

**POLICY COMMENTARY**

# Cutting the Flow: Argentina as a Success Case against Drug Trafficking 2016–2019

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Three Latin American countries centralise cocaine production in the world: Bolivia, Peru, and Colombia. However, the leading consumer markets are the United States and Europe. Transnational organised crime often dispatches shipments directly from producing countries, but also often use transshipment countries as a strategy to reduce risks.

Argentina was for many years identified as an essential cocaine transshipment country especially bound to Europe. This phenomenon gave place to the consolidation of an internal cocaine market that had a profound impact on crime levels in the country.

In December 2015, a new strategy to counter drug trafficking was introduced, based on several institutional strengthening programs divided on four pillars aimed at raising operating costs and risks for criminal organisations.

This strategy included policies aimed at reducing the supply of drugs, generating an environment hostile to organised crime, reducing demand, and improving control of money laundering by these organisations.

While the natural illegal characteristic of this market makes it difficult to estimate the outcome of this strategy, it is possible to state that Argentina went through an institutional strengthening process that appears to have at least affected the transshipment of cocaine to Europe. Other impacts remain to be confirmed through further studies.

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**Keywords:** Argentina; Cocaine; Cannabis; Latin America; Cartels

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## Introduction

It is crucial to warn the reader that this article does look forward to determining the impact that the strategy introduced had in the problem of drugs as a whole and neither on the effectiveness of drug supply reduction measures on consumption. By contrast, it analyses the Argentinean institutional strengthening policies introduced by the government amidst the framework of a ‘Grand Strategy’ against drug supply between 2015 and 2019. Also, please be aware that because of the limited space available in this format, specific policies are briefly described.

In the first part of this article, the institutional strengthening framework is described. The lack of former coherent strategies against drug trafficking forced the Argentinean government to design, for the first time, a comprehensive plan to strengthen institutions involved in the fight against drug trafficking (Sain 2008). The development of a ‘Grand Strategy’ against drug supply provided a framework for this institutional strengthening plan. The second part of the article describes the potential impact that the institutional strengthening strategy may have caused.

This work faced the challenge of a lack of disaggregated statistics and lack of consistency in criminal statistics from former administrations. Between 2008 and 2015, the Argentine National Crime Statistics System omitted publishing criminal statistics. (MINSEG 2020). Therefore, the main methodologies used in this work to measure or assess law enforcement activities to reduce drug supply include seizures volumes, federal law enforcement operations and drug law offences committed during that period. All this data comes from figures published by UNODC or Argentina’s Ministry of Security published and unpublished databases. Additionally, as in many areas, crime is related to drug trafficking, the evolution of homicide

rates are examined (Goldstein 1985). Non-quantitative sources include reports from other countries and international organisations.

### **An Institutional Strengthening Based Strategy**

A 2013 report from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) listed Argentina third among the countries most frequently mentioned as a point of origin for cocaine seizures made in Europe over the period 2001–2012 (UNODC 2013). By 2019 the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) EU Drugs Market Report ceased mentioning Argentina as an essential departure point of cocaine shipments to Europe (EMCDDA 2019). How did this transformation happen?

Argentina, formerly known as a relevant transshipment point for cocaine bound to Europe, is now a cocaine consuming country. Since mid-2000, drug use in Argentina skyrocketed. A 67% increase was reported in cocaine use between 2008 and 2017 (UNODC 2017). Monthly consumption prevalence of cocaine during that period rose from 1% to 1.67% (UNODC 2017). Annual consumption prevalence of marijuana also increased in the same period, growing from 3.7% to 8.13 % (UNODC 2017). As in many other places, the exporting routes gave birth to a consuming domestic market, turning Argentina into one of the two countries with the highest cocaine consuming prevalence in the region.

To address this situation, following the work of criminologist Jay Albanese, the Ministry of Security introduced an institutional strengthening strategy based on the adaptation of these four pillars (Albanese 2011):

- Constrain the supply of cocaine through the introduction of three defensive layers.
- Reduce the demand for drugs by reducing its availability on the streets and increasing its price.
- Enhance the state's capacity to inflict higher costs and risks on TOC.
- Affect the TOC capabilities to launder money and introduce its profits in the grey economy.

