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Analysis of Psychotropic Substance Seizures Occurring in 2017–2022 in Tamaulipas, a Mexican Border State with USA

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Abstract: The trafficking of illegal substances is a global issue. Tamaulipas, a northeastern state in Mexico, is strategically located for drug trafficking to the United States by organized crime. In this study, drug seizure events conducted by the Mexican government in the main cities of Tamaulipas between 2017 and 2022 are analyzed. It was noticed that there was a decrease in events from 2017 to 2020, followed by a slight increase in 2021. Marijuana was the most seized drug, with cocaine and amphetamines following behind. The frequency of drug seizure events was higher in the border cities of Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa, and Matamoros due to their international commercial bridges with the USA. Nuevo Laredo and Reynosa showed a high amount of marijuana seized. In Matamoros, a coastal city, the quantity of cocaine seized was the highest. Results suggest that substances seized were intended to be illegally transported to the USA through Mexican border cities.

Keywords: drugs seizure; Tamaulipas Mexico; illegal drug traffic; marijuana

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1. Introduction

The Texas, USA–Tamaulipas, Mexico border is a strategic region in terms of trade, migration and drug trafficking. The Mexican state of Tamaulipas is a key point for drug distribution to the United States. It is also a major route for arms trafficking from the United States to Mexico and other Latin American countries as well as human trafficking from Central and South America to the United States. This is because Tamaulipas shares a long border with the USA and an extensive seacoast. Furthermore, Tamaulipas possesses 17 international bridges to the USA between Nuevo Laredo and Matamoros on the Gulf coast, a higher number than any other Mexican state. As compared to other Mexican border and coastal states, Tamaulipas' border cities are the closest destinations (and therefore, the safest ones for criminal organizations) for drug traffickers who operate in the center and the south and southeast of Mexico. Because of its location, Tamaulipas is also connected with states that in turn relate to the most important ports of the Mexican Pacific that follow inland transport into the north zone of the Tamaulipas state for trafficking to the USA (Correa-Cabrera 2012, 2016). It is important to highlight that the illicit substances that reach Tamaulipas have different sources. Mexico is a producer of marijuana, amphetamines and heroin. The production of these substances is located in southern and western Mexican states (Aguilar-Valenzuela 2014). While the source of cocaine is in South America, and it is documented to be transported by sea, it enters Mexico through the gulf and the east coast of Mexico. The internalization of the drug is important for criminal groups to achieve the traffic to the USA (Brophy 2008; Medina-Mora and Real 2013). The transit of drugs inside Mexico and the traffic for the USA is carried out by drug cartels. Cartels dispute for areas of influence and for the control of drug pathways inside Mexico and inside Tamaulipas. Unfortunately, violence is the most important and dominant factor in the

world of drugs, and Mexico has observed an increase in violence associated with drugs since 2008 (Medina-Mora and Real 2013).

In 2007, in a report for the USA congress, Cook highlighted the importance of Mexican drug cartels and their zones of influence. In that report, the Gulf cartel was considered to have a presence in 13 Mexican states and exerted dominance in Nuevo Laredo, Miguel Alemán, Reynosa, and Matamoros. These cities are located in the northern zone of Tamaulipas state, and all of them are border cities to the USA. In fact, the birthplace and headquarters of the Gulf cartel is the coastal city Matamoros (Cook 2007). Because of the war on drugs conducted by the Mexican president Calderon, around 2012, the Mexican cartels suffered transformations. In particular, an armed fraction of the Gulf cartel emancipated and formed the "Los Zetas" cartel (Rosen and Zepeda-Martínez 2015), a criminal organization based in Nuevo Laredo. Later, because of internal conflicts and disputes with other cartels, Los Zetas gave rise to Northeast cartel who now controls the drug trafficking to the USA and criminal activities in the northwest zone of Tamaulipas. Disputes and dominance of criminal groups may be related to the routes that follow illicit substances inside Tamaulipas.

