



December 2018

# COLOMBIA

## U.S. Counternarcotics Assistance Achieved Some Positive Results, but State Needs to Review the Overall U.S. Approach

Accessible Version

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-19-106](#), a report to the Caucus on International Narcotics Control, U.S. Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

Colombia is the world's leading producer of cocaine, with production levels more than tripling from 2013 through 2017 (see figure). The U.S. and Colombian governments have been longstanding partners in the fight against drug trafficking. Since the launch of Plan Colombia in 1999, the U.S. government has invested over \$10 billion in counternarcotics efforts in Colombia. This assistance has supported a range of eradication, interdiction, and alternative development programs.

GAO was asked to review U.S. counternarcotics assistance to Colombia. This report examines (1) to what extent the U.S. government has assessed the effectiveness of its counternarcotics efforts in Colombia and (2) what is known about the effectiveness of U.S.-supported eradication, interdiction, and alternative development programs in Colombia. GAO reviewed data and documentation from U.S. agencies, performed a literature review of relevant research on counternarcotics efforts in Colombia, conducted fieldwork in Colombia, and interviewed U.S. and Colombian officials.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that State, in consultation with relevant agencies, (1) evaluate the effectiveness of eradication and interdiction in reducing the cocaine supply in Colombia and (2) undertake a comprehensive review of the U.S. counternarcotics approach in Colombia that considers the relative benefits and limitations between eradication, interdiction, and alternative development efforts. State generally concurred with the recommendations.

View [GAO-19-106](#). For more information, contact Jennifer A. Grover at (202) 512-7141 or [groverj@gao.gov](mailto:groverj@gao.gov).

December 2018

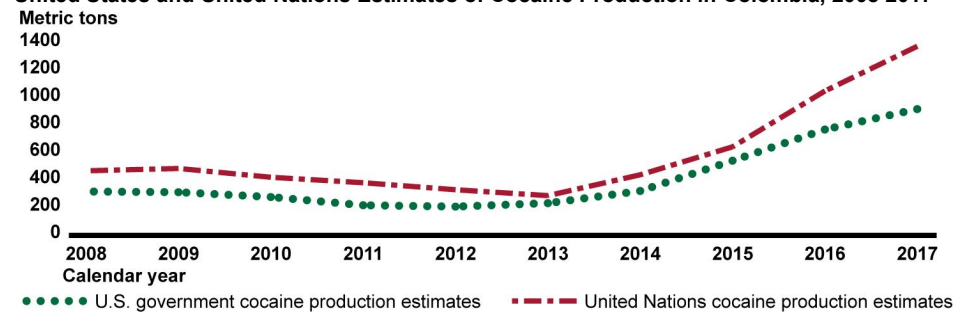
## COLOMBIA

### U.S. Counternarcotics Assistance Achieved Some Positive Results, but State Needs to Review the Overall U.S. Approach

## What GAO Found

U.S. agencies that provide counternarcotics assistance to Colombia conduct performance monitoring of their activities, such as by tracking the hectares of coca fields eradicated and the amount of cocaine seized, but have not consistently evaluated the effectiveness of their activities in reducing the cocaine supply. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has evaluated some of its alternative development programs, but the Department of State (State), which has lead responsibility for U.S. counternarcotics efforts, has not evaluated the effectiveness of its eradication and interdiction activities, as called for by its evaluation policies. Additionally, State has not conducted a comprehensive review of the U.S. counternarcotics approach, which relies on a combination of eradication, interdiction, and alternative development. Without information about the relative benefits and limitations of these activities, the U.S. government lacks key information to determine the most effective combination of counternarcotics activities.

United States and United Nations Estimates of Cocaine Production in Colombia, 2008-2017



Sources: GAO presentation of Office of National Drug Control Policy and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime data. | GAO-19-106

Notes: The United Nations and the U.S. government each produce annual estimates of the amount of coca cultivation and cocaine production in Colombia. Although their estimates show the same general trends, the United Nations and the U.S. government use different methodologies to produce their estimates, resulting in differences in the specific amounts estimated from year to year.

GAO's review of U.S. agency performance monitoring data and third-party research offers some information about the relative effectiveness of eradication, interdiction, and alternative development activities. For example, available evidence indicates that U.S.-supported eradication efforts in Colombia may not be an effective long-term approach to reduce the cocaine supply, due in part to coca growers responding to eradication by moving coca crops to national parks and other areas off limits to eradication. Agency data show that U.S.-supported interdiction efforts in Colombia seized hundreds of tons of cocaine and arrested thousands of drug traffickers, yet the net cocaine supply has increased and third-party studies have mixed findings on the long-term effectiveness of interdiction efforts. USAID evaluations indicate that alternative development programs in Colombia have provided legal economic opportunities to some rural populations previously involved in illicit crop production. However, USAID as well as third-party research suggests that alternative development requires significant and sustained investment and some programs have had design and sustainability challenges.

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# Contents

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Letter	1
Background	4
U.S. Agencies Conducted Performance Monitoring of Counternarcotics Activities in Colombia, but Have Not Evaluated Key Efforts and State Has Not Undertaken a Comprehensive Review of the Overall Approach	18
Available Evidence Indicates that U.S.-Supported Eradication Efforts in Colombia May Not Be an Effective Long-Term Supply- Reduction Approach	29
U.S.-Supported Interdiction Efforts Seized a Substantial Amount of Cocaine and Disrupted Drug Trafficking Organizations in Colombia, but the Long-Term Effect of These Efforts is Unclear	42
U.S.-Supported Alternative Development Programs in Colombia Have Achieved Some Positive Results, but Officials and Research Have Noted Some Implementation Challenges	55
Conclusions	66
Recommendations for Executive Action	66
Agency Comments and Our Evaluation	67
Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology	70
Appendix II: List of Studies Reviewed	76
Appendix III: Comments from the Department of State	79
Appendix IV: Comments from the U.S. Agency for International Development	84
Appendix V: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments	87
Appendix VI: Accessible Data	88
Data Tables	88
Agency Comment Letters	90

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## Tables

Table 1: Reported Arrests, Disruptions, Dismantling, and Extradition of Colombian Drug Trafficking Organizations and Members, 2008-2017	49
Table 2: Examples of U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Alternative Development Programs in Colombia	57
Table 3: Embassy Bogotá Reported Results of U.S. Government Assistance Related to Its Objective of Improving Conditions for Inclusive Rural Economic Growth from Its Fiscal Year 2017 Performance Plan and Report	59

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## Figures

Figure 1: Estimated Coca Cultivation and Cocaine Production in Colombia, 2008-2017	5
Figure 2: Map of Colombia's Geographic Location in the Western Hemisphere	7
Figure 3: Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development Foreign Assistance Provided to Colombia, Fiscal Years (FY) 2008-2017	14
Figure 4: Department of Defense Estimated Counternarcotics Funding Provided for Colombia, Fiscal Years (FY) 2008-2017	15
Figure 5: Map of Current and Planned Strategic Operational Centers in Colombia	27
Figure 6: Colombian Manual Eradicators Destroying Coca Fields	31
Figure 7: U.S.-Supported Colombian National Police Helicopter Maintenance Facility	33
Figure 8: Estimated Hectares of Coca Cultivation and Coca Eradication (Aerial and Manual), 2001-2017	34
Figure 9: Estimated Kilograms of Cocaine Seized in Colombia, 2008-2017	47
Figure 10: U.S.-Supported Cacao Growers Association Cacao Crop in Colombia	56
Accessible Data for United States and United Nations Estimates of Cocaine Production in Colombia, 2008-2017	88
Accessible Data for Figure 1a: Estimated Coca Cultivation and Cocaine Production in Colombia, 2008-2017	88
Accessible Data for Figure 1b: Estimated Coca Cultivation and Cocaine Production in Colombia, 2008-2017	88

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Accessible Data for Figure 3: Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development Foreign Assistance Provided to Colombia, Fiscal Years (FY) 2008-2017	89
Accessible Data for Figure 4: Department of Defense Estimated Counternarcotics Funding Provided for Colombia, Fiscal Years (FY) 2008-2017	89
Accessible Data for Figure 8: Estimated Hectares of Coca Cultivation and Coca Eradication (Aerial and Manual), 2001-2017	89
Accessible Data for Figure 9: Estimated Kilograms of Cocaine Seized in Colombia, 2008-2017	90

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### Abbreviations

AUC	United-Self Defense Forces of Colombia
Bacrim	criminal bands
CBP	Customs and Border Protection
CEO	Strategic Operational Center
CNP	Colombian National Police
CPOT	Consolidated Priority Organization Target
DEA	Drug Enforcement Administration
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DOD	Department of Defense
DOJ	Department of Justice
ELN	National Liberation Army
FARC	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
ICE	Immigration and Customs Enforcement
ICITAP	International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program
INL	Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs
ISR	intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
Monitor	Monitoring and Evaluation Clearinghouse
OCDETF	Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces
ONDCP	Office of National Drug Control Policy
OPDAT	Office of Overseas Prosecutorial Development Assistance and Training
POM	Program Objective Memorandum
PTO	Priority Target Organization
SIU	Sensitive Investigative Unit
SOUTHCOM	U.S. Southern Command
State	Department of State

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UN	United Nations
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development

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December 12, 2018

The Honorable Charles E. Grassley  
Chairman  
Caucus on International Narcotics Control  
United States Senate

The Honorable Dianne Feinstein  
Co-Chair  
Caucus on International Narcotics Control  
United States Senate

Coca cultivation and cocaine production in Colombia have increased substantially in recent years, hitting record levels in 2017, according to U.S. government and United Nations (UN) estimates. These increases have occurred despite the longstanding partnership between the United States and Colombia to combat illicit drug production and trafficking. In 1999, the Colombian government announced the launch of a major initiative, known as Plan Colombia, which was designed to reduce the production of illegal drugs and improve security in the country.<sup>1</sup> At that time, Colombia had become the world's leading producer of cocaine and was in the midst of a violent internal conflict that had lasted for decades. This multi-sided conflict was fueled by proceeds from illegal drug trafficking and involved the Marxist insurgent organization the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (known by its Spanish acronym, FARC) and other armed left-wing groups, as well as right-wing paramilitary groups. Since Plan Colombia's inception, the U.S. government has provided over \$10 billion in support of the counternarcotics and security effort, according to the Department of State (State). This support has included assistance for eradication, interdiction, and alternative development programs. In providing counternarcotics assistance to Colombia, the U.S. government has sought to use a whole of government approach involving a range of agencies. The Colombian government has also made significant investments in the fight against

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<sup>1</sup>For further information on the initial years of Plan Colombia, see GAO, *Plan Colombia: Drug Reduction Goals Were Not Fully Met, but Security Has Improved; U.S. Agencies Need More Detailed Plans for Reducing Assistance*, [GAO-09-71](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 6, 2008).

illegal drugs, with its own funding representing about 95 percent of the total spent since the start of Plan Colombia.

When Plan Colombia was launched in 1999, some feared that Colombia was on the brink of becoming a failed state, but it has since seen significant improvements in security, including dramatic drops in violence and the reassertion of state control over much of the country's territory. For example, between 2000 and 2016, homicides in Colombia declined by 53 percent and kidnappings declined by 94 percent. As the security situation improved, Colombian authorities were also able to achieve considerable reductions in coca cultivation and cocaine production, reaching a low point in 2012. Meanwhile, the Colombian government undertook peace negotiations with the FARC, which were formally concluded in a peace agreement in November 2016 that the parties have begun to implement. Starting in 2013, however, coca cultivation and cocaine production in Colombia have been on the rise once again, according to U.S. government and UN estimates. In addition, Colombia continues to struggle with the presence of drug trafficking organizations and other armed criminal actors in many parts of the country. Colombia is currently at an important juncture as it seeks to implement the peace agreement and address increasing illicit drug production.

You asked us to review U.S.-supported eradication, interdiction, and alternative development programs in Colombia and what is known about the effectiveness of these programs in achieving U.S. counternarcotics goals. Specifically, this report examines (1) to what extent the U.S. government has assessed the effectiveness of its counternarcotics efforts in Colombia, (2) what is known about the effectiveness of U.S. government-supported eradication programs in Colombia over the last 10 years, (3) what is known about the effectiveness of U.S. government-supported interdiction programs in Colombia over the last 10 years, and (4) what is known about the effectiveness of U.S. government-supported alternative development programs in Colombia over the last 10 years.<sup>2</sup>

To address these objectives, we analyzed Department of Defense (DOD), Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Department of Justice (DOJ),

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<sup>2</sup>We focused our scope on the last 10 years to examine more recent developments in U.S. counternarcotics assistance to Colombia, rather than reviewing U.S. counternarcotics assistance to Colombia since the start of Plan Colombia in 1999. In addition, it has been approximately 10 years since GAO last conducted a comprehensive review of U.S. counternarcotics assistance to Colombia. See [GAO-09-71](#).



State, and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) data and documentation, including available evaluations and performance monitoring data the agencies use to assess the effectiveness of their counternarcotics activities in Colombia.<sup>3</sup> We also interviewed officials from each of these agencies to gather further information regarding what is known about the effectiveness of U.S.-supported counternarcotics efforts in Colombia. In assessing to what extent the U.S. government has assessed the effectiveness of its counternarcotics efforts in Colombia, we compared U.S. agencies' actions to requirements established in agency evaluation policies and to federal internal control standards. As part of our work, we also collected data from the UN and the Colombian government related to drug production trends and counternarcotics efforts. To assess the reliability of these data, we reviewed available documentation and interviewed knowledgeable U.S. officials. We determined that the U.S. government, UN, and Colombian government data were sufficiently reliable for our purposes in this report. To validate and supplement U.S. government information regarding the effectiveness of its counternarcotics programs, we also conducted a literature review to determine what relevant research has concluded about these programs in Colombia and the extent to which relevant non-U.S. government studies reached similar or different conclusions than the U.S. government's findings regarding the effectiveness of U.S.-supported counternarcotics programs in Colombia. To conduct our literature review, we developed a list of search terms related to eradication, interdiction, and alternative development in Colombia and conducted a search using selected bibliographic databases. In order to narrow down the initial search results to a priority list of studies, we considered a variety of factors including the relevance of the study to our research questions, the extent to which the study focused on Colombia or was more global in nature, whether the study had been published in 2008 or later, and whether the study included original research. In total, we selected 23 studies to include in our review and to analyze in greater depth for this report. As part of our work, we also conducted interviews with a nongeneralizable sample of three non-U.S. government experts. Finally, we conducted fieldwork in Colombia where we interviewed U.S. and Colombian officials that have responsibility for and insights into U.S.-funded counternarcotics

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<sup>3</sup>The primary federal agencies involved in counternarcotics activities in Colombia are DOD, DHS, DOJ, State, and USAID and their respective components. For the purposes of this report, we use the terms "U.S. agencies" and "U.S. government" to encompass these agencies and their components.

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programs. For more information about our scope and methodology, see appendix I.

We conducted this performance audit from September 2017 to December 2018 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

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## Background

Colombia is the world's largest producer of cocaine and also continues to be a source of heroin and marijuana.<sup>4</sup> After declining most years since 2000, coca cultivation and cocaine production increased again in Colombia beginning in 2013, hitting record highs in 2017 (see fig. 1).<sup>5</sup> Much of the cocaine produced in Colombia is consumed in the United States. According to the Drug Enforcement Administration's (DEA) Cocaine Signature Program, over 90 percent of cocaine found in the continental United States is of Colombian origin.<sup>6</sup> In 2017, the DEA reported that cocaine use in the United States was increasing concurrent with production increases in Colombia. Although the United States continues to be the primary market for Colombian cocaine, Colombian drug traffickers are also expanding into other markets around the world, according to DEA and Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) reporting.

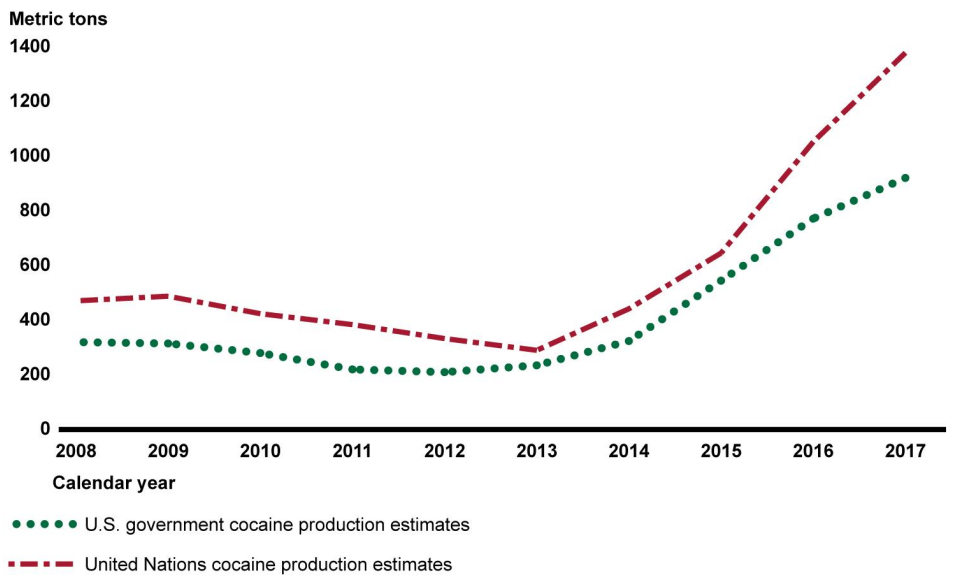
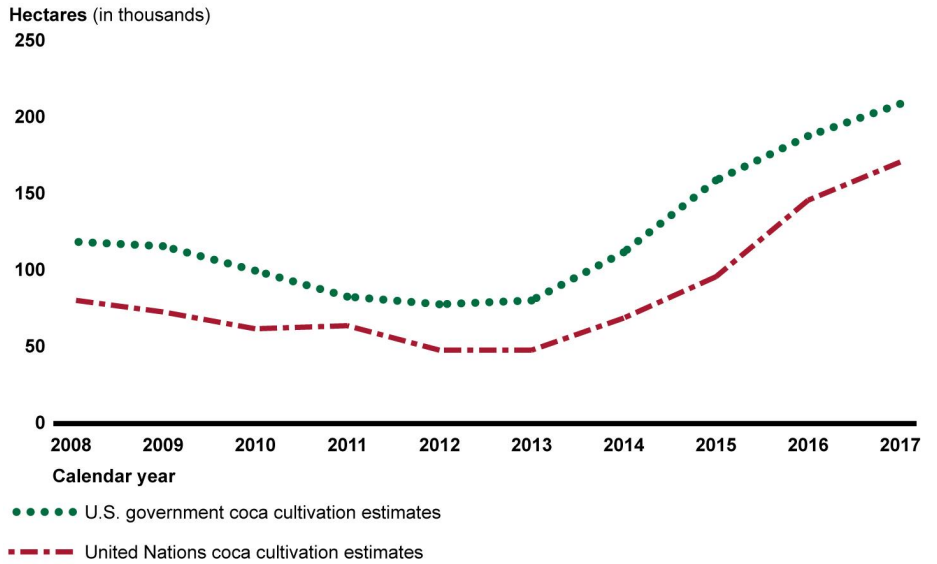
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<sup>4</sup>As of 2016, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimated that approximately 69 percent of the global area under coca cultivation and 61 percent of global cocaine production occurred in Colombia.

<sup>5</sup>The UN and the U.S. government each produce annual estimates of the amount of coca cultivation and cocaine production in Colombia. Although their estimates show the same general trends, the UN and the U.S. government use different methodologies to produce their estimates, resulting in differences in the specific amounts estimated from year to year.

<sup>6</sup>According to DEA, Cocaine Signature Program data is based on forensic analysis of bulk seizures of cocaine made throughout the United States; the Cocaine Signature Program is not intended to reflect U.S. market share but is rather a snapshot of current trends. Cocaine Signature Program forensic findings are consistent with law enforcement reporting that confirms that Colombian-source cocaine dominates the U.S. market.

**Figure 1: Estimated Coca Cultivation and Cocaine Production in Colombia, 2008-2017**



Sources: GAO presentation of Office of National Drug Control Policy and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime data. | GAO-19-106

Notes: The United Nations and the U.S. government each produce annual estimates of the amount of coca cultivation and cocaine production in Colombia. Although their estimates show the same general trends, the United Nations and the U.S. government use different methodologies to produce their estimates, resulting in differences in the specific amounts estimated from year to year.

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U.S., Colombian, and UN officials; as well as third-party researchers, have cited a variety of reasons for the increases in coca cultivation and cocaine production in Colombia, including:

- the Colombian government's decision to end aerial eradication of coca crops in October 2015;
- prior to the end of aerial spraying, coca growers' movement to areas off limits to aerial spraying and other countermeasures employed by growers;
- the Colombian government's desire to avoid social protests in coca-growing regions controlled by the FARC during peace negotiations;
- the FARC's drive to induce farmers to plant additional coca in areas under their control in anticipation that the Colombian government would provide subsidies for farmers to switch from coca to licit crops after the conclusion of the peace agreement;
- declining Colombian and U.S. funding for counternarcotics efforts;
- decreases in the price of gold, which diminished criminal organizations' revenues from illegal gold mining and led to a redirection of resources back to cocaine production to make up losses; and
- increased demand for cocaine in the United States and other parts of the world.

