Grande River; in others, the two countries are definitively split by man-made fencing or walls.

The border, especially as it pertains to the U.S. and Mexico, is a much more fluid concept. A border, or borderland, is a region contiguous to a boundary that is impacted by the boundary’s presence. Such border regions are dynamic, frontier spaces, zones of transition and house multiple forms of social, economic, and political exchange that cross the boundary itself. However, there is no quantitative guideline for the expanse of this region. Because of its close proximity, and social and economic ties to Tijuana, for example, San Diego falls within what most would agree to be the border region. In Texas, the Falfurrias Border Checkpoint is located almost 70 miles from the Pharr Port of Entry, yet authorities there are responsible for policing “alien and narcotic traffic.” Due to the direct impact of the boundary on the Border Checkpoint, Falfurrias meets the qualitative criteria of a border region, but geographically, this distinction is not as clear-cut. On an even broader scale, one could inquire about whether a place like Oelwein, Iowa is a part of the border. The town of roughly 6,700, nicknamed ‘Methlehem,’ and featured in Nick Reding’s detailed study of the American "meth epidemic" Methland, has been plagued with methamphetamine addiction fuelled by “the modern Mexican drug-trafficking business.” Oelwein is also affected by the presence of the U.S.-Mexico boundary, much like San Diego or even Falfurrias, but due to its location, most would not consider it to be a part of the border region. Views of what constitutes

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40 Ibid.
the ‘border’ can significantly differ, and can also influence border policy as a way to deal with immigration and drugs.

The border region and the boundary itself as a division also shape ideologies about membership both without and within. McGuire notes that “across the globe, democratic nation-states have fortified their boundaries to keep out desirable people and contraband,” and the U.S. is no exception.\textsuperscript{43} The U.S. government has increasingly demarcated and fortified its southern boundary with Mexico to protect American safety and sovereignty, but its very presence creates illegality by dictating what goods and persons can pass legally, and under what circumstances. Illegality can be described as “a form of extreme social marginalization… which throughout U.S. history… [has] served to justify the lesser status imposed on unauthorized migrants.”\textsuperscript{44} The term ‘illegal’ is used to create a sense of ‘us’ versus ‘them,’ and as a result, American authorities often “[treat] noncitizens as ‘aliens’ rather than ‘persons.’”\textsuperscript{45} It criminalizes persons based on their immigration status, which may have been impacted by income or mobility.\textsuperscript{46}

The term ‘illegal’ has come to be synonymous with unauthorized immigration by Mexicans, despite unauthorized immigrants converging on the U.S. from a wide array of other countries.\textsuperscript{47} Furthermore, stereotypes have classified Mexican immigrants as “poor, ignorant, [and] degraded.”\textsuperscript{48} Granting their entry into the U.S. is seen as “tantamount to opening Pandora’s Box”; by allowing Mexican immigrants into the country, the floodgates are opened for drug violence and other associated issues to spill over the boundary.\textsuperscript{49} This social construct of immigrants as criminal and foreign has impacted not only public opinion, but also the treatment of immigrants both

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{44}Joseph Nevins, Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond: The War on “Illegals” and the Remaking of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary, (New York: Routledge, 2010), 151.
  \item \textsuperscript{46}Joseph Nevins, Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond: The War on “Illegals” and the Remaking of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary, (New York: Routledge, 2010), 180.
  \item \textsuperscript{47}Ibid., 147.
  \item \textsuperscript{48}Ibid., 129.
\end{itemize}
authorized, who are unfairly discriminated against, and unauthorized, who face not only discrimination but penalization from American institutions.

Criminalizing unauthorized immigrants enables a structure of detention institutions, a system where the treatment of those detained is often questionable. According to Martin, “newly implemented technologies of border inspection, identification, and surveillance follow transboundary travelers before, during, and after their passage through a port of entry” and, as a result of these increased policing measures, the number of non-citizens detained more than doubled between 1999 and 2009. 50 Many of the detention centers were former prisons, with staff that was “trained as correctional officers… and received no re-training to address the needs of asylum-seekers, migrants, children, and families.”51 Children were often separated from their parents, where their belongings – crayons, drawings, and toys – were considered to be contraband by authorities. 52 However, due to the blanket criminalization of adults and children, there is a “lack of ‘soft facilities’ for low-risk detainees” that could more appropriately manage non-citizens. 53

These persons have been socially constructed and legally enshrined as ‘illegal’ solely on the basis of their immigration status, a status that serves to justify their exclusion “from the benefits of citizenship,” as well as their detention and treatment. 54 In the imagination of many Americans, these unauthorized immigrants pose a security threat to the U.S. based on their ‘otherness’ and associated stereotypical characteristics. These ideologies emerge out of the presence of the U.S.-Mexico boundary, both as a dividing line between two countries and their distinct cultures and as a division that, when crossed improperly, itself creates illegality. Perhaps these ideologies offer an explanation for how Mexican immigrants are viewed in relation to drug smuggling and use in America. Portraying and treating unauthorized Mexican immigrants as criminals marginalizes and dehumanizes an entire population, thereby making it easier to frame them as also responsible for the influx of drugs and the associated problems of drug abuse in the U.S. This way of thinking is

52 Ibid., 483, 486.
present not only in the social and geographical imagination of drugs, immigration, and the border amongst the American public, but also in the U.S. government’s policies to deal with these issues.

