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RESEARCH  
REPORT

## BEYOND THE NARCOSTATE NARRATIVE

### What U.S. Drug Monitoring Data Says About Venezuela

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# KEY FINDINGS

- Venezuela's state institutions have deteriorated and the country lacks an impartial, transparent, or even functional justice system. In this environment, armed groups and organized criminal structures, including drug trafficking groups, have thrived. **But U.S. government data suggests that, despite these challenges, Venezuela is not a primary transit country for U.S.-bound cocaine. U.S. policy toward Venezuela should be predicated on a realistic understanding of the transnational drug trade.**
- Recent data from the U.S. interagency Consolidated Counterdrug Database (CCDB) indicates that 210 metric tons of cocaine passed through Venezuela in 2018. By comparison, the State Department reports that **over six times as much cocaine (1,400 metric tons) passed through Guatemala the same year.**
- According to U.S. monitoring data, the amount of cocaine trafficked from Colombia through Venezuela is significant, but it is a fraction of the cocaine that is sent through other transit countries. **Around 90 percent of all U.S.-bound cocaine is trafficked through Western Caribbean and Eastern Pacific routes, not through Venezuela's Eastern Caribbean seas.**
- There was an increase in cocaine flows through Venezuela in the period from 2012 to 2017, but that increase corresponds with a surge in cocaine production in Colombia during that same time. CCDB data suggests the amount of cocaine trafficked through Colombia rose from 918 metric tons in 2012 to 2,478 metric tons in 2017 (a 269 percent increase), and from 159 to 249 metric tons in Venezuela in that same period (a 156 percent increase). **When cocaine trafficking in Colombia dropped slightly post-2017, cocaine flows in Venezuela fell as well.**
- U.S. CCDB data shows that **cocaine flows through Venezuela have fallen since peaking in 2017.** According to CCDB data, the amount of cocaine flowing through Venezuela fell 13 percent from 2017 to 2018, and appeared to continue to fall slightly through mid-2019.
- **A peaceful, negotiated, and orderly transition offers the best chance of allowing the reforms needed to address organized crime, drug trafficking, and corruption in Venezuela.** The 2009 military coup d'etat and resulting turmoil in Honduras provides a cautionary tale for U.S. policymakers who see intervention or collapse as the best way route for a return to democracy in Venezuela.

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# INTRODUCTION

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When U.S. policymakers talk about Venezuela's crisis, the flow of cocaine through the country is a frequent talking point. In a background call on February 5, 2020, a senior Trump administration official told journalists that Nicolas Maduro "has turned Venezuela into a narco state, which has become a primary point of narcotics trafficking to Central America, Mexico, therefore the United States."<sup>1</sup> In November 2019, SOUTHCOM Commander Navy Admiral Craig Fuller told reporters, without specifying a timeline, that "There's been over a 50 percent increase of narco-trafficking in and through Venezuela, and Maduro and his cronies are lining their pockets, in cahoots with the illicit narco-trafficking."<sup>2</sup>

Statements like these have some roots in fact. There is no question that organized crime and corruption have flourished in the midst of Venezuela's crisis. There is credible evidence of many officials' corruption, involvement in illicit activity, kickbacks, and patronage schemes; the Maduro government has tolerated or enabled many of these activities, thereby assuring the loyalty of key backers, especially those within the armed forces, which oversee everything from Venezuela's borders and ports to its oil industry.<sup>3</sup> Former Vice President Tareck El Aissami has been indicted on drug charges by the U.S. Department of Justice,<sup>4</sup> 20 others within the political and economic elite have faced Kingpin Act sanctions for alleged illicit activity,<sup>5</sup> and two of Maduro's nephews have been imprisoned for plotting to transport 800 kilograms of cocaine<sup>6</sup> into the United States.

However, the scale of transnational drug trafficking through Venezuela is frequently exaggerated, fueling sensationalist and inaccurate media coverage. On July 10, 2019, for instance, Yahoo News published a piece claiming that Venezuela had become the "cocaine capital of the world." There is no factual basis for this claim, neither in terms of production nor in terms of total transit flow.