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### Armed Conflicts and Drug Trafficking in Colombia over Time

Colombia has historically been one of Latin America's more enduring democracies and successful economies. However, Colombia has also faced more than 50 years of internal conflict and has long been a leading drug producing and trafficking nation. See figure 2 for a map showing Colombia's geographic location relative to the United States.

**Figure 2: Map of Colombia's Geographic Location in the Western Hemisphere**



Source: Map Resources (map). | GAO-19-106

### Armed Internal Conflicts in Colombia

For several decades, Colombia has struggled with a multi-sided conflict, involving both left-wing guerilla groups and right-wing paramilitary groups (see sidebar for background information on Colombia). Since its start, the conflict has resulted in at least 220,000 deaths and the displacement of more than 5 million Colombians, according to the Congressional Research Service. The FARC, a Marxist insurgent organization formed in 1964, was the largest of the left-wing groups. At its peak, the FARC had an estimated 16,000 to 20,000 fighters, according to the Congressional

## Colombia at a Glance



## Geography

- Located in South America bordering Panama, Venezuela, Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, the Pacific Ocean, and Caribbean Sea
- 1,138,910 square kilometers in area (slightly less than twice the size of Texas)
- 32 departments and one capital district (Bogotá)
- Agricultural land: 37.5 percent

## Population

- 47,698,524 (2017 estimate); third most populous country in Latin America
- Urban population: 80.8 percent of total population
- 41.5 percent of the population is under 25 years of age

## Economy

- \$309.2 billion gross domestic product (GDP) at official exchange rate (2017 estimate)
- \$14,500 GDP per capita at purchasing power parity (2017 estimate)
- 28 percent of population below the poverty line (2017 estimate)
- Gross domestic product composition by sector: agriculture, 7.4 percent; industry, 31.3 percent; services, 61.4 percent (2017 estimate)
- Agricultural products: coffee, cut flowers, bananas, rice, tobacco, corn, sugarcane, cocoa beans, oilseed, vegetables, shrimp, forest products
- Industries: textiles, food processing, oil, clothing and footwear, beverages, chemicals, cement, gold, coal, emeralds

## Government

- Independence from Spain in 1810
- One of oldest democracies in Latin America
- President Iván Duque (took office August 7, 2018)

Sources: CIA World Factbook, Congressional Research Service, and the Department of State | GAO-19-106

Research Service.<sup>7</sup> In an effort to unseat the Colombian government, the FARC, along with the second largest left-wing guerilla group in Colombia,

the National Liberation Army (known by its Spanish acronym ELN), undertook a widespread campaign of murder, kidnapping, extortion, and other human rights violations, according to various sources. Over time, the two groups also became increasingly involved in drug trafficking to fund their operations.

In response to the violence caused by the FARC and the ELN, a number of wealthy Colombians, including drug traffickers, began to hire armed paramilitary groups for protection during the 1980s. According to DOD officials, initially these groups were formed legally as self-defense groups; however, they turned to crime and drug trafficking over time. Many of these groups subsequently united under an umbrella organization called the United-Self Defense Forces of Colombia (known by the Spanish acronym AUC). According to reporting from various U.S. government and third-party sources, the AUC murdered individuals suspected of supporting the FARC and ELN and engaged in direct combat with these groups. From 2003 through 2006, the AUC formally dissolved after negotiating a peace agreement with the administration of former Colombian President Álvaro Uribe. However, some former AUC members did not demobilize and instead joined criminal groups (known as criminal bands, or Bacrim) that continue to be involved in drug trafficking today, according to reporting from various U.S. government and third-party sources.

<sup>7</sup>According to DOD officials, this number may have been as much as two to three times higher when including non-uniformed FARC militia members.

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## Drug Trafficking in Colombia

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, Peru and Bolivia were the leading global producers of cocaine but enforcement efforts in those two countries increasingly pushed cocaine production into Colombia. By the late 1990s Colombia had emerged as the leading source of cocaine in the world.<sup>8</sup>

Over time the landscape of drug trafficking in Colombia has changed. In the 1980s and early 1990s, major drug trafficking organizations such as the Medellín and Cali cartels controlled cocaine trafficking in Colombia. These cartels were vertically integrated organizations with a clearly defined leadership that controlled all aspects of cocaine production and distribution in their respective geographic areas. By the late 1990s, however, Colombian authorities, with the support of the United States, had largely succeeded in dismantling these two cartels. Over time, drug trafficking in Colombia fragmented and is now generally characterized by more loosely organized networks that are less integrated and have less well-defined leadership structures. Major organizations currently involved in drug trafficking include the Clan del Golfo,<sup>9</sup> the largest of the Bacrim; FARC dissident groups that have not accepted the peace agreement; and the ELN.

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## Peace Agreement with the FARC

In August 2016, the Colombian government and the FARC reached a peace agreement ending more than five decades of conflict. The peace agreement was the culmination of four years of formal negotiations. In October 2016, however, Colombian voters narrowly defeated a referendum on whether to accept the peace agreement. After the voters rejected the agreement, the Colombian government and the FARC worked to make certain revisions and signed a second accord. The Colombian Congress then approved the revised agreement in November 2016. The Colombian government has estimated that it will cost \$43 billion to implement the peace agreement over 15 years but State has estimated that the cost will be between \$80 billion and \$100 billion.

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<sup>8</sup>In 1990, less than 20 percent of the world's geographic area under coca cultivation was in Colombia, but by 2000 this proportion had increased to almost 75 percent, according to UN reporting.

<sup>9</sup>Clan del Golfo is also known as the Urabeños or Clan Úsaga.

The peace agreement included agreements on six major topics:

- land and rural development,
- the FARC's political participation after disarmament,
- illicit crops and drug trafficking,
- victims' reparations and transitional justice,
- the demobilization and disarmament of the FARC and a bilateral cease-fire, and
- verification to enact the programs outlined in the final accord.

The agreement on illicit crops and drug trafficking addresses a range of issues related to coca eradication and crop substitution, public health and drug consumption, and drug production and trafficking. As part of the agreement, the FARC committed to work to help resolve the problem of illegal drugs in the country and to end any involvement in the illegal drug business. Among other things, the Colombian government pledged to prioritize voluntary drug-crop substitution programs over forced eradication, and where forced eradication was necessary, to prioritize manual removal over aerial spraying. Other portions of the peace agreement also relate to counternarcotics efforts. For example, the section on land and rural development discusses benefits for farmers who undertake substitution of illicit crops.

Colombian authorities and the FARC have completed several actions called for under the peace agreement but progress on implementation has been uneven. Since the finalization of the peace agreement in November 2016, over 7,000 FARC members have disarmed and surrendered almost 9,000 weapons, about 1.7 million rounds of ammunition, and about 42 tons of explosive material, according to State reporting. The Colombian Congress has also passed implementing legislation, including a bill establishing the Special Jurisdiction for Peace to support transitional justice efforts. However, a significant number of FARC members have refused to demobilize and key FARC leaders have been accused of violating the peace agreement through continued involvement in the drug trade and other illegal activities.<sup>10</sup> According to State reporting, the FARC has also failed to offer information on drug

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<sup>10</sup>Estimates of the number of "dissident" FARC members who have refused to take part in the peace process vary. For example, State reported in November 2017 that there were estimates of anywhere from 800 to 1,500 dissident FARC members.



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trafficking routes, contacts, and financing, as it had committed to do under the accord. The peace agreement continues to be controversial in Colombia with many Colombians believing that it does not do enough to hold the FARC accountable for the violence and crimes that it committed. Colombian President Iván Duque, who assumed control of the government in August 2018, has stated his intention to revise some elements of the agreement.

Currently, the Colombian government is also engaged in peace negotiations with the ELN that were formally launched in February 2017. Although the talks continue, the negotiations have experienced several setbacks. For example, the two parties had agreed to a temporary ceasefire that lasted from September 4, 2017, to January 9, 2018, but they did not reach an agreement to extend the ceasefire and the ELN launched a number of attacks shortly thereafter, including a police station bombing in the city of Barranquilla that killed 7 police officers and injured more than 40.

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## Plan Colombia and U.S. Counternarcotics Efforts in Colombia

Colombia and the United States have a longstanding partnership on counternarcotics efforts. Since the early 1970s, the U.S. government has provided assistance to the Colombian government to support its efforts to combat illicit drug production and trafficking activities. However, by the late 1990s, Colombia had become the world's leading producer of cocaine and a major source of heroin used in the United States. In response, the Colombian government, with U.S. support, launched Plan Colombia in 1999 with the goals of (1) reducing the production of illicit drugs and (2) improving security in the country by reclaiming areas of the country held by illegal groups.<sup>11</sup>

U.S. assistance to Colombia over the years has focused on three key approaches for reducing the supply of illegal drugs produced in the country and trafficked to the United States: eradication, interdiction, and alternative development.

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<sup>11</sup>The U.S. and Colombian governments initially envisioned Plan Colombia as a 6-year undertaking. Over time, the Colombian government has announced several follow-on initiatives that have guided the U.S.-Colombian counternarcotics and security partnership. For the purposes of this report, we refer to these various efforts collectively as Plan Colombia.

- **Eradication.** Eradication seeks to reduce coca cultivation by destroying coca plants through either the aerial spraying of herbicides on the crops, or the manual spraying of herbicides or uprooting of the plants by personnel on the ground.<sup>12</sup>
- **Interdiction.** Interdiction seeks to disrupt or dismantle drug trafficking organizations by investigating the operations of drug traffickers; seizing drugs and their precursors,<sup>13</sup> cash, and other assets; destroying processing facilities; blocking air, sea, and land drug trafficking routes; and arresting and prosecuting drug traffickers.
- **Alternative development.**<sup>14</sup> Alternative development seeks to discourage involvement in the drug trade by providing people with viable, legal livelihoods through training, technical assistance, and other support; as well as by working with the private sector, civil society, and the Colombian authorities to create the necessary conditions in communities for legal economies to develop.

Under the general guidance of the White House's ONDCP and the leadership of State at the country-level, a number of U.S. agencies have a role in supporting counternarcotics efforts in these three key areas. ONDCP is, among other things, responsible for developing the National Drug Control Strategy and coordinating the implementation of this strategy. It does not implement any counternarcotics programs in Colombia. State is the lead agency responsible for setting U.S. counternarcotics policy in Colombia, consistent with the overall direction provided by the National Drug Control Strategy. The ambassador at Embassy Bogotá has ultimate authority over all U.S. agencies operating in the country. State is the agency primarily responsible for supporting eradication efforts in Colombia. A number of agencies are responsible for supporting various aspects of interdiction efforts in Colombia, including: State; DOD; DOJ's Criminal Division, DEA, and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI); and DHS's Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and U.S. Coast Guard.

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<sup>12</sup>Coca cultivation is illegal in Colombia, except for personal consumption in indigenous areas.

<sup>13</sup>Precursors are the substances used to make drugs. In addition to coca leaves, key precursors used in the production of cocaine include potassium permanganate, urea, and gasoline.

<sup>14</sup>For the purposes of this report we use the term "alternative development." USAID acknowledged that the term alternative development has been used for many years, but also noted that the range of alternative development assistance we describe in this report could also be termed "integrated rural development."

USAID is the agency primarily responsible for supporting alternative development efforts in Colombia.

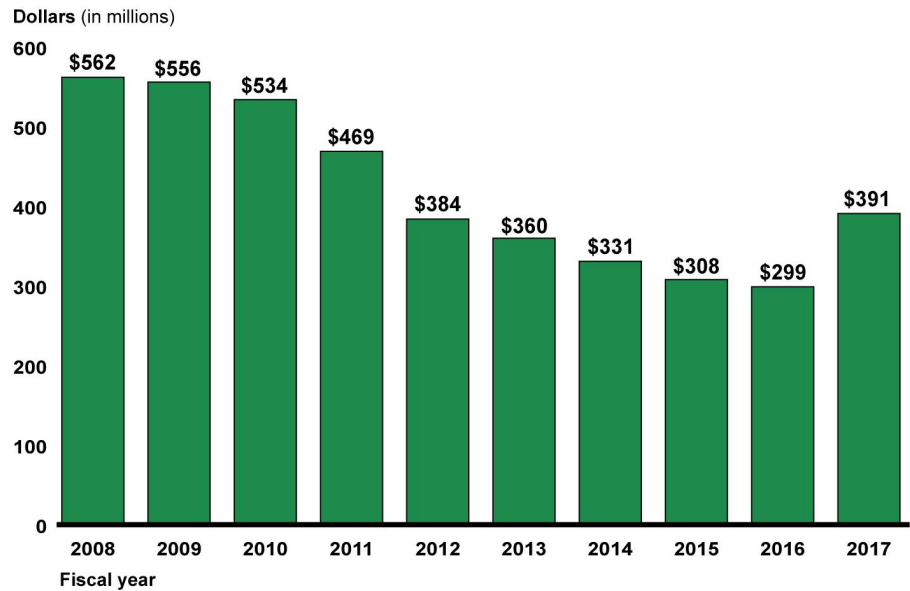
The U.S. government provided about \$5 billion in foreign assistance for Colombia in fiscal years 2008 through 2017. State and USAID provide foreign assistance to Colombia for a range of programs and activities that extend beyond counternarcotics efforts. State and USAID provide this assistance to Colombia through several accounts. State funds the largest share of its programs in Colombia through the International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement account. It also provides funding to Colombia through the Foreign Military Financing; International Military Education and Training; and Nonproliferation, Anti-terrorism, Demining, and Related Programs accounts. USAID implements its programs in Colombia using funding from the Economic Support Fund account. DOD provides counternarcotics funding to Colombia through its Central Transfer Account.<sup>15</sup> Figures 3 and 4 show U.S. assistance to Colombia in fiscal years 2008 through 2017.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Additionally, DOD provides limited funding to Colombia through other accounts such as the Traditional Commanders Activities and the Counter Terrorism Fellowship Program. However, according to DOD, these accounts do not fund counternarcotics activities.

<sup>16</sup>DOJ and DHS and their component offices and agencies also use their appropriated funds to support counternarcotics efforts in Colombia. For example, these funds pay for the salaries of U.S. personnel stationed in the country and support activities such as criminal investigations. We do not report data on funds appropriated to DOJ and DHS used for such purposes.

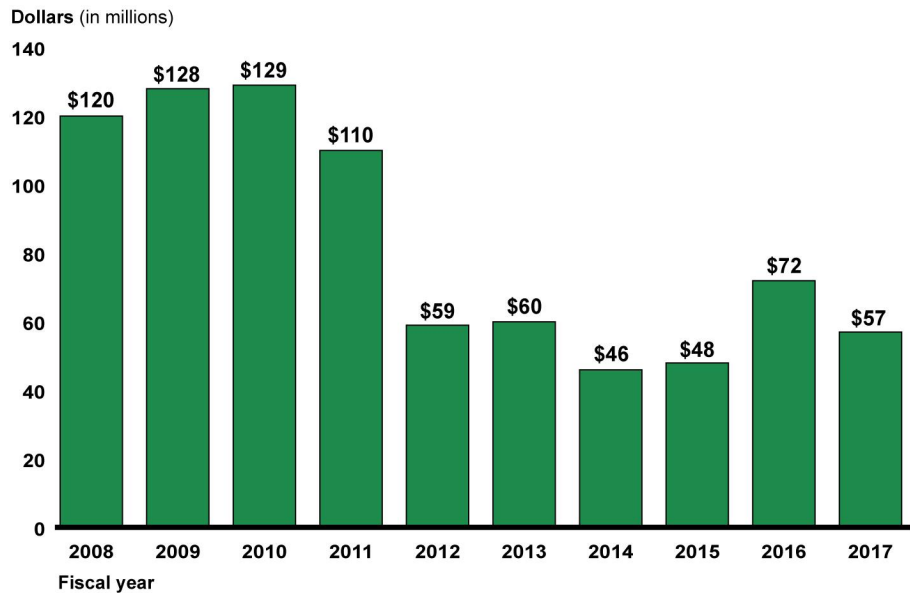
**Figure 3: Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development Foreign Assistance Provided to Colombia, Fiscal Years (FY) 2008-2017**



Source: GAO presentation of Department of State data. | GAO-19-106

Notes: According to the Department of State (State), as of August 2018, final fiscal year 2018 foreign assistance allocations for Colombia had not been determined; however, the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2018 provided that \$391.3 million in foreign assistance funds be made available for assistance to Colombia. State and the U.S. Agency for International Development requested \$246.4 million in foreign assistance for Colombia in fiscal year 2019.

**Figure 4: Department of Defense Estimated Counternarcotics Funding Provided for Colombia, Fiscal Years (FY) 2008-2017**



Source: GAO presentation of Department of Defense data. | GAO-19-106

Notes: The counternarcotics funding shown in this figure is from the Department of Defense's (DOD) Central Transfer Account. According to DOD officials, DOD allocates counternarcotics funding by projects rather than by country or region. However, DOD produced estimates of the amount of funds provided for Colombia. According to DOD, as of August 2018, it planned to allocate \$39.9 million in counternarcotics funding for Colombia in FY2018. DOD also provides limited funding to Colombia through other accounts such as the Traditional Commanders Activities; the Counter Terrorism Fellowship Program; Overseas Humanitarian, Disaster, and Civic Aid; and the Defense Security Cooperation Agency. However, according to DOD, these accounts do not fund counternarcotics activities.

The U.S. government's efforts in Colombia are part of its broader efforts to combat drug trafficking throughout the Western Hemisphere, including in other partner countries and in the "transit zone," which is the area from South America through the Caribbean Sea and the eastern Pacific Ocean used to transport illicit drugs to the United States.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the U.S. government combats the illegal drug problem through a range of domestic law enforcement efforts and programs designed to reduce illicit drug use. These various efforts are not addressed in this report.

<sup>17</sup>For more information on U.S. government counternarcotics efforts in the Western Hemisphere and in the transit zone specifically, see GAO, *Counternarcotics: Overview of U.S. Efforts in the Western Hemisphere*, [GAO-18-10](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 13, 2017) and GAO, *Coast Guard: Resources Provided for Drug Interdiction Operations in the Transit Zone, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands*, [GAO-14-527](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jun. 16, 2014).

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## Recent Developments in U.S.-Colombia Efforts on Counternarcotics

The Obama administration supported the peace process in Colombia and announced a new initiative in February 2016, known as Peace Colombia. Peace Colombia was designed to establish a new framework for cooperation between the two countries and refocus U.S. assistance to support peace agreement implementation. The administration called for an initial \$450 million in funding for Peace Colombia in fiscal year 2017. Under Peace Colombia, U.S. assistance was to be focused in three areas:

- consolidating and expanding progress on security and counternarcotics while reintegrating the FARC into society;
- expanding the Colombian state's presence and institutions to strengthen the rule of law and rural economies, especially in former conflict areas; and
- promoting justice and other essential services for conflict victims.

More recently, the Trump administration has raised questions about Colombia's commitment to meeting its counternarcotics obligations. As required by law, the Trump administration in September 2017 issued a memorandum documenting the annual presidential determination on countries that are major drug transit or illicit drug producing countries. As in years past, the memorandum identified Colombia as one of these countries. The memorandum also stated that the administration had seriously considered designating Colombia as a country that had demonstrably failed to adhere to its obligations under international counternarcotics agreements due to the extraordinary growth of coca cultivation and cocaine production over the past three years. According to the memorandum, the administration ultimately decided not to take this step because of the close partnership between the U.S. government and the Colombian National Police and Armed Forces. However, the memorandum underscored that the administration would keep the designation as an option and expected Colombia to make significant progress in reducing coca cultivation and cocaine production.

As part of the U.S.-Colombia High Level Dialogue in March 2018, the U.S. and Colombian governments pledged to expand counternarcotics cooperation over the next 5 years with the goal of reducing Colombia's

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estimated coca cultivation and cocaine production by 50 percent by the end of 2023.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>The High Level Dialogue was a meeting involving senior officials from the U.S. and Colombian governments. At the meeting, the two governments addressed a range of issues including democracy, human rights, governance, and social and economic opportunities.

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## U.S. Agencies Conducted Performance Monitoring of Counternarcotics Activities in Colombia, but Have Not Evaluated Key Efforts and State Has Not Undertaken a Comprehensive Review of the Overall Approach

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### U.S. Agencies Conducted Performance Monitoring of Counternarcotics Activities in Colombia, but Have Not Evaluated the Effectiveness of Eradication and Interdiction Efforts

U.S. agencies<sup>19</sup> have conducted ongoing performance monitoring of various counternarcotics activities in Colombia, but State, DOD, DHS, and DOJ have not conducted evaluations of U.S. eradication and interdiction programs.<sup>20</sup> Performance monitoring is the ongoing review and reporting of program accomplishments, particularly progress toward pre-established goals. It is typically conducted by program or agency management. Performance monitoring focuses on whether a program has achieved its objectives, expressed as measurable performance standards. In contrast, program evaluations are individual systematic studies conducted periodically or on an ad hoc basis to assess how well a program is working. They are often conducted by experts, either from inside or outside the agency, who are not working on the program. Program evaluations typically examine a broader range of information on

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<sup>19</sup>For the purposes of this report, we use the terms “U.S. agencies” and “U.S. government” to encompass federal agencies and their components that have roles and responsibilities in Colombian counternarcotics efforts, including State; USAID; DOD; DHS’s CBP, ICE, and Coast Guard; and DOJ’s Criminal Division, DEA, and the FBI.