U.S. Immigration & Drug Policies

For as long as the U.S.-Mexico boundary has existed, there have been numerous attempts to bring the border region ‘under control.’ Over the past six decades, this desire to pacify the border region has been particularly evident in the American government’s policies. It is through these policies that the link between drugs, immigration, and border policy is apparent. Over time, many of these policies, especially border policies, have aimed to uphold American sovereignty and security by combatting illicit drug smuggling and unauthorized immigration. These policies have “variously welcomed and discouraged persons from entering” the United States, carefully balancing American economic and security interests.\(^{55}\) However, in certain instances, they have been considered discriminatory and received widespread criticism. Throughout the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries, American legislation pertaining to border security and immigration specifically targeted a number of ethnic groups. The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the first piece of American legislation to restrict immigration based on national origins, banned labourers originating from China who were framed as a cultural threat and associated with widespread use of opium.\(^{56}\) Decades later, the National Origins Act of 1924 established quotas for immigrants of specific nationalities outside the Western Hemisphere.\(^{57}\) While the subsequent legislation did not always explicitly target a particular ethnic group, an underlying ethnically-driven focus on immigration, drugs, and border security was often present.

The first prominent example of such a policy targeting Mexican immigrants specifically was Operation Wetback in 1954. This operation was named for the wet backs of unauthorized immigrants who swam across the Rio Grande River to the U.S., though it is widely deemed to be a derogatory, if not racist term by today’s standards. Operation Wetback targeted border states and


“involved the massive roundup” of suspected unauthorized immigrants.58 The U.S. Border Patrol apprehended and deported over one million individuals throughout 1954, but this did not happen without consequence: many American citizens of Hispanic heritage were apprehended as a part of this process.59 It followed another mass deportation during the Great Depression era when 415,000 citizens and non-citizens were expelled from the U.S.60 Operation Wetback drew criticism for dumping deportees at unnecessarily long distances from the boundary, in often harsh desert conditions, resulting in death in certain instances. Despite public outcry, “the government called the operation a success and said the border had ‘been secured’.” 61

In contrast with Operation Wetback, the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 sought to reduce unauthorized immigration through three main channels: “sanctions of employers, increased border enforcement, and a legalization program” for unauthorized immigrants already in the United States.62 The IRCA imposed penalties on employers who hired unauthorized immigrants and increased funding to the then-Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS). It also offered temporary status to persons who entered the United States illegally, but who “could prove continuous residence since January 1, 1982,” and permanent status (following an 18-month waiting period) to “farm workers who could prove that they had worked for 80 days in the 12 months ending May 1, 1986.”63 The program legalized approximately three million unauthorized immigrants, the majority of whom originated in Mexico.64 At a time when both official and public sentiment among Americans favored “boundary enforcement and immigration restriction,” this policy did not bode well, and its success is arguable.65 It was “perceived as failing to address the issue of unauthorized crossings from Mexico,” and the boundary itself remained vulnerable to

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59 Ibid.
60 Ibid., 38.
65 Ibid., 77, 104-105.
unauthorized crossing. Its tenets were also poorly understood by the American public and employers alike. According to a 1988 General Accounting Office Survey, an estimated “22 percent of employers did not know the existence of the [IRCA], while another 20 percent did not clearly understand its major provisions.” Furthermore, in 1988, the INS had approximately 635 personnel responsible for monitoring seven million employers; the agency was vastly outnumbered and ill-equipped to adequately hold employers accountable to IRCA regulations. Following the IRCA’s implementation, there was a significant decrease in Border Patrol apprehensions. However, Donato, Durand, and Massey assert that, while the IRCA likely influenced migration patterns, “evidence is mixed as to whether the IRCA actually deterred undocumented migrants from Mexico.”

Around the same time as the IRCA, U.S. policy outside the country’s boundaries sought to diminish the impact of Colombian drug rings on American soil. In 1987, the DEA launched Operation Snowcap, which aimed “to seize large amounts of cocaine and to cripple Colombian distribution routes that passed through Guatemala.” Guatemala had previously served as a ‘leapfrog’ state where Colombian drug traffickers could stop to refuel their planes en route to the U.S. However, Operation Snowcap inadvertently rerouted drug trafficking through Mexico, which shared a land border with the U.S., and where Mexican organizations charged a premium (often one-for-one) on Colombian drugs passing through. As a result, Mexican DTOs grew incredibly wealthy as well as highly centralized, with major repercussions for the U.S.