### **The Institutional Strengthening Measures Employed to Reduce drug Supply**

With 9800 km of borders, Argentina has one of the longest borders in the world. Physical and electronic protection was improved, as well as information sharing among public officials with responsibilities on border controls. In conjunction with the National Directorate of Migration, online access to the INTERPOL I24/7 system was ensured at all border crossings for the first time (Casa Rosada 2016). Additionally, four strategic border crossings limiting with drug-producing countries Bolivia and Paraguay (including the renowned Tri-Border Area) were selected for the installation of an advanced C4ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance) system. Airspace control improved significantly with the introduction of new domestically manufactured 3D active long-range radars in the northern border (VERRIER 2020).

The introduction in 2016 of a federal seizure reporting protocol was approved by ministerial resolution, allowing analysts to map drug trafficking for the first time. Additionally, dedicated federal and local task forces were introduced to tackle domestic trafficking (Boletín Oficial 2019). Furthermore, it is worth mentioning the result of the 'Safe Neighborhoods' program to pacify violent neighbourhoods. This program successfully reduced neighbourhood violence by displacing criminal organisations and recovering the sovereign presence in the area through the simultaneous intervention of multiple agencies (Argentine Government 2020).

### **The Institutional Strengthening Measures Introduced to Reduce Drug Demand**

While this study is centred in supply reduction strategies, it is essential to highlight that demand-oriented programs were significantly increased during that same period. According to the national office on drug treatment and prevention, investment in drug treatments showed an increase of almost 800% between 2015 and 2018, allowing more people to be treated. Individuals in Buenos Aires City that accessed care went from 3,451 in 2015 to 5,283 in 2018 (SEDRONAR 2019). The impact of these programs in the supply side of the problem should be determined through further studies.

Additionally, supply reduction strategies may affect demand. Some scholars argue that price-demand relation can become almost elastic, and according to some studies, a price reduction of 10% can increase the number of consumers by 10%, while according to the same survey a 10% permanent increase in price would reduce consumption by 14% (Grossman & Chaloupka 1998).

## **The Institutional strengthening measures that increased risks and costs to drug trafficking organisations**

The Homeland Security Council proved to be vital in devising a unified vision and developing a coherent strategy between the four federal law enforcement agencies and the 23 provincial police agencies. Yearly meetings tripled during this period, and more than 20 agreements were signed between the federal government and local authorities (SAETTONE 2020). These agreements included the strategic document 'Argentina sin Narcotráfico' (Argentina without drug-trafficking, ARGENTINE GOVERNMENT 2017). Corruption detection and prevention measures included new programs oriented towards detecting drug use by officers, mandatory sworn asset declaration, and protection measures for corruption whistleblowers (MINSEG 2019). According to Transparency International, corruption perception on the police decreased by 5% between 2017 and 2019 (Transparency 2019). Additional measures included the development of the first Joint Training Center for Senior Officers and the recovery of the national crime statistics systems, achieving an 'A' grade in 2018 given by the United Nations certifying high-grade statistics gathering (MINSEG 2019).

An asymmetric response was also necessary to seriously investigate the most significant criminal organisations. Interagency task forces were introduced. These vetted units trained in the Drug Enforcement Administration headquarters in Quantico made up of officers from federal and provincial law enforcement agencies, achieved impressive results. In 2019 one of them, consisting of only 22 officers, was responsible for almost 10% of yearly cocaine seizures (Salta 2018). Other task forces included the Airport Communication Programme (AIRCOP) funded by the European Union and UNODC and the Port Cooperation Project (SEACOP), sponsored by the European Union to strengthen cooperation against maritime traffic, gave Argentina access to vital databases and early warning systems.