<sup>20</sup>USAID completed an evaluation in 2009 that assessed the U.S. government’s support for Plan Colombia’s illicit crop reduction components. Although the study’s main focus was alternative development it also addressed certain issues related to eradication and interdiction.



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program performance and its context than is feasible to monitor on an ongoing basis.<sup>21</sup>

### Performance Monitoring and Reporting

U.S. agencies have conducted a range of performance monitoring efforts to assess their counternarcotics activities in Colombia. While some monitoring is performed through interagency mechanisms, most monitoring is done at the individual agency level.

Interagency monitoring mechanisms include ONDCP reports, such as its annual Budget and Performance Summary and its annual National Drug Control Strategy Performance Reporting System Report,<sup>22</sup> and Embassy Bogotá's annual Performance Plan and Reports. ONDCP's Budget and Performance Summaries and Performance Reporting System Reports are not Colombia-specific and discuss a range of domestic and international counternarcotics efforts. These reports, however, generally provide some limited performance information related to Colombia. For example, ONDCP's Budget and Performance Summaries include information, by agency, on their counternarcotics budget requests as well as some selected performance reporting. As part of these documents, State and USAID have reported data on certain performance metrics specific to Colombia, such as the number of hectares of drug crops eradicated in U.S. government-assisted areas of Colombia and the number of rural households benefitting from U.S. government interventions in Colombia. In addition, the reports contain narrative related to the results of counternarcotics activities in Colombia. At the country level, Embassy Bogotá's annual Performance Plan and Report provides information on the embassy's progress in meeting its goals and objectives, including those related to counternarcotics. As part of these reports, the embassy provides data on results for the fiscal year, relative to established targets, for a range of counternarcotics performance metrics. These Performance Plan and Reports primarily focus on State and USAID activities, rather than describing the results of all U.S. agencies' activities in Colombia.

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<sup>21</sup>For more information on the differences between performance monitoring and evaluation, see GAO, *Performance Measurement and Evaluation: Definitions and Relationships*, [GAO-11-646SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 2011).

<sup>22</sup>ONDCP has not released a Budget and Performance Summary since fiscal year 2017 or a Performance Reporting System Report since fiscal year 2016.

At the agency level, State, USAID, DOD, DOJ, and DHS and their components have, to varying degrees, conducted performance monitoring of their counternarcotics activities in Colombia. Examples of key performance monitoring activities, by agency, are described below:

- **State:** State, with input from other U.S. agencies involved in counternarcotics efforts, produces its annual *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, which is global in scope, but includes specific country reports, including on Colombia. These reports describe key steps that Colombia has taken over the year to combat drug trafficking and how U.S. assistance has supported these efforts. In addition, State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) has developed a Colombia country plan for 2017 through 2021 that presents results data for a number of counternarcotics-related indicators, such as the percent of coca hectares eradicated against Colombia's national goals and the number of hours flown by the Colombian National Police in support of counternarcotics and other related missions. The INL country plan also establishes performance targets for future years. State/INL implementing partners are also responsible for producing periodic reports that describe their progress in meeting pre-established performance targets for their projects.
- **USAID:** USAID has developed a Colombia-specific information system, the Monitoring and Evaluation Clearinghouse (Monitor), that provides the agency with information about the status and progress of all USAID alternative development projects in Colombia. For example, Monitor tracks metrics such as the number of hectares of licit crops supported by USAID, the number of beneficiaries from improved infrastructure services, and the number of households who have obtained documented property rights as a result of USAID assistance. USAID implementing partners are also responsible for producing periodic reports that describe their progress in meeting pre-established performance targets for their projects.
- **DOD:** U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) completes annual Program Objective Memorandums (POM) related to each of its program areas as part of the DOD budget process. Each POM is tied to a particular project code. For example, SOUTHCOM has a project code for counternarcotics support in South America and a project code for the Regional Helicopter Training Center in Colombia. As part of each POM, SOUTHCOM reports on the activities supported under the project code and reports on results relative to pre-established performance targets. Examples of metrics tracked in the POMs include the rate of operational readiness of Colombian maritime patrol

aircraft and the hours a day the Colombian Air Force was able to provide video surveillance to support operations.

- **DOJ:** DEA has developed its annual Threat Enforcement Planning Process, which guides the agency's operational strategy and serves as a means of monitoring performance. Under this three-stage process, DEA offices, including the one in Colombia, first identify threats within their area of responsibility that link to agency-wide threats that DEA has established. The offices then develop mitigation/enforcement plans for each identified threat, and, subsequently, produce impact statements that summarize the outcomes and results related to each mitigation/enforcement plan. For example, the impact statements describe key arrests that have been made and major seizure operations. In addition, the FBI office in Colombia produces an annual summary of statistics to monitor the accomplishments of the Colombian vetted unit that it supports, including the number of arrests, the amount of drugs seized, and the commercial value of assets seized.
- **DHS:** ICE and CBP stated that they do not conduct performance monitoring activities specific to Colombia. Coast Guard officials stated that the Coast Guard compiles information that it provides to its Colombian counterparts on a recurring basis, including data on the number of Colombian-flagged ship interdictions it has completed and the number of Colombian nationals apprehended. All three agencies contribute to DHS annual performance reports. These annual reports include some performance information related to DHS counternarcotics efforts more broadly, such as ICE's work combatting transnational criminal organizations that may operate in Colombia.

State, USAID, DOD, DOJ, and DHS use a range of metrics to assist them in both formally and informally monitoring the performance of eradication, interdiction, and alternative development efforts in Colombia. These agencies produce some of these data, while in other cases they use data from other sources including implementing partners, the Colombian government, and the UN. Examples of key metrics include:

- **Eradication:** hectares of coca cultivated, hectares of coca eradicated, and coca replanting rates.
- **Interdiction:** amounts of cocaine seized, the number of cocaine processing laboratories destroyed, the number of drug trafficking organizations disrupted or dismantled, and the number of drug trafficking suspects extradited to the United States.

- **Alternative Development:** the number of households involved in coca cultivation, increases in the value of sales of legal products in areas involved in narcotics production, the number of households receiving land titles as a result of U.S. assistance, and the value of agricultural and rural loans generated through U.S. assistance.

State, USAID, DEA, and DOD have undertaken efforts to further strengthen their performance monitoring efforts in recent years. For example, in September 2017, State/INL signed a new monitoring and evaluation contract for the Western Hemisphere which is designed to strengthen its existing performance measures and identify new metrics to better assess performance. According to a State official, the contractor is currently working with both State officials in Washington D.C. and at embassies in the Western Hemisphere to, among other things, develop a list of performance measures that link to INL's goals for the region and that involve data that can be feasibly and consistently collected across the countries in the region. USAID officials noted that recently USAID has been collecting data on contextual indicators and developing baseline studies to help inform new alternative development programs it is implementing in Colombia. According to USAID officials, these baseline studies have collected information related to productivity, exports, income, multidimensional poverty, citizen security, social capital, and trust in institutions. In addition, as noted above, DEA established its new Threat Enforcement Planning Process in fiscal year 2017. According to DEA, this process is designed to, among other things, allow the agency to move beyond basic output measures and better assess how its offices, including the office in Colombia, are doing in combatting priority threats within their area of responsibility. Finally, according to a DOD official, DOD's Office of Counternarcotics and Global Threats is developing guidance for assessing the counternarcotics programs it supports around the world to help the office's leadership make better informed decisions about how to best use DOD's limited counternarcotics resources.

Although performance metrics are useful for monitoring progress and can help inform evaluations of effectiveness, they are generally not intended to assess effectiveness directly. For example, U.S. agencies track data on the amount of cocaine seized in Colombia, but a number of U.S. officials noted that it is unclear to what extent increases in cocaine seizures in recent years are due to the increased effectiveness of interdiction efforts or more cocaine being present in Colombia to seize. As another example, some agencies track data on the number of Colombian officials receiving counternarcotics training through their programs, but

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these data are not designed to capture what, if any, improvements in counternarcotics outcomes are achieved as a result of that training.

### Evaluations

USAID has completed independent evaluations of several of its alternative development programs. However, other agencies have not formally evaluated the long-term effectiveness of their eradication or interdiction activities.

**Alternative Development:** Since 2008, USAID has conducted a number of formal, independent evaluations of its alternative development programs in Colombia.<sup>23</sup> Some of these evaluations have examined USAID's alternative development efforts more broadly, while others have focused on the effectiveness of specific programs such as USAID's Consolidation and Enhanced Livelihood Initiative, More Investment in Sustainable Alternative Development, and Areas for Municipal-Level Alternative Development programs. Many of these evaluations were done through a 5-year monitoring and evaluation contract that USAID awarded to Management Systems International in May 2013.<sup>24</sup>

**Eradication and Interdiction:** State, DOD, DEA, FBI, ICE, CBP, and the U.S. Coast Guard all reported that they had not conducted any formal, systematic evaluations to assess the effectiveness of U.S.-supported eradication and interdiction efforts in Colombia since 2008. State documents indicate that State was considering an evaluation of its counternarcotics activities in Colombia as early as 2015; however, State officials noted that these plans were delayed due to competing priorities. State reported that it now plans to award a contract in 2019 for an

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<sup>23</sup>According to USAID, in addition to its evaluations of alternative development programs in Colombia, USAID has also developed assessments with complementary information, such as regional case studies and sectoral studies on tertiary roads, critical river segments in relation to illegal economies, and alternative development institutional models. USAID has also conducted evaluations of a number of its other assistance programs in Colombia in addition to its alternative development programs.

<sup>24</sup>USAID noted that it plans to award a follow on monitoring and evaluation contract by the end of 2018. Through this contract, USAID plans to continue to receive technical and advisory services related to performance monitoring and the design and implementation of performance and impact evaluations and other assessments.

evaluation of its counternarcotics activities.<sup>25</sup> According to State officials, a scope of work for the evaluation has not been completed, so the details of the planned evaluation have not yet been decided, including whether the evaluation would assess activities in the long term and which activities it would include. State's November 2017 evaluation policy highlights the importance of evaluations in achieving U.S. foreign policy outcomes and ensuring accountability.<sup>26</sup> The policy establishes a requirement that all large programs, such as State's counternarcotics program in Colombia, be evaluated at least once in the program's lifetime, or once every 5 years for ongoing programs.<sup>27</sup> According to State officials, evaluations can be challenging to design and potentially entail significant investments of resources and time; however, State's evaluation policy reaffirms the importance and feasibility of conducting evaluations, including impact evaluations. Without evaluations of U.S.-supported eradication and interdiction efforts in Colombia, U.S. agencies do not have complete information regarding the long-term effectiveness of these efforts in reducing coca cultivation and the cocaine supply. As the lead agency responsible for setting U.S. counternarcotics policy in Colombia, State is best positioned to lead an evaluation of U.S.-supported eradication and interdiction efforts in the country. However, such an evaluation would benefit from the involvement and expertise of other U.S. agencies engaged in counternarcotics activities in Colombia. State's evaluation policy encourages such evaluations that are undertaken collaboratively with other U.S. agencies.

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<sup>25</sup>Although not focused on the effectiveness of eradication or interdiction, State/INL has commissioned independent evaluations of some programs in Colombia. INL commissioned a 2013 evaluation of its Rule of Law program in Colombia. In addition, INL and U.S. Southern Command commissioned a 2018 evaluation of their joint U.S.-Colombia Action Plan, which supports Colombian security forces' training of other partner country security forces in Latin America.

<sup>26</sup>Department of State, *Department of State Program and Project Design, Monitoring, and Evaluation Policy* (November 2017).

<sup>27</sup>State's evaluation policy defines "large" programs as those meeting or exceeding the median cost of programs, projects, or processes for the implementing bureau or independent office.

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## State Has Not Conducted a Comprehensive Review of the Overall U.S. Counternarcotics Approach in Colombia to Determine the Most Effective Combination of Activities

The U.S. counternarcotics approach in Colombia has historically entailed a combination of eradication, interdiction, and alternative development programs. Although the U.S. government implements a wide range of counternarcotics efforts in Colombia and can point to various results for these activities, State and other U.S. agencies have no systematic way to determine whether the current combination of activities is the most effective approach to achieve U.S. goals. According to DEA officials, measuring the effectiveness of overall U.S.-counternarcotics efforts in Colombia has been particularly challenging in recent years due to historical, transformational events which have taken place in that country. Various U.S. officials acknowledged that the substantial increases in coca cultivation and cocaine production as well as the other significant changes that have occurred in Colombia in recent years, including the end of aerial eradication, the conclusion of the peace agreement with the FARC, and decreases in Colombian and U.S. counternarcotics budgets, necessitate that the U.S. government review its approach to counternarcotics efforts and consider adjustments to reflect these developments.

In addition, the U.S. government's approach is affected by Colombia's counternarcotics priorities and key initiatives, which continue to evolve. For example, in September 2015, Colombia announced a new counternarcotics strategy which specified three priority areas: rural development programs to reduce drug cultivation; law enforcement efforts to dismantle drug trafficking organizations; and public health approaches to reduce domestic drug consumption. Colombia has also launched an initiative to establish Strategic Operational Centers (known by the Spanish acronym CEO) in key regions of the country. These CEOs are designed to bring together the Colombian military, police, and civilian agencies to focus on a whole-of-government approach to improving security, establishing a state presence, and fighting drug trafficking in these areas. The Colombian government has now launched CEOs in three areas—Tumaco, San José del Guaviare, and Caucasia—and plans to open a fourth, in Cúcuta, later in 2018 (see fig. 5).<sup>28</sup> It is also considering adding a fifth CEO in the Caquetá/Putumayo region. In

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<sup>28</sup>Tumaco was the first CEO to be established. It became operational in January 2017.

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addition, the Colombian government, with support from the U.S. embassy, launched the Antioquia Free from Coca initiative in December 2017. The initiative seeks to bring together the Colombian national government, local governments in Antioquia, the armed forces, the private sector, and the U.S. government to create a new model for development and counternarcotics in the Antioquia region. State has reported that the U.S. government plans to shift substantial resources to the initiative.



**Figure 5: Map of Current and Planned Strategic Operational Centers in Colombia**



Source: GAO presentation of information from the Department of State and Map Resources. | GAO-19-106

Note: The Government of Colombia plans to open a Strategic Operational Center in Cúcuta sometime in 2018.

Various U.S. officials stated that finding an appropriate combination of eradication, interdiction, and alternative development assistance is critical to achieve the U.S. objective of reducing cocaine production and trafficking in Colombia in this new context. To find this combination, U.S.

officials stated that there are a range of considerations to weigh. For example, U.S. officials stated that they must consider to what extent to prioritize pursuing short-term reductions in coca cultivation and cocaine supplies versus longer-term efforts to address the underlying causes of the drug problem in Colombia, such as the widespread lack of legal economic opportunities in rural areas of the country. In addition, U.S. officials and documents from various agencies noted that counternarcotics efforts must be properly sequenced and coordinated to be effective. DEA analysis, for example, found that farmers are unlikely to permanently abandon coca farming without sustained and concurrent eradication and alternative development.

Although U.S. officials noted the importance of finding an appropriate combination of eradication, interdiction, and alternative development assistance, they acknowledged that they have not undertaken a comprehensive review of their counternarcotics approach in Colombia that considers the benefits and limitations of these efforts to determine whether the U.S. government's current combination of activities is the most effective approach to achieve U.S. counternarcotics goals. Officials from State and other agencies noted that such reviews are challenging to do systematically and noted that they must generally rely on imperfect metrics, such as the amount of coca being cultivated, to determine if their counternarcotics approach is working. In addition, most U.S. efforts at measuring performance and evaluating results are focused at the individual agency level, rather than designed to determine what combination of U.S. counternarcotics activities will best achieve U.S. objectives of reducing the cocaine supply.

Federal internal control standards state that agency management should use quality information to achieve the entity's objectives.<sup>29</sup> Among other things, the standards note agency management should use quality information to make informed decisions and evaluate the entity's performance in achieving key objectives and addressing risks. Without a comprehensive review of the U.S. counternarcotics approach in Colombia that considers the combination of eradication, interdiction, and alternative development efforts, the U.S. government lacks important information on how to most effectively combat drug trafficking in a changing environment in Colombia. To undertake such a review, the U.S. government might

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<sup>29</sup>GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: September 2014).

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determine the need to collect additional information and conduct further evaluations of its counternarcotics programs, but it could also potentially use a range of existing information on what is known about the effectiveness of eradication, interdiction, and alternative development programs. State, as the lead agency at the embassy in Colombia, would be best positioned to guide an interagency effort to undertake such a review.

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## Available Evidence Indicates that U.S.-Supported Eradication Efforts in Colombia May Not Be an Effective Long-Term Supply-Reduction Approach

State's INL has supported Colombian aerial and manual eradication efforts over time, but these efforts have declined after the Government of Colombia's decision to end aerial eradication and several years of limited or no funding for manual eradication driven by decreased Colombian government demand for this assistance, according to State officials. Despite these declines, officials from several U.S. agencies reported eradication should be a vital component of U.S. counternarcotics efforts in Colombia. Nevertheless, U.S. officials and the studies and experts in our review identified a number of factors which may reduce the effectiveness of eradication as a supply reduction approach, including the strategies coca growers use to mitigate the effects of eradication and potential adverse effects it may have on Colombian citizens. Additionally, third-party research suggests that eradication efforts do not substantially affect the long-term supply of cocaine and are potentially costly.

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### Since 2008 U.S.-Supported Eradication Efforts Have Declined after Changes in Colombian Counternarcotics Policy; However, U.S. Officials Believe Eradication Is an Important Component of an Overall Counternarcotics Approach

INL has provided financial assistance and operational support for Colombian eradication efforts in three key areas: aerial eradication, manual eradication, and aviation support. Overall eradication efforts, however, have declined over time and the Colombian government stopped aerial eradication altogether in 2015.

- **Aerial Eradication:** Until 2015, INL directed the largest portion of its eradication assistance toward the Colombian National Police aerial eradication program. The program's goal was to reduce coca cultivation and harvests by spraying coca fields with glyphosate.<sup>30</sup> INL helped fund, plan, and operate the aerial eradication program. It provided the pilots, planning, aircraft, logistics, maintenance, and fuel to operate the program's two spray bases. Funding for the aerial eradication program declined over time from \$66.2 million in fiscal year 2008 to \$12.7 million in fiscal year 2014. From October 2013 to October 2014, aerial eradication was temporarily suspended by the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá after two pilots were shot down during eradication operations. In May 2015, the Colombian government stopped the aerial eradication program amid concerns that glyphosate had a negative impact on public health. Cessation of aerial spraying took effect in October 2015.<sup>31</sup>
- **Manual Eradication:** According to State officials, U.S. assistance shifted from aerial to manual eradication after the 2015 ban on aerial spraying. Manual eradication involves using mobile eradication teams, which are transported into coca fields to manually remove and destroy coca plants (see fig. 6). These teams are made up of Colombian police and military personnel, as well as civilian contractors, according to INL officials. Initially manual eradication was used in concert with aerial spraying in an effort to combat replanting in areas already subjected to aerial spraying, but with the ban on aerial spraying, manual eradication became a stand-alone approach. INL provides a variety of support for manual eradication teams including operational support and equipment, such as demining and brush cutters. Additionally, INL helps identify and fund the development of new technologies that might improve the effectiveness of manual eradication, such as armored ground spraying vehicles which protect manual eradicators from the danger of improvised explosive devices

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<sup>30</sup>Glyphosate is commonly used in commercial agricultural herbicides. Prior to ending aerial eradication in 2015, Colombia was the only country that had allowed the spraying of glyphosate over its territory for counternarcotics purposes according to a 2017 Congressional Research Service report.

<sup>31</sup>According to State, the initial decision to suspend aerial eradication by the Colombian government was political and stemmed from a 2015 World Health Organization report indicating that glyphosate was a "probable carcinogen." Subsequently, according to State, the Colombian Constitutional Court issued a series of rulings that prohibited aerial eradication until the government could design a program that met standards for oversight and implementation. State officials noted that glyphosate remains legal in Colombia and is widely used for agricultural and home purposes.

and landmines. INL funding for manual eradication varied during fiscal years 2008 through 2016, ranging from four fiscal years where INL provided no funding to a high of \$9.5 million in fiscal year 2014. INL funding for manual eradication increased substantially in fiscal year 2017 to \$26 million. According to State, decreases in the budget for manual eradication were driven by reduced Colombian government demand for this assistance.

