The production and trafficking of popular illicit drugs generates a multi-billion dollar black market in which Latin American criminal and terrorist organizations thrive. Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) largely control the United States illicit drug market. Drug trafficking-related violence has surged in Mexico since late 2006, when Mexican President Felipe Calderón began to increase security pressure against DTOs. The brutality of the Mexican DTOs has escalated as an increasing number of groups have battled each other and the Calderón government for control of lucrative drug trafficking routes into the United States. The Latin America and the Caribbean region has among the highest crime rates of any region in the world. In 2010, the UNODC found that homicides in Latin America and the Caribbean had, on average, increased from 19.9 per 100,000 people in 2003 to 32.6 per 100,000 people in 2008.

Forensic analyses of cocaine seized or purchased in the United States have repeatedly shown that nearly 90% of the samples originate in Colombia. Cocaine is typically transported from Colombia to Mexico or Central America by sea usually by Colombian traffickers, and then onwards by land in the United States and Canada usually by Mexican traffickers.

The cannabis plant can be easily cultivated both indoors and outdoors, and its relatively simple production has led to its being produced and traded almost everywhere in the world, often in local markets. In this way, much of the demand for cannabis can be covered by local production, which producers may also consider to be safer since it involves less trafficking and subsequently reduces the risk of seizure.

The result of Mexican organized crime groups' increasing dominance of cocaine trafficking between South America and the United States has been a notable increase in lethal violence that not only affects members of drug trafficking groups but also members of the security forces and innocent bystanders. In Mexico, homicides are concentrated in a small number of states: Chihuahua, Sinaloa, Guerrero and Baja California, which account for some 11 per cent of the population but recorded 41 per cent of the country's total intentional homicides in 2003.