Despite Tamaulipas being recognized as one of the Mexican states with significant drug-related activity, there has been little research conducted to describe, understand, and prevent the local dynamics of drugs and associated violence conducted by criminal groups in the area (Gomez-San Luis and Almanza-Avendaño 2016). The routes followed by the different types of drugs inside Mexico may not be the same and they may be related to the influence of the different cartels in the Tamaulipas state. This descriptive manuscript reports information on psychotropic substance seizures that occurred in Tamaulipas, Mexico, between 2017 and 2022. The Mexican federal police, army, and marine forces carried out psychotropic seizures in strategic locations throughout the state. The objective of this communication is to describe the seizures of different drugs in Tamaulipas and to perform a time-related analysis in terms of routes of transport and the destination of psychotropic drugs and the cartel group operating the drug trafficking. Results suggest that different criminal groups have preferences for trafficking specific types of drugs, which depend on the routes followed by the drugs. The legalization of marijuana in the USA has been observed to impact drug trafficking and the interests and activities of the cartels in the zone.

2. Materials and Methods

We conducted a study using databases from the National General Attorney and National Public Security System executive secretariat. The study analyzed data collected from the seizure of psychotropic substances in the Tamaulipas state, Mexico, between 1 January 2017 and 31 December 2022. The database contained information on the type, weight, and location of the confiscated substances. Figure 1 shows the seizure locations, which were linked to the main cities in the Tamaulipas state and adjacent American cities (INEGI 2018). We used SPSS V.27 software (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA, 2020) for statistical analysis, mainly using descriptive analyses and considering statistical significance at $p < 0.05$. The Kruskal–Wallis test and Dunn's test were used for comparisons due to the different data distributions. We analyzed the data based on yearly events, the city of seizure, the type of substance, and their combinations. A seizure event was defined as the act of an authority confiscating illicit substances and recording the location, type, and amount of the seizure. The enforced law groups participating in the seizures were the Mexican army (SEDENA), the Mexican Navy (MARINA), National Guard (Guardia Nacional), federal police (Policia Federal), financial police at customs (Policia Fiscal en aduanas) and Tamaulipas state police (Policia Estatal de Tamaulipas). Importantly, the vast majority of illicit substance seizures were carried out in highways and state road vehicle inspection spots that are distributed all over the state. Within cities, video surveillance and inspection spots were the most used methods.

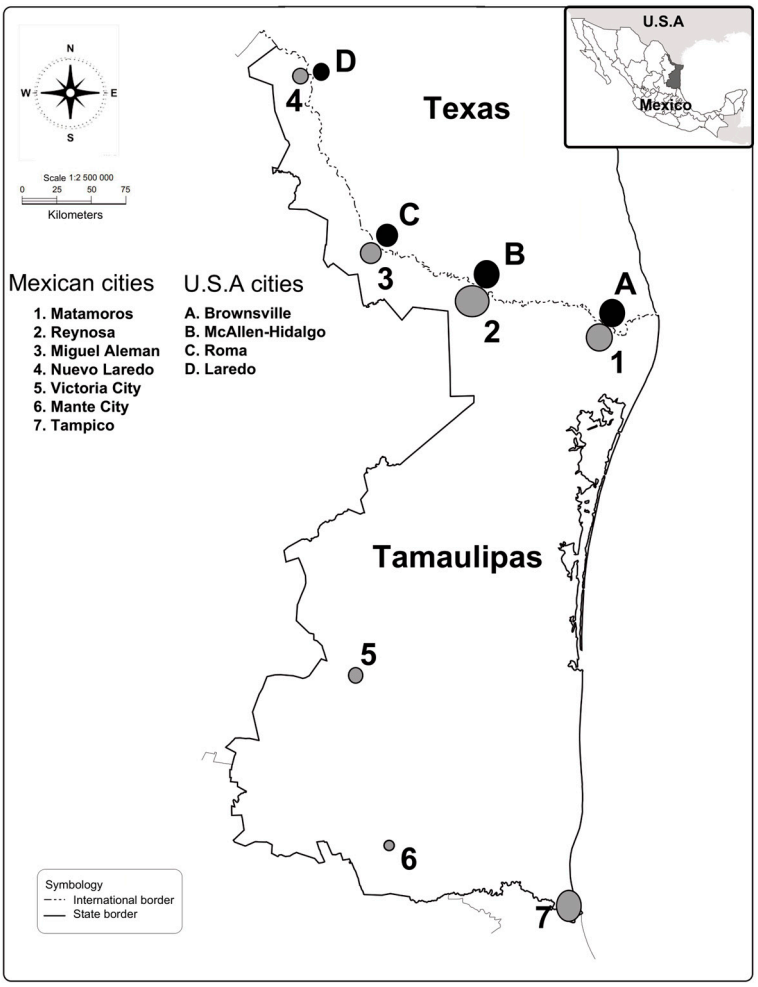


Figure 1. Map of Tamaulipas. Main cities corresponding to drug seizure spots included in the study are also displayed.