**Figure 6: Colombian Manual Eradicators Destroying Coca Fields**



Source: GAO. | GAO-19-106

- **INL Aviation Support:** INL has also provided aviation support to the Colombian National Police and the Colombian Army to assist counternarcotics efforts. According to INL, these aviation programs provide critical assistance for a number of counternarcotics efforts such as eradication, but also for interdiction, and security operations. Because Colombia is a vast country with rugged terrain, many rivers, and poor roads, State officials indicated air mobility is critical for effective counternarcotics operations.
- **Colombian National Police (CNP):** INL provides logistical, operational, maintenance, safety, and training assistance to the CNP's aviation brigade in support of its counternarcotics operations. The CNP aviation program costs roughly one-third of INL's Colombia budget, averaging about \$55 million annually in

fiscal years 2008 through 2017. Under this program INL helped the CNP procure its air fleet. Currently, the INL aviation program supports a total of 56 CNP aircraft, of which 52 are owned by the U.S. government (see fig. 7).<sup>32</sup> Additionally, INL's aviation program provides assistance for the CNP to build maintenance facilities, develop training plans, implement safety programs, and procure equipment, such as flight recorders and communications gear. As of 2018, INL also plans to provide \$21 million over 4 years for the CNP's aerial imagery collection and data analysis system, which Colombian authorities use to map coca fields and plan eradication missions.<sup>33</sup>

- **Colombian Army:** INL provided aviation support for the Colombian Army prior to Colombia's takeover of the army aviation program in 2012—a process known as nationalization. INL provided the Colombian Army's aviation program nearly \$150 million from fiscal years 2008 through 2011. According to INL, this support contributed significantly to the Colombian Army's aerial eradication efforts as well as efforts to dismantle armed drug trafficking organizations, such as the FARC and ELN. In 2008, the Colombian government began to nationalize 62 aircraft from INL and, in 2012, assumed full responsibility for their maintenance and operations.

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<sup>32</sup>The 56 CNP aircraft that INL supports include 52 helicopters and 4 airplanes. In total, the CNP air fleet includes 80 helicopters and 56 airplanes.

<sup>33</sup>This system is called the Antinarcotics Monitoring and Integrated Information System.

**Figure 7: U.S.-Supported Colombian National Police Helicopter Maintenance Facility**

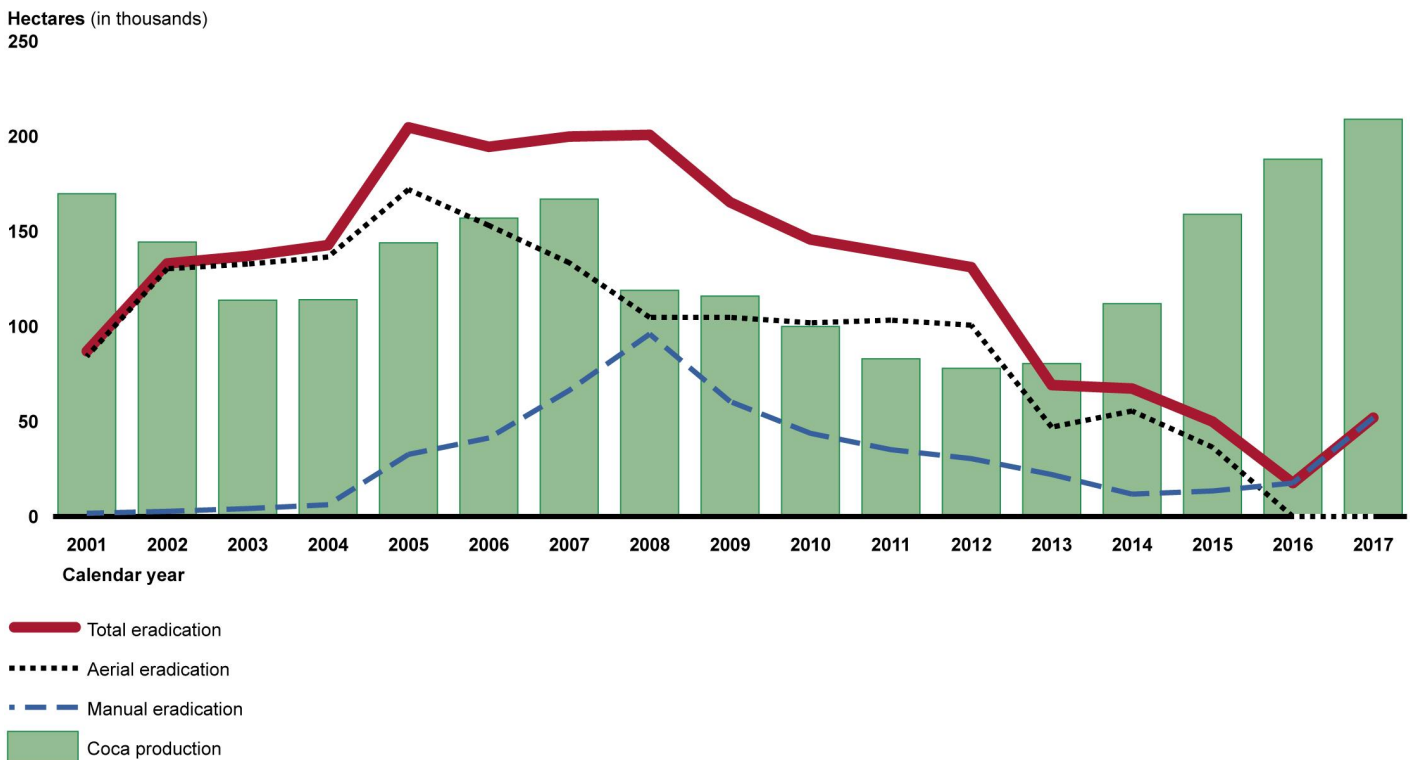
Source: GAO. | GAO-19-106

State monitoring data indicate total eradication levels (aerial and manual) generally increased from 2001 through 2008, and then decreased thereafter (see fig. 8).<sup>34</sup> In 2002, aerial eradication levels began to increase, reaching a high point in 2005, and then falling consistently until 2008. From 2008 through 2012 aerial eradication remained generally constant before the temporary suspension of the program in 2013. Aerial eradication operations resumed in October 2014, but the program was stopped completely in October 2015. Manual eradication levels increased significantly after 2004 and reached a peak by 2008. After 2008, manual eradication steadily declined through 2015, as Colombian government funding for these efforts were cut by two-thirds, according to State officials. However, this trend was reversed in 2016, and State reported Colombia more than doubled its manual eradication efforts from 2016

<sup>34</sup>U.S. officials acknowledged that monitoring data on eradication can be difficult to interpret because coca fields can be aerially “eradicated” multiple times in a year and still yield crops. For instance, DEA officials stated that the same 1-hectare field could be sprayed three times, counted as 3 hectares “eradicated,” yet still produce a coca crop after the series of interventions.

through 2017. Coca cultivation initially dropped from 2001 to 2003, but then increased until 2007 as eradication expanded. From 2008 through 2012, coca cultivation decreased alongside total eradication levels. However, coca cultivation began to increase in 2013, and reached record levels by 2017.

**Figure 8: Estimated Hectares of Coca Cultivation and Coca Eradication (Aerial and Manual), 2001-2017**



Source: GAO presentation of Department of State data. | GAO-19-106

Note: The same coca fields can be eradicated multiple times in one year. Thus, for some years, the total estimated number of hectares of coca eradicated may exceed the total hectares of coca cultivated.

Despite overall declines in eradication, according to U.S. officials these efforts remain an important component of an overall counternarcotics strategy in Colombia. Although State has not conducted an empirical assessment on the nature and strength of the relationship between aggregate eradication levels and coca cultivation levels, State officials stated that eradication is important not only as a means of destroying existing coca crops but also as a deterrent to farmers considering planting coca. For example, State officials noted that from 2005 through 2012 the number of hectares of coca under cultivation in Colombia decreased by



over 50 percent, which they attributed to aggressive aerial and manual eradication efforts during this period. State officials also believe reductions in eradication levels contributed to the significant increase in coca cultivation that began in 2013. However, State data indicate that from 2004 through 2007 coca cultivation increased as eradication levels increased. Likewise, from 2008 through 2012 coca cultivation decreased as eradication levels decreased. State officials also stated that eradication efforts are beneficial in several other ways not directly related to reducing the cocaine supply. For instance, eradication efforts act as a show of government presence and force in remote areas of Colombia. In addition, State cited eradication as one factor that drove the FARC to the negotiating table. In 2014, the Defense Intelligence Agency conducted analysis that assessed the relationship between eradication and coca cultivation levels in Colombia and found that eradication efforts were correlated with downward trends in coca cultivation, but it did not assess the causal effect of eradication on coca cultivation.

U.S. government analysis has also found that sustained aerial eradication can reduce the productivity of coca plants. A 2009 DEA analysis of three major coca growing regions of Colombia found that coca-leaf yields had decreased by an average of 10 percent per year over the previous 2 to 5 years in areas subjected to aerial eradication.<sup>35</sup> Because not all coca growing regions are equally productive, DEA officials stated that targeted aerial spraying of Colombia's most productive regions could result in more effective eradication efforts.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) studies have also noted ways that eradication may impact coca cultivation. For example, the UNODC 2018 World Drug Report noted that reductions in eradication levels was one of a number of different factors that led to increasing coca cultivation levels since 2013. Similarly, UNODC reported in its 2017 survey of territories affected by illicit crops in Colombia that one of the possible drivers of the increases in coca cultivation in Colombia was coca growers' perception of reduced risk due to the suspension of aerial eradication and the possibility of avoiding manual eradication by means of

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<sup>35</sup>This DEA study measured the effect of aerial eradication on coca productivity and did not measure the effectiveness of eradication as a supply reduction counternarcotics strategy. For example, the analysis did not examine how replanting and displacement—the shift of coca cultivation to other areas—can offset the overall supply effects of eradication. In addition, the declines in coca yields documented in DEA's analysis have now been fully reversed.

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blockades against eradicators. In addition, the study noted that manual eradication imposes costs on coca farmers because it takes 8 months for harvests to be ready after coca crops are replanted resulting in low productivity in this initial stage.

Although U.S. officials believe that eradication is an important counternarcotics tool, they also stated that eradication cannot be used in isolation and must be paired with interdiction and alternative development efforts to form a comprehensive counternarcotics approach. U.S. officials also noted that using eradication as a supply-reduction strategy amounts to “mowing the grass”—that is, it represents a short-term approach to reducing the coca crop. As such, they stated that eradication efforts must be maintained indefinitely to affect the cocaine supply. According to State, areas with high levels of coca cultivation tend to have the highest presence of armed groups, violence, and insecurity and thus require a comprehensive and sustained approach, including eradication, to be able to demonstrate a viable Colombian state presence.

According to INL officials in Bogotá, the embassy has discussed potential options for resuming the aerial spraying program with the Colombian government. These officials acknowledged that restarting the program would be costly; however, they also stated that they believe it could be an important part of a comprehensive counternarcotics program. Colombia’s President Iván Duque, elected in June 2018, has also indicated that he is willing to consider resuming the spraying program. Furthermore, the Colombian government is exploring the use of alternative technologies, such as drones, to spray herbicides in an effort to work around the aerial spraying cessation. The Colombian National Police are conducting tests to determine the effectiveness of these efforts. State noted that it is observing these tests.

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### Multiple Factors May Limit the Effectiveness of Eradication Efforts or Undermine Their Viability as a Long-Term Supply-Reduction Strategy

U.S. and UN officials as well as third-party studies we reviewed identified a number of factors that reduced the effectiveness of eradication efforts at an operational level. We previously reported that U.S. funded counternarcotics efforts, which focused on aerial spraying, did not achieve Plan Colombia’s overarching goal to reduce the cultivation,

production, and distribution of cocaine by 50 percent, in part because coca farmers responded with a series of effective countermeasures.<sup>36</sup> Separately, State also indicated that aerial eradication was becoming less effective prior to the end of the spraying program in 2015. Similarly, U.S. and UN officials noted factors that had a negative impact on the effectiveness of manual eradication efforts.

- **Crop displacement:** U.S. officials, UN reports, and third-party researchers have noted that eradication has caused coca cultivation to move, or be displaced, to smaller plots and areas “off-limits” to aerial spraying, such as national parks, territories near international borders, and protected indigenous and Afro-Colombian areas, thus diminishing its impact on supply reduction. According to INL, at the beginning of the 2000s plots of 10 or more hectares were commonplace, easy to identify, and spray, but by 2016, the average plot size was less than a hectare, making aerial spraying more difficult. In addition, coca cultivation in areas off-limits to aerial spraying, such as national parks, border areas, and indigenous and Afro-Colombian areas, has increased substantially. According to one State cable, in 2014 over 70 percent of the nationwide cultivation increases in cultivation occurred in these areas. The Congressional Research Service reported that cultivation increased in these areas by 50 percent between 2014 and 2015.<sup>37</sup> Likewise, a UN report noted that between 2015 and 2016, coca cultivation had increased by 32 percent in indigenous areas, by 45 percent in Afro-Colombian areas, and by 27 percent in national parks.<sup>38</sup> According to the UN report, these areas account for only .04 percent of Colombia’s national territory but are the source of 32 percent of the nation’s coca cultivation. Four of the studies in our literature review also concluded that eradication led to crop displacement. One study indicated that the displacement of coca cultivation tends to disproportionately affect vulnerable populations by concentrating crime in the areas where these populations tend to live.<sup>39</sup> The study concluded that coca

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<sup>36</sup>[GAO-09-71](#).

<sup>37</sup>Congressional Research Service, *Colombia’s Changing Approach to Drug Policy*, R44779 (Nov. 30, 2017).

<sup>38</sup>United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Colombia: Survey of Territories Affected by Illicit Crops—2016* (August 2017).

cultivation has increased in some of the most socially and environmentally vulnerable areas of Colombia, including disadvantaged rural communities and has tended to further marginalize those Afro-Colombian communities that experienced dramatic increases in coca cultivation.

- **Countermeasures:** Coca growers and drug traffickers can employ countermeasures, such as using mines and improvised explosive devices, which create serious risks for manual eradication teams. For example, 4 manual eradicators were killed and 39 wounded during manual eradication operations in 2017, according to one State cable. Likewise, aerial spraying operations were also targeted by attacks. For example, in 2013 two pilots were shot down while conducting aerial eradication operations. This attack led to a temporary halt in aerial spraying operations. One State cable reported that from 1996 to October 2015 at least five spray aircraft were downed by hostile fire, resulting in the deaths of four pilots.
- **Replanting, pruning, and other mitigation efforts:** Coca growers have developed techniques, including replanting and pruning, which can mitigate damage to coca plants and reduce the effectiveness of eradication efforts. According to a 2017 UN report, 80 percent of the coca fields detected in 2016 had previously been subjected to aerial or manual eradication efforts. One DEA report confirmed that 25 percent of coca growers in the region they studied in 2008 had replanted their crops after spraying. Colombian government data showed that from 2014 through 2016 areas subjected to manual eradication were replanted between 25 and 37 percent of the time. In addition, coca growers can prune bushes immediately after spraying to help counter the effects of glyphosate and allow the plants to yield fresh leaves that may be harvested. According to data provided by State, from 2006 through 2012 areas subjected to aerial spraying were reconstituted—replanted or pruned—on average about 56 percent of the time.<sup>40</sup> Growers may also intersperse coca plants alongside licit agricultural crops because aerial eradication efforts tend to be focused on large coca fields and attempt to avoid licit crops.

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<sup>39</sup>Alexander Rincón-Ruiz, Hyarold Leonardo Correa, Daniel Oswaldo León, and Stewart Williams, “Coca Cultivation and Crop Eradication in Colombia: The Challenges of Integrating Rural Reality into Effective Anti-drug Policy,” *International Journal of Drug Policy*, vol. 33 (2016).

<sup>40</sup>According to State these reconstitution data are based on a limited, nongeneralizable sample. Therefore, actual reconstitution rates may be higher or lower than reported here.

- **Coca growers' economic incentives:** According to a DEA study, in 2007, nearly 60 percent of coca growers were ready to abandon coca farming. Likewise, a 2009 DEA study stated that sustained aerial eradication efforts, lasting 5 to 8 years, would force coca growers to give up coca farming. DEA noted that the Putumayo region, which it used as a model in the study, was "nearing a tipping point" in which coca cultivation would be abandoned after aerial eradication caused 60-80 percent losses in coca fields. However, aerial eradication efforts were sustained at or above 100,000 hectares from 2002 to 2012 before decreasing and eventually ending altogether in 2015. By 2016, coca cultivation had increased substantially and DEA data showed that only 5 percent of growers were ready to abandon coca. Similarly, a UN coca cultivation survey found that the number of households involved in the coca trade increased steadily from roughly 60,000 in 2008 to over 100,000 in 2016. DEA officials we interviewed agreed that it now appears that coca growers do not "abandon" coca farming during periods of sustained eradication, but rather they temporarily stop farming coca until it is economically advantageous to resume. State officials noted that they anticipate increases in eradication levels under President Duque and expect that increased eradication may alter coca farmers' analysis of the benefits and risks of growing coca. One expert we interviewed was skeptical that eradication could ever raise the economic costs of growing coca high enough to dissuade farmers from growing coca because they find it easy to grow and are very responsive to price changes. The expert stated that the revenues from growing coca are often significantly higher than the costs of growing the plant. Given such high potential profits, there is typically an economic incentive to grow the crop.

A number of other factors may also undermine the viability of eradication as a supply reduction strategy more broadly:

- **Protests against eradication:** According to a 2017 State cable, rural protestors use blockading tactics at eradication sites to disrupt manual eradication efforts. This cable reported that protesters blocked 428 manual eradication operations in 2016, and 152 operations in 2017. In addition, these protests against manual eradication efforts have led to violent confrontations between local populations and Colombian security forces. One such confrontation in Nariño—Colombia's top coca-producing region—led to the deaths of a number of civilian protesters.
- **Destruction of licit agriculture:** Local civil society organizations in Colombia maintain that glyphosate spraying drifts with the wind and kills legal crops near eradicated areas, negatively affecting local

populations. State maintains that its eradication programs had a minimal impact on licit crops; however, those whose licit crops had been harmed as a result of aerial spraying were eligible for compensation. According to State, from 2001 through the end of the aerial spraying program in October 2015, Colombians registered nearly 18,000 complaints of accidental spraying of licit crops. Of these complaints, State noted that only 3 percent were found to have merit and were therefore eligible for compensation.

- **Debate over adverse health effects:** The debate over the purported negative health effects of glyphosate has made aerial spraying efforts in Colombia controversial. In March 2015, the World Health Organization’s International Agency for Research on Cancer identified glyphosate as “probably” able to cause cancer in humans. However, two U.S. agencies dispute these findings. From 2002 through 2011, State formally certified to Congress that the glyphosate spraying program posed no unreasonable health risks to humans. The Environmental Protection Agency has also generally concluded that glyphosate exposure from aerial eradication in Colombia has not been linked to adverse health effects. Several other studies we reviewed discussed the potential health effects of glyphosate.
- **International disputes:** In 2013, Ecuador and Colombia agreed to a settlement to a case Ecuador filed in 2008 before the International Court of Justice in The Hague seeking a prohibition of the use of herbicides in aerial eradication near the Colombia-Ecuador border as well as indemnification for claimed damages associated with Colombia’s eradication program. Ecuador received \$15 million in compensation from Colombia for alleged health and environmental harms and Colombia agreed to a 10 kilometer exclusion zone on the border with Ecuador in which it would not conduct aerial spraying.

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### Third-Party Research Suggests that Eradication Efforts Do Not Have a Substantial Long-Term Effect on Reducing Coca Cultivation and Cocaine Supply and Are Potentially Costly

Third-party research we reviewed suggests that eradication efforts do not have a substantial long-term effect on coca cultivation and cocaine supply and are potentially costly. Eight studies in our literature review had key findings on the effectiveness of eradication efforts in Colombia. All eight studies raised questions regarding the effectiveness of eradication as a strategy to substantially reduce coca cultivation and the cocaine supply.

Five studies also generally concluded it is a potentially costly supply reduction approach.

Five studies found that eradication has only a small effect on reducing coca cultivation, but the estimates for reductions varied by study. For example, one study found that a 1 percent increase in the risk of eradication decreases coca cultivation by roughly .44 hectares.<sup>41</sup> Another study estimated that a 1 percent increase in the risk of eradication would decrease the total area in Colombia under cultivation by .66 percent.<sup>42</sup> Likewise, a third study found that as a result of displacement, the supply reduction effects of spraying were so small that an additional 33 hectares must be sprayed every year in order to reduce coca cultivation by 1 hectare.<sup>43</sup>

Three other studies concluded eradication efforts had no net effect on reducing the coca or cocaine supplies, or have led to increased coca cultivation. For example, one of these studies reported that a 1 percent increase in eradication actually increases the amount of land under coca cultivation by 1 percent as growers try to compensate for losses.<sup>44</sup> The author noted that municipal level data on eradication and coca cultivation trends was broadly compatible with their findings. In addition, the author presented data from 2006 through 2012 which indicated a 38 percent decrease in eradication levels as well as a 38 percent decrease in coca cultivation. Another study concluded that the effects of eradication were nullified by coca growers' ability to rapidly relocate their operations to other areas.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Marcela Ibanez and Stephen Klasen, "Is the War on Drugs Working? Examining the Colombian Case Using Micro Data," *The Journal of Development Studies*, vol. 53, no. 10 (2017).

<sup>42</sup>Marcela Ibanez and Fredrik Carlsson, "A Survey-based Choice Experiment on Coca Cultivation," *Journal of Development Economics*, vol. 93 (2010).

<sup>43</sup>Daniel Mejía, Pascual Restrepo, and Sandra V. Roza, *On the Effects of Enforcement on Illegal Markets: Evidence from a Quasi-experiment in Colombia*, World Bank Group (2015).

<sup>44</sup>Luis Carlos Reyes, "Estimating the Causal Effect of Forced Eradication on Coca Cultivation in Colombian Municipalities," *World Development*, vol. 61 (2014).

