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Labor Migration, Drug Trafficking Organizations, and Drug Use: Major Challenges for Transnational Communities in Mexico

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Abstract

In our article, we present the recent findings of our ethnographic field study on drug use and the emergence of a drug use culture in transnational communities in Mexico. Transnational communities are part of a larger migratory labor circuit that transcends political borders and are not restricted to a single locality. Transnational migrants and returning immigrants link the multiple localities through their social networks. In southern Guanajuato, Mexico, using a transnational migration paradigm, we examined the manner in which transnational migration and drug trafficking organizations are contributing to a growing drug problem in these communities. We found that transnational migrants and returning immigrants, including deported workers, introduce drugs and drug use practices, and contribute to the creation of a drug use culture within the communities. The social conditions in the community that foster and proliferate drug use are many: the erosion of the traditional family, truncated kinship bases, and new social formations. These conditions are all consequences of migration and emigration. Recent drug cartel activities are also contributing to this growing drug problem. The cartels have aggressively targeted these communities because of availability of money, existing drug use, a drug use culture, and the breakdown of traditional deterrents to substance abuse. Although a number of communities in three municipalities were part of our study, we focus on two: Lindavista, a *rancho*, Progreso, a municipal seat. Our field study in Mexico, one of four sequential ethnographic field studies conducted in Guanajuato and Pennsylvania, was completed over a six month period, from September, 2008, through February, 2009, using traditional ethnography. The four field studies are part of a larger, ongoing, three-year bi-national study on drug use among transnational migrants working in southeastern Pennsylvania. This larger study, near its third and final year, is funded by the National Institute of Drug Abuse.

Keywords

transnational migration; migrants; drug trafficking organizations; drug cartels; drug trafficking; substance abuse; Mexico

Introduction

Transnational communities in Mexico unavoidably find themselves in the middle of a major international drug trade that spans from Columbia and surrounding countries, through Mexico,

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into the United States. Although drug related violence along the border receives much of the news attention in the United States, over the last couple of years this war has escalated and expanded into Mexico's Central Plateau region.[1] This once relatively peaceful region of Mexico, in comparison to the border, is home to millions of transnational migrants and thousands of transnational communities. Since the early 1900s, generation after generation of transnational workers have made their way to the United States. Some returned to Mexico to continue their traditional way-of-life, while others eventually settled down and remained abroad. Today, these transnational communities in Mexico are beginning to experience drug problems once only found along the U.S.-Mexico border and in their U.S. counterpart communities. These problems, for the most part, stem from transnational labor practices but also from the aggressive expansion of drug trafficking organizations, or drug cartels, into rural areas of the region.[2]

Transnational communities transcend the U.S.-Mexico border and share a population, resources, and similar cultural traditions. These communities, as Rouse (1989; 1990) and others describe them, form a migratory circuit that is dynamic, fluid, and not restricted to a single locality or separated by nation-state borders. Transnational migrants and immigrants link the multiple localities. Traditionally in this circuit, labor, money, and culture circulate. Lately, as drug cartels incorporate this circuit into their activities, illicit drugs, arms, and narco-dollars have begun to make an appearance and change the dynamics of traditional transnational communities.

In this article, we address the understudied intersection of transnational labor migration, drug trafficking activity, and drug use in transnational communities in Mexico. Little is known about the ways in which transnational migration and drug trafficking are contributing to drug use and the emergence of a drug use culture in these communities. In fact, these two factors are often ignored by drug use researchers in both countries. We begin by introducing our bi-national study, focusing on our community ethnography in Mexico, and briefly reviewing the relevant literature on transnational migration, drug cartels, drug trafficking, and substance use in rural Mexico. We continue with a discussion of our community-based research that includes a description of two communities in our—study Lindavista, a *rancho*, and Progreso, the municipal seat—and a synopsis of the ethnographic methods used in the field.[3] Next, we turn our attention to transnational migration and how migrants, immigrants, and repatriated workers play a significant role in drug use and the emergence of a drug use culture in these communities. Included in this discussion is how transnational migration has weakened the traditional family and kinship bases in transnational communities that once served as important deterrents to improper behaviors, including substance abuse. We then discuss how drug trafficking by a major cartel in the region is also contributing to drug problems. Our discussion of this sensitive and dangerous subject is limited to how the cartel is making drugs available locally and abroad through *tienditas*, or drug cells. We end with a brief discourse on the challenges that transnational migration and drug trafficking, especially the latter, pose to transnational communities in Mexico.

[1]The Central Plateau Region is a basin within the Cordilleran highlands in central Mexico. The states that make up this vast area are Durango, Jalisco, Michoacán, Guanajuato, San Luis Potosi, Zacatecas, Tamaulipas, and Nuevo Leon.

[2]"Drug trafficking organizations" and "drug cartels" are used interchangeably in the article. We are aware that the two have different underlying premises; the former, the distribution and sales of the drugs, and the later, the setting of drug prices. We use the two, despite these differences in premises, because drug trafficking organizations are mainly known by the colloquial term, drug cartels.

[3]Originally, ranchos and rancherias, terms with origins in the colonial period, referred to settlements in rural Mexico. Population size differentiated the two. Ranchos were communities with a population of 500 to 2,500 inhabitants, and rancherias, hamlets with a population of under 500 inhabitants. Today, despite changes in population size, in which some ranchos have less than 500 inhabitants and some rancherias more than 500, communities continue to be referred to locally by their original classification.

Research Problem

Our article is based on a field study of drug use in rural transnational communities, and to a lesser extent in municipal seats, in three adjacent municipalities—Largoverde, Progreso, and La Promesa—in southern Guanajuato.[4] We focused our efforts on communities with transnational migrants in southeastern Pennsylvania, where the majority of the transnational migrants from the three municipalities work. The objective was to gather community-based data on local drinking and drug use, as the two activities often occur together, and to make inquiries about drug availability, drug users, drug use practices and norms, and the nature of drug use among returning transnational migrants and immigrants. Our original data gathering plan for our Mexican field study did not include drug cartel activity in the area because it was not an identified factor in our bi-national model of drug use among transnational migrants. However, once in the field, we realized that there was a need to include drug cartel activities, as they greatly affected drug use in our research site. With regard to the cartels, we limited our inquiries to their activities in the rural communities, and for safety reasons, we did not delve into them in-depth.

Our field study is part of a three-year study on drug use among transnational migrants who work in a major horticultural industry in southeastern Pennsylvania.[5] It is the second of four sequential ethnographic field studies that are part of this larger project: the first, a community ethnography in Pennsylvania, the second, community studies in Mexico, the third, a study of drug use cases (case studies) in the United States, and the fourth and last, a follow up study in Mexico. The aim of our larger study is to further develop a bi-national social ecology model of drug use among transnational Mexican migrants (García 2007). The model is comprised of the following set of factors: migration status (e.g., legal status in the United States and migration history), community factors in the United States and Mexico (e.g., social isolation in labor camps and the availability of drugs), and individual factors, such as background characteristics of the migrants (e.g., age, educational level, and employment history) and their predisposing experiences (e.g., family history of drug use and the witnessing of drug use). It suggests that individual factors interact with community factors, and together, they contribute to substance abuse among transnational migrants in the United States and Mexico.