3. Results

A total of 981 events of psychotropic seizure events were reported in the 2017 to 2022 period in Tamaulipas, a Mexican border state next to Texas, USA. The contributions for the different law enforcement groups in the total seizure reported here were as follows: Mexican army, 47%; Mexican Navy, 17%; National Guard, 16%; federal police, 15%; financial police at customs, 3%; and Tamaulipas state police, 2%. In Figure 2, the distribution of the events per year can be observed. Notably, from the period studied, 2017 was the year with the highest number of seizure events recorded; in the subsequent years, the number of events showed a decreasing tendency over time that was partially reverted in 2021.

Figure 3 shows the number of total seizure events recorded per city in the studied period. It can be noticed that Matamoros, Nuevo Laredo, and Reynosa showed a much higher number of psychotropic seizures than the other state cities such as Victoria, Tampico, and Mante. It is important to mention that Matamoros, Nuevo Laredo, and Reynosa are located close to the international border and they neighbor and share international bridges with American cities with high commercial activity (Figure 1).

Figure 4 shows the number of events of psychotropic substance seizures between 2017 and 2022 by type of substance and by city. Marijuana-related events were higher than those of any other substance in every city studied, followed by cocaine, amphetamines, heroin, and benzodiazepines. In regard to fentanyl, two seizure reports were reported between 2017 and 2022 in Tamaulipas; both happened in 2022; one of them was 1.67 kg in Matamoros, and the other was 1 kg in Reynosa. Matamoros was the city with the highest number of seizure events, and most of them related to marijuana. A detailed analysis of the

total weight of drugs seized in the main border cities showed that in the period studied, in Nuevo Laredo, they seized 59.4 tons; they seized 36.5 tons in Reynosa; and in Matamoros, they seized 15.9 tons of psychotropic substances.

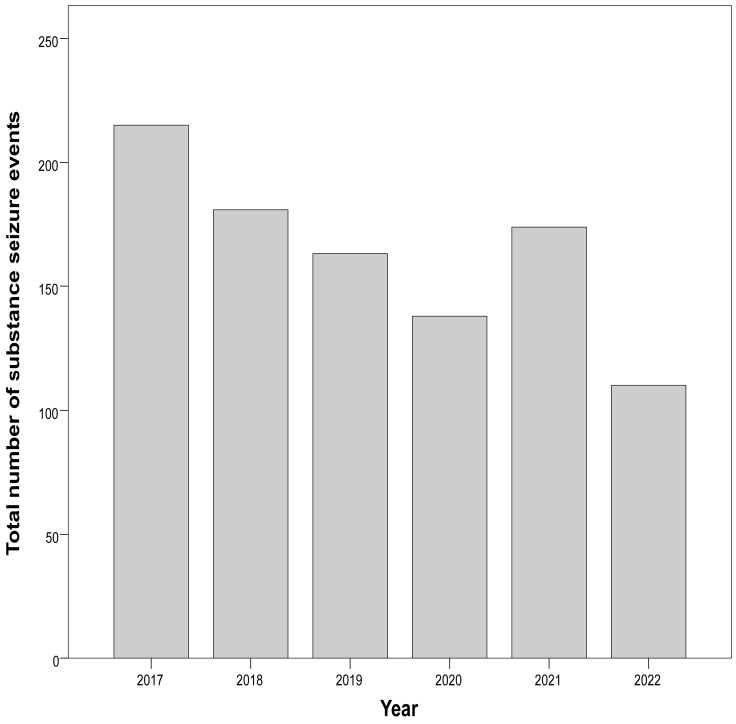


Figure 2. Total number of seizure drug events by year in the 2017 to 2022 period in Tamaulipas.