<sup>45</sup>Leonardo Raffo López, Javier Andrés Castro, and Alexander Díaz España, "Los Efectos Globo en los Cultivos de Coca en la Región Andina (1990-2009)," *Apuntes del Cenes*, vol. 35, no. 61 (2016).

Several of the studies we reviewed examined aspects of the costliness of eradication efforts, but relied on cost data that were either limited or we were unable to substantiate. Three studies generally concluded that eradication is costly in absolute terms, while two others suggested that eradication appears to be more costly than other alternative counternarcotics efforts. For example, one study suggested removing 1 kilogram of cocaine from retail markets through eradication would cost the United States roughly \$940,000.<sup>46</sup> Another study estimated that an additional \$100,000 spent on eradication would reduce coca cultivation in Colombia by 1.5 percent.<sup>47</sup>

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## U.S.-Supported Interdiction Efforts Seized a Substantial Amount of Cocaine and Disrupted Drug Trafficking Organizations in Colombia, but the Long-Term Effect of These Efforts is Unclear

U.S. agencies have provided a variety of support for Colombian interdiction efforts, including capacity building and operational support. These efforts resulted in the seizures of a substantial amount of cocaine and precursor chemicals and disrupted drug trafficking organizations by arresting these organizations' leadership and seizing valuable assets. However, the long-term effects of these efforts are unclear due to continued increases in cocaine production and the emergence of new drug traffickers. U.S. and Colombian officials identified a number of ways to improve the effectiveness of interdiction. A limited number of third-party studies on interdiction suggest mixed findings but indicate interdiction may be more effective than eradication because it targets drug trafficking at a more costly point in the production and distribution process.

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<sup>46</sup>Daniel Mejía and Pascual Restrepo, "The Economics of the War on Illegal Drug Production and Trafficking," *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, vol. 126 (2016).

<sup>47</sup>Ibanez and Carlsson, "A Survey-based Choice Experiment on Coca Cultivation,"



## U.S. Agencies Have Provided Capacity Building and Operational Assistance to Support Colombian Interdiction Efforts

**Building Partner Capacity:** U.S. agencies provided a range of assistance that has improved Colombian authorities' capacity to conduct interdiction efforts. U.S. and Colombian officials noted that because of these efforts, Colombian security services were able to provide counternarcotics training and support to other countries in the region. Key examples of U.S. efforts to build partner capacity included:

- **Counternarcotics forces:** U.S. agencies provided a broad range of assistance to improve the effectiveness of Colombian counternarcotics forces. For example, INL funded the creation and training of the Colombian Army's counternarcotics brigades—military units responsible for seizing cocaine, destroying cocaine processing labs, and securing eradication sites. In addition, DOD and INL provided training and expertise to the Colombian National Police's Junglas unit, which is a highly-trained special operations unit used to detect and destroy cocaine labs and capture high value drug traffickers. INL funded the construction of the Colombian National Police training facility where security services from Colombia and neighboring countries receive counternarcotics-related training. Likewise, DOD provided a broad array of programs designed to improve the operational capabilities of Colombian security forces. For instance, the agency's Regional Pilot Training School helps provide helicopters, training, and certification for up to 50 Colombian and 24 international pilots annually. According to DOD, the goal of this program is to increase the Colombian capacity to rapidly deploy to remote areas of the country to conduct counternarcotics operations.
- **Equipment procurement and maintenance:** U.S. agencies provided assistance to procure and maintain equipment for their Colombian counterparts. The largest such effort is INL's Aviation Program, which procured and maintained a fleet of aircraft for the Colombian National Police. The aviation program allows the police to conduct interdiction operations in areas of the country which are difficult to access, according to INL officials. INL also procured and maintained other equipment, including communications equipment and night vision goggles. In addition, DOD provided equipment to vetted Colombian security forces with counter-narcotics missions, including patrol boats; protective gear; and specialized navigation, communications, and surveillance equipment.

- **Judicial support:** For over 20 years DOJ's Office of Overseas Prosecutorial Development Assistance and Training (OPDAT) has provided a range of assistance to help reform the Colombian judicial system and improve its ability to prosecute crimes. According to OPDAT officials, this assistance is critical for the successful prosecution of drug cases. The office assisted with prosecutor training, case-based mentoring, case efficiency, litigation skills, and plea bargaining. Likewise, DOJ's International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program (ICITAP) provided training, including curriculum development, seminars, and on-the-job training, to improve the Colombian government's ability to conduct criminal investigations and develop forensics capabilities according to agency officials. ICITAP's training efforts in Colombia focused, in part, on reforming Colombia's legal framework as well as fostering cooperation and organizational development between the country's judicial and law enforcement agencies.
- **Investigative support:** A number of U.S. agencies worked closely with Colombian vetted units, to support these agencies' missions abroad. For example, DEA provided funding, training, and vetting for Colombian Sensitive Investigative Units (SIUs). According to DEA officials, DEA conducted bilateral counternarcotics and money laundering investigations with these Colombian vetted units. Similarly, the FBI and ICE both work with Colombian vetted units and provide investigative support for counternarcotics investigations. For example, the FBI worked closely with its vetted unit in Colombia to investigate transnational criminal organizations. FBI officials told us that these cases were almost exclusively related to drug trafficking organizations in Colombia.

**Operational Support:** U.S. agencies also provided operational support for Colombian interdiction operations. Key examples of U.S. operational support include:

- **Targeting, extraditions, and prosecutions:** A number of U.S. offices supported the targeting, extradition, and prosecution of Colombian drug traffickers. For example, DOJ's Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces (OCDETF) developed the Consolidated Priority Organization Target (CPOT) list in order to identify and target the leaders of major drug trafficking organizations. Likewise, the FBI targets drug trafficking leadership as well as facilitators—those who support drug traffickers financially or politically—by investigating money laundering and corruption cases according to agency officials. In addition, DOJ officials partnered with the Colombian government to extradite drug traffickers to the U.S. for

trial. According to the DEA officials, extradition is one of the most effective investigative tools against drug trafficking in Colombia. The DEA officials noted that the vast majority of persons charged and extradited to the United States from Colombia have been convicted. Additionally, an FBI official stated that the extradition of high level drug traffickers has the potential to degrade the operational ability of their organizations because these extradited leaders may cooperate with U.S. courts to get reduced sentences. This cooperation can then create leads for new cases and provide new information and witnesses for active cases, further undermining the operations of criminal organizations.

- **Detection and monitoring:** Several U.S. agencies supported Colombian interdiction efforts by assisting with detecting and monitoring of drug trafficking operations. For example:
  - According to DEA, during bilateral investigations the agency and its Colombian counterparts utilized a number of investigative tools to detect and monitor drug trafficking networks and money laundering organizations with the ultimate goal of prosecution in Colombia and the United States. DEA stated that information gleaned from these efforts is shared and used to coordinate maritime interdiction operations that can lead to additional evidence for prosecution. One DEA official stated that these detection and monitoring efforts yield more leads than U.S. and Colombian security forces have the resources to interdict.
  - Beginning in 2003, INL supported the CNP's Air Bridge Denial program. This program was developed to help improve the Colombian government's ability to detect and intercept airplanes smuggling drugs into and out of Colombia. In 2003, Colombia documented 60 to 70 flights per month transporting drugs into and out of the country. Today, Colombia reports detecting no more than two or three flights per year, according to State. The program, including all aircraft, hangars, equipment, and facilities was nationalized in January 2010. Following nationalization, INL's Air Bridge Denial budget decreased from roughly \$20 million in 2004 to \$1 million in 2012 and, at present, INL no longer funds the program.
  - DOD also provided intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) in support of interdiction operations. According to officials the agency uses its ScanEagle unmanned aerial vehicles to help Colombian security forces track maritime vessels moving drugs on Colombia's Pacific coast. For example, DOD provided various task forces, which include Colombian police, army, navy, marines,

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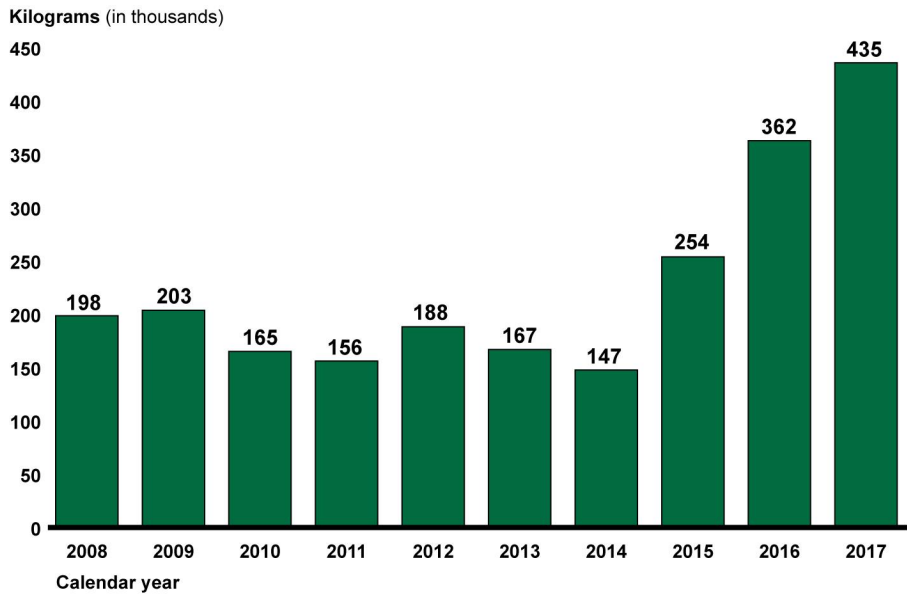
and coast guard units, with ISR support via ScanEagle systems, including imaging and video to support interdiction efforts along the Pacific coast of Colombia, according to DOD officials.

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### Monitoring Data Show Interdiction Efforts Seized a Substantial Amount of Cocaine and Disrupted Drug Trafficking Organizations; However, the Long-Term Effects of These Efforts Are Unclear

U.S., UN, and Colombian monitoring data indicate that interdiction disrupts drug trafficking operations by seizing large amounts of cocaine, precursor chemicals, and other assets used by drug trafficking organizations. According to UN data, the amount of cocaine seized in Colombia increased from about 198 metric tons in 2008 to an estimated 435 metric tons in 2017 (see fig. 9). These totals accounted for an estimated 42 percent and 32 percent of the cocaine produced in those years, respectively. From 2008 through 2017 the total financial impact of cocaine seizures on drug trafficking organizations exceeded \$4 billion. Several factors may explain these increases in the amount of cocaine seized. Several U.S. officials noted that increases in cocaine production means there is more cocaine to be seized in transit, while another official stated that seizure increases without corresponding increases in resources indicate that interdiction efforts may be becoming increasingly effective over time. In addition, interdiction efforts have led to the destruction of numerous drug processing facilities. From 2008 through 2017, nearly 30,000 coca paste and cocaine processing laboratories were destroyed, according to Colombian data.

**Figure 9: Estimated Kilograms of Cocaine Seized in Colombia, 2008-2017**



Source: GAO presentation of United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime data. | GAO-19-106

Since 2008, Colombian security forces have also seized over 30 million gallons of the liquid precursor chemicals necessary for the production of cocaine, as well as 8,087 vehicles, 1,083 boats, 18 airplane, 65,778 firearms, over 13 million rounds of ammunition, and 34,800 pieces of communications equipment associated with drug trafficking operations, according to Colombian government data. In addition, since 2008, ICE estimates that Colombian authorities have seized over \$35 million in bulk cash and hundreds of millions of dollars in drug related contraband at Colombian ports.

U.S. supported interdiction efforts have contributed to the disruption and dismantling of a number of drug trafficking organizations and the arrest and extradition of high value drug trafficking suspects on the CPOT and priority target organization (PTO) lists (see table 1).<sup>48</sup> For example, as part of an “Operation Agamemnon II” that sought to disrupt and dismantle the Clan del Golfo, Colombian forces killed the group’s second-in-

<sup>48</sup>OCDETF develops the CPOT list through an annual interagency process, while the PTO list is an agency-specific list developed by DEA. The DEA generally defines priority target organizations (PTO) as drug trafficking organizations for which investigations have the potential to achieve disruption or dismantlement at the highest level of the organization and to provide the greatest potential impact on the reduction of illicit drugs.

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command, Roberto Vargas Gutierrez in August 2017; captured its third-in-command, Luis Orlando Padierna Pena in November 2017; and killed or captured many other senior and mid-level leaders. Likewise, in April 2017, Colombian forces arrested Edison Washington Prado Álava in Tumaco and seized \$25 million in cash. Prado Álava, known as the “Pablo Escobar of Ecuador,” had issued death threats against police, prosecutors, and judges in both Ecuador and Colombia. In February 2018, with the cooperation of Colombian authorities, Prado Álava was extradited to the United States, where he is facing prosecution.

**Table 1: Reported Arrests, Disruptions, Dismantling, and Extradition of Colombian Drug Trafficking Organizations and Members, 2008-2017**

Category	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	Total
CPOT arrests (fiscal year)	4	2	6	1	6	4	2	2	2	2	31
PTO arrests (calendar year) <sup>a</sup>	No data	512	442	693	736	549	560	626	683	643	5,444
CPOT organizations dismantled (fiscal year)	16	17	15	7	3	11	6	7	6	6	94
PTO organizations dismantled (calendar year)	21	19	23	18	25	21	16	29	20	9	201
CPOT organizations disrupted (fiscal year)	43	31	28	21	27	34	46	17	15	11	273
PTO organizations disrupted (calendar year)	11	8	6	3	5	5	3	11	11	20	83
Extraditions (calendar year)	201	181	147	118	179	129	128	100	116	56 <sup>b</sup>	1,355

Legend: CPOT = Consolidated Priority Organization Target, PTO = Priority Target Organization.

Source: GAO presentation of the Department of Justice’s Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces (OCDETF) and Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) data. | GAO-19-106

<sup>a</sup>DEA did not provide PTO arrest data for 2008 because the agency transitioned this information from physical arrest logs to an electronic database in September 2008. In addition, DEA noted that there are only partial data for 2009 and 2010. Thus, the total number of PTO-related arrests is an estimate.

<sup>b</sup>The reported number of extraditions for 2017 is through September 2017.

From fiscal years 2008 through 2017, OCDETF reported that Colombian forces arrested 31 Colombians, disrupted 273 Colombian organizations and dismantled 94 others linked to the CPOT list. From calendar years 2008 through 2017, DEA reported that U.S. and Colombian authorities had also disrupted 83 PTOs and dismantled 201 others, including an estimated 5,444 PTO-related arrests.<sup>49</sup> DEA officials stated that nearly all of these extraditions were for drug related crimes and these individuals were all “high value” targets.

However, the long-term effect of these efforts is unclear. While seizures remove roughly 40 percent of the total cocaine supply each year on average, increases in cocaine production mean that the net supply of cocaine destined for the United States has increased despite the substantial amount of cocaine seized. U.S. officials also stated that while arrests and extraditions remove drug trafficking leaders, which may temporarily degrade the operational capabilities of drug trafficking organizations, the lucrative nature of the cocaine market ensures that others will replace these individuals.

U.S. and Colombian sources identified several other challenges that may impact the effectiveness of interdiction efforts. One FBI official stated that as investigative efforts fragment drug trafficking organizations, it becomes more challenging to target organizations and dismantle their command and control structures. One of the studies we reviewed suggested that as these organizations are dismantled, local populations may be affected by pronounced cycles of violence as competing armed groups vie for control of drug trafficking operations in areas formerly under the control of an established criminal organization which has been dismantled. Sources also stated that extraditions may become less of a deterrent to drug traffickers over time as they and their legal counsels become more familiar with the U.S. judicial system and are able to effectively plead to lesser charges and get lighter sentences.

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<sup>49</sup>DEA reported that arrests data were not available for 2008 due to a transition from physical arrest logs at foreign offices to an electronic database in September 2008. In addition, DEA noted that there are only partial data for 2009 and 2010. Thus, the total number of PTO-related arrests is an estimate.



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## U.S. and Colombian Officials Identified Opportunities to Improve the Effectiveness of Interdiction Efforts

U.S. and Colombian officials identified a number of ways to improve interdiction efforts and increase the effectiveness of these operations:

- **Maritime/riverine boat program:** State and DOD have already provided assistance to strengthen Colombia's maritime and riverine interdiction capabilities, but INL officials noted that they were exploring options to provide further support for riverine interdiction efforts given the significance of Colombia's waterways in drug trafficking. A number of U.S. and Colombian officials, including officials from INL, the Colombian Navy, and the U.S. and Colombian Coast Guards, stated that an enhanced "boat program," similar to INL's aviation program, would improve the country's ability to interdict cocaine shipments traveling along Colombian maritime routes. Officials noted that features of such a program should include the procurement, supply, and maintenance of boats capable of tracking down the "go fast" boats used by traffickers. These vessels cost \$1 million each, and provide a significant return on investment, according to Colombian authorities. One such boat, for example, was able to interdict 12 tons of cocaine (valued at \$60 million) in 1 year in Tumaco, Colombian officials stated.
- **Port of entry/container interdiction operations:** DHS officials from ICE and CBP have supported Colombian efforts to seize drugs and other contraband at air and sea ports of entry. However, one ICE official stated that container smuggling is the "Achilles' heel" of cocaine interdiction efforts in Colombia. According to this official, Colombian ports vary in their willingness to cooperate with U.S. agencies in order to combat drug smuggling. For example, the official stated that one port provides a lot of information to ICE and CBP officials because it participates in CBP's Container Security Initiative, while another port is known for corruption and smuggling. This official believes that hundreds of tons of cocaine leave via containers carrying licit merchandise and reported that, for example, one interdiction operation targeting the port in Cartagena had resulted in the seizure of 35 tons of cocaine since 2015. According to ICE officials, assigning more personnel to Colombian air and seaports would greatly increase seizures of cocaine and contraband.
- **Drug trafficking organization funding/finance:** A number of U.S. and Colombian sources suggested that interdiction efforts can be improved by targeting drug trafficking organizations' assets and

revenues. Because money is at the top of the value chain, disrupting cash flow before it can return to drug traffickers would have a significant impact on their ability to profit from criminal activities and continue to fund their operations, according to several U.S. and Colombian sources. One expert we spoke to indicated that interdiction efforts could be improved by targeting money laundering, bulk cash shipments, and contraband smuggling. According to one FBI official, drug trafficking organizations cannot operate without financing, and as a result it is important to focus on money laundering cases. Similarly, one ICE official described bulk cash shipments and money laundering as the “fuel” that drives drug trafficking and believes it is critical to devote more resources in this area. DEA stated that in addition to its bilateral investigations with Colombia, the agency also conducts simultaneous money laundering investigations often resulting in seizures of assets and bulk cash. However, INL officials stated that Colombian asset forfeiture laws have made it difficult for authorities to seize and liquidate the assets of drug traffickers. In 2017, revisions to these laws were passed making it easier for Colombian officials to liquidate these assets and use these resources to fund further counternarcotics efforts; however, State noted that the revised asset forfeiture process still faces several challenges including the limited number of judges and long periods of time needed to adjudicate these cases.

- **Regional maritime interdiction operations:** U.S. and Colombian officials suggested that sustaining regional maritime interdiction operations between the U.S., Colombia, and other nations in the transit zone can significantly disrupt drug trafficking operations if maintained long term. For example, beginning in March 2017, the U.S. and Colombian navies—along with maritime authorities from Panama, Costa Rica, Mexico, Honduras, Ecuador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua—conducted Operation Orion, a series of coordinated maritime interdiction operations targeting different areas of the transit zone. One of these operations, conducted jointly by Colombia and Panama, seized 2.5 tons of cocaine in 1 month and led to 20 arrests. U.S. Coast Guard officials stated that Operation Orion was a successful, short-term example of how regionally coordinated operations can improve the effectiveness of maritime interdiction and believe that continuous operations of this type would dramatically improve the effectiveness of interdiction efforts overall. U.S. Coast Guard officials also noted that these types of coordination efforts among Colombia and other countries in the region are an important step toward self-sufficiency and away from a reliance on U.S. funding and law enforcement support for maritime operations. However, these

officials noted that there are currently not enough resources devoted to interdiction to sustain these types of partnerships in the long term. Colombian Navy officials agreed that countries in the region need to devote more resources to sustain these types of regional efforts. However, these officials also noted that Colombia has taken some steps, such as developing permanent information sharing agreements with regional partners, to develop these types of relationships.

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### A Limited Number of Third-Party Studies on Interdiction Have Mixed Findings, but Suggest Potential Effectiveness Relative to Eradication

Third-party research we reviewed had limited findings related to interdiction. While seven of the studies in our literature review discussed aspects of interdiction efforts, four studies had findings related to the effect of these efforts on the cocaine supply. These four studies had mixed findings about the overall effectiveness of interdiction efforts. One study we reviewed found that an increased emphasis on interdiction efforts in Colombia, beginning in 2006, had achieved a substantial reduction in the net supply of cocaine.<sup>50</sup> Another study indicated that increases in the costs to produce cocaine were mainly due to the interdiction of precursor chemicals such as gasoline.<sup>51</sup> However, two other studies concluded that increased cocaine seizures did not have a substantial impact on either the price or the overall supply of cocaine, which has steadily increased since 2013.<sup>52</sup>

Several of the seven studies we reviewed suggested that interdiction is more effective or more cost-effective than eradication efforts. Two studies indicated that interdiction policies had a greater impact on the cocaine supply than eradication policies. For example, one study showed that the destruction of cocaine processing labs has a greater impact on cocaine prices than aerial or manual eradication efforts. Two other studies concluded that interdiction was more cost effective than eradication

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<sup>50</sup>Mejía, “Plan Colombia: An Analysis of Effectiveness and Costs.”