By the early 1990s, these organizations had evolved “into what the DEA would call five major DTOs,” each of which maintained control over a border sector. In response to this, coupled

68 Ibid., 251.
71 Nick Reding, Methland: The Death and Life of an American Small Town, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009), 156.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid., 158.
74 Ibid., 113.
with a perceived need to control immigration and championed by the Clinton Administration, Operation Blockade (later renamed ‘Hold-the-Line’ due to the Mexican government’s disapproval of its original name) was launched in the El Paso border sector on September 19, 1993. Operation Blockade employed “400 agents and their vehicles in a highly visible show of force along a 20-mile section of the boundary;” at what had once been the second-busiest border sector, apprehensions were reduced to 80 to 90 percent of their previous levels.76

The successes of Operation Blockade “served to provide intellectual and political inspiration of sorts for [Operation] Gatekeeper,” which was launched on October 1, 1994, in the San Diego border sector.77 Gatekeeper, largely modeled on Blockade, sought “to reduce unauthorized or illegal crossing [of contraband and persons]… across the U.S.-Mexico boundary in the area of San Diego, California,” through the use of sophisticated technology and increased Border Patrol visibility.78 Although authorities touted Operation Gatekeeper as “necessary to establish a border for the first time,” the effectiveness of the operation is highly questionable.79 First, it posed difficulties due to its coincidence with the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994; NAFTA sought to liberalize trade for legal goods and services while Gatekeeper’s objective was to keep illegal contraband and persons out of the U.S.

As well, Wayne Cornelius, a specialist on Mexican migration to the United States at the University of California, San Diego, indicates that “the operation has led unauthorized migrants to rely increasingly on professional smugglers and guides.”80 Operation Gatekeeper redirected the traffic of unauthorized immigrants eastward, into less navigable regions in Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas.81 This prompted subsequent Operations Safeguard and Rio Grande, in Nogales,

77 Ibid., 94.
79 Ibid., 115.
81 Ibid., 329.
Arizona in 1995, and Laredo, Texas in 1997 respectively.\textsuperscript{82} The effectiveness of these large, sweeping operations, as previously mentioned, was questionable, and met with mixed opinion.

Most recently, the American government launched the Combat Methamphetamine Act. Unlike the previous overarching operations, the ‘Combat Meth Act’ is strictly devoted to reducing methamphetamine abuse through regulation. It was passed by the U.S. Congress in September 2005, and came into effect in March 2006, near the height of the so-called ‘meth epidemic.’ Among the legislation’s tenets was to “control the sale of over-the-counter ephedrine,” the widely accessible key ingredient to make methamphetamine.\textsuperscript{83} Previously, small-lab meth cooks had been able to purchase unlimited amounts of cold medication containing ephedrine, in order to produce methamphetamine at home. However, there was “a loophole in the ephedrine legislation that allowed pills containing pseudoephedrine [a synthetic version of ephedrine that is highly profitable to pharmaceutical conglomerates] to remained unregulated.”\textsuperscript{84} As Phil Price, the former special agent in charge of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, notes, the Combat Meth Act was effective at deterring small-scale meth-makers, but it also empowered the powerful Mexican DTOs, who already had the resources to continue producing methamphetamine under increased demand.\textsuperscript{85} These well-intentioned policies aimed at eliminating drug abuse, smuggling, and unauthorized immigration were ultimately unsuccessful, and magnify the connection between drugs, immigration, and border policy.

The Roots of a ‘Drug Epidemic’

Despite ample efforts by the U.S. government to curtail drug abuse through legislation, the prevalence of drug use and abuse among the American population remains high. Some would go so far as to declare it an epidemic. Beginning in 2004, Portland’s \textit{The Oregonian} ran an influential series of articles detailing a national methamphetamine epidemic.\textsuperscript{86} As recently as 2015, \textit{The New

\textsuperscript{82} Joseph Nevins, Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond: The War on “Illegals” and the Remaking of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary, (New York: Routledge, 2010), 156.
\textsuperscript{83} Nick Reding, \textit{Methland: The Death and Life of an American Small Town}, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009), 107.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 112, 113.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 180.
York Times has published articles about ‘America’s heroin epidemic.’ It is important to critically analyze how drug abuse can become so severe as to constitute an epidemic.

This phenomenon has been particularly evident in small Midwestern towns, where economic decline and lack of viability from agricultural income have given way to drug abuse. Oelwein and Ottumwa, Iowa are two such towns that have experienced the drug epidemic firsthand, specifically from rampant abuse of methamphetamine. These two eastern Iowa towns offer a glimpse of how economic hardship can render a population vulnerable to the social and economic deterioration that accompany widespread drug abuse.

