

Drug Trafficking

by Gail B. Stewart



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Drug Trafficking

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Stewart, Gail, 1949—

Drug trafficking / by Gail B. Stewart.

p. cm. — (Overview series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Summary: Presents a historical overview of drug trafficking and discusses its economic and legal aspects.

ISBN 1-56006-116-2

1. Drug traffic—Juvenile literature. 2. Drug traffic—United States—Juvenile literature. 3. Narcotics, Control of—Juvenile literature. 4. Narcotics, Control of—United States—Juvenile literature. I. Title. II. Series: Lucent overview series.

[DNLM: 1. Drug traffic. 2. Narcotics, Control of.]

HV5801.S78 1990

363.4'5—dc20

90-6196

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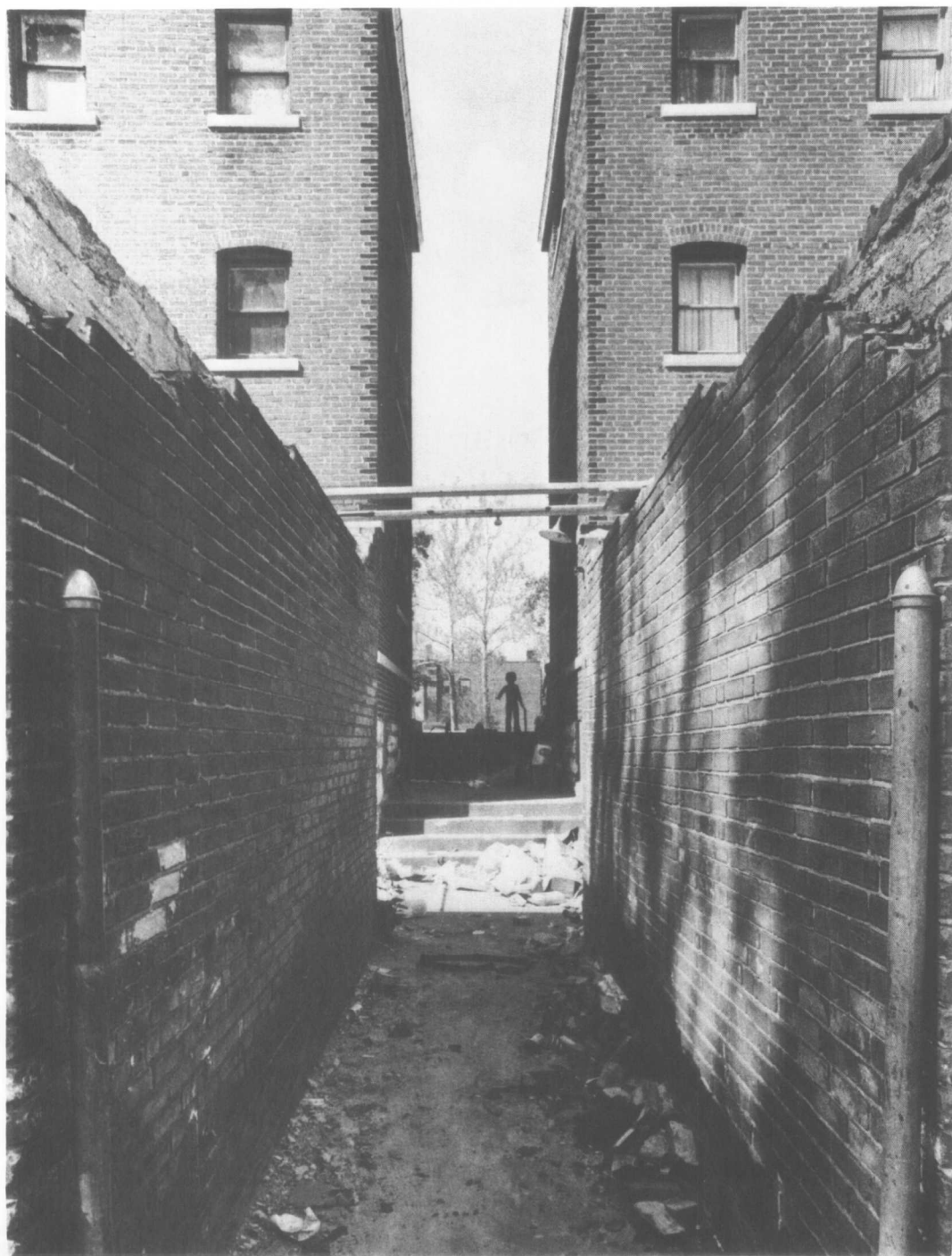
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*For my family, Carl, Ted,
Elliot, and Flynn*