<sup>51</sup>Ibanez and Klasen, “Is the War on Drugs Working? Examining the Colombian Case Using Micro Data.”

<sup>52</sup>Mejía and Restrepo, “The Economics of the War on Illegal Drug Production and Trafficking;” Sebastian Quintero, and Isabel Posada, “Estrategias Políticas para el Tratamiento de las Drogas Ilegales en Colombia,” *Revista Facultad Nacional de Salud Pública*, vol. 31, no. 3 (2013).

efforts. For example, one study indicated that the cost of removing 1 kilogram of cocaine from retail markets in the United States was \$175,000 if resources were devoted to interdiction and \$940,000 if resources were devoted to eradication.<sup>53</sup> However, this study relied on cost estimates that were either limited or we were unable to substantiate.

A number of the studies in our literature review and experts we interviewed stated that counternarcotics resources should primarily be devoted to interdiction efforts instead of eradication efforts because they target drug traffickers at the top of the “value chain”. According to these studies and experts, counternarcotics actions are more costly to drug traffickers at this stage of the drug trafficking process. For example, two studies indicated that the destruction of cocaine processing labs is the most effective counternarcotics effort. One study stated that the destruction of these labs is an effective interdiction strategy because these labs add significant value to the final product, cocaine lost at this stage is not easily replaced, and the destruction of labs reduces demand for coca leaves and coca cultivation.<sup>54</sup> This study indicated that for every lab destroyed, coca cultivation decreases by 3 hectares as demand for the leaves falls. Another study indicated that the number of processing laboratories destroyed accounts for 75 percent of the price fluctuation of cocaine.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>Mejía and Restrepo, “The Economics of the War on Illegal Drug Production and Trafficking.”

<sup>54</sup>Mejía, “Plan Colombia: An Analysis of Effectiveness and Costs.”

<sup>55</sup>Luis Eduardo Sandoval, Angela López, and Camilo Cárdenas, “Determinantes y Características de la Oferta de Cocaína en Colombia (1989-2006),” *Revista Facultad de Ciencias Económicas: Investigación y Reflexión*, vol. 17, no. 2 (2009).

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## U.S.-Supported Alternative Development Programs in Colombia Have Achieved Some Positive Results, but Officials and Research Have Noted Some Implementation Challenges

U.S.-supported alternative development programs in Colombia have attained some positive outcomes. USAID evaluations and monitoring data show that alternative development programs have achieved a number of positive results in increasing opportunities to participate in the legal economy in Colombia, but have also faced issues that reduced their effectiveness. U.S. and Colombian officials stated that alternative development programs are important to a long-term counternarcotics strategy, but noted a number of implementation challenges. Third-party research suggests that alternative development has the potential to reduce coca cultivation if properly implemented.

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### USAID Has Supported a Range of Alternative Development Programs Designed to Increase Licit Economic Opportunities in Colombia

USAID's alternative development programs in Colombia provide support in a number of key areas, including programs that are intended to:

- assist in the development of value chains for agricultural products, such as cacao and coffee, or the development of licit businesses;
- support land formalization efforts, including the issuance of land titles and the development of Colombia's national registry of land ownership (known as a cadaster);
- increase access to rural finance;
- strengthen producer associations (see fig. 10);
- leverage private sector investment to support rural development;
- provide needed infrastructure to strengthen communities and support legal economies including roads, schools, electricity, and sanitation; and
- support civil society organizations and strengthen governance, including efforts to build social capital and increase the presence of the Colombian government in areas affected by conflict.

**Figure 10: U.S.-Supported Cacao Growers Association Cacao Crop in Colombia**

Source: GAO. | GAO-19-106

According to USAID, over time, it has broadened the focus of its alternative development efforts to move beyond crop substitution programs and to instead work to transform underdeveloped regions within Colombia and address the underlying issues that drive the economics and culture of drug trafficking.<sup>56</sup> USAID noted that it has also sought to prioritize particular geographic regions, rather than seeking to implement programs throughout the whole country. Table 2 lists examples of alternative development programs that USAID has funded in Colombia over the past 10 years. USAID, State, and Colombian officials noted that this broader, more comprehensive focus for alternative development is necessary in order to create the conditions that would be conducive for legal alternatives to coca cultivation to be viable in many parts of Colombia. For example, Colombia faces substantial deficiencies in its road network. Without improvements in the road network, many Colombians in rural areas do not have a feasible way of transporting legal crops to markets or accessing basic services. Significant numbers of Colombian farmers also do not possess title to their land, which, among other things, limits their ability to access credit and reduces their incentives to make longer-term investments in legal crops such as cacao, which take years to mature.

<sup>56</sup>USAID also supports other programs that are not directly related to alternative development, but which support U.S. efforts to combat illegal drug production and maintain security in Colombia. For example, USAID has supported the Colombian government's efforts to successfully reintegrate former members of illegal armed groups, who were involved in the illicit economy, back into society through a combination of psychosocial services, formal education, vocational training, income assistance, and health care support.

**Table 2: Examples of U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Alternative Development Programs in Colombia**

<b>Program name</b>	<b>Planned implementation years</b>	<b>Estimated funding amount</b>	<b>Program description</b>
Areas for Municipal-Level Alternative Development	2005-2011	\$189 million	Supported activities related to productive agricultural projects, public works, municipal governance, and civil society collaboration. Projects were implemented in 75 municipalities.
More Investment in Sustainable Alternative Development	2006-2011	\$180 million	Provided technical assistance and support to micro, small, and medium enterprises and supported commercial forestry, conservation, and agribusiness. Projects were implemented in more than 500 municipalities.
Consolidation and Enhanced Livelihood Initiative	2010-2017	\$202 million	Created to support the Colombian government's National Consolidation and Territorial Reconstruction Policy and bring the state to conflict-affected regions. Provided assistance for productive activities and agricultural value chains; supported the development of credit and financial institutions and programs, public and productive infrastructure, land formalization, and civil society; and strengthened local and regional governments. Implemented in a number of municipalities across four regions.
Rural Finance Initiative	2015-2020	\$23 million	Promote market-based financial services to underserved members of the rural sector, particularly in areas affected by conflict; create incentives for and support financial institutions to enter into new markets; facilitate modernization of the financial system's legal and regulatory framework to increase rural financial inclusion. Implemented in 8 "economic corridors."
Producers to Markets Alliance	2017-2022	\$71 million	Facilitate increased sales by connecting rural agricultural producers and business to new buyers, including by expanding export and trade opportunities; support increased production and improved quality of key products, such as cacao and coffee; and facilitate increased public and private investment in rural infrastructure, such as repair and maintenance of tertiary roads, to support business activities. Implemented in priority municipalities in eight departments.
Community Development and Licit Opportunities	2017-2022	\$72 million	Provide assistance to strengthen communities' capacity to partner with the public and private sector in order to improve collaboration; improve the quality of local services, including infrastructure; foster partnerships between communities and the public and private sectors to support increased entrepreneurship, investment, and economic growth. Implemented in 51 municipalities across 9 departments.

Sources: GAO analysis of USAID documentation. | GAO-19-106

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## USAID Evaluations and Monitoring Data Show that Alternative Development Programs Have Achieved Some Positive Results, but Have Also Faced Issues that Reduced Their Effectiveness

We reviewed seven independent evaluations that USAID has commissioned since 2008.<sup>57</sup> These evaluations reported that USAID alternative development programs have achieved a range of positive results. For example, a 2016 midterm impact evaluation of USAID's Consolidation and Enhanced Livelihood Initiative found that, among other things, an increased number of program beneficiaries reported that their economic situation was good or very good compared to the baseline at the beginning of the project. In addition, the evaluation found that program beneficiaries' sales of supported products had increased significantly and had far exceeded USAID targets. A 2014 post-implementation evaluation of two USAID programs (1) More Investment in Sustainable Alternative Development and (2) Areas for Municipal-Level Alternative Development found positive outcomes for some beneficiaries, including success in helping producer associations get their products to market.

However, the evaluations also reported that USAID alternative development programs did not achieve all intended goals and faced certain implementation issues including problems with project design, program funding not being sustained for adequate periods, and a lack of consistent support from the Colombian government, which was a partner in these programs. For example, an April 2009 evaluation of USAID alternative development efforts under Plan Colombia reported, among other things, that many marketable crops in Colombia, such as cacao or coffee, take several years to grow before they are ready to harvest and produce income for farmers. Thus, farmers need income support during this period as they transition from dependence on coca to legal crops, but, according to the evaluation, USAID and the Colombian government frequently did not provide sufficient income to cover food costs or other expenses, making farmers highly vulnerable to resume coca cultivation. An April 2011 evaluation of USAID's Integrated Governance Response program reported that some funded projects were at a standstill due to

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<sup>57</sup>In the case of the Consolidation and Enhanced Livelihood Initiative program, there was one general evaluation of the program as well as five regional evaluations. For our purposes, we count this as one evaluation.



the delays by the Colombian local and regional governments in fulfilling their commitments. USAID, for example, had funded the construction of a cold-storage facility to assist milk producers in one region, but the facility had not been provided with electricity because the municipal government had not sent a building inspector to approve its construction. A February 2017 review of alternative development in Colombia reported that a number of alternative development efforts may require longer time horizons than allowed by most USAID contracts or cooperative agreements.

In addition to these evaluations, other USAID assessments have reported that alternative development programs have achieved some positive results. For example, data from USAID's Monitor system report that USAID projects related to "Inclusive Rural Economic Growth" exceeded their targets for 23 of 44 performance indicators for which results were reported for fiscal year 2017. Similarly, for fiscal year 2017, USAID reported that it exceeded its targets for six of nine performance indicators related to inclusive rural growth that were tracked in Embassy Bogotá's Performance Plan and Report (see table 3). An internal USAID analysis also noted that the agency had been able to increase the ratio of legal crops grown relative to coca in areas where it had funded programs to increase opportunities for such crops. Specifically, USAID reported that in 14 departments where it had funded such programs, the ratio of illegal to USAID-supported legal crops under cultivation had decreased from 302:1 hectares to 13:1 hectares from 2011 to 2016.

**Table 3: Embassy Bogotá Reported Results of U.S. Government Assistance Related to Its Objective of Improving Conditions for Inclusive Rural Economic Growth from Its Fiscal Year 2017 Performance Plan and Report**

Performance indicator	Target	Result	Target met or not met
Households with formalized land	1,700	280	Not met
Individuals receiving agricultural productivity or food security training	250	306	Met
Farmers and others applying improved technologies or management	35	45	Met
Value of smallholder incremental sales generated	\$9,500,000	\$9,665,824	Met
Value of agricultural and rural loans transacted	\$33,750,000	\$126,665,246	Met
Clients benefitting from financial services	25,000	166,447	Met
Pieces of land tenure and property rights legislation or regulations positively affecting the property rights of the poor	1	8	Met
Parcels with relevant information corrected or incorporated in official land administration systems	1,000	424	Not met

Performance indicator	Target	Result	Target met or not met
Percentage of female participants in productive economic resources programs	50	35	Not met

Sources: GAO analysis of Department of State documentation. | GAO-19-106

USAID noted different factors that resulted in three of the nine targets not being met. For example, USAID stated that the target for households with formalized land was not met because the Colombian government eliminated the agency previously responsible for land formalization in December 2015 and created two new agencies in its place. According to USAID, these new agencies did not begin operations until March 2017, which delayed USAID’s work with the Colombian government on the project and created uncertainty about the Colombian government’s land policy and administration.

Data reported by UNODC also provides certain information related to the effectiveness of alternative development efforts in Colombia. UNODC, for example, collects and reports data on the number of households involved in coca production as part of its annual illicit crop cultivation surveys. These data show that the number of households in Colombia involved in coca cultivation increased from 59,328 to 106,900 between 2008 and 2016 (an increase of 80 percent). Such data indicate that any gains achieved in encouraging Colombians to switch from illegal to legal livelihoods through alternative development programs have been outweighed by other factors driving increased involvement in coca cultivation.

### U.S. and Colombian Officials View Alternative Development Programs as Important to a Long-Term Counternarcotics Strategy, but Noted a Number of Implementation Challenges

U.S. and Colombian officials stated that alternative development, and the creation of viable opportunities for Colombians to get access to public services and participate in the legal economy, is important to solving the drug problem in Colombia. However, these officials acknowledged that comprehensive alternative development is a long-term approach that requires significant investment. They also pointed out that large portions of rural Colombia have been marginalized for decades and that the Colombian government will need to make substantial, sustained investments in rural areas to establish the necessary conditions for legal economies to develop. According to USAID officials, USAID data indicate

that the regions where USAID has intervened have fared better than the areas where it has not, but the scope and scale of its interventions have not been significant enough to counteract overall coca cultivation and cocaine production trends in the country.

U.S. government analysis and officials noted that there are also powerful economic disincentives for farmers to shift from the cultivation of coca to legal crops such as coffee or cacao. According to State analysis, while prices per kilo of cacao and coffee are higher than coca, lower investment costs, more frequent harvests, higher yields per hectare, minimal field maintenance costs, and negligible transportation costs, make growing coca the more profitable economic choice in most parts of Colombia. For example, in the Nariño region, State found that growing coca can be up to 14 times more profitable per hectare than cacao, factoring in all costs. DEA analysis has found that average annual profit accrued by Colombian farmers from a hectare of coca increased by more than 120 percent from 2012 to 2016. In addition, DEA analysis has found that as profitability has increased, the number of coca farmers wanting to stop growing coca has declined substantially.

According to USAID documents and officials, a number of other factors have also affected USAID's ability to effectively support alternative development efforts in Colombia, including Colombian policy and legal restrictions, insecure and inaccessible locations, coordination challenges with the Colombian government, the diversity of needs within Colombian communities, and Colombia's current alternative development focus and U.S. legal restrictions.

**Colombian policy and legal restrictions.** USAID has been limited in its ability to implement alternative development programs in a number of coca cultivating areas due to policy and legal restrictions. For example, according to USAID evaluations and officials, under the Colombian government's previous "zero coca" policy, it was prohibited from providing any assistance in an area until it was proved that all coca in the area had been eradicated. As a result, USAID was unable to provide assistance for coca growers to switch to and remain in legal livelihoods. In addition, approximately 8 to 10 percent of coca is grown in national parks, where,

according to USAID, under Colombian law, it may not implement any development projects.<sup>58</sup>

**Insecure and inaccessible locations.** USAID has been limited in its ability to provide assistance in some key coca growing areas of the country due to security concerns and the remote nature of the locations. According to USAID, the Colombian government has at times prohibited it from operating in “red zones” where there was active, armed conflict. USAID stated that it has also chosen not to fund programs in some regions because it is too dangerous for the agency’s implementing partners to safely operate. In addition, USAID noted that some of the areas with the highest concentration of coca are largely inaccessible, making it challenging to implement assistance programs, since many of them have no roads and can only be reached by boat or by foot.

**Coordination challenges with the Colombian government.** According to USAID officials, USAID has also faced challenges because of the lack of consistent, coordinated support from the Colombian government and difficulties getting Colombian agencies to work together. For example, after the Colombian government announced the National Consolidation Plan in 2009, USAID focused its assistance in 40 of the 58 municipalities that the Colombian government had selected for consolidation.<sup>59</sup> Despite evidence of progress being made in these areas, by 2013 the Colombian government had begun to reduce its support for the policy, according to USAID. USAID stated that impediments to the successful continuation of the plan included, among other things, a lack of political support, disorganization at the top levels of the Colombian government, changes to and the politicization of the Colombian government’s administrative entity leading the effort, and challenges executing national budgets flexibly and efficiently at the local level. As a result, USAID stated that it was forced to adapt its efforts in the later years of the plan to focus on working with local partners rather than the national government.

**Diversity of needs within Colombian communities.** USAID has faced challenges designing appropriate alternative development programs

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<sup>58</sup>According to UNODC’s 2017 survey of coca cultivation in Colombia, the amount of coca cultivated in Colombian national parks increased by 27 percent between 2015 and 2016.

<sup>59</sup>Under the National Consolidation Plan, the Colombian government sought to establish legitimate state authority in selected areas formerly controlled by illegal groups. In these areas, the Colombian government sought to use a sequenced approach that involved the Colombian military, police, and civilian agencies.

given the diversity of communities within Colombia that have differing needs in terms of alternative development support. For example, there are a wide range of microclimates throughout Colombia which can make it challenging to replicate the same types of technical assistance for farming of legal crops in different parts of the country. USAID noted that it works to tailor its alternative development programming to specific regions. For example, USAID reported that it worked to tailor its assistance to meet the needs of an indigenous community in Northern Cauca. USAID was seeking to improve access to finance in the community; however, due to communal ownership of land, the community could not use land as collateral for loans, according to USAID. Thus, USAID stated that it tailored its assistance by setting up a revolving fund managed and administered by the community itself to expand financing for local businesses. U.S. and Colombian officials noted the need for additional information on various communities to know how to best design programs that would work in the different areas.

**Colombia's current alternative development focus and U.S. legal restrictions.** According to USAID, its efforts to support alternative development in Colombia have also been challenged by the Colombian government's current program focus. According to USAID, State, and Colombian officials, a central part of the Colombian government's counternarcotics strategy under the peace accord is to implement a voluntary eradication and crop substitution program. Under the program, in exchange for voluntarily eradicating their coca crops, farmers receive cash assistance and technical support to help them transition to the cultivation of legal crops. However, according to USAID, the Colombian government is implementing the program in conjunction with the FARC. As a result, USAID officials stated that the U.S. government's ability to support the program is restricted because the FARC is still designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. USAID and State officials also pointed out a range of implementation problems with the program and stated that the plan has had little to no impact on the current coca cultivation trends in Colombia. For example, USAID officials noted that the payment of stipends to farmers has begun before the eradication of their coca has been required or verified. As of April 2018, the Colombian government had signed up approximately 50,000 families for the program, according to State reporting. However, State reported that the Colombian government has publicly acknowledged that the program is lagging in achieving its intended results and was forced to reduce its targets under the program from 50,000 to 22,000 hectares in 2017.

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## Third-Party Research Suggested that Alternative Development Has the Potential to Reduce Coca Cultivation if Properly Implemented, but Noted Limitations

Independent research and non-governmental experts we spoke to generally suggested that alternative development programs have the potential to strengthen legal economic activity and encourage communities to shift away from coca cultivation, if properly implemented. Ten studies in our literature review discussed alternative development. Of these 10 studies, 3 included original research that found evidence regarding the potential effectiveness of alternative development programs in Colombia.

- One study we reviewed found that social investment in infrastructure and human capital could be an effective and complimentary strategy for controlling illegal crops.<sup>60</sup> The study found that \$5.55 spent in social investment per inhabitant in a given municipality prevented the cultivation of a new hectare of coca.
- A different study, looking at land titling efforts in Colombia, found that the formalization of one additional hectare of land for small landholders within a given municipality resulted in a decrease of approximately 1.4 hectares of land allocated to coca cultivation within that municipality.<sup>61</sup>
- An additional study found that implementing community planning models that involved citizen participation could be effective in encouraging the adoption of alternative development projects and the substitution of legal crops in place of coca.<sup>62</sup>

Several other studies did not include original research on the effectiveness of alternative development programs, but made recommendations to increase the emphasis placed on such efforts based

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<sup>60</sup>Eleonora Davalos, "New Answers to an Old Problem: Social Investment and Coca Crops in Colombia," *International Journal of Drug Policy*, vol. 31 (2016).

<sup>61</sup>Juan Carlos Muñoz-Mora, Santiago Tobón, and Jesse Willem d'Anjou, "The Role of Land Property Rights in the War on Illicit Crops: Evidence from Colombia," *World Development*, vol. 103 (2018).

<sup>62</sup>Carlos Alberto Avila Ceron, Ignacio De los Rios-Carmenado, and Susana Martín Fernández, "Illicit Crops Substitution and Rural Prosperity in Armed Conflict Areas: A Conceptual Proposal Based on the *Working With People* Model in Colombia," *Land Use Policy*, vol. 72 (2018).

on the authors' review of existing evidence. For example, one review of existing research recommended that policies aimed at reducing illicit crop cultivation should be centered upon alternative livelihood programs.<sup>63</sup> The study noted that the Colombian government should consider expanding and improving a successful alternative development program it had previously implemented in the Macarena region of Colombia.

Some studies and experts, however, raised issues about the implementation of alternative development programs and noted potential limitations in their effectiveness. For example, one study that assessed the effectiveness of alternative development found that because coca cultivation is unlikely to change as a result of increases in perceived risk and relative profit, alternative development was likely to have only small effects on coca cultivation levels.<sup>64</sup> Another study noted that alternative development programs have tended to be located far from areas where coca crops have been grown.<sup>65</sup> Thus, the study recommends pursuing more comprehensive counternarcotics efforts in areas affected by coca cultivation. An additional study cited the success of one regional alternative development program, but noted that many alternative development programs in Colombia have faced implementation problems.<sup>66</sup> One expert we interviewed stated that alternative development can work in particular parts of Colombia, yet such efforts were likely not viable in some key coca growing regions, where there is little infrastructure to market legal crops. Thus, the expert stated it is crucial to target where alternative development programs are implemented.