Oelwein, a small, northeastern Iowa town of roughly 6,700 people, had been a prosperous agricultural hub for more than a century before the ‘meth epidemic’ struck. Farming could be described as the ‘lifeblood’ of Oelwein and, by extension, the entirety of surrounding Fayette County. As well, meatpacking plants offered stable jobs and a sustainable income for the local population. At Iowa Ham in Oelwein, employees earned “eighteen dollars an hour with full union membership and benefits.” This all changed in the 1980s when mounting debt made small-scale family farms a less reliable source of income, and in 1992, when Iowa Ham was purchased by Gillette and wages “fell from $18 an hour to $6.20,” placing a severe financial burden on its employees.

Similarly, in nearby Ottumwa, residents relied on the local meatpacking plant for employment. The Hormel meatpacking plant was sold to Cargill’s Excel Meat Solutions in 1987, and wages were cut “from $18 an hour to $5.60 with no benefits.” These low-paying jobs were swooped up by, as Reding describes it, “illegals streaming across the border to work in meatpacking plants throughout the Great Plains.” Many of these unauthorized immigrants are part of the highly decentralized network of DTOs that infiltrate small towns and deliver illicit drugs from their sources to American consumers. Such issues cannot simply be solved by

89 Ibid., 49.
90 Ibid., 50, 53.
91 Ibid., 69.
92 Ibid., 113.
93 Ibid.
increasing border security presence; criminalizing immigrants is not sufficient to eradicate America’s ‘drug epidemic.’ Rather, it is important to consider the root of micro-level domestic issues.

With the loss of jobs and pay in both Oelwein and Ottumwa, workers were often forced to take on additional jobs to make ends meet; these conditions rendered many susceptible to drug use. Methamphetamine’s effects include “increased wakefulness, increased physical activity, [and] decreased appetite,” all attractive attributes for those forced to take on multiple jobs with long hours.94 Fayette County Prosecutor Nathan Lein described the scenario as a ‘nightmare’; places like Ottumwa and Oelwein had “lost all bases of civilized culture” to a highly addictive, sometimes psychosis-inducing drug.95

Oelwein’s population declined throughout the 1980s and 1990s, resulting in “a long-term steady loss of tax revenue,” among other repercussions.96 Thus, Oelwein and Ottumwa, like many other places in the American Midwest, and in small towns across the U.S., have descended into a vicious circle. Initially, the changing nature of the agricultural and meatpacking industries led to economic decline, which led to drug use and abuse. Now, drug abuse has caused additional damage to the economic situation, which, in turn, leads to further drug abuse, a seemingly insurmountable cycle. The common root cause of this drug epidemic lies in a lack of stable jobs and reliable income, and it is only by addressing these issues that the epidemic can be eradicated.

Where To Go From Here

The link between drugs, immigration, and border policy is evident throughout the U.S.-Mexico border region and beyond. These three intertwined categories are present in the ideologies and policies pertaining to the border and immigration that shape public mindset, and influence public policy, which aims narrowly on hardening the border and criminalizing immigrants. Through these links emerges a picture of a complex relationship between these factors, in a nation

96 Ibid., 30.
where drug use and abuse remain a major problem. To resolve this issue, it is simplistic to only examine immigration and border policy. Certainly, there are many instances where drugs cross the U.S.-Mexico boundary due to inadequate policing. It would be nearly impossible to avoid this; in 1995, one customs official estimated that if every crossing vehicle were examined for narcotics, traffic would back up into Mexico City in just 15.8 days.  

There are indeed circumstances under which these drugs were trafficked by immigrants, as was the case with unauthorized Mexican workers and methamphetamine in small-town Iowa, but this remains an exception.  

It becomes easy to generalize Mexican immigrants, both authorized and unauthorized, as ‘foreign’ or ‘other,’ and to place blame on an entire group of people for the tangled web of drugs, immigration, and border policy in the context of the U.S.-Mexico divide. Thus, it is important to remove the stigmas surrounding immigrants from Mexico, regardless of their immigration status.

Irrespective of the source of these illicit narcotics, it is important to also look inwardly to examine the domestic issues plaguing American communities and forcing many to turn to drugs. Economic downturn, changing trends in the agricultural industry, and the outsourcing and decreasing of the American workforce are among the many issues that must be addressed as root causes of U.S. drug use and abuse. The American government needs to institute effective legislation that will alleviate these domestic issues causing Americans to use drugs and, unlike the ‘Combat Meth Act,’ will definitively halt the production, sale, and consumption of drugs. Drugs, immigration, and border policy remain intrinsically linked through ideologies, legislation, and an increasingly globalized world. It is important to consider each of these factors in-depth but also taken together as part of a much larger, complex issue. Addressing the both the specific consequences, and interconnectedness of these three factors is necessary because, like it or not, these linkages will likely persist for many years to come.

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