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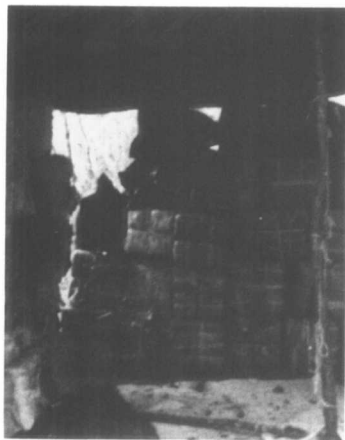
Introduction

IN JANUARY 1990 Avianca Airlines flight 52 crashed in New York. The plane was taking people from Colombia, in South America, to the United States. Two days later, as surgeons were operating on one of the survivors, they discovered sixteen small rubber containers of cocaine in the patient's intestines. Officials stated that the man, a native of Medellin, Colombia, had been trying to smuggle a pound of cocaine into the United States.

In a run-down housing project on the North Side of Chicago, forty-year-old Shirley Williams has an apartment on the third floor. She has two small sons, and there is a picture on her kitchen wall of a little girl. Williams says the picture is of her daughter, Shala, now dead. Only a few days after the photo was taken, the five-year-old was jumping rope outside, right next to the building, when shooting broke out between warring gangs. Shala was frightened and confused about where to run for cover. She was hit by cross fire and died instantly. Police said later the battle was a dispute between gangs competing for drug-selling territory.

In 1988, a little elementary school in Bogota, Colombia, was bombed. The night watchman had seen a driver slow down and throw something. Seconds later, an explosion leveled the building. Neighbors came running with their jackets thrown on over

(opposite page) Many people think that drugs are only a problem in run-down ghettos, like this one in Chicago. In reality, drug trafficking involves the efforts of thousands of people from all social strata.



Drug agents seized this Colombian cocaine and heroin before it could be transported to the United States. Illegal drugs pour into the United States at staggering rates. Experts estimate that drug trafficking is a \$120 billion-per-year business.

pajamas. Children cried because their school was gone. Parents were angry, for they knew why the bombing had occurred. The principal explained that the school—and others like it—had been threatened by the powerful drug organizations operating in Colombia. The organizations were angry because the schools had been teaching students that drugs are bad, said the principal.

Links in a chain

When people think about the drug business, they often think only of secret deals between drug addicts and pushers, or sellers. The drug business, however, is far more complex and involves more than deals between pushers and users. It depends on the efforts of thousands of people who grow raw materials that are made into drugs. The business also depends on people who transport the drugs, chemists who refine them, and people who smuggle them from one country to another. In addition, the illegal drug business needs distributors and wealthy drug “lords” who organize the whole trafficking system.

The cultivation, transportation, refining, and sale of illegal drugs is called *drug trafficking*. Because the trafficking of drugs is illegal, the whole process is cloaked in secrecy. The story of drug trafficking is the story of midnight meetings off the coast of Florida or one of the other millions of hiding places used by smugglers coming into the United States. Because the business must remain secret, people need to be bribed not to alert the police. Often drug dealers bribe border guards and police officers to allow them to continue with their trafficking. One reason such large amounts of money are involved in drug trafficking is because there are so many people participating in the process—so many links in a chain—and all must get their share of the profits.

The profits are immense. In the United States



A smuggler from Colombia sits in handcuffs after a drug bust in Miami. Although the transportation of drugs to the U.S. is dangerous and expensive, the profits are often immense.

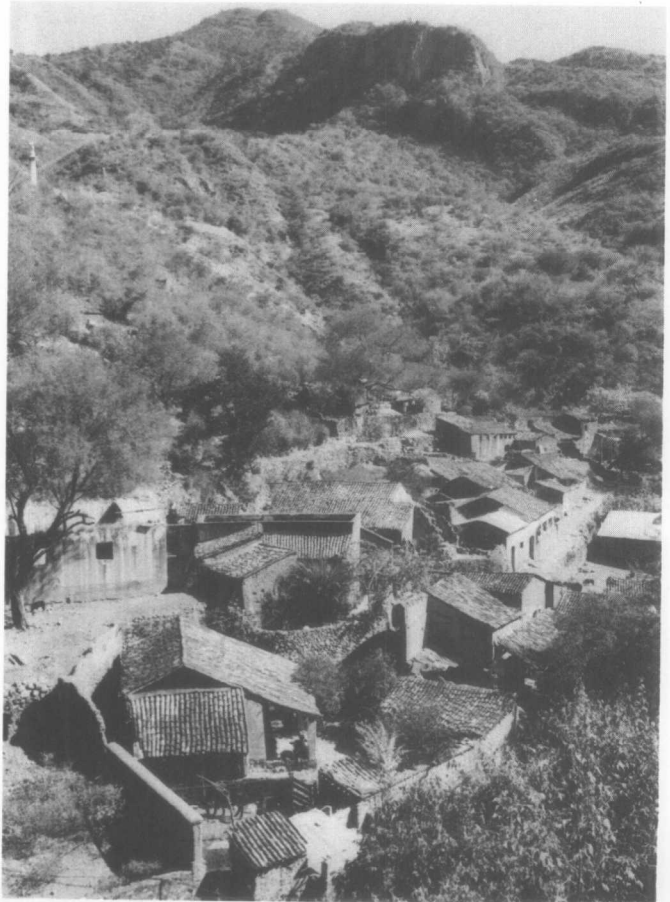
alone, drug trafficking is a \$120 billion-per-year business. It is a business in which smugglers can spend \$500,000 on a speedboat to be used for one night and then abandoned. Traffickers make so much money, in fact, that it is difficult for them to hide it, or even to spend it, without calling attention to themselves.