Migration, Drug Trafficking, and Drug Use in Transnational Communities

For three decades transnational labor migration and immigration from Mexico to the United States has been the subject of numerous studies. Researchers on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, representing an array of academic disciplines and theoretical approaches, have studied many facets of this transnational labor phenomenon (Zúñiga Herrera, Arroyo Alejandre, Escobar Latapí, and Verduzco Igartúa 2006).

Since the 1990s, the majority of these studies, along with others that address transnational labor practices in other countries, are based on a transnational paradigm of labor migration. They examined an array of concepts and issues related to transnational migration. Some focus on social actors, such as transmigrants (e.g, Glick Schiller, Bash, and Szanton Blanc 1995), structures and social organization, such as community (e.g., Georges 1992; Grasmuck and Pessar 1991) and family (e.g., Rouse 1989; 1990; González 1995; 1997), and systems of relationships, such as social networks (e.g., Gupta and Ferguson 1992; González 1992; 2001) in their research. Others center on issues of politics, identity, and conflict in contested social

[4]We use pseudonyms in place of the real names of the communities and municipalities in our research site. General descriptions of individuals and areas in Pennsylvania and Guanajuato, as opposed to specific descriptions that may give away their identity and locations, provide further protection to the communities and research participants.

[5]The NIH-funded study is “The Origin and Development of Drug Use Among Transnational Mexican Farmworkers,” Grant # 5R01DA019690-03.

spaces, such as class (e.g., Ong 1992; Rouse 1992), nationalism and race (e.g., Fouron & Glick Schiller 2001 & Guarnizo, Sánchez, and Roach 1999), and gender (e.g., Goldring 2001; González 2001). Despite their differences in focus, all are in support of the same argument. Migrants and immigrants move about or circulate in a "transnational social field", a phrase coined by Glick Schiller and her collaborators (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994; Glick Schiller, Basch, and Szanton Blanc 1995). This social field has been defined as an "unbounded terrain of interlocking egocentric networks" (Glick Schiller 1999:97) and as "spatial entities that personal actors have constructed or are in the process of constructing through the plethora of their daily activities and that are often at odds with the territories of sovereign states" (Kleinschmidt 2006:1). Through these transnational social fields, as Rouse (1989; 1990) points out, people, information, ideas and resources flow relatively unrestricted from one locale to another.

Despite their contributions to the study of transnational migration, few studies examine drug use in transnational communities in Mexico. Some migration studies on the family and community address social conditions, such as the breakdown of the traditional family, that contribute to drug use, but they do not make the connection between migration and drug use. The work of Chaney (1985), González (200l), Salgado de Synder (1993), and Rouse (1989) are examples. Their works clearly document that transnational labor migration impacts family and community in adverse ways. Salgado de Synder (1993), for example, shows that the absence of husbands, who are in the United States working, clearly changes family life and dynamics. During their absence, their wives and children move in with their in-laws. Wives also end up with additional responsibilities such as looking after the general welfare of the family, in addition to continuing to maintain their domestic duties and the care of their children, as Chaney (1985) discusses in his study. Wives and mothers undergo stress as a result of taking on additional obligations and responsibilities and are often unable to control and discipline their children. Children, especially male adolescents, do not behave, as they did when their fathers were present, and do not carry out their chores, as they should.

The absence of husbands, fathers, and other adult males in transnational communities, as González (2001) documents in her work at our research site, also impacts the demographic composition of populations. Increasingly, communities are comprised of the elderly, women of all ages, and adolescents and children. Missing are men in their productive years; specifically in their 20s, 30s, 40s, and, to a lesser extent, their 50s, who are in the United States working. Immigration to the United States is also changing the size and composition of the populations. González (2001) found that entire families in our research site are emigrating from their communities and leaving behind abandoned homes. Rouse (1989) and Salgaldo de Synder (1993) report in their studies that women often marry migrants and do not remain in their communities as their mothers did, but leave with their husbands to the United States, where they settle and start a family.

A small number of studies on the narcoeconomy in rural transnational communities concentrate on drug production and distribution and their impact on rural underdevelopment (Painler 1994; Smith and Thongtham 1992), social inequality (McDonald, 2005), and modernity and culture change at the local level (Malkin 2001; McDonald 2005). Some attempt to link narcotrafficking to migration. McDonald's (2005) and Malkin's (2001) work are examples. McDonald (2005) examines the contributions of the narcoeconomy to a small, rural transnational community in Central Mexico. Using ethnographic vignettes, he demonstrates how this economy contributes to existing inequality, subverts traditional forms of leisure, gives rise to a new consumer culture, and creates new farmers. Young men follow existing "narco-based" migrant networks to the United States to make their wealth and return to settle down and pursue lives as farmers, despite the challenges of being a farmer in a fading agrarian economy.

In her research on the economic, social, and cultural relationship among drug trafficking, migration and modernity in the *tierra caliente* (a tropical micro-climate) region of Michoacán, Malkin (2001) also links drug trafficking to migration. The objective of her study is to examine the local context in which the narcotics industry of the region emerged. She connects the development of the agroindustry of the region to the rise of drug trafficking. Irrigation and infrastructure projects laid the "social and economic foundations for the emergence of narco-trafficking" and the regional agroindustry "encouraged transnational connections of which the narco-traffickers could take advantage" (Malkin 2001:120). In describing the historical processes, she also describes how local drug traffickers are changing the local cultural landscape through the introduction of new wealth, social status, and opportunities that are challenging existing notions of hard work and providing for one's family by means of an honest day of local work. Working in marijuana production and in its trafficking are considered alternatives to local agricultural employment. As a result, young men who migrate to the United States engage in these activities, especially the trafficking of marijuana.

Studies on illicit international activities, Stares (1996), Williams and Savona (1996), and Castells (1998), for example, use a transnational paradigm to examine the marketing of illegal commodities (e.g. drugs, pornography, weapons, and people) and related illicit activities (e.g., laundering of the proceeds). However, they fail to consider how drugs and related illicit activities occur through transnational migration social networks and in transnational social spaces. In regard to drugs, for example, how are they marketed, transported, and sold through these important networks and social arenas? Their analyses of illegal commodities and illicit activities take place outside of these social places, missing altogether transnational migrant-based linkages across nation-state borders that facilitate the distribution and sales of illegal goods, particularly drugs.

Another body of literature—drug use studies in the United States and Mexico—seldom includes transnational migrants and does not make use of a transnational paradigm (García and Gondolf 2004). In the United States, for instance, the few studies on drugs and migrants, such as the research conducted by the National Commission to Prevent Infant Mortality (NACPIM) (1993), and Goicoechea-Balbona and Grief (1992), do not examine drug use among these laborers and seldom differentiate transnational migrant workers from their domestic counterparts. In Mexico, this population finds itself in a similar state of near neglect by researchers. For instance, drug use in the Mexican countryside, the home base of the majority of transnational migrants who work in the United States, is understudied. Most of the drug research is conducted in Mexican cities, especially in Mexico City, where a quarter of the country's population resides.