Yet this narrative is repeated time and time again by actors who suggest that a negotiated, democratic solution in Venezuela is impossible. The Venezuela as "narcostate" narrative is often invoked by hardliners to depict the Maduro government as not just authoritarian, but motivated by illicit profits and therefore unable to negotiate and perhaps impossible to respond to without the use of force. This argument was repeatedly used by critics of National Assembly President Juan Guaidó's decision to enter into negotiations with Maduro in May 2019.<sup>7</sup>

This paper uses the U.S. government's own best estimates of transnational illegal cocaine shipments to gauge the scale and relative importance of Venezuela's role as a transit country. In particular, we draw on recent data from the U.S. interagency Consolidated Counterdrug Database (CCDB), a multi-source collection of global illegal drug trafficking events that is gathered from intelligence data such as detection and surveillance, as well as interdiction and law enforcement data. According to the Department of Defense, "The CCDB event-based estimates are the best available authoritative source for estimating known illicit drug flow through the Transit Zone. All the event

data contained in the CCDB is deemed to be *high confidence* (accurate, complete and unbiased in presentation and substance as possible).<sup>8</sup> We have supplemented CCDB estimates with public statements and presentations made by officials at the Drug Enforcement Administration, Department of Defense, and Department of State regarding drug trafficking trends in the Americas.

It is important to note that the challenges inherent in measuring clandestine activities mean that even those estimates that U.S. agencies may consider to be the most rigorously derived—such as those produced by the CCDB—will inevitably be incomplete

and should be interpreted accordingly. The data should be considered indicative of broad trends, not as full and complete portrayals of illegal drug flows.

It is also important to emphasize that this report is focused on assessing the significance of Venezuela’s role as an illegal drug transit country in the context of the policy debate over the most viable approach to facilitating a return to democracy in Venezuela. Given this focus, we do not delve into important debates regarding the wisdom of the underlying prohibitionist drug policy framework<sup>9</sup> and the consequences of enforcement efforts aimed at reducing illegal drug production,

**FIGURE 1**

**COCAINE MOVEMENT NORTH FROM SOUTH AMERICA, 2017**



Source: 2018 DEA Threat Assessment

# VENEZUELA: A TRANSIT COUNTRY FOR COCAINE

As has been the case for many decades, Colombia, Peru and Bolivia cultivate nearly all of the world's coca and produce nearly all of the world's cocaine.<sup>11</sup> Venezuela is a transit country, largely for cocaine produced in neighboring Colombia. Just as cocaine flows from Andean producing countries through Central America, Mexico, and the Caribbean, cocaine also is transported

through Venezuela en route to major international markets in the United States and Europe.

In an April 2019 report describing Venezuela as a “cocaine superhighway,”<sup>12</sup> CNN cited an anonymous U.S. official who asserted that 240 metric tons of cocaine passed through Colombia into Venezuela in 2018,

**FIGURE 2**

## 2016 NON-COMMERCIAL MARITIME EVENTS FROM COLOMBIA AND ECUADOR TO GUATEMALA AND MEXICO



Source: September 2017 Hearing in Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control

and was then shipped via aerial routes to Central America. The existence of air transit routes through Venezuela have been well-documented,<sup>13</sup> and have been discussed by U.S. officials on a regular basis ever since Hugo Chavez ceased cooperation with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration in 2005. However, U.S. government estimates of total cocaine flows suggest that Venezuela is very far from becoming the central route for north-bound cocaine. According to CCDB estimates, 210 metric tons of cocaine transited Venezuela in 2018 (39 percent of it via aerial routes). By comparison, in its 2019 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report<sup>14</sup>, the State Department estimated that more than six times as much (1,400 tons) cocaine made its way through the transit country of Guatemala in 2018.

U.S. officials have frequently stated that far more cocaine is trafficked through the

so-called "Eastern Pacific" route (through southwest Colombia and Ecuador) than through Venezuela. According to the 2018 DEA Threat Assessment,<sup>15</sup> the total northern flow of cocaine through the Eastern Pacific in 2017 represented 84 percent of all cocaine traffic, with an added 9 percent passing through the Western Caribbean and just 7 percent passing through the Eastern Caribbean (See Figure 1).