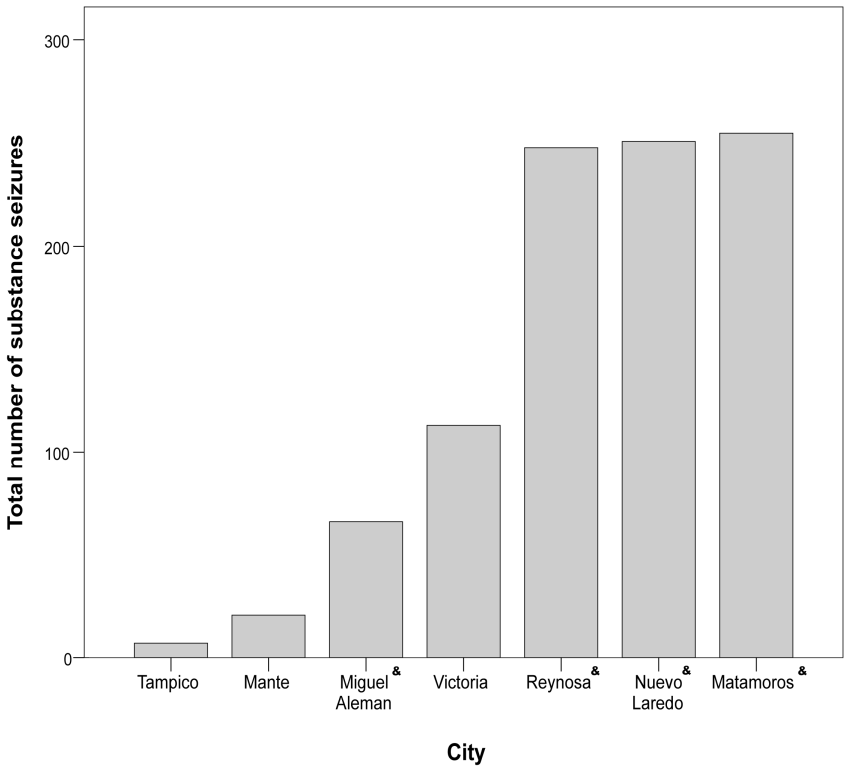


Figure 3. Total number of abuse substance seizure events in the 2017 to 2022 period distributed in the main cities of Tamaulipas, Mexico. & = border cities neighboring the USA.

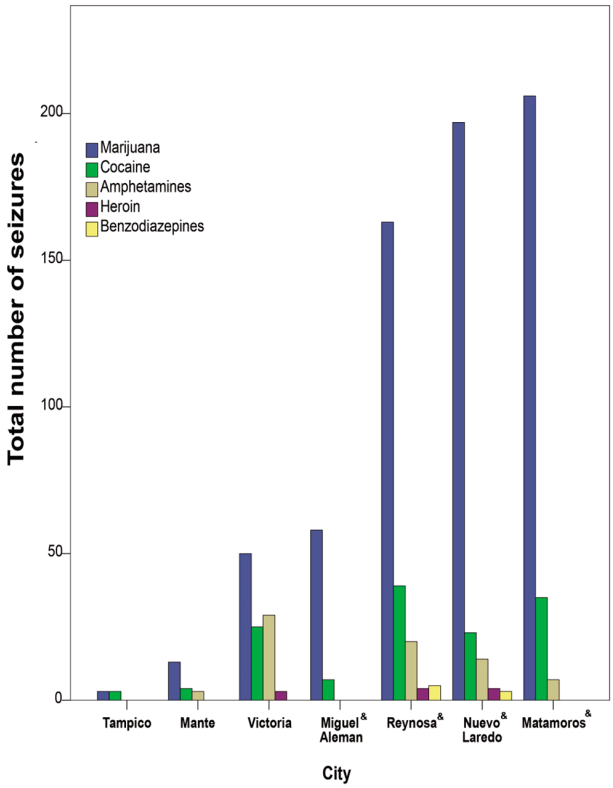


Figure 4. Total number of seizure events for the different type of psychotropics in the 2017 to 2022 period distributed in the main cities of Tamaulipas, Mexico. & = border cities neighboring the USA.