Improvement in precursor chemicals control was essential to deny organised crime access to critical components for the manufacture and cutting of drugs. In this sense, the transfer of the chemical precursor control area from SEDRONAR (drug use prevention agency) to the Ministry of Security achieved a more significant and better joint work between the auditing teams and the federal security forces. Highway and Roads checkpoints to control freights significantly rose. While during the year 2015 a total of 1,307 stopovers checkpoints were implemented, by 2018 those checkpoints reached 1,861 nationwide, representing a growth of 42% in precursors chemicals transport control (Argentine Government 2019). Controls and audits to chemical manufacturers and resellers were also significantly increased. These controls rose from 896 in 2015 to 1,355 in 2018, representing an increase of 51% in that period. (Argentine Government 2019).

Bilateral international cooperation was also crucial in building a more robust and riskier environment against organised crime. Several Memorandums of understanding were signed with Bolivia, Paraguay, the United States, Russia, China, Israel and Germany. These paved the way to international investigations and gave Argentina access to unique training programs and much-needed equipment. The agreement with Paraguay led for the first time to an intervention by the Argentine Gendarmerie in a crop eradication operation alongside Paraguayan officers in Paraguayan soil. As a result, more than 345 tons of cannabis were destroyed (Clarín 2019).

Argentina joined all UNODC early warning systems such as ION, PICS and EWA and, as noted above, the AIRCOP and SEACOP programmes. Argentina also hosted the COPOLAD High-Level Meeting (EU-Latin America Cooperation Programme on Drugs) (COPOLAD 2019). In 2016 and after ten years of restrictions, a mission of the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) visited Argentina.

The national drugs list, formerly updated only twice between 1991 and 2015, was updated yearly since 2016. Furthermore, in 2019 Argentina adopted generic NPS definitions in its national legislation, representing one of the most advanced drug listing systems in the world. The chemical analysis that led to this system was published in the UNODC portal, making it available worldwide (UNODC EWA 2019).

In November 2018, the Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission of the Organization of American States (CICAD) chose Argentina to chair the group, setting another historic milestone in the matter. Besides, Argentina chaired the CICAD Group of Experts on Chemical Substances and Pharmaceuticals (CICAD 2019).

## **Institutional Strengthening Money-Laundering Prevention**

In 2017, Argentina's Ministry of Security announced that it had disrupted an organisation linked to the Sinaloa cartel operating in Argentina and Uruguay with the capacity to launder up to \$60 million weekly.

Improving the ability to prevent money laundering was another critical pillar of the new strategy introduced. To this end, the Financial Information Unit was strengthened by providing it with greater autonomy, more significant staffing, and transferring it into the orbit of the Ministry of the Economy. Computer analysis

tools were incorporated, and joint analysis teams were established with the Drug Trafficking Prosecutor's Office and the Under-Secretary to Combat Drug Trafficking.

As a result of this transformation, the Financial Reporting Unit managed to freeze organised crime assets of more than \$ 10 billion, tripled the amount of money laundering convictions and increased the number of reports sent to the national procurement by 45% (UIF 2020).

As a recognition to its capacity and commitment, Argentina was selected in 2019 to chair the Egmont Group, an entity that brings together Financial Reporting Units throughout the country for the exchange of sensitive information and in 2017 chosen to head the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) (UIF 2020).

## Direct Results

Cannabis seizures showed an increasing trend during 2015–2018. In 2018 a total of 256 tons of cannabis were seized, the highest amount in history. A steep increase of 60% in seizures was registered between 2016 and 2018. When comparing against the previous administration figures (between 2011 and 2015) seizures of this narcotic increased 60% (DATAUNODC 2019 and Argentine Government 2019). **Figure 1: Cannabis Seizures.**

Regarding cocaine, the increase was even more considerable. With a total of more than 15 tons seized, never in history as much cocaine was seized as in 2017 (DATAUNODC 2019). According to the last UNODC cocaine seizures available data, between 2015 and 2017, Argentina was the country in the Southern Cone that achieved the highest growth in cocaine seizures. In that period seizures in Argentina grew 126%, followed by Brazil with a 76% increase and Chile with a 6.9% increase. Bolivia showed a decrease of 21.2%, Uruguay a reduction of 31.7% and Paraguay a decrease of 58.9%. (DATAUNODC 2019). **Figure 2: Cocaine Seizures 2015–2017.**