Drug Use Research in Transnational Communities

We conducted our six month field study from September, 2008 through February, 2009. We also draw on findings from our studies conducted in southeastern Pennsylvania and on our research in southern Guanajuato that spans from the mid-1970s to the present (García 2008; García and González 1999; González 1992). Observations made over the summers of 1994 to1998, 2004, 2006, and 2008, while teaching an ethnographic field school in the region, were also useful, but most of the data for the article was from the six month field study.

During the field study, we lived in the city of La Promesa, which placed us in the midst of transnational families in an urban setting and served as an ideal location for traveling to nearby rural transnational communities, such as Lindavista. We visited our informants in these communities, many of whom have assisted us in research projects over the years. Visits were particularly made to attend family celebrations, such as birthdays and baptisms, and community events, such as the day of Our Lady of Guadalupe. These many visits and special activities

gave us ample opportunities to make observations and hold informal and open-ended interviews.

We complemented our observations and interviews with three focus groups and reviews of public documents, such as newspapers, annual community reports prepared by medical interns for the Health Secretariat of the State of Guanajuato, literature created by local Alcoholics Anonymous groups, and other self-help literature. Local newspapers and regional dailies, such as *El Tiempo*, *El Correo* and *La Jornada*, and the national press, such as *Excelsior* and *Reforma*, were examined to obtain information regarding local, regional, and international drug arrests, drug abatement efforts, and drug cartel activity. In particular, *Proceso*, a weekly national magazine, was invaluable in obtaining background information on the drug cartels operating in our research site. The periodical's coverage of these drug trafficking organizations has been so thorough and detailed that the Secretariat of Public Safety, a federal agency, has accused its editors and correspondents of revealing sensitive drug intelligence to the public, including to the cartels themselves (Carrasco Araizaga 2009a; Albor 2009)

Progreso and Lindavista: Transnational Communities

The field study included a number of transnational communities in three adjacent municipalities in southern Guanajuato—Lagoverde, Progreso, and La Promesa—birthplace of the vast majority of the transnational migrants in southeastern Pennsylvania. We make references to some of these communities in this article, but only focus on two communities in the municipality of Progreso: Lindavista, and the municipal seat by the same name of the municipality, Progreso. The two communities are good examples of the *ranchos* and cities in the research area.

Lindavista exemplifies the *ranchos* located in this subsistence farming region, with few local employment opportunities, but with a long tradition of labor migration to the United States, especially to Pennsylvania. The community is home to around 600 inhabitants. A paved road, on which buses and other vehicles circulate, connects Lindavista to the city of Progreso, the municipal seat, and to a number of surrounding *rancherías*, communities smaller than Lindavista. The residents of Lindavista are concentrated in a single nuclear settlement crossed by streets, of which only the main streets are paved and the others covered with cobblestones. Public services include a primary school, a middle school, and a health clinic, staffed by a medical student in his/her residency year, and a community nurse. Two small grocery stores, two mills for grinding corn, and a kerosene shop sell a number of goods. Telephone service is available at one of the grocery stores and some of the homes have landlines of their own, while others have cellular telephones. Catholic mass is held once a week on Saturdays at the local chapel.

There are constant reminders in the *rancho* that Lindavista is a transnational community. The households with family in the United States are distinguishable from those that do not have anyone working across the border. Built of brick and mortar with glass windows, instead of typical adobe brick and wooden shutters, the migrant-funded dwellings are larger and of recent construction. Abandoned homes are another sign of a transnational community. One-third of the houses in the community are abandoned as a result of immigration to southeastern Pennsylvania. U.S. purchased vehicles, cars and trucks with Pennsylvania and Delaware license plates, are another reminder. Migrants return with these vehicles, use them locally, and store them in carports constructed adjacent to their houses. In the middle of the community, at the site of the active spring, Our Lady of Guadalupe is painted on one of the rock formations that surround the gushing waters. Many migrants visit this landmark to pray and entrust themselves to the saint on the night prior to departing for the United States.

Progreso is the municipal seat and the only city in a municipality that is home to close to 50,000 residents. Since its founding in the early 1800s, the city has been a major administrative, religious, and commercial center in the municipality and the region. Local employment opportunities center on wage work in the local garment industry and on *maquila* work in homes; assembling clothing and placing adornments on it. With just over forty thousand inhabitants, Progreso is a small city. Despite its small size, Progreso has a number of neighborhoods. Some house the wealthy of the city and others the poor. Until recently, many of the families had lived in the city for generations, or were one or two generations removed from surrounding *ranchos*, including Lindavista. Over the past couple of decades, they have been joined by immigrants from Mexico City and other Mexican cities in search of opportunities in the textile and garment industry and its supplementary businesses. Some of the more successful families, whose prosperity did not originate from this industry, made their early money by migrating to work in the Chicago area as early as the 1920s. Over the decades, others have done the same, creating strong links to this major U.S. metropolitan area and to other parts of the United States.

Transnational Migration and Emigration

The men from Progreso and other communities, including those from Lindavista, did not migrate in significant numbers until the 1940s, under the auspices of a bilateral US-Mexican labor initiative known as the Bracero Program.[6] During the approximately 20 years of the program's duration, migration became so important to hundreds of communities that after the program's termination, it became a way of life for future generations.

In the late 1960s, half a dozen men from Lindavista, pioneers in every sense of the word, opened and established a migration route to southeastern Pennsylvania that would change their home community forever. They were the first migrants from Mexico to work as harvesters in a major horticultural industry in Pennsylvania. Over the next decade, others made their way to Pennsylvania and other states. During this time, returning migrants who had accumulated substantial savings left Lindavista for the cities of Progreso or La Promesa and created enclaves that would attract others from their community in the future. In the 1980s men from the region, together with migrants from other parts of Mexico, specifically from the states of Jalisco and Mexico, became the majority of the workforce in the horticultural industry.

In the early1980s, transnational migrants from Lindavista and other communities in the region started to immigrate to southeastern Pennsylvania and other states, such as Illinois, Texas, North Carolina, and later Georgia. Around this time, changes in the horticultural industry, from seasonal to year-round production, required a more sedentary and skilled workforce. At first, migrants with authorization to work in United States settled with their families. Later, unauthorized workers followed. Toward the middle of the decade, the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, commonly known by its acronym, IRCA, made legal, or authorized, immigration an option for more migrants and their families.[7] Because of the waiting time involved in the processing of applications, many bypassed it and sent for their families without proper immigration authorization. Married and single women joined their spouses, fathers, or

[6]The Bracero Program was an "emergency" bilateral labor agreement between Mexico and the United States in which the former was to provide the agricultural industry of the latter with labor. The program was to remain in operation only during World War II, but under the auspices of Public Law 78, it was extended until 1964. *Braceros*, the laborers recruited through this program, were to work no more than six months out of any given year. However, many of them would stay beyond their contract period. In the mid-1960's, after the program's termination, growers fearful of losing their skilled farm labor force, encouraged and assisted ex-*bracero* workers and their families to settle down.