As shown in Figure 5, in 2017, Nuevo Laredo was the city with the highest volume of total seized drugs; however, in the subsequent years, a marked decrease was observed and the rate remained low until 2022. A similar phenomenon was observed for Reynosa from 2017 to 2020, but in 2021, we observed a recovery peak. Matamoros was the third city in terms of the volume of psychotropics seized over time. In this case, we observed a peak of activity in 2018. The cities of Victoria, Tampico, and Miguel Alemán showed consistently relatively low drug seizures during the period studied.

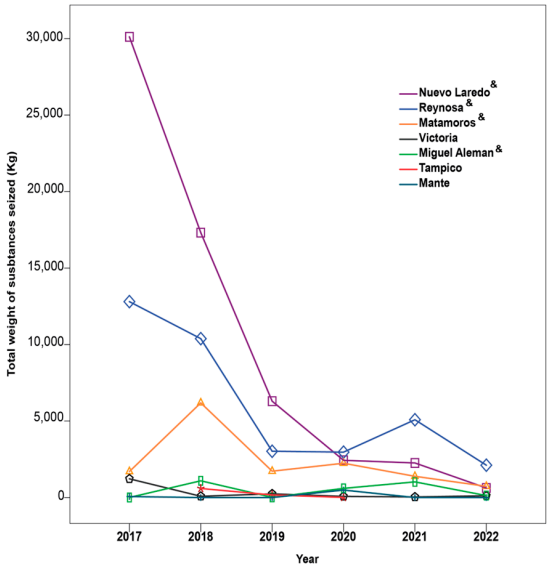


Figure 5. Total weight of seized drugs (all types) by year in the 2017 to 2022 period in the main cities of Tamaulipas, Mexico. & = border cities neighboring the USA.

The total weight of seized drugs in the period in Tamaulipas cities (selected as those with the highest number of events) studied per year is shown in Figure 6. The information on this graph suggests the volume of drugs that are systematically moved to and through the cities. We observed that the weight of drugs sized per year in Nuevo Laredo and Reynosa was statistically higher than that of Victoria, the state capital.

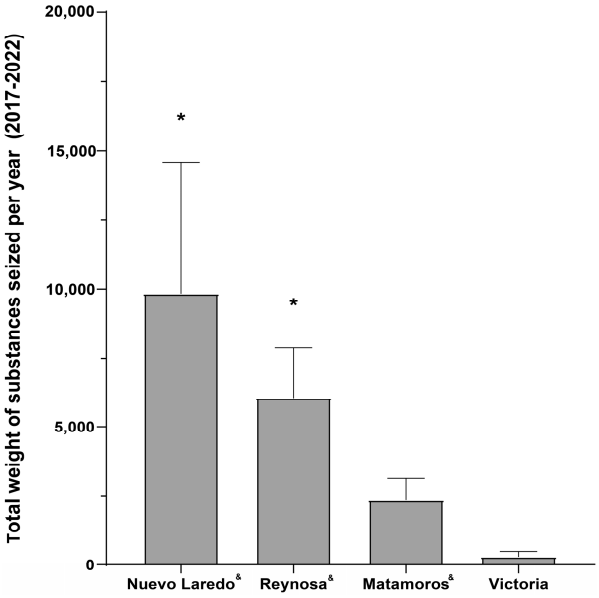


Figure 6. Total weight of psychotropics seized (all types) in the three most important border-adjacent cities of Tamaulipas (Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa and Matamoros) and the state capital (Victoria) per year in the 2017 to 2020 period. Bars represent mean ± SEM. Data were analyzed for comparison by using the Kruskall–Wallis test followed by Dunn's test for multiple comparisons. * = statistical difference ($p < 0.05$) as compared to Victoria. & = border cities neighboring the USA.

