

# Researcher studies impact of drug-trafficking violence

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A UMass Lowell researcher who analyzes the causes and impacts of violence fueled by drug trafficking has won critical acclaim for her work and is bringing a fresh understanding of these issues from the streets into the classroom.

When teaching, UMass Lowell's Angelica Duran-Martinez, assistant professor of political science, draws on 15 months of extensive fieldwork she conducted in five cities in Colombia and Mexico experts have considered for decades to be centers for drug-trafficking organizations.

"Through my research, I began to better understand the political factors that contribute to variations in the frequency and type of violence committed, whether it be hidden or visible in the community," she said.

Her investigation took her to Cali and Medellín in Colombia, and Ciudad Juárez, Culiacán and Tijuana in Mexico several times. While in each city, she interviewed [crime victims](#)' families, drug dealers, [government officials](#), law-enforcement officers, community organizers and journalists. For historical perspective, she pored over news accounts, police reports and court records of drug-related murders from 1984 through 2011.

Duran-Martinez found that patterns of violence are tied to three main factors: whether the [drug cartels](#) had a market monopoly or were fighting for turf, whether they were outsourcing the violence to street

gangs or performing criminal acts themselves and whether the security forces provided by the government in each city were cohesive or fragmented.

She discovered that the frequency of violence escalates when trafficking organizations are fighting for turf or when the violence is outsourced to street gangs.

"I also found that drug traffickers who face a cohesive and effective security apparatus, as well as those protected by corrupt state actors, often have an incentive to minimize and hide their violence, so as not to cause a public outcry and force a crackdown," she said. "On the other hand, trafficking organizations in areas with fragmented security forces may have incentives to maintain control through visible violence, including public assassinations, bombings and shootouts."

Duran-Martinez's research is detailed in her first book, "The Politics of Drug Violence: Criminals, Cops and Politicians in Colombia and Mexico." The work has won praise from the International Association for the Study of Organized Crime, which commended the quality and relevance of her findings and will honor her later this year as part of the annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology.

A native of Colombia, Duran-Martinez has been committed to understanding and finding effective responses to illegal drug trafficking for much of her life. She began examining these issues while working for the United Nations as a graduate student.

Her students are benefiting from her firsthand account of her experiences. At UMass Lowell, Duran-Martinez has created courses that specifically address drug enforcement policies and theories of political and criminal violence. She teaches undergraduate courses in comparative and Latin American politics, along with courses in research design and

methods for Ph.D. candidates in the global studies program.

Duran-Martinez's findings suggest military might is not effective in stemming the drug trade, as military operations against organized crime increase both direct and collateral [violence](#) and deaths, leading to bloody battles for control, she said. A better approach, she finds, is for governments in [drug](#)-producing countries to put more resources into long-term social and economic solutions, including education.

"And, although it's not a popular idea, decriminalization or legalization of drugs in consumer nations would help a lot by removing the financial incentives that drive illegal markets," she said. "We're already seeing this with the legalization of marijuana in some states and the decriminalization of all drugs in Portugal."

Provided by University of Massachusetts Lowell

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