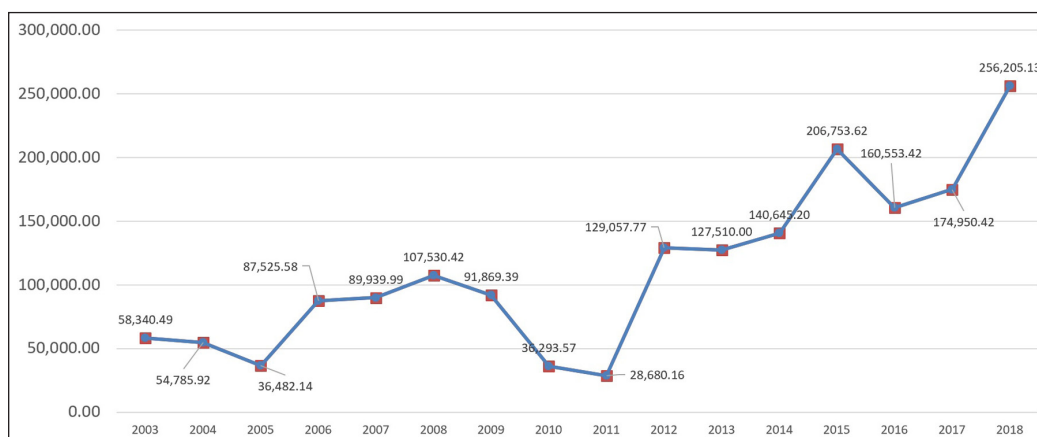
This growth in seizures may have affected the local consumer market, as the Cocaine Price-Purity program registered an increase in the price of cocaine on the streets of 437% between September 2016 and July 2018. While this information may reflect an increasing scarcity of cocaine, it is necessary to clarify that this program is being implemented only in Buenos Aires City, lacking information from other cities (Infobae 2020).

Regarding synthetic drugs, in 2017, there was an increase, compared to 2014, of +236%. More units of this narcotic were seized in 2017 than in the last two years of the previous administration. 145% more units were seized in 2017 than in 2015 (DATAUNODC 2020 and unpublished figure for 2018).

To assess the level of efficiency achieved by law enforcement efforts it is required to analyse seizures, drug law offences and operations simultaneously. The federal law enforcement forces arrested 31,820 individuals in 2018 for drug crimes, a 147% jump from the 12,853 arrests recorded in 2015. Anti-drug operations rose to 28,108 in 2018, an increase of 100% in comparison with the 14,065 registered in 2015 (MINSEG 2019).