[7]Basically, the purpose of IRCA was to halt the growing "illegal" immigration problem of the United States by legalizing undocumented workers residing in the country, deterring others from entering illegally, and penalizing employers who hired workers without proper immigration documents or inspection. The Special Agricultural Workers (SAW) Program, a major legalization program of IRCA, was intended to legalize the undocumented labor force employed in agriculture. It would allow illegal, or undocumented, farm workers to legalize their status in the country if they met certain criteria.

brothers, leaving their children behind with their parents (González 1997). Others continued to migrate from Lindavista and other parts of Mexico to work in the horticultural industry, remaining in Pennsylvania for up to five years (in some cases) before returning to Mexico.

Drug Use in Transnational Communities in Mexico

As we discovered, drug use occurs in our research region both in the transnational communities situated in the countryside and in cities. Marijuana, cocaine and its derivative, crack, and crystal methamphetamine are the major drugs. Returning transnational migrants were the primary consumers in the past. Today, the drug users include non-migrants, mainly adolescents and young people in their 20s and 30s. The number of users is unknown. Concrete data or estimates on the number of users do not exist because there are no local epidemiological studies of drug use. Data from the System of Epidemiological Surveillance of Addictions (Sistema de Vigilancia Epidemiológica de las Adicciones) in the State of Guanajuato is not made available by municipality or community. The same problem exists with findings from the National Survey against Addictions (Encuestra Nacional contra las Adicciones). Despite the dearth of epidemiological data, doctors, community nurses, and health promoters argue that the consumption of drugs, such as marijuana, cocaine, and crystal methamphetamine, has increased in their service areas over recent years, especially among young members of the population. Community nurses in the *ranchos*, who are in contact with their service populations on a daily basis, support this claim by noting that an increasing number of families in their communities have members with drug problems.

Not coincidentally, as transnational migration intensified and drug use became common, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and other self-help groups, such as Los Guerreros, or the warriors, have emerged and increased in number in the municipal seats and to a lesser extent in the *ranchos*. Today, in the municipalities in our region of study, there are nearly two dozen AA groups, all of which have recovering drug addicts as members, who at one time or another were transnational migrants. Members of these self-help groups have also established AA groups in transnational communities in southeastern Pennsylvania and the nearby state of Delaware. The regular membership of these groups is comprised of transnational Mexican migrants, most of whom are in the United States without proper work authorization. As is the case with all AA groups, meetings are open to anyone interested in abstinence and turning their lives around, regardless of their backgrounds. The meetings are held in the Spanish language at Catholic and other churches and in community centers. Testimonies center around migration, work, and other areas of their lives that have a bearing on the migrants' substance use.

Transnational Migrants and Drug Use

In southeastern Pennsylvania, transnational migrants use drugs for recreational and work enhancement purposes, according to their work schedules (García 2008). In fact, the majority of the transnational migrants in our study started their drug use in Pennsylvania (García 2008). We do not know the specific number of drug users, given that our current and previous research does not address prevalence; only the nature of drug use. We do know that drug users are between the ages of 18 to 38, although younger and older workers have used or experimented with drugs (García 2008). Migrant drug users consume marijuana, cocaine, crack, and amphetamines. Marijuana and cocaine, the preferred drugs, are used with alcohol during drinking binges (García 2008).

Some migrant drug users continue their habitual drug use upon returning to their homeland. Others will only use drugs if the opportunity arises. Drugs, especially cocaine, are used during drinking episodes open to kin and close friends. Some of the younger migrants, between the ages 18 of 28, avoid traditional drinking circles and practices and are creating drug-using groups, as will be described. During social drinking, drugs are made available to everyone in

the group, so non-drug users learn firsthand about drug use and may be pressured to try drugs. The majority of the migrants in our research population first tried drugs after conceding to peer pressure from close and trusted friends. The first time user may experiment with drugs and eventually abandon the interest, or may continue to the point of becoming a regular user, depending on his social network, experiences under the influence of drugs, and living situation in the United States. Drugs become available in the *ranchos* of the municipality of Progreso as associates of cartels open markets there, and they have been sold in municipal seats and regional cities, such as Morelia, for at least three decades if not more.

Transnational migrants and immigrants do not return to Mexico as often as they would like. Workers with authorization to live and work in the United States, made possible with a permanent residency visa, return home annually. The number of trips varies according to the work schedule in the United States and the availability of funds for travel. Unauthorized workers do not return as frequently, some for years, because of increased surveillance along the U.S. Mexico border since 9–11 and the high monetary cost, not to mention the risk to life, associated with crossing into the United States illegally. Most migrants, regardless of their legal status, return home during December and January to celebrate the holidays and community festivities when they are able to do so. In December, for example, there is the commemoration of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the nation's patron saint, on the 12th, and Christmas celebrations later in the month with *posadas* (nativity pageants) and the *Reyes Magos* (Christmas observance based on the journey of the Bible's Three Wise Men). There are also two major community fiestas held nearby in January, each with parades, rodeos, and dances featuring well-known bands—one in Lagoverde and the other in the city of Progreso, both commemorating their patron saints.

When migrants and visiting immigrants make it home, it is a time to celebrate, especially if the return coincides with one the festivities in December or January. The men celebrate their return with social drinking, increasingly accompanied with drug use. Some of the younger returnees—ranging in age from sixteen to twenty-six—return home with small sports cars, hip-hop style clothing, "boom boxes", Spanish-language compact discs with the latest *duranguense* (*banda* style music with origins in the Mexican state of Durango), *reggaeton* (fusion of reggie and rap in the Spanish language), and *narco-corridos* (narco-ballads glorifying drug trafficking and its way of life) music, along with stories of their adventures crossing the border illegally and working in the United States. They, more than their older counterparts, celebrate their return with heavy drinking with their kin and *cuates*, or close friends. Having returned with dollars, they are generous and buy cases of beer, bottles of *tequila* or *charanda* (a regional distilled sugar cane-based alcohol beverage), and if their money permits it, contract a *banda* (wind and percussion musical group). In the patios of their homes or the home of a good friend or relative, or on a street corner, the men, some of them other returning compatriots, congregate to drink and listen to music. Individuals in the group who use drugs step away from these gatherings to use drugs and return to these areas to continue drinking. Drug use is not an open or a public activity unless everyone is using drugs. Cocaine is used throughout the drinking episode in order for the participants to keep drinking. As the evening progresses and alcohol takes its toll, cocaine use reaches its peak. These boisterous celebrations last for two or three days, into the wee-hours of the morning. Young migrants are known to spend up to several thousand dollars on these festive events, especially if they contract a *banda*.