Since marijuana, cocaine, and amphetamines were the most seized psychotropic products in the study, we decided to analyze the seizures of the three substances normalized per year in the main Tamaulipas cities. In Panel A from Figure 7, it can be observed that in Nuevo Laredo, an average of 10,000 kg of marijuana per year was seized, followed by Reynosa with 6000 kg per year. The statistical analysis showed a significant difference in both cities as compared to Victoria. Panel B of Figure 7 shows the year-normalized seizures of cocaine in the main Tamaulipas cities. In this case, the coastal Matamoros city showed a higher statistical average as compared to Nuevo Laredo. No difference was observed as compared to the other studied cities. The seizures of amphetamines per year are shown in Figure 7, Panel C. We observed that the rate of confiscation of this type of drug was far lower than that of marijuana and cocaine. In Nuevo Laredo, a higher average than those of the other cities was found; however, it did not reach statistical significance because of the data dispersion.

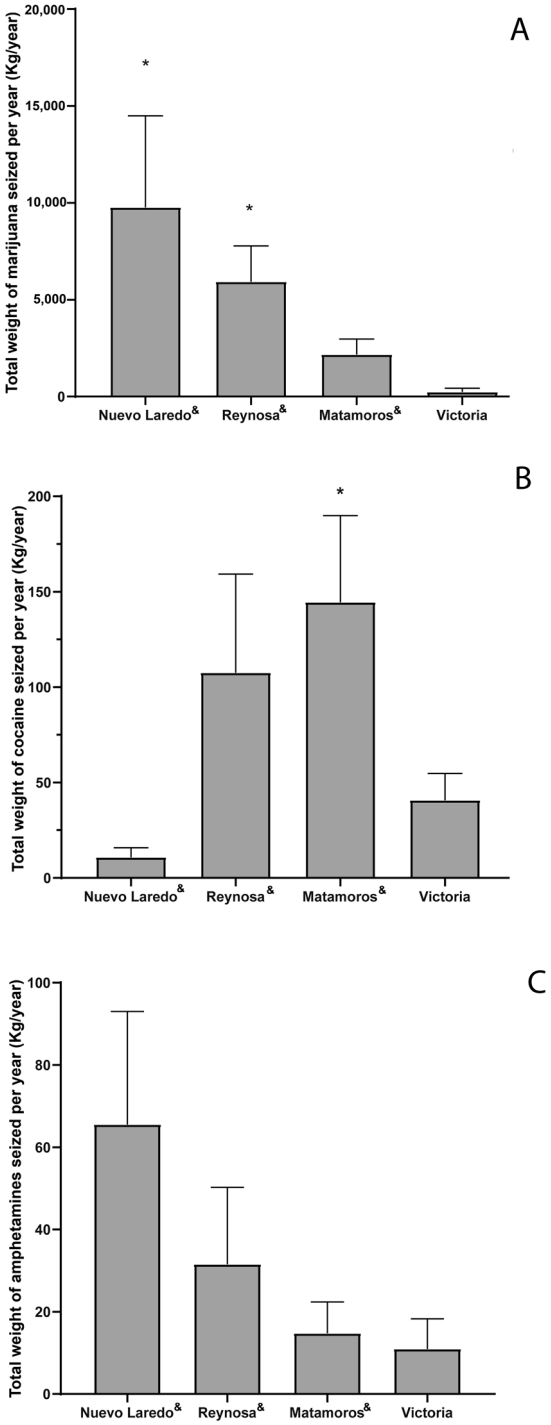


Figure 7. Total weight of marijuana (**A**), cocaine (**B**) and amphetamines (**C**) seized in the three most important border-adjacent cities of Tamaulipas (Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa and Matamoros) and the state capital (Victoria) per year in the 2017 to 2020 period. Bars represent mean ± SEM. Data were analyzed for comparison by using Kruskall–Wallis test followed by Dunn's test for multiple comparisons. In (**A**) * = statistical difference ($p < 0.05$) as compared to Victoria. In (**B**) * = statistical difference ($p < 0.05$) as compared to Nuevo Laredo. No statistical differences were observed in (**C**). & = border cities neighboring the USA.

4. Discussion

This investigation aims to provide an account of the seizure of illegal products by Mexican security organizations in Tamaulipas, a northern Mexican state bordering Texas,

USA, between the years 2017 and 2022. This study deals with the transit and confiscation of psychotropic drugs, and the well-known intention of criminal groups to bring drugs into North America and the routes followed by drugs of abuse in northeast Mexico. One significant finding of this study is that the seizure of narcotics has shown a downward trend from 2017 to 2022, which may in part be due to the COVID-19 pandemic's impact, as indicated by the 2021 recovery in drug seizures (Figure 2). Border cities like Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa, and Matamoros have seen a higher number of drug seizure events than non-border cities for all types of drugs (Figures 3 and 4) due to their historical association with organized crime and violent crimes (Pereda 2023).