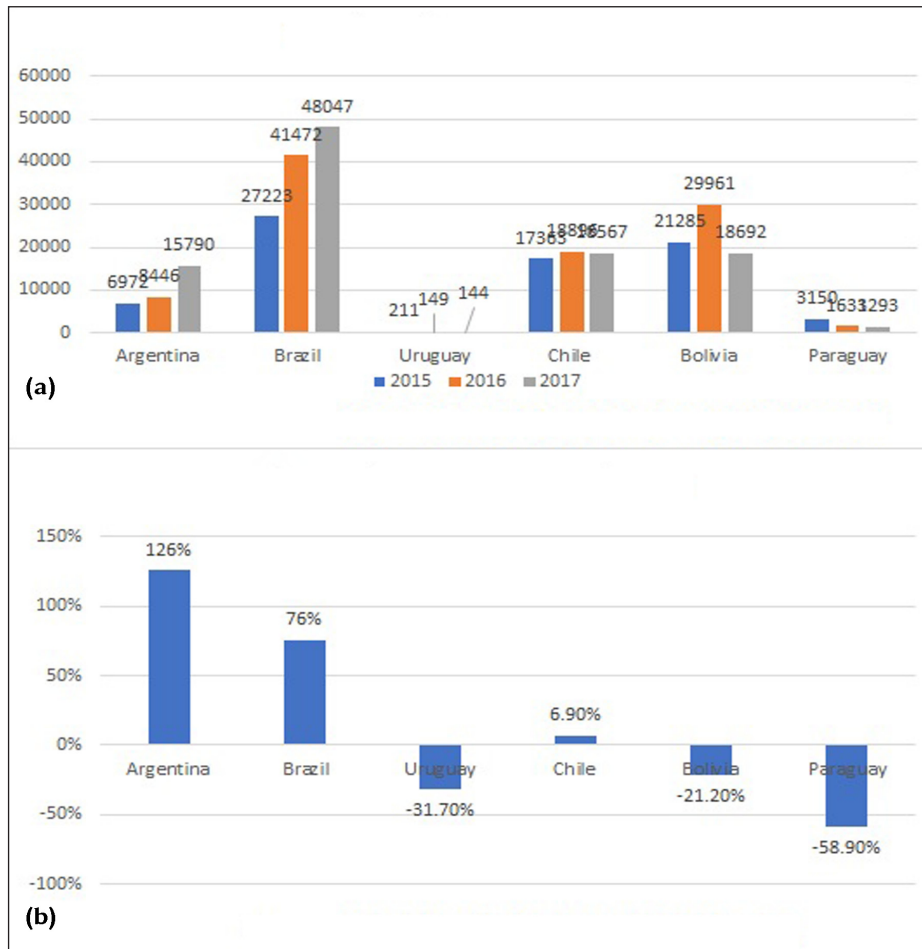
**Figure 3: Offenses and Arrests.**

On the other hand, despite this significant increase in productivity, according to the Drug Trafficking Federal Prosecution Office (PROCUNAR), 37% of the drug law offences processed by federal law enforcement officers were related to personal consumption causes (PROCUNAR 2019). This proportion of causes related to possession of drugs to consume remained unchanged between 2015 and 2019 (PROCUNAR 2016, 2019).

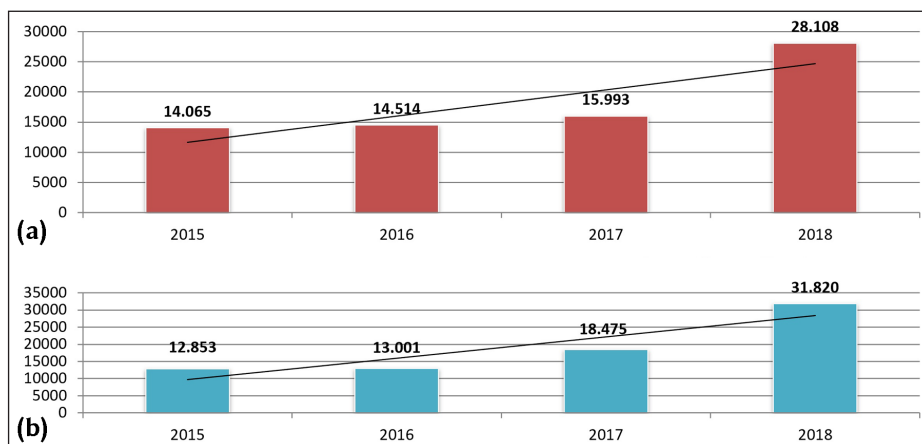


**Figure 1: Cannabis Seized by federal law enforcement agencies (Kg).**

Sources: 2003–2017 UNODCDATA. 2018: Unpublished figures collected by the Ministry of Security of Argentina.



**Figure 2: (a)** Cocaine Seizures 2015–2017. **(b)** Change between 2015 and 2017. Source: UNODC, World Drug Report 2019 Data.



**Figure 3: (a)** Federal Law Enforcement Drug Law Offenses recorded. **(b)** People arrested on drugs possession law. Source: Ministry of Security.