These gendered celebrations are a tradition in communities in southern Guanajuato and other regions with a long history of labor migration. For decades, they have occurred and have always involved alcohol. The use of drugs is relatively new. On the surface, these celebrations appear to be wealth displays orchestrated by the migrants and returning immigrants to either demonstrate success or to mask failures. In some cases, especially if young migrants are the

sponsors, they may simply be showing off. However, an alternative explanation is that these celebratory events are re-entering rituals that allow migrants and immigrants alike to announce their return and to re-integrate themselves into their communities, and as such, are important to them and to the community at large. They use these occasions to resolve any tensions or resentments among kin and close friends that may have emerged during their absence. These celebrations also belay any envy in the community. By being generous with drink, food, and music, the returning migrants demonstrate that they are not selfish and are more than willing to share their success with others, especially community members who cannot afford the high costs associated with migration to the United States. Additionally, migrants use the opportunity to thank kin and friends who performed a favor for them during their absence. For example, they may be grateful because their families were looked after, their crops were harvested on time, or their livestock was tended. Kin and friends also take advantage of these occasions to ask the migrants and immigrants to sponsor a baptism, a wedding, or a family member who wants to migrate *al norte* (to the north). More formal re-integration rituals in other parts of Central Mexico, organized around the Catholic religion and not involving alcohol consumption, have also been documented in the work of others, such as Espinoza (1999).

Los Deportados, Gangs, and the Emergence of a Drug Use Culture

There is another group that is introducing drug use in transnational communities in rural and urban areas of Mexico. The group is known locally as *los deportados*, or the deportees. In their late teens and twenties, these young men were either deported from the United States for a felony conviction or voluntarily returned on their own after committing a serious crime. Some of these young men, with and without permanent residency status, or a “green card”, were repatriated under the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996.[8] Others returned on their own to avoid being arrested and convicted in the United States. Their crimes vary from attempted homicide to drug dealing, but regardless of their crimes, their problems began with heavy drug use. Some sold drugs on their own but many were involved in drug sales and other crime activities as members of gangs associated with drug trafficking organizations. Depending on the region of the United States in which they were located, they belonged to or were affiliated with the Latin Kings, Sureños, or other gangs. With their hair cropped short, arms, torso, and neck covered with tattoos and dressed in a distinctive style—Timberland shoes, baggy pants, and oversized, creased tee shirts—these young ex-migrants and immigrants stand out in their communities. This appearance and attire is common among young Mexican Americans and other Latinos in the *barrios* of Los Angeles, Chicago, Dallas, Atlanta, and Philadelphia.

Local residents and others in Lindavista and other communities in the region blame the *deportados* for drug use in rural communities. *Los deportados*, similar to returning migrants and visiting immigrants, introduce drug use to *ranchos* and cities. Unlike their non-deported counterparts, however, they are accomplishing this in a more direct and systematic fashion. They continue to pursue their drug activities in Mexico as if they were still in the United States. Traditional drinking circles are avoided, and instead, they are creating drug-using groups. In so doing they are creating a drug use culture comprised of *los deportados* and their local followers. Drugs are not used openly or in public, but in cemeteries, soccer fields, or out in agricultural fields. *Los deportados* prefer drugs over alcohol, and sell drugs locally so that they can afford to buy and use them. Others are committing burglaries of local residencies where they have never occurred in the past, stealing from the patios of homes, and taking livestock to pay for drugs.

[8]Among its many measures, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 calls for the deportation of immigrants and migrants convicted of certain felony offenses regardless of their legal status in the United States. The provisions also bar the re-entry of the deportees into the country.

Los deportados, including those who return on their own after committing crimes, are creating gang-like social groups based on a drug use culture. The size of these groups differs; some have about half a dozen members, others as many as two dozen. Members socialize with one another on a regular basis, dress alike, communicate using a street version of hybrid Spanish and English, known as *caló*, and share similar values and norms, especially as they pertain to drug use. Members and others loosely affiliated with the group use drugs together, share drugs, and sell them in order to obtain more. As will be discussed, members of this new social group are also increasingly recruited by drug cartels to sell drugs, transport drugs to the U.S.-Mexico border, and distribute and sell drugs in the United States.

Adolescents, who have not traveled outside of the region, but have been exposed to the outside world through television, internet, movies and other media, are easily impressed by *los deportados*. They look up to them and see them as social heroes who dared to sell drugs and challenge the authorities in the United States. *Los deportados* personify the narco-trafficking heroes glorified in popular *narco-corridos*. The underlying message of these ballads is the same: honorable men from humble and rural origins, who engage in drug trafficking out of need, not greed, pursue their profitable pursuits, outsmart the authorities, especially, the *gringos*, and when provoked, shoot it out, and in some versions die after a heroic fire fight.

Adolescent males, who have not migrated to the United States but aspire to do so and most likely will, enjoy hearing about *los deportado*s' adventures. Many of the stories told center around their exploits, which are often exaggerated, and about the availability of large quantities of money, power, social status, women and sex for drugs, all made possible through drug dealing. Easily influenced young males start to emulate the repatriated young men; their dress, their use of *caló*, and their drug use. They, too, start to sell drugs to afford them, or if a parent or some other relative works in the United States, they use money from remittances to buy drugs. Consequently, these adolescents no longer work in their families' economic pursuits, or for that matter, in any other economic endeavor. Instead, they devote much of their day to roaming in small groups or gangs, *pandillitas*, as the local residents refer to them, from one community to another. In and around local communities, while loitering in the plazas or at the outskirts, they tag (spray paint graffiti on walls), drink beer, and use cocaine or smoke marijuana.

Communities, especially the *ranchos*, find themselves ill prepared to deal with unruly adolescents and their drug use. Traditional forms of social control, such as the traditional family which in the past served this purpose, are no longer effective. Traditionally tri-generational family groups, as our genealogies reveal, were the norm prior to increased labor migration and emigration. Over the years, transnational migration and emigration have reconfigured either temporarily or permanently these traditional tri-generational living arrangements. Today, the practice continues but in many families, males—husbands/fathers, older sons, and older brothers—are often missing for years. Compounding the problem, the permanent loss of kin in Lindavista has truncated kinship ties in the community and the kinship bases of many families. Since 1980, when immigration to the United States started to increase, Lindavista has lost 30 percent of its population. Some of the remaining families in the community have more kin in the United States than they do locally. Local kinship is important. Relatives have always looked after each other, especially the children in the extended family, and have made sure that proper behavior, customs, and traditions are learned, practiced, and passed on to the next generation. The absence of kin, especially close kin, has eroded this important social safety net in the communities. Although immigrants want to help with some of the social problems from afar, they are not in a position to do so.

The near absence of males has resulted in the loss of important male authority figures who deter unruly and antisocial behavior among younger members of the community. For example,

on more than one occasion, we have seen older males, especially fathers and uncles, remind their younger male relatives of acceptable drinking behavior and, when needed, intercede by taking alcohol away when heavy drinking was involved. They do the same with other unacceptable behaviors. However, fathers and other male kin, such as uncles, godfathers, and older brothers, are not present in the same numbers as they were in the past to intervene when community norms are violated. Local authorities in the rural communities, *delagados,* do not know how to handle problems once resolved by families. *Delagados* serve as more of a community representative in municipal government than anything else and do not have any police authority or a police force. When matters get out of hand and cannot be dealt with locally, they summon the municipal police force for assistance. Some *delagados* in our research site are part of the local drug problem in their communities. They sell drugs or protect community members who engage in drug trafficking activities.