This pairs with a U.S. government map of maritime trafficking presented in a September 2017 hearing on the subject in the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control.<sup>16</sup> As the diagram illustrates, in 2016 cocaine shipments through this Pacific route far outpaced Caribbean shipments (See Figure 2).

## FROM 2012-2019, VENEZUELA'S COCAINE FLOW ROSE AND FELL WITH PRODUCTION IN COLOMBIA

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In assessing data on cocaine trafficking events leaving from Venezuela, one of the most notable trends is an increase from 2012 to 2017 (see Figure 3). During that time, the CCDB suggests that cocaine flows through Venezuela rose from 159 to 249 metric tons per year (a 57 percent increase, see Figure 4). Over the same period, the number of recorded illicit air and maritime events of cocaine departing Venezuela more than doubled, jumping from 201 to 473.

The increase in cocaine transiting through Venezuela coincides with Nicolas Maduro's

rise to power. Maduro was elected president in April 2013, following the death of his predecessor, Hugo Chavez. Maduro has deepened his reliance on the armed forces since taking power, and has given them control over border entry points and ports, which have in turn presented opportunities for corruption networks to bloom. There is evidence of increased involvement in organized crime by actors in the armed forces; since the 1990s military figures involved in organized crime have been collectively referred to as the "Cartel of the Suns,"<sup>17</sup> in reference to the suns on

the lapels of commanders' uniforms. But as the research organization InSight Crime has noted, these cells of corruption are not a hierarchical group and there is no clear relationship between them; thus, "describing them as a 'cartel' in the traditional sense would be a leap."<sup>18</sup>

Maduro's deepened reliance on the armed forces, which in turn has allowed for more opportunities for corruption, is only part of the picture. As Figures 4 and 5 illustrate, the 2012-2017 surge in cocaine transiting Venezuela coincided with a larger boom in cocaine produced in and flowing from neighboring Colombia.<sup>19</sup> CCDB data

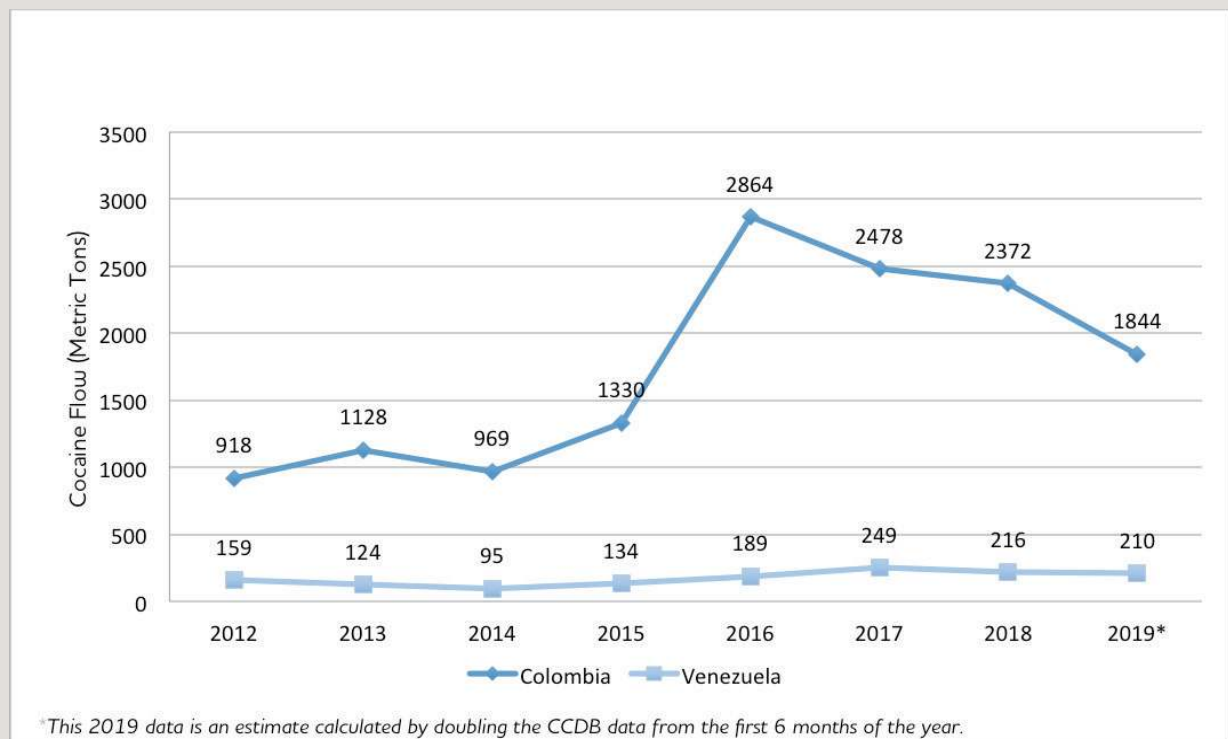
suggests the amount of cocaine that moved through Colombia increased from 918 metric tons in 2012 to 2,478 metric tons in 2017 (up 269 percent), and rose from 913 aerial and maritime events to 3,660 events.<sup>20</sup>