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<sup>63</sup>Daniel Mejia, "Plan Colombia: An Analysis of Effectiveness and Costs," *Improving Global Drug Policy: Comparative Perspectives and UNGASS 2016* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2015).

<sup>64</sup>Marcela Ibanez and Fredrik Carlsson, "A Survey-Based Choice Experiment on Coca Cultivation," *Journal of Development Economics*, vol. 93 (2010).

<sup>65</sup>Alexander Rincón-Ruiz, Hyarold Leonardo Correa, Daniel Oswaldo León, and Stewart Williams, "Coca Cultivation and Crop Eradication in Colombia: The Challenges of Integrating Rural Reality into Effective Anti-Drug Policy," *International Journal of Drug Policy*, vol 33 (2016).

<sup>66</sup>Mejia, "Plan Colombia: An Analysis of Effectiveness and Costs."

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## Conclusions

Since the launch of Plan Colombia almost 20 years ago, the U.S. and Colombian governments have partnered closely to combat drug trafficking through a mix of eradication, interdiction, and alternative development efforts. Since then, violence in Colombia has decreased and the successful negotiation of a peace agreement with the FARC brought an end to that 50-year conflict. However, increasing cocaine production levels in the past 4 years and the continued existence of a range of violent criminal groups underscore the ongoing threat of narcotics trafficking for Colombia.

As the U.S. government seeks to support Colombia in this new phase of its fight against drug trafficking, U.S. agencies should consider what combination of eradication, interdiction, and alternative development activities will help to best achieve their counternarcotics goals. There is a range of available information that can help provide U.S. agencies with insight into the effectiveness of their eradication, interdiction, and alternative development activities. However, to date, State and other U.S. agencies involved in eradication and interdiction activities in Colombia have not evaluated these efforts to determine their long-term effectiveness in reducing the cocaine supply. In addition, State has not undertaken a comprehensive review of the U.S. government's counternarcotics approach in Colombia. Such a review would help State to systematically consider the relative benefits and limitations of the U.S. government's eradication, interdiction, and alternative development activities. With this information, State would be well positioned to ensure that it and other U.S. agencies are prioritizing limited resources and pursuing the combination of counternarcotics activities with the greatest likelihood of achieving long-term success in the fight against drug trafficking in Colombia.

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## Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making two recommendations to State:

The Secretary of State should, in consultation with other U.S. agencies involved in counternarcotics efforts in Colombia, conduct an evaluation of the long-term effectiveness of eradication and interdiction in reducing the cocaine supply. (Recommendation 1)



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The Secretary of State should, in consultation with other U.S. agencies involved in counternarcotics efforts in Colombia, undertake a comprehensive review of the U.S. counternarcotics approach in Colombia and identify what changes, if any, should be made to the types and combination of U.S. activities, taking into consideration how the relative benefits and limitations between eradication, interdiction, and alternative development may impact the effectiveness of these efforts. (Recommendation 2)

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## Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of the report to DHS, DOD, DOJ, State, and USAID for review and comment. DHS, DOJ, and State provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate. State and USAID also provided written comments, which are reproduced in appendix III and IV, respectively. In its written comments, State noted that it agreed in general with our recommendations, but suggested that our first recommendation be broadened to encompass an evaluation of the effectiveness of whole-of-government counternarcotics efforts, rather than focusing on eradication and interdiction specifically. We respect State's argument in favor of broadening the scope of our first recommendation, but we chose not to revise our recommendation based on this rationale. We believe that an evaluation focusing specifically on the long-term effectiveness of eradication and interdiction in reducing the cocaine supply would provide State with important information on two key components of the approach that has characterized U.S. counternarcotics efforts in Colombia for decades but have not been evaluated to date. Such an evaluation would be consistent with analyses already undertaken for alternative development, and would contribute to a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of each of these three key efforts. In addition, our second recommendation to State addresses the need for a broader, comprehensive review of the overall U.S. counternarcotics approach, which would expectedly take into account eradication, interdiction, and alternative development, as well as other U.S. efforts to combat drug-related criminal activities. If State opts to pursue a broader evaluation of all U.S. counternarcotics efforts in Colombia, we would consider this responsive to our first recommendation as long as the evaluation includes a meaningful assessment of the effectiveness of eradication and interdiction efforts.

Additionally, as part of its comments, State highlighted the importance of a whole-of-government approach to counternarcotics in Colombia that

employs a range of efforts that are implemented in a coordinated manner. Consequently, State noted that any review of the individual components of the U.S. counternarcotics strategy will present an incomplete picture and State expressed concern that we had considered eradication, interdiction, and alternative development in isolation. In the report, we note that the U.S. government's counternarcotics approach in Colombia has long called for a mix of eradication, interdiction, and alternative development efforts and we highlight the fact that U.S. officials believe that finding the appropriate combination of these efforts is critical to achieving the U.S. government's counternarcotics objectives in Colombia. Thus, while we present more in-depth analyses of eradication, interdiction, and alternative development, we begin our discussion with an overall description of U.S. efforts in Colombia more generally, covering the role of various U.S. agencies in these efforts, the nature of overall collaboration with Colombia, and the events that shaped the current situation.

Finally, in its comments, State said that we had failed to consider relevant information on eradication that had been published by various sources. In developing our findings in this report, we reviewed available U.S. government, Colombian government, and United Nations data and analysis on eradication, as well as third-party research, and we sought to accurately present this range of information in a balanced manner. Accordingly, we have made relevant modifications to our narrative to further describe information in UN studies related to the results of eradication efforts in Colombia.

In its comments, USAID stated that it concurred with our recommendation that State lead a comprehensive review of the U.S. counternarcotics approach in Colombia. USAID noted that it believes such a review could help identify what changes, if any, are necessary to make to the types and combination of U.S. activities, while taking into consideration how the relative benefits and limitations of eradication, interdiction, and alternative development could affect the effectiveness of these efforts.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees and the Secretaries of Defense, Homeland Security, and State, as well as the Attorney General and the USAID Administrator. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff members have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-7141 or [groverj@gao.gov](mailto:groverj@gao.gov). Contact points for our

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Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made contributions to this report are listed in appendix V.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jennifer Grover". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

Jennifer A. Grover  
Director, International Affairs and Trade

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# Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

This report examines (1) to what extent the U.S. government has assessed the effectiveness of its counternarcotics efforts in Colombia, (2) what is known about the effectiveness of U.S. government-supported eradication programs in Colombia over the last 10 years,<sup>1</sup> (3) what is known about the effectiveness of U.S. government-supported interdiction programs in Colombia over the last 10 years, and (4) what is known about the effectiveness of U.S. government-supported alternative development programs in Colombia over the last 10 years.

To assess to what extent the U.S. government has assessed the effectiveness of its counternarcotics efforts in Colombia, we analyzed Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Department of Defense (DOD), Department of Justice (DOJ), Department of State (State), and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) data and documentation that describe U.S.-supported counternarcotics efforts since 2008, including available performance monitoring data and evaluations that the agencies use to assess the effectiveness of their counternarcotics activities in Colombia. In doing so, we reviewed performance reporting that the agencies conduct through interagency mechanisms including the Office of National Drug Control Policy's (ONDCP) annual National Drug Control Strategy Performance Reporting System report and Budget and Performance Summary report, as well as Embassy Bogotá's annual Performance Plan and Report. In addition, we reviewed agency-level performance monitoring data and related reports produced by DHS, DOD, DOJ, State, and USAID, as well as their relevant component agencies and offices. For example, we reviewed State's annual *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, performance data from USAID's Monitoring and Evaluation Clearinghouse information system, U.S.

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<sup>1</sup>We focused our scope on the last 10 years to examine more recent developments in U.S. counternarcotics assistance to Colombia, rather than reviewing U.S. counternarcotics assistance to Colombia since the start of Plan Colombia in 1999. In addition, it has been approximately 10 years since GAO last conducted a comprehensive review of U.S. counternarcotics assistance to Colombia. See GAO, *Plan Colombia: Drug Reduction Goals Were Not Fully Met, but Security Has Improved; U.S. Agencies Need More Detailed Plans for Reducing Assistance*, [GAO-09-71](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 6, 2008).

Southern Command annual program management reviews, DEA/Colombia impact statements produced through its Threat Enforcement Planning Process, and annual DHS performance reports. We also reviewed evaluations that USAID had conducted of its alternative development programs in Colombia. To identify relevant USAID evaluations, we consulted USAID officials and conducted a search of USAID's Development Experience Clearinghouse, which is USAID's online, publicly available repository of program documentation. In evaluating to what extent the U.S. government has assessed the effectiveness of its counternarcotics efforts in Colombia, we compared State's actions to its evaluation policy.<sup>2</sup> In addition, we compared U.S. agencies' actions to applicable federal internal control standards.<sup>3</sup>

To determine what is known about the effectiveness of U.S. government supported eradication, interdiction, and alternative development programs, we analyzed DHS, DOD, DOJ, State and USAID data and documentation related to counternarcotics efforts in Colombia. As part of our work, we also analyzed data from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's (UNODC) annual surveys of territories in Colombia affected by illicit crops, which documented coca cultivation and cocaine drug productions trends, as well as counternarcotics efforts. In addition, we analyzed Colombian government data and other reporting describing counternarcotics efforts. These U.S. government, United Nations, and Colombian government data included a range of metrics. For eradication programs, we reviewed metrics including estimated coca cultivation levels, eradication levels, coca plant productivity levels, coca replanting rates, and the territorial distribution of coca cultivation. For interdiction, we reviewed metrics including estimated cocaine production levels; the levels of seizures of cocaine, precursor chemicals, and drug trafficking organization assets; the number of drug trafficking organizations disrupted or dismantled; and the number of drug trafficking organization members arrested and extradited. For alternative development programs, we reviewed metrics including the number of households involved in coca cultivation, the amounts of coca cultivated relative to legal crops in areas receiving U.S. government support, increases in the value of sales of legal products in areas involved in narcotics production, the number of

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<sup>2</sup>Department of State, *Department of State Program and Project Design, Monitoring, and Evaluation Policy* (November 2017).

<sup>3</sup>GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: September 2014).

households receiving land titles as a result of U.S. assistance, and the value of agricultural and rural loans generated through U.S. assistance. To assess these data, we reviewed available documentation, and interviewed cognizant U.S. officials. In addition, we were able to compare different sources in some instances, specifically the U.S. government and the UN estimates of coca cultivation and cocaine production in Colombia. We noted several limitations to these data. For example, the coca cultivation and production figures are estimates, and while both the U.S. government and UN have procedures to verify their estimates, there were differences between the two sources in terms of the levels of production and cultivation reported due to differences in their estimating methodologies. For example, one challenge to estimating the hectares of coca eradicated is that crop fields can be eradicated multiple times in 1 year, which means that the total number of hectares eradicated can exceed the total number of hectares cultivated in some years. Likewise we noted that kilograms of cocaine seized in Colombia may be the result of a variety of actions, and can be influenced by the volume of cocaine production, as well as the actions of law enforcement officials. We determined that the U.S. government, United Nations, and Colombian government data were sufficiently reliable to present general trends from 2008 through 2017.

Further, we reviewed agency documentation from State, USAID, DOD, and DEA in order to identify plans, reviews, strategies, and assessments related to counternarcotics efforts in Colombia. For example, we reviewed State's annual International Narcotics Control Strategy Reports, Embassy Bogotá's annual Performance Plan and Reports, DOD U.S. Southern Command performance management reviews, and DEA's Threat Enforcement Planning Process assessment. In addition, we reviewed seven evaluations that USAID had commissioned of its alternative development programs in Colombia and identified relevant findings from these evaluations regarding the effectiveness of alternative development efforts in Colombia. Some of these evaluations related to specific alternative development programs, while others evaluated USAID's alternative development efforts in Colombia more broadly. It was beyond the scope of this engagement to assess the quality of these evaluations. We also reviewed USAID performance data in its Monitor system and in Embassy Bogotá's annual Performance Plan and Report and compared USAID's results to the targets it had established. We did not perform an assessment of the underlying metrics that USAID used, as our purpose was to compare actuals to targets.

To gather further information regarding what is known about the effectiveness of U.S. government supported eradication, interdiction, and alternative development programs, we interviewed U.S. officials that have responsibility for and insights into U.S.-supported counternarcotics efforts in Colombia from:

- DHS, including Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the U.S. Coast Guard;
- DOD, including the Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Counternarcotics and Global Threats and U.S. Southern Command;
- DOJ, including the Criminal Division, the Drug Enforcement Administration, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation;
- State, including the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs and the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs;
- and USAID's Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean.

In addition, we conducted fieldwork in Colombia in March 2018. During our fieldwork, we interviewed U.S. officials from DHS, DOD, DOJ, State, and USAID involved in counternarcotics activities at Embassy Bogotá. In addition, we interviewed various officials from Colombian security and civilian agencies and from the UNODC. We also visited the headquarters of the Colombian National Police Air Service's headquarters in Guaymaral (near Bogotá) and the Colombian National Police's International School for the Use of Police Force for Peace (near Ibagué). Finally, as part of our fieldwork, we visited Tumaco in southwest Colombia. Tumaco is the municipality with the highest levels of coca cultivation in Colombia and is also the most significant hub for the trafficking of cocaine out of the country. In Tumaco, we visited the Colombian government's Strategic Operation Center, observed a manual eradication operation, and met with a number of USAID alternative development program beneficiaries. The information on foreign law in this report is not the product of GAO's original analysis, but is derived from interviews and secondary sources.

Finally, to help validate and supplement U.S. government findings regarding the effectiveness of its counternarcotics programs, we conducted a literature review to determine the extent to which relevant non-U.S. government studies either validated or reached different conclusions than the U.S. government's findings regarding the effectiveness of U.S.-supported counternarcotics programs in Colombia. To conduct this review, we developed a list of search terms related to

eradication, interdiction, and alternative development in Colombia. Then, working with a GAO research librarian, we conducted a search using selected bibliographic databases, including Scopus and SciELO. We conducted searches for materials in both English and Spanish. The searches resulted in the identification of an initial list of 261 English-language articles and 45 Spanish-language articles. The team then conducted a process to narrow down the initial search results to a priority list of studies. In order to narrow down the results, we considered a variety of factors including the relevance of the study to our research questions, the extent to which the study focused on Colombia or was more global in nature, whether the study had been published in 2008 or later, and whether the study included original research. To validate our priority list of studies, we shared our results with a non-U.S. government expert who had studied counternarcotics efforts in Colombia to see if there were further studies that we should include. We added one additional study based upon his review. In total, we selected 23 studies to include in our literature review and to analyze in greater depth for this report. Within our literature review, we identified a relatively small number of authors that had conducted research relevant to our work, in particular, studies related to interdiction efforts in Colombia. As a result, there are several authors who have more than 1 study included within the list of 23 studies we selected. For each of the 23 studies we selected, we completed a data collection instrument to, among other things, identify the study's key findings and recommendations and to make a high-level assessment that the study was of sufficient quality to include in our review. We ensured that our selection included studies issued or published in 2008 or later. During our review, we noted that several studies analyzed data from slightly earlier time periods. In addition, we noted that some studies analyzed data for particular regions or settings within Colombia. While this does not affect the quality of the studies, it does raise the possibility that their findings might not fully apply to the current situation in Colombia.

As part of our work, we also conducted interviews with a nongeneralizable sample of three non-U.S. government experts to gather further information regarding what is known about the effectiveness of U.S. counternarcotics programs. In selecting these experts, we sought to choose people with different types of experiences studying and working on counternarcotics efforts in Colombia, in order to get a range of perspectives about these efforts.

We conducted this performance audit from September 2017 to December 2018 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing



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standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

## Appendix II: List of Studies Reviewed

This bibliography contains citations for the 23 studies we reviewed regarding the effectiveness of Colombian counternarcotics efforts.

Beltrán, S. "La Institucionalidad Rural en Colombia: Reflexiones para Su Análisis y Fortalecimiento." *Mundo Agrario*, vol. 17, no. 53 (2016).

Camacho, A., and D. Mejía. "The Health Consequences of Aerial Spraying Illicit Crops: The Case of Colombia." *Journal of Health Economics*, vol. 54 (2017): 147-160.

Ceron, C., I. De los Rios-Carmenado, and S. Fernández. "Illicit Crops Substitution and Rural Prosperity in Armed Conflict Areas: A Conceptual Proposal Based on the Working With People Model in Colombia." *Land Use Policy*, vol. 72 (2018): 201-2014.

Davalos, E. "New Answers to an Old Problem: Social Investment and Coca Crops in Colombia." *International Journal of Drug Policy*, vol. 31 (2016): 121-130.

Fisher, D., and A. Meitus. "Uprooting or Sowing Violence?: Coca Eradication and Guerrilla Violence in Colombia." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 40, no. 9 (2017): 790-807.

Ibanez, M., and F. Carlsson. "A Survey-Based Choice Experiment on Coca Cultivation." *Journal of Development Economics*, vol. 93 (2010): 249-263.

Ibanez, M., and S. Klasen. "Is the War on Drugs Working? Examining the Colombian Case Using Micro Data." *The Journal of Development Studies*, vol. 53, no. 10 (2017): 1650-1662.

Ince, M., "Filling the FARC-Shaped Void." *The RUSI Journal*, vol. 158, no. 5 (2013): 26-34.

Jonsson, M., E. Brennan, and C. O'Hara. "Financing War or Facilitating Peace? The Impact of Rebel Drug Trafficking on Peace Negotiations in

Colombia and Myanmar.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 39, no. 6 (2016): 542-559.

López, L., J. Castro, and A. España. “Los Efectos Globo en los Cultivos de Coca en la Región Andina (1990-2009).” *Apuntes del CENES*, vol. 35, no. 61 (2016): 207-236.

McDermott, J., “La Nueva Generación de Narcotraficantes Colombianos post-FARC: ‘Los Invisibles’.” *InSight Crime* (2018).

Mejía, D., “Plan Colombia: An Analysis of Effectiveness and Costs.” The Brookings Institution (2015).

Mejía, D., and P. Restrepo. “The Economics of the War on Illegal Drug Production and Trafficking.” *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*, vol. 126 (2016): 255-275.

Mejía, D., P. Restrepo, and S. Rozo. “On the Effects of Enforcement on Illegal Markets: Evidence from a Quasi-experiment in Colombia.” World Bank Group (2015).

Muñoz-Mora, J.C., S. Tobón, and J. d’Anjou. “The Role of Land Property Rights in the War on Illicit Crops: Evidence from Colombia.” *World Development*, vol. 103 (2018): 268-283.

Quintero, S., and I. Posada. “Estrategias Políticas para el Tratamiento de las Drogas Ilegales en Colombia.” *Revista Facultad Nacional de Salud Pública*, vol. 31, no. 3 (2013): 373-380.

Reyes, L., “Estimating the Causal Effect of Forced Eradication on Coca Cultivation in Colombian Municipalities.” *World Development*, vol. 61 (2014): 70-84.

Rincón-Ruiz, A., H. Correa, D. León, and S. Williams. “Coca Cultivation and Crop Eradication in Colombia: The Challenges of Integrating Rural Reality into Effective Anti-Drug Policy.” *International Journal of Drug Policy*, vol. 33 (2016): 56-65.

Rincón-Ruiz, A., U. Pascual, and S. Flantua. “Examining Spatially Varying Relationships between Coca Crops and Associated Factors in Colombia, Using Geographically Weight Regression.” *Applied Geography*, vol. 37 (2013): 23-33.

Sánchez, M., “Cultivos Ilícitos y Confianza Institucional en Colombia.” *Política y Gobierno*, vol. 21, no. 1 (2014): 95-126.

Sandoval, L., A. Lopez, and C. Cárdenas. “Determinantes y Características de la Oferta de Cocaína en Colombia (1989–2006).” *Revista Facultad de Ciencias Económicas: Investigación y Reflexión*, vol. 17, no. 2 (2009): 199-208.

Seatzu, F., “‘If Ya Wanna End War and Stuff, You Gotta Sing Loud’—A Survey of the Provisional Agreement between FARC and Colombia on Illicit Drugs.” *Araucaria. Revista Iberoamericana de Filosofía, Política y Humanidades y Humanidades*, vol. 18, no. 36 (2016): 373-389.

Thoumi, F., “Políticas Antidrogas y La Necesidad de Enfrentar las Vulnerabilidades de Colombia.” *Análisis Político*, no. 67 (2009): 60-82.

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# Appendix III: Comments from the Department of State



United States Department of State  
*Comptroller*  
Washington, DC 20520

November 27, 2018

Thomas Melito  
Managing Director  
International Affairs and Trade  
Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20548-0001

Dear Mr. Melito:

We appreciate the opportunity to review your draft report, "COLOMBIA: U.S. Counternarcotics Assistance Achieved Some Positive Results, but State Needs to Review the Overall U.S. Approach, GAO Job Code 102323.

The enclosed Department of State comments are provided for incorporation with this letter as an appendix to the final report.

