

Cartel-Style Drug Violence Is Coming to Europe

Photojournalist Teun Voeten has reported on conflict around the world, and watched as drug violence has crept up in his Dutch homeland.

by [Mike Power](#) | February 18, 2021, 10:15am



Teun Voeten has worked on the global frontline for three decades, covering war, conflict and social issues from the Middle East and Africa to South East Asia and Europe.

Best known for his in-depth reportage on [tunnel dwellers](#) in Manhattan in the 1990s, his latest [book](#) depicts one of the most vicious ongoing conflicts in recent history, Mexico's drug war.

We spoke to Teun about why sicarios enjoy killing people, the rise of drug gangs in his [increasingly violent](#) Dutch homeland and why he rejects legalisation.

VICE: What did you learn while investigating the drug trade in Mexico?

Teun Voeten: I was shocked at the amount of viciousness and brutal nihilism that pervades society. Once that violence has acquired a certain dynamic, it's nearly impossible to stop it. It is amazing how ordinary people can get sucked in by that dynamic.

In your book you discuss the "joy of killing" felt by assassins you've interviewed. What do you mean by that?

I interviewed many sicarios [hitmen] who said they actually enjoyed killing people. But these are not exotic monsters, just human beings. They had prior criminal careers covering a range of offences, from robbery to accidental homicide, the latter quite often in self-defence.

They are recruited by cartels and trained at special camps where they become professional killers. Many sicarios told me it gives them great satisfaction to finish an enemy off; they gain a sense of professional pride to successfully execute a mission. They gain a sense of empowerment to have taken a life. In some cases, people get addicted to these powerful feelings and keep on killing.



SOLDIER PATROLLING THE SCENE OF A CARTEL SHOOTING IN JUAREZ. PHOTO: TEUN VOETEN.

How do they reach that point?

Although most people initially resent killing people, it is remarkably easy to overcome that. They deploy the same strategies I've seen worldwide. Jihadi terrorists, West African child soldiers and Mexican sicarios all handle killing like this: they create a moral, emotional or political distance between themselves and their victims by dehumanising them. That distance can also be achieved literally, with the use of long-distance or remote weapons. Many killers change their state of mind, whether involuntarily through brainwashing, or through drug use. Finally, some killers are forced to kill and are rewarded, or punished, for refusing or failing. And so, they kill.

Why do you think the drug trade in Mexico is so gruesomely violent compared to Europe?

Mexico has a longstanding tradition of severe endemic corruption. Its legal system has a fair level of impunity, but is currently overwhelmed, which produces even higher levels of impunity. It is a country with huge economic inequality, far worse than any EU state.

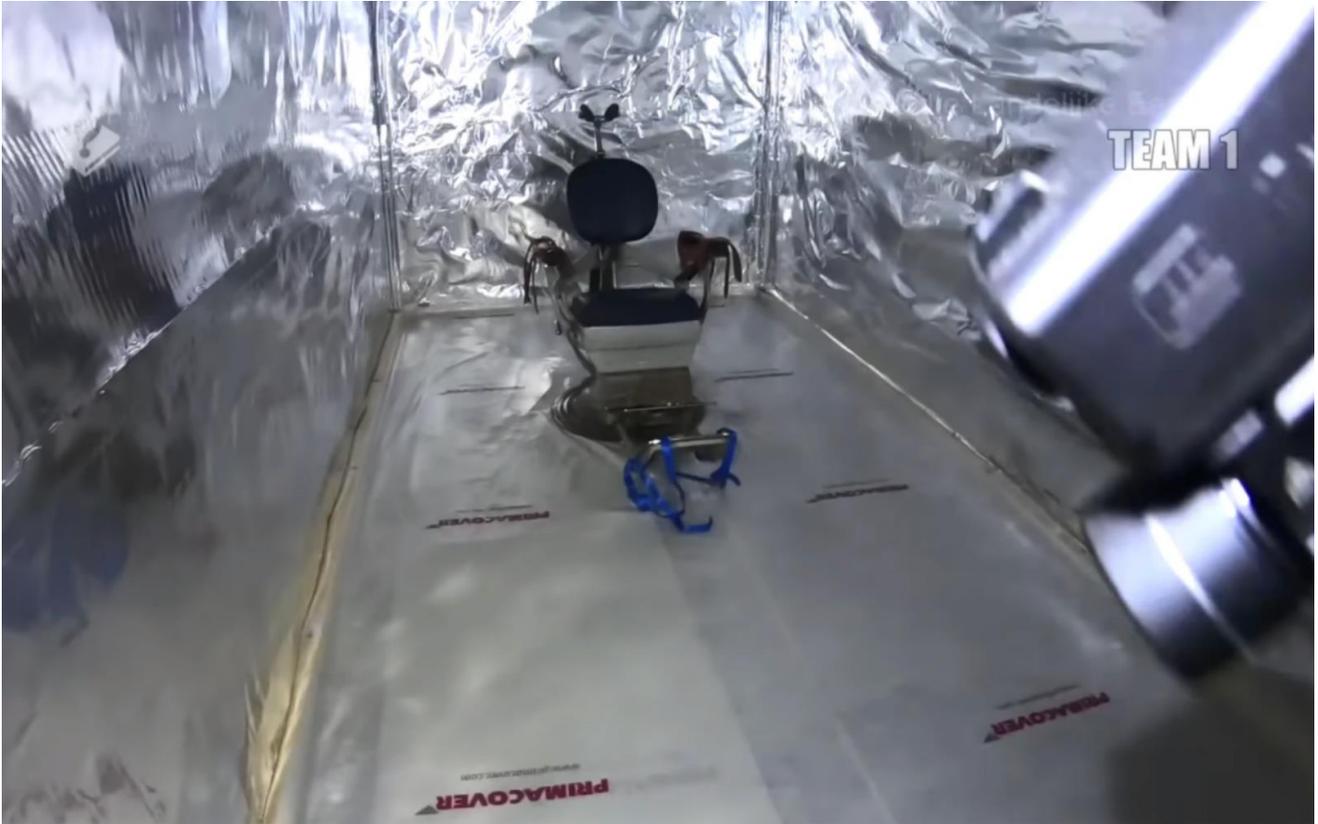
A brutal neoliberal system has created a huge underclass of have-nots, who are an endless labour pool for the cartels. There are very remote areas that are inaccessible and ideal to hide out and start illegal operations. Then there is a huge, porous border with a consumer nation country, the US, that has an insatiable demand for drugs, and is also a supplier of heavy weapons that are easily smuggled into Mexico.