Whether measured by metric tons or aerial and maritime events, trafficking through Venezuela increased along with production in Colombia, though by a lesser amount.

According to CCDB estimates, this boom began to slow in both countries in 2017, with cocaine events dropping 14 percent in Colombia and 13 percent in Venezuela.

**FIGURE 3**

**COCAINE FLOW IN COLOMBIA AND VENEZUELA: 2012-2019**

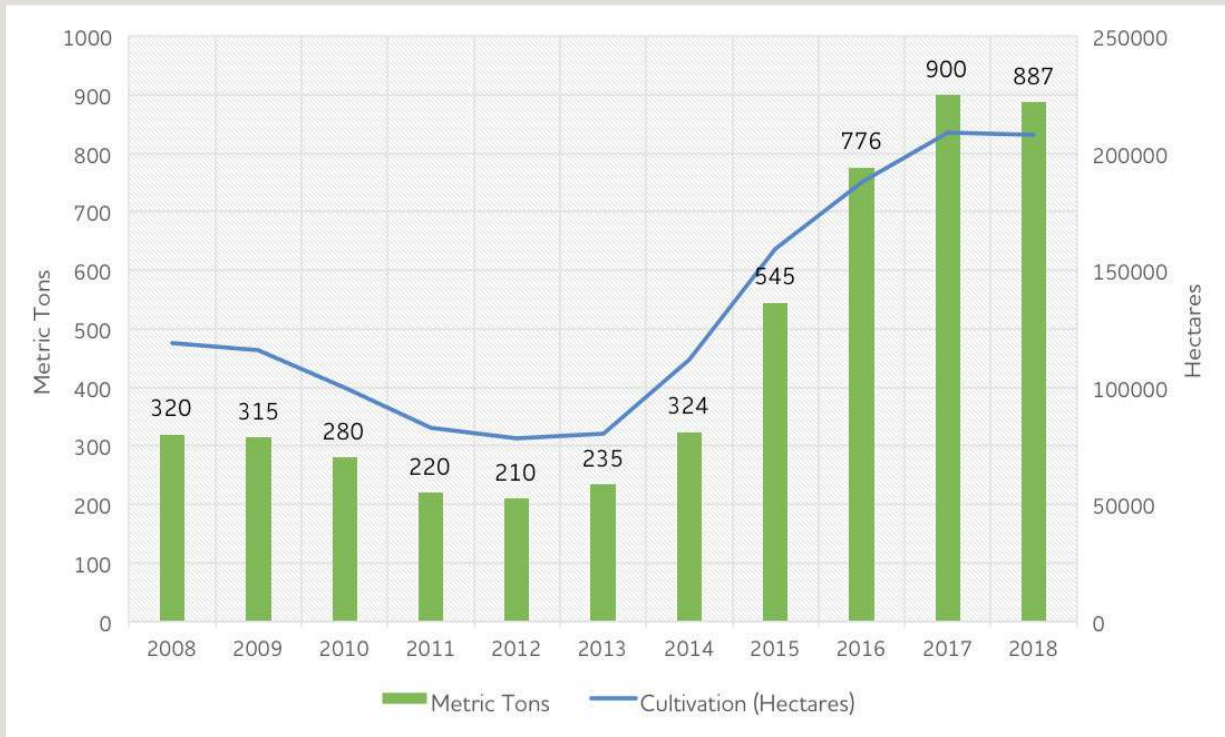


Source: Consolidated Counterdrug Database (CCDB), 2019



**FIGURE 4**

**COCA CULTIVATION AND COCAINE PRODUCTION IN COLOMBIA: 2008-2018**



Source: US Department of State

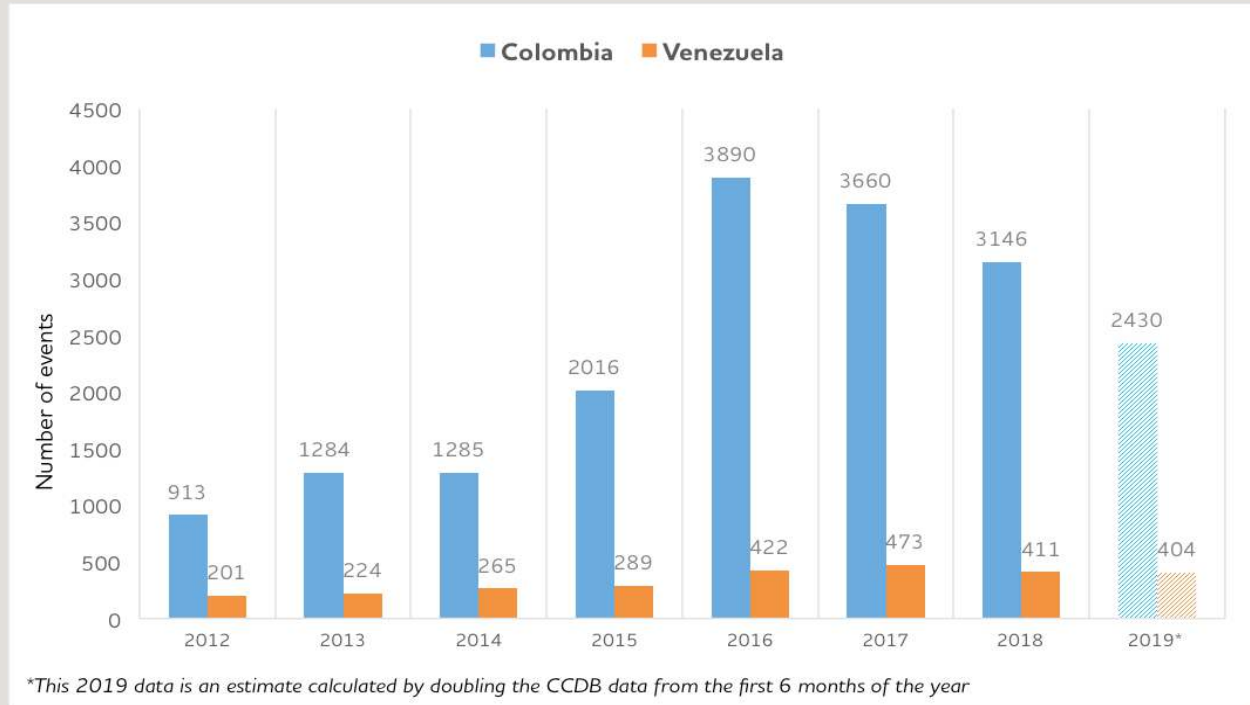
Based on the most recent time period for which the authors have been able to obtain CCDB data (through June 30, 2019) a slight decline continued in 2019—which saw 1,215 cocaine events and 922 metric tons depart from Colombia, and 202 events and 105 metric tons from Venezuela in the first half of the year.

This post-2017 period calls into question the hypothesis that U.S. sanctions have driven military stakeholders to ramp up their reliance on drug trafficking as a significant source of income. Rather than indicating an increase in cocaine trafficked through Venezuela after the U.S. imposed financial

sanctions in 2017 and oil sanctions in 2019, CCDP data suggest that the amount of cocaine flowing through Venezuela declined during this period. Meanwhile, Maduro has survived intensifying domestic and international pressure, indicating that drug trafficking is not a key explanation for his ability to retain power.