If you have any questions concerning this response, please contact Nathan Lee, Program Officer, Office of Western Hemisphere Programs, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs at (202) 663-2910.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chris H. Flaggs".

Christopher H. Flaggs

Enclosure:  
As stated

cc: GAO – Jennifer Grover  
INL – Kirsten D. Madison  
OIG - Norman Brown

**Department of State Comments on Draft GAO Report**

**COLOMBIA: U.S. Counternarcotics Assistance Achieved Some  
Positive Results, but State Needs to Review the Overall U.S. Approach**  
**(GAO-19-106, GAO Code 102323)**

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on your draft report, *Colombia: U.S. Counternarcotics Assistance Achieved Some Positive Results, but State Needs to Review the Overall U.S. Approach*.

The Department of State strives to ensure foreign assistance supports U.S. national security priorities, and programs are accountable to the purposes for which Congress appropriated the funds.

When Plan Colombia assistance began in 2000, Colombia was on the brink of becoming a failed state. The country was at war and the Colombian government controlled only half of its territory. Through bipartisan Congressional support for strengthening Colombian police and military capabilities, the United States helped improve citizen security outcomes, including a 50 percent reduction in homicides and 90 percent reduction in kidnappings since 2002; virtually eliminated narcoflights departing from Colombia; and Colombian police and military forces became strong U.S. allies that now export their hard-won security expertise to other partners in the hemisphere via the U.S.-Colombia Action Plan on Regional Security Cooperation. As these results demonstrate, U.S. counternarcotics assistance built impressive institutional capabilities that now allow the Colombian government to further expand its presence into formerly FARC-controlled territory and meet today's narcotics challenges head on.

For more than two decades, the U.S. approach to counternarcotics in Colombia has included Department of State, USAID, and Department of Defense-managed foreign assistance to build Colombian government capabilities, especially in the police and military services and to support Colombian alternative development, coca eradication, and cocaine and precursor interdiction programs. This approach includes law enforcement cooperation, information sharing, and DOJ-managed extraditions of top narcotraffickers. While eradication and interdiction are key components of the U.S. approach, the Department considers all the pieces interrelated, mutually reinforcing, and equally important to an effective, sustainable long-term solution to Colombia's narcotics challenge. Any analysis of the long-term effectiveness of cocaine supply reduction efforts needs to consider

all of these factors to be meaningful, and by definition, any review of individual components of a comprehensive strategy will provide an incomplete picture.

The Department agrees with the lessons learned articulated in GAO's October 2017 report, *Counternarcotics: Overview of U.S. Efforts in the Western Hemisphere* (GAO-18-10). Consistent with the findings of that report, we endorse a whole-of-government approach to counternarcotics in Colombia that acknowledges eradication of coca alone is not sufficient; combines security, police presence, access to government services, licit economic alternatives to coca, expansion of road infrastructure, eradication, disruption of organized criminal groups, and interdiction; recognizes that results take time; and promotes an approach that is geographically targeted and driven by information and intelligence. The Department is concerned about the current report's consideration of eradication, interdiction, and alternative development activities in isolation rather than as a comprehensive, whole-of-government approach to counternarcotics. In practice, each of these tools targets a different aspect of the narcotics challenge, and all must work together in concert to achieve and sustain counternarcotics results. As such, the current report presents an incomplete picture of the "overall U.S. approach."

The U.S. government's primary mid-term counternarcotics objective in Colombia, as enunciated at the March 2018 High-Level Dialogue, is to combat the more than 290 percent increase in pure cocaine production potential since 2013 by working with the Colombian government to cut coca cultivation and cocaine production by 50 percent by the end of 2023. This ambitious goal is vital to protecting American lives and requires support from a wide variety of U.S. government agencies. The President, through the National Security Strategy and Executive Order 13773, has clearly articulated as a priority a comprehensive and decisive approach to dismantle transnational criminal organizations (TCOs), deny the ability of TCOs to harm Americans, and restore safety for the American people.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) data indicate that, following a dramatic decline in cocaine overdose-related deaths in the United States, this figure has steadily increased after 2013, with the 10,375 overdose related deaths in 2016 the highest on record, a 53 percent increase over the prior year. This worrying trend highlights the urgency to combat the aforementioned increases in cocaine production using a whole-of-government approach that includes, but does not depend solely on, eradication. The international community, through the *UN Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances*, and more recently at the 2016 UN General Assembly Special Session on the world



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drug problem, has also recognized the importance of eradication as a tool that is necessary, but not sufficient on its own to sustainably combat drug trafficking.

Successful counternarcotics efforts require sustained political will and commitment from partner nations. As the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) 2018 *World Drug Report* notes, a reduction in eradication and alternative development activities in Colombia resulted in a dramatic resurgence in coca cultivation after 2013. The political decision to reduce eradication, particularly during peace negotiations with the FARC, among other factors, “resulted in a perceived decrease in the risk of coca cultivation and a dramatic scaling-up of manufacture.” It appears the draft report failed to consider various useful published sources on eradication, including UN studies.

In conclusion, the Department prioritizes effective stewardship of taxpayer dollars, to include ensuring that counternarcotics programs are evaluated for long-term effectiveness in reducing cocaine supply. The Department agrees in general with GAO’s recommendations, but suggests that Recommendation 1 be broadened to say “evaluate the effectiveness of whole-of-government counternarcotics efforts, including eradication, interdiction and law enforcement operations, and alternative development, in reducing the cocaine supply in Colombia,” rather than “conduct an evaluation of the long-term effectiveness of eradication and interdiction in reducing the cocaine supply.”

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# Appendix IV: Comments from the U.S. Agency for International Development



Jennifer Grover  
Director, International Affairs and Trade  
United States Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20226

Dear Ms. Grover:

I am pleased to provide the formal response of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to the draft report of the U. S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) entitled, "*COLOMBIA: U. S. Counter-narcotics Assistance Achieved Some Positive Results, but State Needs to Review the Overall U. S. Approach*" (GAO-19-106). USAID worked closely with the Department of State and the interagency on the Department of State's formal response to this draft report. USAID concurs with the GAO's recommendation that the Department of State lead a comprehensive interagency review of U.S.-funded counter-narcotics programs in the Republic of Colombia, and welcomes the opportunity to participate in the process.

Under the leadership of the Department of State, USAID participates in a whole-of-Government counter-narcotics effort in Colombia. USAID believes a comprehensive review of the U.S. counter-narcotics approach in Colombia can help identify what changes, if any, are necessary to make to the types and combination of U.S. activities, while taking into consideration how the relative benefits and limitations of eradication, interdiction, and alternative development could affect the effectiveness of these efforts. USAID will cooperate fully in this review process.

We appreciate the GAO's acknowledgement of the success of USAID-funded alternative-development programs in Colombia that have provided legal economic opportunities to some rural communities that were previously involved in the production of illicit crops. The Agency agrees that achieving a long-term, sustainable reduction in the production of cocoa requires a comprehensive strategy (after the adequate resolution of security issues), including creating linkages to licit markets, generating economic opportunities, addressing land-tenure property rights, and expanding financial inclusion.

In July of 2018, USAID Administrator Mark Green travelled to Colombia to visit programs funded by the U.S. Government. During a speech to Colombian legislators, he said, "We should aggressively pursue eradication as our governments have agreed, but we must also offer alternative livelihoods." The Government of Colombia (GOC) has demonstrated its

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**Appendix IV: Comments from the U.S. Agency  
for International Development**

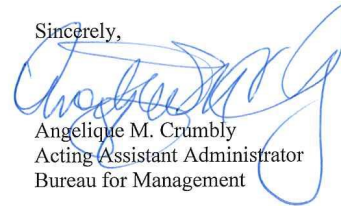
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commitment and willingness to remain a strong ally of the United States. To date, the GOC has contributed 95 percent of the costs of counter-narcotic efforts in-country.

USAID appreciates that the GAO recognized the complex market dynamics that face farmers in Colombia by mentioning several of the different incentives that drive the increase in the production of coca, such as decreasing investment costs, more-frequent harvests, minimal field-maintenance costs, and negligible transportation expenses. As the draft report mentions, the average annual profit for Colombian farmers who produce coca has increased by more than 120 percent between 2012 and 2016, which makes counter-narcotics efforts even more difficult. USAID's programs are having an impact, as the draft report recognizes, but we know more work is necessary.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to your draft report, and for the courtesies extended by your staff while conducting this engagement.

Sincerely,



Angelique M. Crumbly  
Acting Assistant Administrator  
Bureau for Management

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# Appendix V: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

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## GAO Contact

Jennifer A. Grover, (202) 512-7141, or [groverj@gao.gov](mailto:groverj@gao.gov)

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## Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Juan Gobel (Assistant Director), Ryan Vaughan (Analyst-in-Charge), Owen Starlin, Pedro Almoguera, Martin De Alteriis, Leia Dickerson, Neil Doherty, Mark Dowling, Dawn Locke, and Aldo Salerno made key contributions to this report.

# Appendix VI: Accessible Data

## Data Tables

**Accessible Data for United States and United Nations Estimates of Cocaine Production in Colombia, 2008-2017**

n/a	Metric tons	Metric tons	Metric tons	Metric tons	Metric tons	Metric tons	Metric tons	Metric tons	Metric tons	Metric tons
Category	Calendar year 2008	Calendar year 2009	Calendar year 2010	Calendar year 2011	Calendar year 2012	Calendar year 2013	Calendar year 2014	Calendar year 2015	Calendar year 2016	Calendar year 2017
United Nations cocaine production estimates	471	488	424	384	333	290	442	646	1,053	1,379
U.S. government cocaine production estimates	320	315	280	220	210	235	324	545	772	921

**Accessible Data for Figure 1a: Estimated Coca Cultivation and Cocaine Production in Colombia, 2008-2017**

Category	Hectares									
Fiscal year	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
United Nations coca cultivation estimates	81,000	73,000	62,000	64,000	48,000	48,000	69,000	96,000	146,000	171,000
U.S. government coca cultivation estimates	119,000	116,000	100,000	83,000	78,000	80,500	112,000	159,000	188,000	209,000

**Accessible Data for Figure 1b: Estimated Coca Cultivation and Cocaine Production in Colombia, 2008-2017**

Category	Metric tons									
Fiscal year	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
United Nations cocaine production estimates	471	488	424	384	333	290	442	646	1,053	1,379
U.S. government cocaine production estimates	320	315	280	220	210	235	324	545	772	921

**Accessible Data for Figure 3: Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development Foreign Assistance Provided to Colombia, Fiscal Years (FY) 2008-2017**

Category	Fiscal year 2008	Fiscal year 2009	Fiscal year 2010	Fiscal year 2011	Fiscal year 2012	Fiscal year 2013	Fiscal year 2014	Fiscal year 2015	Fiscal year 2016	Fiscal year 2017
Dollars in millions	562	556	534	469	384	360	331	308	299	391

**Accessible Data for Figure 4: Department of Defense Estimated Counternarcotics Funding Provided for Colombia, Fiscal Years (FY) 2008-2017**

Category	Fiscal year 2008	Fiscal year 2009	Fiscal year 2010	Fiscal year 2011	Fiscal year 2012	Fiscal year 2013	Fiscal year 2014	Fiscal year 2015	Fiscal year 2016	Fiscal year 2017
Dollars in millions	120	128	129	110	59	60	46	48	72	57

**Accessible Data for Figure 8: Estimated Hectares of Coca Cultivation and Coca Eradication (Aerial and Manual), 2001-2017**

Calendar year	Total Eradication	Aerial Eradication	Manual Eradication	Coca Cultivation
2001	86,966	84,251	1,745	169,800
2002	133,127	130,364	2,763	144,400
2003	137,036	132,816	4,220	113,850
2004	142,784	136,551	6,233	114,100
2005	204,725	172,020	32,705	144,000
2006	194,480	153,134	41,346	157,000
2007	199,879	133,496	66,383	167,000
2008	200,776	104,772	96,004	119,000
2009	165,329	104,772	60,557	116,000
2010	145,733	101,940	43,793	100,000
2011	138,502	103,302	35,200	83,000
2012	131,164	100,678	30,486	78,000
2013	69,172	47,052	22,120	80,500
2014	67,346	55,532	11,814	112,000
2015	49,968	36,494	13,474	159,000
2016	17,643	0	17,643	188,000
2017	52,001	0	52,001	209,000

**Accessible Data for Figure 9: Estimated Kilograms of Cocaine Seized in Colombia, 2008-2017**

Category	Fiscal year 2008	Fiscal year 2009	Fiscal year 2010	Fiscal year 2011	Fiscal year 2012	Fiscal year 2013	Fiscal year 2014	Fiscal year 2015	Fiscal year 2016	Fiscal year 2017
Cocaine seizures (in thousands of kilograms)	198	203	165	156	188	167	147	254	362	435

## Agency Comment Letters

### Accessible Text for Appendix III Comments from the Department of State

Page 1

November 27, 2018

Thomas Melito

Managing Director

International Affairs and Trade Government Accountability Office

441 G Street, N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20548-0001

Dear Mr. Melito:

We appreciate the opportunity to review your draft report, "COLOMBIA: U.S. Counternarcotics Assistance Achieved Some Positive Results, but State Needs to Review the Overall U.S. Approach, GAO Job Code 102323.

The enclosed Department of State comments are provided for incorporation with this letter as an appendix to the final report.

If you have any questions concerning this response, please contact Nathan Lee, Program Officer, Office of Western Hemisphere Programs,



Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs at (202) 663-2910.

Sincerely,

Christopher H. Flaggs

Enclosure:

As stated

cc: GAO-Jennifer Grover

INL - Kirsten D. Madison

OIG - Norman Brown

Page 2

Department of State Comments on Draft GAO Report

COLOMBIA: U.S. Counternarcotics Assistance Achieved Some Positive Results, but State Needs to Review the Overall U.S. Approach

(GAO-19-106, GAO Code 102323)

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on your draft report, Colombia: U.S. Counternarcotics Assistance Achieved Some Positive Results, but State Needs to Review the Overall U.S. Approach.

The Department of State strives to ensure foreign assistance supports U.S. national security priorities, and programs are accountable to the purposes for which Congress appropriated the funds.

When Plan Colombia assistance began in 2000, Colombia was on the brink of becoming a failed state. The country was at war and the Colombian government controlled only half of its territory. Through bipartisan Congressional support for strengthening Colombian police and military capabilities, the United States helped improve citizen security outcomes, including a 50 percent reduction in homicides and 90 percent reduction in kidnappings since 2002; virtually eliminated narcoflights departing from Colombia; and Colombian police and military forces became strong U.S. allies that now export their hard-won security

expertise to other partners in the hemisphere via the U.S.-Colombia Action Plan on Regional Security Cooperation. As these results demonstrate, U.S. counternarcotics assistance built impressive institutional capabilities that now allow the Colombian government to further expand its presence into formerly FARC-controlled territory and meet today's narcotics challenges head on.

For more than two decades, the U.S. approach to counternarcotics in Colombia has included Department of State, USAID, and Department of Defense-managed foreign assistance to build Colombian government capabilities, especially in the police and military services and to support Colombian alternative development, coca eradication, and cocaine and precursor interdiction programs. This approach includes law enforcement cooperation, information sharing, and DOJ-managed extraditions of top narco-traffickers. While eradication and interdiction are key components of the U.S. approach, the Department considers all the pieces interrelated, mutually reinforcing, and equally important to an effective, sustainable long-term solution to Colombia's narcotics challenge. Any analysis of the long-term effectiveness of cocaine supply reduction efforts needs to consider

### Page 3

all of these factors to be meaningful, and by definition, any review of individual components of a comprehensive strategy will provide an incomplete picture.

The Department agrees with the lessons learned articulated in GAO's October 2017 report, *Counternarcotics: Overview of U.S. Efforts in the Western Hemisphere* (GAO-18-10). Consistent with the findings of that report, we endorse a whole-of-government approach to counternarcotics in Colombia that acknowledges eradication of coca alone is not sufficient; combines security, police presence, access to government services, licit economic alternatives to coca, expansion of road infrastructure, eradication, disruption of organized criminal groups, and interdiction; recognizes that results take time; and promotes an approach that is geographically targeted and driven by information and intelligence. The Department is concerned about the current report's consideration of eradication, interdiction, and alternative development activities in isolation rather than as a comprehensive, whole-of-government approach to counternarcotics. In practice, each of these tools targets a different aspect of the narcotics challenge, and all must work together in concert to

achieve and sustain counternarcotics results. As such, the current report presents an incomplete picture of the “overall U.S. approach.”

The U.S. government’s primary mid-term counternarcotics objective in Colombia, as enunciated at the March 2018 High-Level Dialogue, is to combat the more than 290 percent increase in pure cocaine production potential since 2013 by working with the Colombian government to cut coca cultivation and cocaine production by 50 percent by the end of 2023. This ambitious goal is vital to protecting American lives and requires support from a wide variety of U.S. government agencies. The President, through the National Security Strategy and Executive Order 13773, has clearly articulated as a priority a comprehensive and decisive approach to dismantle transnational criminal organizations (TCOs), deny the ability of TCOs to harm Americans, and restore safety for the American people.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) data indicate that, following a dramatic decline in cocaine overdose-related deaths in the United States, this figure has steadily increased after 2013, with the 10,375 overdose related deaths in 2016 the highest on record, a 53 percent increase over the prior year. This worrying trend highlights the urgency to combat the aforementioned increases in cocaine production using a whole-of-government approach that includes, but does not depend solely on, eradication. The international community, through the UN Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, and more recently at the 2016 UN General Assembly Special Session on the world

#### Page 4

drug problem, has also recognized the importance of eradication as a tool that is necessary, but not sufficient on its own to sustainably combat drug trafficking.

Successful counternarcotics efforts require sustained political will and commitment from partner nations. As the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) 2018 World Drug Report notes, a reduction in eradication and alternative development activities in Colombia resulted in a dramatic resurgence in coca cultivation after 2013. The political decision to reduce eradication, particularly during peace negotiations with the FARC, among other factors, “resulted in a perceived decrease in the risk of coca cultivation and a dramatic scaling-up of manufacture.” It appears the draft report failed to consider various useful published sources on eradication, including UN studies.

In conclusion, the Department prioritizes effective stewardship of taxpayer dollars, to include ensuring that counternarcotics programs are evaluated for long-term effectiveness in reducing cocaine supply. The Department agrees in general with GAO's recommendations, but suggests that Recommendation 1 be broadened to say "evaluate the effectiveness of whole-of-government counternarcotics efforts, including eradication, interdiction and law enforcement operations, and alternative development, in reducing the cocaine supply in Colombia," rather than "conduct an evaluation of the long-term effectiveness of eradication and interdiction in reducing the cocaine supply."

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## Accessible Text for Appendix IV Comments from the U.S. Agency for International Development

### Page 1

Jennifer Grover

Director, International Affairs and Trade

United States Government Accountability Office

441 G Street, N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20226

Dear Ms. Grover:

I am pleased to provide the formal response of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to the draft report of the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) entitled, "COLOMBIA: U.S. Counter-narcotics Assistance Achieved Some Positive Results, but State Needs to Review the Overall U.S. Approach" (GAO-19-106). USAID worked closely with the Department of State and the interagency on the Department of State's formal response to this draft report. USAID concurs with the GAO's recommendation that the Department of State lead a comprehensive interagency review of U.S.-funded counter-narcotics programs in the Republic of Colombia, and welcomes the opportunity to participate in the process.

Under the leadership of the Department of State, USAID participates in a whole-of-Government counter-narcotics effort in Colombia. USAID

believes a comprehensive review of the U.S. counter-narcotics approach in Colombia can help identify what changes, if any, are necessary to make to the types and combination of U.S. activities, while taking into consideration how the relative benefits and limitations of eradication, interdiction, and alternative development could affect the effectiveness of these efforts. USAID will cooperate fully in this review process.

We appreciate the GAO's acknowledgement of the success of USAID-funded alternative-development programs in Colombia that have provided legal economic opportunities to some rural communities that were previously involved in the production of illicit crops. The Agency agrees that achieving a long-term, sustainable reduction in the production of coca requires a comprehensive strategy (after the adequate resolution of security issues), including creating linkages to licit markets, generating economic opportunities, addressing land-tenure property rights, and expanding financial inclusion.

In July of 2018, USAID Administrator Mark Green travelled to Colombia to visit programs funded by the U.S. Government. During a speech to Colombian legislators, he said, "We should aggressively pursue eradication as our governments have agreed, but we must also offer alternative livelihoods." The Government of Colombia (GOC) has demonstrated its

## Page 2

commitment and willingness to remain a strong ally of the United States. To date, the GOC has contributed 95 percent of the costs of counter-narcotic efforts in-country.

USAID appreciates that the GAO recognized the complex market dynamics that face farmers in Colombia by mentioning several of the different incentives that drive the increase in the production of coca, such as decreasing investment costs, more-frequent harvests, minimal field-maintenance costs, and negligible transportation expenses. As the draft report mentions, the average annual profit for Colombian farmers who produce coca has increased by more than 120 percent between 2012 and 2016, which makes counter-narcotics efforts even more difficult. USAID's programs are having an impact, as the draft report recognizes, but we know more work is necessary.

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Thank you for the opportunity to respond to your draft report, and for the courtesies extended by your staff while conducting this engagement.

Sincerely,

Angelique M. Crumbly

Acting Assistant Administrator

Bureau for Management

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