According to the National General Attorney Policy on Drugs office, marijuana is the most commonly seized drug in Mexico, followed by cocaine and amphetamines (Secretaria de Salud 2019). The high volume of seized drugs is due to Mexico's strategic location on narcotics routes (Secretaria de Salud 2019).

Tamaulipas is a Mexican boundary state next to the USA; drug seizures carried out here represent not only the internal demand, which is important in this area of the country (Borges et al. 2018), but also the fraction of narcotics intended to enter the United States, which is a well-known phenomenon (Barreda-Vidal 2014). It has been observed that border cities such as Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa, and Matamoros experience a higher number of seizure events and larger quantities of confiscated drugs compared to non-border cities (Barreda-Vidal 2014). This drug seizure phenomenon is also linked to international legal commercial activity. For instance, Miguel Alemán, a border city with a commercial international bridge, reported legal activity of 1.8/1.2 million dollars in sells/buys in 2022. In comparison, Reynosa counted on three international bridges and the commercial activity was 16,500/15,200 million dollar sells/buys Matamoros reported 7200/6000 million dollar sells/buys, and Nuevo Laredo reported 4600/3900 million dollar sells/buys (Data Mexico 2023). Figure 3 shows that the number of events in Miguel Alemán is far lower than those of Matamoros, Reynosa, or Nuevo Laredo. Criminal groups use any sort of strategies or people to transport drugs, and they often deceive authorities by using legal commercial activity as a cover. For example, in 2015, the USA Customs and Border Protection Agency reported that 120 Mexican teenagers were arrested because they tried to bring drugs into the USA (Hernández 2018).

It is interesting to note that illegal drug seizures decreased after 2017 and this trend continued until 2022, with a peak in recovery observed in 2021 (as shown in Figure 2). This could be linked to the decrease in drug seizures in Nuevo Laredo between 2017 and 2020, which were characterized by high volumes of marijuana intended for the USA market (as seen in Figure 5). These findings are consistent with the United Nations report, which suggests that marijuana seizures in the USA and Canada are declining due to policies aimed at legalizing it for medical and recreational use (World Drug Report 2020). Other groups also claim that the flow of marijuana from Mexico to the USA is clearly decreasing, and this claim has produced a series of changes in both countries (Dudley et al. 2022). Thus, the legalization of marijuana in the USA is related to a decrease in violence that is derived from drug commercialization inside the USA (Gavrilova et al. 2019). On the other hand, it is possible that legalizing the possession, production, and sale of marijuana in the USA could reduce its trafficking from historically producing countries, leading criminal groups to switch to other drugs like amphetamines (Zarega 2022). Alternatively, criminal groups inside Mexico might shift to other illegal activities such as kidnapping, extortion, and the robbery of tourists and immigrants, which could lead to an increase in such crimes (Ochoa-Elizondo 2017). This may already be happening in Nuevo Laredo, where there has been a rise in violence and insecurity over the past three years (Ferri 2023). The presence of the Northeast cartel, an organized criminal group that engages in extortion and the robbery of immigrants looking to reach the USA, as well as the trafficking of illegal substances, could be contributing to this phenomenon (Asmann 2023; Resa-Nestares 2004).

We observed that the amounts of the different drugs varied according to the cities mentioned, as depicted in Figure 7. In this regard, the state of Tamaulipas plays a crucial

role in the distribution of various drugs. It is connected to the southern and western regions of Mexico via the San Luis Potosi estate. These areas, particularly Sinaloa, Durango, and Michoacan, are known for their amphetamine and marijuana production, with significant laboratories located there (Aguilar-Valenzuela 2014). We observed that marijuana and amphetamines showed a similar pattern of seizure as shown in Figure 7, with Nuevo Laredo being the city with more seizures than the other Tamaulipas city. It is important to note that the Mexican states Zacatecas, Nuevo Leon, Durango, and San Luis Potosi are controlled, or at least partially controlled, by the Northeast cartel, which also operates and controls the illicit trade in the border city Nuevo Laredo. A reasonable possibility is that the similar patterns in the seizures of marijuana and amphetamines may obey the routes followed by these drugs as they are moved from interior Mexican states to Nuevo Laredo by the Northeast cartel (Asmann 2023).