**FIGURE 5**

**COCAINE EVENTS IN COLOMBIA AND VENEZUELA:  
2012-2019**



Source: Consolidated Counterdrug Database (CCDB), 2019

## **CORRUPTION AND ORGANIZED CRIME UNDERScores NEED FOR A NEGOTIATED, DEMOCRATIC SOLUTION**

The frequent exaggeration of Venezuela’s role in the international drug trade is often used by certain sectors of the opposition to argue against the possibility of a negotiated settlement of Venezuela’s conflict; but this argument is weak. In a June 12, 2019, public letter <sup>21</sup> to National Assembly President Juan Guaidó, hardline opposition movement Soy Venezuela suggested that “the new dialogue in Norway, endorsed by the criminal corporation headed by Nicolás

Maduro and his partners, is inexplicable to the country because it places them in moral parity with the legitimate government that you represent.” However, historical precedents suggest that negotiation with state and non-state actors involved in illicit economies is not only possible, but is all the more important because of this criminal activity.

First, it is important to remember that

corruption and organized crime were common in the Southern Cone dictatorships of the last decades of the 20th century. Pinochet and his cronies embezzled millions of dollars<sup>22</sup> across shell companies and various transnational bank accounts. Unearthed intelligence documents have proven that Brazil's military dictatorship turned a blind eye to drug trafficking committed by high-level politicians and security forces.<sup>23</sup> And Argentina's military junta even bought off an opposing national team at the 1978 World Cup.<sup>24</sup> Despite this systemic corruption, however, all of these authoritarian governments yielded to international pressure and diplomacy and underwent peaceful transitions to democracy.

Similarly, critics of Colombian peace process argued that the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) would never take a peace deal seriously<sup>25</sup> because drug trafficking provided them with an income source they would never give up. Yet, in 2016, with the right set of incentives, the FARC leadership signed a deal and the vast majority of its fighters demobilized. The Trump administration has demonstrated an understanding of this dynamic as well, and is currently attempting to negotiate a peace deal with the Taliban in Afghanistan, despite their well-known involvement in the global heroin trade.

Second, the criminal co-optation of state institutions in a non-democratic context makes it all the more important to pursue an orderly democratic transition, as violent, disorderly changes of power provide significant opportunities to organized crime and drug trafficking networks.

U.S. policymakers looking at Venezuela in 2020 should consider the experience of Honduras. The 2009 military ouster of President Manuel Zelaya led to the establishment of an interim government

that ruled for seven months, and whose legitimacy was contested by significant sectors of the population. During this time the country saw widespread unrest, violence, and repression, and this instability allowed existing criminal networks to deepen their penetration of state institutions. Organized criminal structures, and transnational drug traffickers in particular, thrived in this environment of impunity. U.S. diplomats have acknowledged that already active criminal activity in Honduras “exploded” in this post-coup period.<sup>26</sup> The effects of this wave of instability-induced trafficking are still observable ten years later, as the country continues to grapple with high-level corruption linked to drug trafficking.<sup>27</sup>

In Honduras, a chaotic military-brokered transition marked by a period of prolonged instability and polarization ultimately created an environment for organized crime and drug trafficking to flourish rather than to decline. This should serve as a red flag for those who bet on either a military “fracture” or a foreign military intervention as a solution to Venezuela’s crisis. Given the organization and dedication of pro-Maduro armed groups, and the fact that roughly 20 percent of the population<sup>28</sup> still supports him, either of these scenarios would likely provoke some form of violent resistance and prolonged unrest similar to post-coup Honduras. Achieving an orderly, peaceful transition that is premised on negotiating with the bloc currently in power would better suit the interests of Venezuela, its immediate neighbors, and the United States.

# CONCLUSION

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The central goal of this report is to separate rhetoric from reality in the debate around Venezuela's role in transnational drug trade, and to provide relevant recommendations to U.S. policymakers. CCDB data does not justify many of the claims made by those who advance the "narcostate" narrative to describe organized crime in Venezuela today and to argue against efforts to achieve a negotiated path to democratic governance in Venezuela. As noted, U.S. authorities estimate that 93 percent of U.S.-bound cocaine is trafficked through Western Caribbean and Eastern Pacific routes, not through Venezuela's Eastern Caribbean coast. While there was a surge in cocaine flow through Venezuela from 2012-2017, it coincided with a much larger spike in cocaine production in Colombia. CCDB data suggests that cocaine flows through Venezuela have fallen since peaking in 2017, the year financial sanctions might have been expected to drive up government interest in illicit income. Cocaine flowing through Venezuela fell 13 percent from 2017 to 2018, and appeared to continue to fall slightly through mid-2019.