Although the story of trafficking involves the making of fortunes, it is also the story of poverty. The people who grow the plants from which the drugs are made often live in the most primitive conditions imaginable. These farmers are the first link in the drug trafficking chain. The few extra dollars they make growing these plants often means the difference between starving and being able to afford a little food for their families.

The large amounts of money involved in the drug trafficking business can trigger violence. No one

wants to be denied his or her part of the profits, and competition is cutthroat. The drug trafficking story is also one of gang assassinations, murdered police officers, and innocent people caught in the middle. It is the story of bombed schools and newspapers that dare to speak out against the traffickers and judges resigning because they fear for their lives.

Finally, the story of drug trafficking is the story of war. The battles are being waged in locations across the world—from the American cities of New York, Miami, and Chicago to far away places like Bogota, Colombia, and Bangkok, Thailand. And it is not only urban centers that are involved. Tiny vil-



The farmers who cultivate the plants from which drugs are made often live in poverty. Here, Bolivian farmers live in shacks, with no running water or electricity.

lages in China, Burma, and Peru, as well as small American towns are part of the drug trafficking chain. In these places, drug traffickers and those who are dedicated to stopping the massive flow of drugs are engaged in a constant struggle. It is a war that experts agree police and drug enforcement agencies are losing.

To understand the details of this war, it is important to understand how it began. How did illegal drug trafficking become the secret, violent, and profitable business that it is today?



The Beginnings of Drug Trafficking

MARIJUANA, COCAINE, and heroin are the three most heavily trafficked drugs in the United States. All three are in demand because they produce positive sensations in many people. All three, however, can produce dangerous side effects, too. Because of the dangers, these drugs are illegal in the United States, as well as in most other nations.

Side effects

Smoking marijuana, for example, usually makes a person feel relaxed and creates a sense of well-being. Users of marijuana say that after smoking the drug, their senses seem sharper. Colors are more vivid; music is more beautiful. But medical experts say there are unpleasant side effects. Marijuana use interferes with memory and the ability to concentrate. Many tasks involving balance and clear headedness—such as driving or following directions—are difficult when a person is high on marijuana.

Like marijuana, cocaine is not usually considered an addictive drug; that is, the user's body does not become dependent on it. However, many users become psychologically dependent on cocaine. That means that even though their bodies are not depen-

(opposite page) A young girl smokes marijuana. Although marijuana is not usually considered an addictive drug, its use is subject to medical and social debate.



Heroin is often injected directly into the bloodstream, causing what users term a "rush."

dent on the drug, users have strong feelings that they need cocaine to function comfortably. Cocaine users usually feel excited and alert when they are high. They are more talkative and energetic. They feel that they can accomplish anything.

Cocaine can produce dangerous health risks. Cocaine in the bloodstream makes the heart beat faster. It makes the body temperature rise and contracts the blood vessels. In some people, these reactions can cause heart attacks, strokes, or seizures.

Heroin is usually injected by needle into a vein. Heroin users often feel what is called a "rush." This means that there is a quick period in which the user feels very happy and calm. Following the rush, the drug makes people drowsy, and many users go to sleep during this time.

Heroin is an addictive drug. Users feel a physical need to keep taking the drug—usually within several hours of a dose. Without more heroin, users feel anxious or angry. Each time they take more heroin, their bodies require larger and larger doses. This increases the likelihood of an overdose, a dose so strong that it prevents the lungs from functioning. A heroin overdose is usually fatal.

A surprising fact

Because the dangers of drug abuse are so well known, people might think such drugs have been illegal for a very long time. It may surprise them to know that the laws that prohibit the sale and use of drugs like cocaine, heroin, and marijuana were passed less than eighty years ago.

Until that time, these drugs were not only legal in the United States but in some cases were hailed as miracle medicines. For that reason, the trafficking of drugs did not include smuggling or illegal transport. The growing, sale, and use of these drugs was completely open and legal and had been since ancient times.