Drug Trafficking Organizations and Transnational Communities in Mexico

Another key transnational activity, drug trafficking, is also contributing to drug use and related activities in transnational communities in Mexico. Unlike before, drug cartels are expanding their activities into predominantly rural municipalities, similar to the ones in southern Guanajuato, and are systematically targeting municipal seats and *ranchos* that were once passed up for lucrative markets in large cities in the interior of the country or along the U.S.-Mexico border. Present in the communities of these municipalities is money from remittances and the social conditions necessary for drug sales: existing drug use, a drug use culture, gang-like social groupings mainly comprised of deportees from the United States, and the breakdown of traditional deterrents to substance abuse. The drug cartels are also using these communities, along with others, as major distribution points, where drugs are stored and moved through well established migration networks. These social networks that for generations have served migrants in seeking a hard-earned livelihood are now being appropriated and used to funnel illicit drug commodities into the United States.

Drug trafficking is not new to nonmetropolitan regions of Central Mexico. Drug cartels have operated in some of these regions for at least half a century, if not more, but until recently did not target transnational communities (Astorga 2000). Early on, starting in the 1940s, with the development of the agro-industrial sector in Mexico, which introduced irrigation systems and transportation networks, they produced marijuana and heroin in relatively isolated areas. These drugs were sold to markets in the United States using networks of their own that at times overlapped with transnational labor networks. Later on, in partnership with Columbian cartels in the 1980s, Mexican cartels constructed air strips and storage facilities for cocaine, and using their existing networks, smuggled the drug into the United States (Andreas 1999; Astorga 2000). The production of methamphetamines was added to their drug activities in the 1990s (Cook 2007). However, over the last 10 years or so, as the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) made it difficult for Mexican drug traffickers to smuggle their commodities into the United States, the cartels started to establish internal markets without abandoning their lucrative U.S markets. Despite turning inward, today these cartels remain the main foreign suppliers of marijuana and major suppliers of heroin and methamphetamine to the United States (Cook 2007). They are also responsible for an estimated 90 percent of all the cocaine that makes its way into the United States (Cook 2007).

Presence of Drug Trafficking Organizations in Southern Guanajuato

Over the last two years, a number of cartels have violently competed for turf in southern Guanajuato, among them, the Gulf Cartel, the Colima Cartel, and La Familia Michoacana.[9] This region was and continues to be attractive because of resources essential to the drug trade: remittances from the United States, which in 2006 alone totaled a record 23 billion dollars for

all of Mexico (Lapper 2007), a lucrative garment industry, and a growing drug market. Today, after a fierce and deadly struggle, La Familia Michoacana, based in the bordering state of Michoacán, is the dominant drug cartel in Guanajuato. It is known locally by its abbreviated name, La Familia, or the Family. La Familia, drawing on other cartels as examples, especially its early sponsor and mentor, the Gulf Cartel, is well organized and runs its drug business like a vertically-integrated corporation with many divisions responsible for producing, marketing, distributing, and selling drugs nationally and internationally (Carrasco Araizaga and Castellanos 2009). It moves and sells an undetermined amount of cocaine from Columbia, often in alliance with other drug cartels, and is a leading producer of marijuana and methamphetamine, all made possible with thousands of associates on its payroll and millions of dollars in bribes to municipal, state, and federal police forces and government officials at all levels (Carrasco Araizaga 2009b;Carrasco Araizaga and Castellanos 2009).

La Familia operates in the vast majority of the municipalities in its home state of Michoacán. However, its origins and major base of operation is in the Municipality of Aquila in a relatively isolated coastal area in *tierra caliente*, ideal for growing marijuana and drug trafficking (Carrasco Araizaga and Castellanos 2009). Nearby Lazaro Cardenas, a major sea-port for Mexico and arguably all of Latin America, is used for this clandestine activity. Cocaine from Columbia and synthetic drugs, mainly from Asia, such as ephedrine and pseudoephedrine are imported. These same drugs, along with others, are exported to the United States (Carrasco Araizaga and Castellanos 2009). Outside of Michoacán, La Familia has expanded into the surrounding states of Jalisco, Guanajuato, Guerrero, and Mexico, including Mexico City (Carrasco Araizaga and Castellanos 2009; Díaz 2009). Expansion into Guerrero and Jalisco has given La Familia control of a 2,300 square kilometer area known as the Pacific Triangle, a major marijuana and poppy/heroin production site (Carrasco Araizaga and Castellanos 2009). In part, La Familia has been successful in its expansion by being ruthless; kidnapping, torturing, and decapitating competitors, police, and any others who are a threat to the organization. Its success is also due to grassroots support, especially from the poor and the socially marginalized, who La Familia wins over by financing school projects, improving local infrastructure, introducing law and order in places controlled by petty criminals, and dealing with local family matters, such as domestic violence, by warning and sometimes beating abusers (Díaz 2009). The rigid, patriarchal structure of La Familia and its approach in gaining popular support from the poor is similar to the patriarchal structure of the traditional Mexican family and its emphasis on family and kin.

Tienditas, Drug Markets, and Narco-Migrantes

In October 2008, we arrived in southern Guanajuato to start our fieldwork, unbeknownst to us at the time, in the middle of a regional drug war. Nearly every day for the next six months, local newspapers printed news stories about this bloody and deadly conflict. It claimed the lives of a number of cartel associates, street dealers, federal and municipal police officers, and innocent bystanders. La Familia, as we would later learn, was battling its old mentor and business partner, Los Zetas, over local drug markets once controlled by the Gulf Cartel. It was consolidating its control over markets by eliminating rival concession-like marketing and distribution businesses, known in the Mexican drug world as *tienditas*, and setting up new ones loyal to the organization.

The term *Tienditas*, or little stores or shops, when translated literally, is a drug cartel metaphor for a drug cell made up of trusted associates responsible for marketing drugs and other cartel activities over a specific territory (Riva Palacio 2009). These cells are managed and operated

[9]There are eight known drug cartels in Mexico all operating in or around major cities and sea, air, and land ports. Some are successors of old cartels, such as the Cartel of Sinaloa, and others are new, such as La Familía Michoacana.

by men in their 20s and 30s who are responsible for opening and expanding drug markets in a specific area, and once established, defending them from rival drug cartels and government authorities (Riva Palacio 2009). The area of a *tiendita* varies; it may cover a neighborhood within a city, an entire city, or, depending on the territory, one or more *ranchos*. Individuals in charge of the *tienditas*, the *jefes* or *dons*, are well trained in the use of high caliber arms, including grenades, and prepared for *levantones* (kidnappings), extortions, *golpizas* (beatings), and murders (Riva Palacio 2009). A percentage of the proceeds from their drug markets, as well as from any kidnappings and extortions with which they assisted, is their compensation. The amount is determined by seniority and experience, demonstrations of loyalty, and success in drug sales, among others. *Jefes*, or bosses, who distinguish themselves in their service to the cartel are rewarded with additional territory, power in the organization, money and women (Riva Palacio 2009). Those who try to switch sides or who try to become independent are punished harshly to convey a message to others. In these cases, these individuals or their family members may receive severe beatings, or in the worst cases, be murdered.