The authors believe that a peaceful, negotiated, and orderly transition to democratic governance in Venezuela offers the best hope of addressing organized crime and corruption in that country. The 2009 military coup d'etat and resulting turmoil in Honduras presents a cautionary tale to U.S. policymakers betting on a transition automatically resulting in more transparent governance.

Drug trafficking is just one of the illicit economies running through the Venezuelan state. We focus on the illicit drug market here because of the availability of relatively good data, and because the arguments of those who are opposed to seeking a negotiated solution to the crisis increasingly point to Venezuela's participation in the illegal drug trade as justification. Sober analysis must be carried out on corruption in state food distribution and government contracts, as well as the growing trade in illicit gold and other minerals, in order to properly assess the size and importance of these illicit economies. Whatever the case, their existence only underlines the necessity



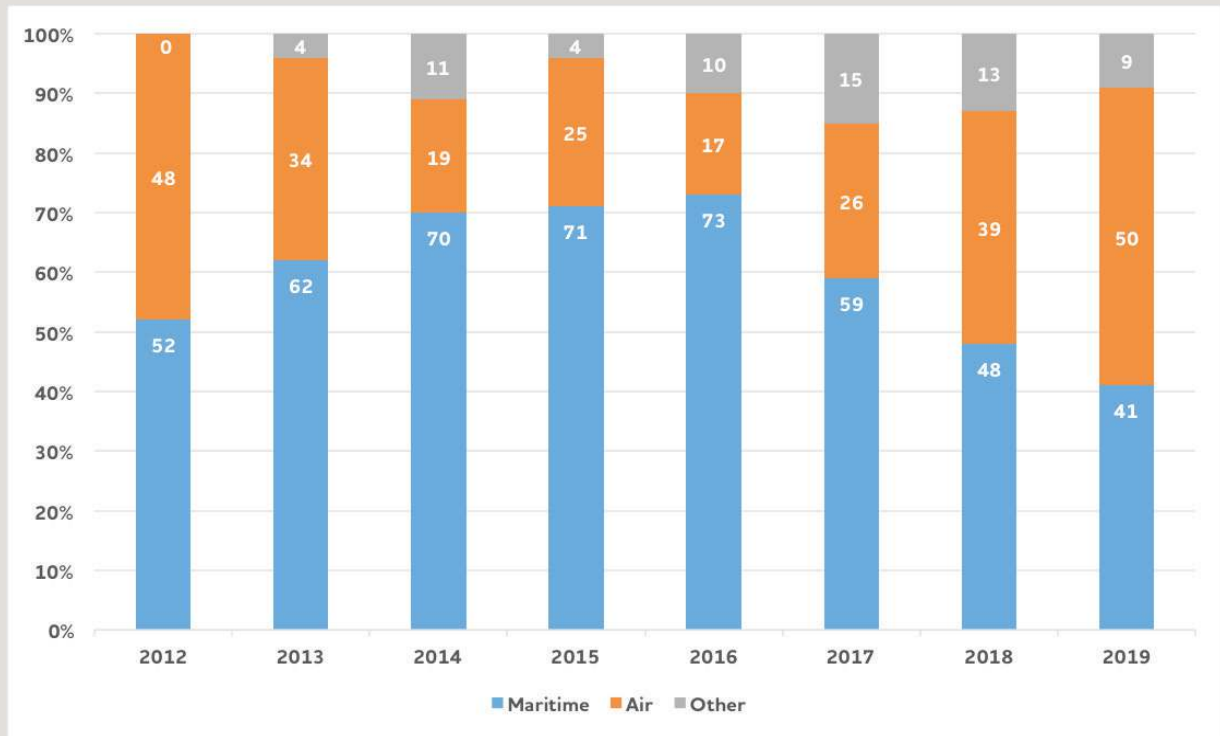
# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **U.S. officials should devise and communicate a more flexible sanctions regime that incentivizes a negotiated electoral solution in Venezuela, which remains the most viable way to build state capacity against organized crime and corruption in the country.** The U.S. government can and should offer Nicolas Maduro relief from financial and oil sanctions in parallel with agreements to conduct internationally-observed credible presidential elections, rather than insisting on Maduro's resignation as a precondition—a demand which stymied negotiations in 2019.
- **U.S. officials and Members of Congress should refrain from threatening a “military option” or pushing for an eventual collapse of the Maduro government under ever-harsher economic sanctions.** Both strategies would impose profound hardships on the Venezuelan people, and would be detrimental to Venezuela's neighbors as well as to U.S. interests. The presence of Colombian guerrilla groups and other pro-Maduro armed actors in Venezuela suggest that a “collapse” scenario would be chaotic and unpredictable, and any foreign military occupation would meet prolonged, violent resistance. It is very likely that both scenarios would see the continued growth of ungoverned spaces and illicit activity in Venezuela's interior.
- **The White House does not have to wait until after a transition to address corruption in Venezuela. U.S. officials should encourage a culture of transparency and accountability from Venezuela's National Assembly.** While United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funds are not directly managed by the National Assembly, USAID does support compensation, travel costs, and other expenses to its members. Given credible allegations of corruption against some National Assembly members, USAID should ensure that National Assembly President Juan Guaidó and his team insist on full transparency in the allocation of these funds.
- **U.S. officials and Members of Congress should encourage and support Colombian authorities to implement a sustainable approach to containing coca cultivation and cocaine production by emphasizing rural development.** By fully implementing the historic 2016 peace accords, the Colombian government could commit to the best long-term strategy for coca crop reduction: building a functioning civilian state presence in areas worst affected by the country's armed conflict.