This level of counterdrug activity seems to have positively affected the domestic security situation, confirming the hypothesis that violent crime was causally related to drug trafficking in the country. The number of homicides nationwide fell by 30% between 2014 and 2018, recording a decrease of 7.6 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2014 to 5.3 in 2018 (MINSEG 2019). In some slums where drug trafficking had become engrossed, the decline in violence was even more significant. In the densely populated poor neighbourhood known as



'1-11-14,' the drop in homicides was 92% between 2015 and 2019. A similar reduction was achieved in the 'Zabaleta' slum, where homicides dropped from 12 in 2014 to 4 in 2019 (MINSEG 2019). Like Argentina, Brasil also registered a fall in homicide rates while increasing cocaine seizures. Between 2015 and 2018, homicide rates fell 8.8% in Brazil (GLOBO 2020). It is possible to discard an improvement in the economic situation in Argentina as an explanation for this decrease. Between 2015 and 2018 GDP per capita fell 26.1% (DATOSMACRO 2020).

Institutional strengthening efforts were also acknowledged by several governments and related international organisations such as the State Department's Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, which in its latest report states that: 'The government launched a national program to combat drug trafficking in 2016 that has increased targeting of drug trafficking organizations and increased efforts to reduce cocaine consumption' (STATE 2020). Likewise, The United Nation's International Narcotics Control Board reported in 2019 that:

'The Board notes that the Government of Argentina has made major efforts to implement the recommendations of the Board following the mission in 2016... The Board acknowledges the effective cooperation of the Government of Argentina in fulfilling the country's obligations under the international drug control treaties...' (INCB 2019).

## Conclusion

Social policies may be assessed by analysing four clear outputs: inputs (human and material resources), processes (legislation, agreements), products (direct results) and impacts (effect on other variables) (COHEN et al. 1996).

Clearly, according to the analytic framework previously mentioned, Argentina significantly improved its Inputs and Processes, including improvements in cooperative security, border and airspace control, statistics gathering, law enforcement accountability, legislation, precursor chemical control, money laundering prevention. Positive direct results can also be confirmed as cocaine and marijuana seizures grew 126% and 60% respectively, and drug offences registered grew by 147%, and federal law enforcement operations grew by 100%.

Now, concerning the impact side of this policy in the first place, it is difficult to show a positive impact of the restriction of supply in demand for drugs. It is premature to try to identify any effect as the last consumption survey was completed in 2017, and the one before back in 2010. Still, the comparison between both reports shows an increase in consumption.

On the other side, the strategy implemented may have successfully affected the transshipment of cocaine to Europe. European drug market reports have shown that European ports have stopped identifying Argentina as a departure point of cocaine shipments. Then again, further analysis is needed to identify any changes in neighbouring countries policies that may have weakened controls and therefore turned those ports into more attractive departure points. In this sense, we do know that Brazil has been increasingly used as a departure point of cocaine to Europe (Robins 2019).

Additionally, this study has shown that Argentina's drug demand and supply statistics system has been inconsistent, especially before 2015. The same applies to UNODC data system, which usually publishes data that is at the least two years old. This lack of consistency limits the possibility of developing accurate and pin-pointed studies. Counterfactual evaluations are not feasible, as other evaluations of national strategies against drugs have found (HM GOVERNMENT 2017). Still, some lessons can be learned from Argentina's experience.

In conclusion, this article may serve as a starting point for those interested in implementing an institutional strengthening approach to reduce drug supply. While demand-oriented strategies will always be crucial to address the problem of drugs, as Caulkin states, enforcement cannot solve the drugs problem, but it may 'hold the line' until demand decreases (Caulkin 1990).

## Competing Interests

I served as Argentina's Drug Enforcement Deputy Secretary of State between 2015 and 2019.

## Author Information

The Author served as Argentina's Drug Enforcement Deputy Secretary of State between December 2015 and December 2019.

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**How to cite this article:** Verrier, M. 2020. Cutting the Flow: Argentina as a Success Case against Drug Trafficking 2016–2019. *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development*, 2(1): pp.21–28. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31389/jied.61>

**Submitted:** 17 April 2020      **Accepted:** 23 July 2020      **Published:** 31 August 2020

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