On the other hand, Tamaulipas has a lengthy coastline along the Gulf of Mexico, including major port cities like Tampico and Matamoros. It is widely acknowledged that cocaine originates in South America and is transported across the ocean by shipping (UNODC 2011). Matamoros, a city located on the coast of Tamaulipas, could be a significant entry point for South American cocaine. The present study shows that the majority of cocaine seizures in the region were recorded in Matamoros, followed by Reynosa, which is located 98 km inland, as depicted in Figure 7. The Gulf cartel, whose headquarters is in Matamoros and controls flow of drugs to Reynosa, is known to control cocaine access and distribution in the region (Brophy 2008). It is documented that this criminal group is using local distribution networks and individuals to transport the cocaine across international bridges into the USA (Brophy 2008; Bichler et al. 2017). Additionally, some of the cocaine may have been intended for internal demand, as reports show that cocaine use is on the rise in Tamaulipas (SISVEA 2022). This increase is consistent with the trend of cocaine addiction in Mexico (Encuesta Nacional de Adicciones 2017), which is linked to the fact that cocaine transported to the USA no longer uses the Caribbean routes and instead passes through Mexico (Villatoro Velázquez et al. 2016). We believe that the fact that cocaine seizure was higher in Matamoros and Reynosa than other Tamaulipas cities is mainly due to the pathway followed by the drug, i.e., it enters Mexico through the sea to Matamoros and is then distributed by the Gulf cartel to Reynosa, which is also controlled by this criminal group.

During the five-year studied period, only two seizures of fentanyl were registered in Tamaulipas, weighing a total of 2.7 kg. This suggests that the illegal trafficking of this substance is low in northeast Mexico. However, reports indicate that fentanyl from Asiatic sources follows ocean pacific routes and reaches western ports such as Manzanillo, Lazaro Cardenas, and Acapulco, which are controlled by the "Jalisco Nueva Generación" cartel. This criminal group is responsible for introducing the substance into the USA (Michel 2017). Fentanyl has also been seized in central Mexican cities such as Mexico City and Puebla, but most of the seizures were registered in Baja California, Jalisco, Nayarit, Sinaloa, and Sonora, which are located in northwest Mexico. These areas are controlled by different criminal groups than those in Tamaulipas (Soto-Rodríguez 2022; Dalby 2019).

Studies have shown that during the pandemic, users reduced marijuana smoking and cocaine consumption (Llorens and Molina 2021). A report indicated that North American young people aged 13 to 20 decreased their cannabis use between 2019 and 2020 (Compton et al. 2023). However, other studies have suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in drug consumption across the board (Carrascoza-Venegas 2022; Conway et al. 2022). As with any research conducted during the pandemic, it is important to approach the data with caution.

A weakness in the study is that the data and analyses presented are limited by the official drug report seizures; because drug trafficking is an illicit activity, there is an inherent uncertainty of how much of the drug reached the intended destination or crossed the Tamaulipas state being unnoticed. Additionally, the procedures in the activities related to drugs seized may be the subject of corruption at several levels; this would affect the

quantities and type of drugs seized, as has been observed in similar studies from other groups (Baika and Campana 2020). We also acknowledge that the surveillance and presence of enforced institutions is higher in border cities than non-border cities and results may be biased for this situation; still, data provide information on the destination of the illicit substances. Nevertheless, we consider that seizures presented here are representative, worth being analyzed, and may be the basis for future studies.

5. Conclusions

Between 2017 and 2022, the majority of drug seizures in Tamaulipas occurred in the cities of Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa, and Matamoros, which are located near the USA border. Among these cities, Nuevo Laredo had the highest number of drug seizures. Unfortunately, violence related to criminal activity is prevalent in this city due to the presence of prominent criminal groups. Tamaulipas is a state in Mexico that has been affected by these issues.

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Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest. All authors certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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