# APPENDIX A: ADDITIONAL GRAPHICS

FIGURE 6

COCAINE EVENTS IN VENEZUELA: 2012-2019



Source: Consolidated Counterdrug Database (CCDB), 2019

# APPENDIX B: DATA

**TABLE 1**

## COCAINE IN COLOMBIA AND VENEZUELA: 2012-2019

		2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019*
Colombia	Events	913	1284	1285	2016	3890	3660	3146	1215
	Metric Tons	918	1128	969	1330	2864	2478	2372	922
Venezuela	Events	201	224	265	289	422	473	411	202
	Metric Tons	159	124	95	134	189	249	216	105

Source: Consolidated Counterdrug Database (CCDB), 2019  
 \*This 2019 data is from January 1, 2019-June 30, 2019.

**TABLE 2**

## COCAINE EVENTS IN COLOMBIA AND VENEZUELA: MARITIME VS. AIR TRANSPORT (%)

		2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019*
Colombia	Air	2	3	3	1	1	2	3	1
	Maritime	83	90	92	94	95	90	88	87
	Other	15	6	6	5	4	8	9	12
<hr/>									
		2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019*
Venezuela	Air	58	29	20	18	13	22	36	35
	Maritime	36	61	61	69	76	68	58	59
	Other	5	10	19	12	11	10	6	6

Source: Consolidated Counterdrug Database (CCDB), 2019  
 \*2019 data is from January 1, 2019-June 30, 2019.

**TABLE 3****COCAINE FLOW IN COLOMBIA AND VENEZUELA: MARITIME VS. AIR TRANSPORT (%)**

		2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019*
Colombia	Air	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.4	0.2	0.3	0.3	0.2
	Maritime	95	96	98	96	97	95	96	93
	Other	5	3	2	3	3	4	3	7

		2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019*
Venezuela	Air	48	34	19	25	17	26	39	50
	Maritime	52	62	70	71	73	59	48	41
	Other	0	4	11	4	10	15	13	9

Source: Consolidated Counterdrug Database (CCDB), 2019  
\*This 2019 data is from January 1, 2019-June 30, 2019.



# NOTES

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## **ABOUT WOLA**

WOLA is a leading research and advocacy organization advancing human rights in the Americas. We envision a future where public policies in the Americas protect human rights, recognize human dignity, and where justice overcomes violence.

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