The *jefes* and their close associates recruit assistants of their own, who are well familiar with their areas, for different *jales*, or jobs. Sought are individuals who are astute, bold and brazen, and can be trusted with money and information. *Los deportados*, especially the ex-gang members discussed earlier, make good prospects because of their street smarts. They, in turn, recruit others to serve as spotters, individuals stationed at the entrances to town, who report on police and military convoys, and *halcones*, or hawks, adolescents who circulate on bicycle and serve as the eyes and ears of drug cartels and report any police and military activities to their bosses. The assistants of the associates are paid on a commission basis, earning a percentage of the drug sale proceeds, which can amount to hundreds of dollars per week. Successful assistants are rewarded with additional territory and an increase in their commission. With time, if their success continues, they may be hired to serve their *jefes* in other capacities, such as transporting drugs, helping in *levantones*, or serving as enforcers or assassins.

Tienditas are responsible for the sale of drugs in the *ranchos* and municipal seats in our research site. In *ranchos*, such as Lindavista and others, local young men, especially repatriated ex-migrants and others of their ilk, serve as local assistants and in return are paid with drugs and proceeds of the drug sales. They are not involved in any other activities of the *tienditas*. There is little risk involved in selling drugs in their communities, given that the drug users are known and strangers are few and far between. Drug sales peak when transnational migrants and visiting immigrants return in December and January to partake in the local festivities described earlier. However, not all of the drugs used during these visits are purchased locally. Drug users may buy their drugs from kin or friends in other communities. This alternative to purchasing drugs locally does not result in conflicts as long as the drugs are not sold locally.

The same practice is common in the municipal seats, where locally-based assistants of *tienditas* sell drugs in assigned neighborhoods. To minimize risk, they sell drugs through local social networks and are highly suspicious of strangers seeking to make a purchase. There are also known places in neighborhoods where drugs can be purchased openly, but even in these situations, drugs are purchased through a contact—someone whom the seller knows. Additionally, there are places where drug users congregate and use drugs. These places are not within sight of the public.

Some of the young men who sell drugs for the *tienditas* also sell drugs in the United States. They are either recruited before their departure or after their arrival. Some only sell drugs to complement their earnings in legitimate pursuits, while others are what we call "*narco-migrantes*", transnational migrants whose primary reason for migrating is to distribute and sell drugs.

Every year millions of transnational migrants travel to the United States and work without committing crimes, except for crossing the border without proper U.S. authorization, as their fathers and grandfathers did countless times before them. However, increasingly, young, third generation transnational migrants are questioning, if not disregarding, the work ethic of their predecessors, especially if it involves hard and dirty work with little pay. Young migrants seek an improvement from the plight of their fathers and are not convinced that work in U.S. agriculture and related industries is a guarantee for a better life. The recent economic recession in the United States and the world has contributed to the growing perception that traditional work is not the way to go anymore. Wages are lower than before in certain sectors, as industries struggle to stay solvent. Work is not as abundant as it was before and in the worst cases, jobs are disappearing. As they confront these realities, they see peers who are working and selling drugs on the side or only selling drugs. These individuals do not work hard and have material gains, such as cars, good jewelry, and clothing to flaunt. Seeing these displays of material success, they are tempted to do the same—to sell drugs—and some eventually do.

Other young men, *narco-migrantes*, are mainly first-generation migrants. These migrants are in their early twenties, if not younger, and, like many other transnational migrants, they enter the United States without proper authorization from U.S. authorities. Often, as a consequence of their first-generation migration background, they have very few, if any, kin in the United States whom they can call upon. In regards to drug use, many of the *narco-migrantes* we interviewed had experimented with drugs before migrating, but became regular users in the United States. They are mainly of urban origin with limited work experience. Many started their migration career out of a sense of adventure and curiosity after hearing many stories about life in the United States from returning migrants. With limited migration experience and a restricted kin network to fall back on, many eventually end up selling drugs in the United States when they are unable to find work. Others, after a few days, abandon their work because they find it too exhausting or not worth the pay, or both. It is then that they are easily recruited to sell drugs. They learn that they can make more money selling drugs than their honest and hard working compatriots who are working long hours and, in many instances, are under paid. The lifestyle that accompanies drug trafficking and sales—drugs, large sums of money in their possession, new and trendy clothing, women, and parties—keeps *narco-migrantes* in the business. When they return home, experienced in selling drugs, they are formally recruited to work for one of the *tienditas*, and in turn, they recruit others to migrate to the United States to sell drugs.

We present two brief cases to illustrate the two general types of transnational migrants who sell drugs in the United Sates: traditional migrants and narco-migrants or *narco-migrantes*. One of the cases involves young men from Lindavista, and the other a group from the city of Progreso. In both cases, the young men did not traffic in drugs; that is, they did not smuggle drugs across the border into the United States. They only sold drugs made available to them at their U.S. destinations.

Case One: Traditional Migrants

In the spring of 2009, three young men from Lindavista were arrested for selling cocaine from a farm in southeastern Pennsylvania. Two of the men are cousins, and the other is a close friend. All three are in their 20s, and are either second or third generation transnational migrants. Nearly half of their kin from Lindavista have immigrated and live in Pennsylvania. Unlike other transnational migrants, particularly first generation migrants, they do not make stops to work en route to their destination. Despite their involvement in drug sales, they do not traffic in drugs. Narco-traffickers who move drugs from the border to distribution points in the U.S northeast provide them with cocaine to sell. These traffickers use transnational migrant networks and communities that start in Texas, run through southern states, and continue up the

eastern seaboard to move their products to northeastern states. Along the way, they easily blend in with the population of transnational communities, make their deliveries, sell their product, and recruit new associates.

The cocaine of the young men was sold to fellow workers and other transnational migrants and immigrants in the area. They started to sell drugs to pay for their own drug use, and later found that there is money to be made selling drugs. Two lived and worked on the farm and the other elsewhere. In their home community, we often saw them together, driving around in a souped-up, brightly custom painted Japanese sports car with a Pennsylvania license plate. Seeing the vehicle traveling up and down the streets often appeared surreal to us. The local background with its adobe structures, cobblestone streets, and livestock being taken to and from pasture made this car, and others like it, stand out.

The day of their arrest, they were found in possession of 385 grams of cocaine worth $665,000 dollars, packaging material, a digital scale and an undetermined amount of money. A shotgun and 9 mm semi-automatic handgun were also seized by the Pennsylvania State Police. The three are being held in a municipal prison in southeastern Pennsylvania awaiting trial for a number of “drug possession with intent to deliver” or “delivery of cocaine” charges. The owner of the farm was not implicated.