The Netherlands is being called a narco-state by some officials there. Is this fair?

I would call it a narcostate-lite. There's a lot of dirty drug money circulating, and a lot of impunity. The Dutch drugs economy is huge and dirty money is infiltrating many legal businesses. There are cases of corruption. We've had AK-47-toting death squads, a beheading in 2016 and a criminal lawyer was gunned down in 2019. In the summer of 2020, police discovered a shipping container at a drugs lab, transformed into a torture chamber. And now we have meth labs employing the expertise of Mexican cartel cooks.

A few years ago, production of meth was unheard of in the Netherlands, but in 2016 the first meth lab was discovered. Last year, 30 labs were busted. Most of them are MDMA labs that have been easily able to switch to crystal meth, as the equipment, networks and infrastructure

are already present. The authorities are taking it very seriously. They see a risk of huge escalation, especially as meth cooks sent by Mexican cartels were found at eight or nine Dutch meth labs last year.



TORTURE CHAMBER DISCOVERED IN THE NETHERLANDS. SCREENSHOT VIA POLICE FOOTAGE .

Why has Holland allowed the drug trade to become so powerful?

Unfortunately, the pot business – which started out as a hippy thing in the 60s and 70s – became a capitalist enterprise, run by slick pimps. The government ignored this activity, and for a long time thought it was just a benevolent hobby of innocent idealists. These weed farmers later switched to harder drugs. It was legal to sell weed, but not to cultivate it, and this tolerant but contradictory attitude of the Dutch created legal loopholes and opportunities in which the drug business could flourish and diversify. And it has.

Holland has a great infrastructure and is a drug-producing, drug-importing, exporting, distributing and consuming country. There is a huge drug economy, and the proceeds of that are infiltrating legitimate Dutch businesses, and a lax fiscal climate facilitates money-laundering.

The use of violence is growing here – there’s a growing class of kids who know nothing but the drug trade and love violence. The Dutch see themselves as the vanguard of liberalism, of progressive thinking. But they are complicit with the growth of the drugs trade in the EU and beyond.



CRYSTAL METH IN A DRUG LAB IN MICHOACAN, MEXICO. PHOTO: TEUN VOETEN.

Do you think meth use will rise in Europe?

In the EU we have a growing population of superfluous, expendable people. In the ghettos encircling our manicured, picture-perfect European city centres, pockets of despair are growing. Coupled with a growing cynicism in our leaders, we are seeing nihilism on a new level. These groups will turn to – and already have reached out to – drugs for work and escape. Meth is the perfect drug for these times. It's cheaper and lasts longer than crack. A £3 hit of meth can last all day. From a crack user's point of view, that's a very good deal.

Unlike most journalists who have worked on the drug war frontline, you reject legalisation. Why don't you want to take the trade and the profits from the cartels?

I don't think more prohibition is the answer, but I certainly don't think legalisation is the solution either. People that are against drugs are normally seen as conservative right-wing dickheads. I want to formulate a progressive, anti-narcotics narrative.

I have a problem with the narcotisation of our contemporary culture. Although use of mild drugs such as coca, beer, hash, *qat* and ephedra in specific cultures has always been tolerated, now the situation is out of hand, thanks to the free market and a narcotic capitalist spirit.

Drug consumption used to be a countercultural statement against a conservative establishment. Now, drug use is a consumerist leisure activity of the masses. Drugs lubricate the capitalist system. Cannabis soothes and tranquillises rebellious voices. Stimulants give wage slaves the energy to let themselves be exploited. Cocaine inflates the self esteem of those who otherwise might realise how unsatisfactory their lives are. MDMA is an escape for people who see their drug-fuelled weekends as payback for trudging into their bullshit jobs all week



FASHION SHOP IN JUAREZ SELLING EARRINGS IN THE SHAPE OF FIREARMS. PHOTO: TEUN VOETEN.

Given the wealth of the cartels, and the poverty still present in countries such as Mexico, how can civil society compete with gangsters and the opportunities that the drug trade offers the poor?

This is a very difficult question. Eradication of drug crime is impossible, but it may be possible to diminish its effects with a combination of preventative, repressive and curative strategies.

We should talk about lowering drug consumption, reducing inequality, creating other economic and cultural opportunities than drugs. It is an uphill battle. But doing nothing, and letting the drug trade fester and continue to undermine civil society, is simply not an option.