Case Two: Narco-Migrants

The second case involves five young men who reside and live in the city of Progreso, all of them are first-generation migrants and the leader of the group is a *narco-migrante*. Two are brothers, one is a cousin of the brothers, and the other two are unrelated, but are close friends of the related men. They range in age from their mid-twenties to their early thirties. The leader of the group, one of the two brothers, recruited the others either in Progreso or in the United States and taught them the drug business. Over the last eight years, all five have migrated to the United States, one to Pennsylvania, and have worked in construction and landscaping in California and Utah. Given the absence of immigrant kin in the United States, they move from one community to another along the transnational social network, from southern California to Nevada and Utah, where they have friends who can provide them with loans, as well as housing and job leads. In these communities, the young men complement their employment with cocaine sales, except for the leader who devotes all of his time to this activity. Two of the five have been deported by the U.S. government, not for illicit drug sales but for being in the country without proper immigration documents.

Two of the five young men used drugs, mainly cocaine, for the first time in the United States, the other three in Progreso before they started migrating. All of them sell cocaine in the United States. Their U.S. clients are from just about all walks of life, including professionals. They claim that selling drugs gets them through frequent lulls in employment and allows them to live a life otherwise not possible—a lifestyle that includes trendy clothing, meals in restaurants, and parties. They do not traffic in cocaine; it is delivered to them by associates of drug traffickers from back home who also hire local gang members to provide the young men with protection. Locally in Progreso, two of the men, one of them the leader, sell cocaine, marijuana and crystal methamphetamine. One of them, as his thin body and black and rotting teeth suggest, is addicted to crystal methamphetamine and uses it regularly, as does his wife. The leader of the group supplies his street associates with drugs from a local *tiendita*, collects money from the sales, and deals directly with his *jefes*. He is known to the local police and has been jailed in Progreso for drug sales, theft, and other criminal activities. There are many times when he disappears for long periods of time and no one seems to know his whereabouts. He is especially difficult to locate when regional drug wars flare up; when they do, he disappears until everything has quieted down.

Major Challenges for Transnational Communities in Mexico

The social consequences of transnational labor migration, such as the introduction of drug use by returning migrants and *los deportados*, together with local activities of drug trafficking organizations, are grave challenges for transnational communities in Mexico, as they also are for the government and health providers. Over the last decade, the two, but particularly drug cartel activity, have made an increasingly bad drug problem in these communities into a crisis in need of immediate attention. Transnational communities are not able to deal with the drug abuse emerging among their populations, especially among their vulnerable, young members. Traditional deterrents against this harmful behavior are failing as a result of transnational migration and immigration. More problematic is that local-level alternative responses to drug abuse are nowhere in sight in the communities. Municipal, state and federal health providers are well aware of this problem but are underfunded, understaffed, and ill prepared to launch an effective response. The involvement of drug trafficking organizations in the drug use of these communities further complicates matters. They pose unprecedented challenges to communities and health providers for the following reasons:

- Drug trafficking organizations are behind the distribution and sale of drugs in transnational communities in Mexico and the United States. The political powerlessness of these communities, not to mention the fear that some members of their populations have of the authorities, creates social conditions for drug trafficking activities. Through terror, if not bribes, cartel associates operate in transnational communities relatively unchallenged.
- Drug trafficking organizations are also appropriating transnational migration networks to conduct their business. Exploiting the illegal status of some of the transnational migrants in the United States and their vulnerabilities in the U.S. job market, drug cartels are recruiting migrants, through promises of wealth, to distribute and sell drugs in Mexico and the United States. These migrants are familiar with the communities, know how to evade the authorities, and easily blend in with the local population.
- The greatest challenge to transnational communities is the threat to the traditional culture of transnational migration. The life of the narco-trafficker is romanticized by many young men; some already migrants and others who will join them in the future. It plays into their masculinity, macho values of toughness and aggressiveness, and the bravado of their youth. They see drug trafficking as a legitimate economic activity, and, as discussed earlier, look down on the work performed by their fathers and their fathers before them. Consequently, values associated with drug trafficking are permeating and changing traditional migrant culture. The key principles of this traditional culture, such as a strong work ethic, the pursuit of honest work despite its physical demands and low pay, envy avoidance, and sacrifice for family, are now giving way to the quest for leisure coupled with drug use, participation in illicit activities, wealth displays without the ritualistic wealth distribution common during their return home, as discussed earlier, and, in the worst of cases, immediate gratification at the expense of family and others.

Conclusion

Illicit drugs and drug abuse have been present in the transnational communities of our research site for at least several decades, and for a longer period of time in other areas of Central Mexico. Transnational migrants, immigrants visiting their homeland, and their deported compatriots are introducing drugs and drug use behaviors to their home communities. With their help, others, especially young people, who have not migrated but in all likelihood will do so in the

near future, are starting to experiment with drugs. Traditional deterrents once in place to deal with this and other unacceptable behaviors are nearly absent. In some communities, as a consequence, a drug use culture is emerging—a culture that, if it takes root--- will set the foundation for a serious drug problem.

Activities of drug trafficking organizations in transnational communities are compounding the gravity of this drug problem. These organizations have found transnational communities and their social networks very useful for their activities. Over the decades, through these networks, countless migrants have made their way north to make an honest living. In particular, drug trafficking organizations are appropriating a highly functional infrastructure within the social networks that is used to facilitate the movement of unauthorized laborers into the United States. Now, drugs are flowing through these networks, and an undetermined number of transnational communities are being used as major distribution centers. In these same communities, drug trafficking organizations are also targeting at-risk adolescents and young people and turning them into drug consumers as well as recruiting them to sell drugs, in some cases as *narco-migrantes* whose sole objective in migrating is to traffic in and sell drugs. Communities are well aware of what is happening and fear for their young, but their members are afraid to go to the authorities, concerned about whether the authorities are in cahoots with the drug cartels and are fearful of reprisals, such as beatings and murder. It is this fear that gives drug cartels and their associates free reign in transnational communities.

The confluence of two transnational processes—transnational labor migration and drug trafficking—is creating a drug problem in transnational communities that is difficult to eradicate, if not treat and control. As stated earlier, the activities of drug trafficking organizations within transnational migration circuits pose unprecedented challenges for transnational communities in Mexico. A quick response is to step up the war on drugs on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, aggressively going after the drug cartels. However, this response alone is not enough. Illicit drugs will still be available and drug abuse will remain a problem. We also must add drug abuse prevention and treatment measures aimed at transnational populations designed with a transnational paradigm in mind—one that takes into consideration the nature of transnational migration. Only then will we be able to locate, intercede, treat, and monitor drug abuse in transnational communities in more than one country and possibly slow the spread of this major health and social problem. The emphasis should be on prevention, working with young people, and curtailing the growing influence of drug cartels and the romantic notions surrounding narco-trafficking that are influencing the youth of many transnational communities. Drug use in these populations is truly an international health problem, as it is in many other parts of the world, and requires the attention, action, trust, and cooperation of governmental health departments and non-governmental health agencies working as partners across nation-state borders.

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