

**Youth Narratives Concerning Drug Trafficking in Sinaloa:  
Joining, Risks, and Plans****Narrativas juveniles sobre el narcotráfico en Sinaloa:  
ingreso, riesgos y planes a futuro**

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**ABSTRACT**

The article's objective is to understand the youth experiences, assessment, and meaning construction of drug trafficking. The fieldwork was carried out in 2018 and 2019 in Culiacán, Sinaloa. A qualitative approach was made to the sociocultural understanding of drug trafficking. We interviewed 16 young persons between the ages of 18 to 29 who collaborated or were involved with drug trafficking. The results highlight drug trafficking entrance motivation and experience; permanence, risk assessment, and consequences of the activities carried out; making plans within and outside drug trafficking. It is concluded that young people join and remain in drug trafficking due to the idealization of a successful life, economic retribution, acceptance, legitimacy, and recognition of drug trafficking in the context. For young people, drug trafficking is constituted as a space for work, projection, and building a future.

*Keywords:* 1. drug trafficking, 2. violence, 3. juvenicide, 4. Culiacán, 5. Sinaloa.

**RESUMEN**

El objetivo de este artículo es comprender las experiencias, valoraciones y la construcción de sentido del narcotráfico desde las juventudes. El trabajo de campo se realizó durante 2018 y 2019 en Culiacán, Sinaloa. Se hizo una aproximación cualitativa a la comprensión sociocultural del narcotráfico. Se entrevistó a 16 jóvenes entre 18 y 29 años que colaboran o colaboraron con el narcotráfico. En los resultados sobresalen: las motivaciones y experiencias de ingreso al narcotráfico; la permanencia, valoración de riesgo y consecuencias de las actividades realizadas; la construcción de planes a futuro dentro y fuera del narcotráfico. Se concluye que el ingreso y la permanencia de las juventudes al narcotráfico se da por la idealización de una vida exitosa, por la retribución económica, la aceptación, la legitimidad y el reconocimiento del narcotráfico en el contexto. Para las juventudes el narcotráfico se constituye como espacio de trabajo, de proyección y construcción de futuro.

*Palabras clave:* 1. narcotráfico, 2. violencia, 3. juvenicidio, 4. Culiacán, 5. Sinaloa.

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INTRODUCTION<sup>4</sup>

In recent years, drug trafficking has become one of the main problems in Mexico. Insecurity and violence associated with drug trafficking are a daily occurrence and disrupt daily life and social practices, ways of thinking, ways of interacting, and positioning oneself in the environment (Reguillo, 2021). In Mexico, the increase in violence can be traced back to historical factors. The upsurge in violence is related to the implementation of political security strategies that have been justified since the “war against drug trafficking”, as well as the dynamics and disputes between criminal groups for control of the territories (Astorga, 2015).

Following Moreno et al. (2016), the Mexican State conceives drug trafficking as an illegal activity and a source of disturbance that threatens national security. For Ramírez (2011) drug trafficking has acquired particularities from historical, political, social, economic and cultural dimensions that are manifested on a local scale. In everyday life, drug trafficking permeates education, the economy, government structures, political relations, security strategies, public health, and other spheres of the public scene (Moreno et al., 2016). In its cultural dimension, drug trafficking disrupts people who are involved in the activity (Valenzuela Arce, 2002) and those who keep their distance (Moreno, 2014).

According to data from the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía [Inegi], 2021b) there is an increase in the perception of insecurity and violence in Mexico. Inegi (2021a) reports that from 2015 to 2021, 208 603 people were killed in Mexico. According to Santiago Roel, director of the news outlet *Semáforo Delictivo*, 80% of homicides in Mexico are associated with drug trafficking (Semáforo, 2021, para. 4). In this scenario, Sinaloa is “a hot zone for homicides” (Inegi, 2019, p. 27). The Citizen Council for Public Security and Criminal Justice (Consejo Ciudadano para la Seguridad Pública y la Justicia Penal; IMER Noticias, 2021) reports that Culiacán ranks 25th on the list of the most violent cities in the world, with a rate of 49.41 homicides per 100 000 inhabitants. On the other hand, Casillas (2021) reports that in Sinaloa forced disappearances increased by 70%, predominantly those of people between 13 and 18 years of age.

In the context described above, youth are the population most affected by drug violence. According to data from the Network for the Rights of Children in Mexico (Red por los Derechos de la Infancia en México [REDIM], 2021), 30 000 girls and boys had been recruited by criminal

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groups in 2015. By 2018, it was documented that over 460 000 children and young people were participating in activities associated with drug trafficking. Between 2018 and 2021, 110 000 people were killed, one-third of whom were men and women between the ages of 15 and 29 (REDIM, 2021).

According to Almonacid (2022), addressing youth and drug trafficking in Mexico is not only referring to the experience of direct violence, but also to issues related to marginalization, vulnerability, inequality, exclusion, lack of opportunities and exposure to violence. When analyzing youth conditions in relation to drug trafficking, Urteaga Castro-Pozo and Moreno Hernández (2020, p. 49) argue that “the most stigmatized, discriminated against, and murdered youth are those in precarious situations.” Meanwhile, Reguillo (2015, p. 65) places youth in a “bulimic society” that swallows them up to expel them:

In drug pits<sup>5</sup>, in the form of executed and tortured bodies; in the form of bodies that enter the maquilas as devices at the service of the machine; as migrants; as hitmen, lookouts, ants, mules at the service of organized crime; as sacrificial soldiers in the lower ranks of the military hierarchy.

According to Nateras Domínguez (2016b) educational institutions no longer represent a means of social mobility for young people in creating a promising future. In the workplace, there are few opportunities, precariousness and income difficulties even for specialized professionals, which allows for informal employment and the involvement of young people in illegal activities. For Rivera (2022) youths experience normalized processes of vulnerability and accumulated precariousness. This leads to a disenchantment with the present, to the construction of a future based on uncertainty, to assuming insecure identities with little projection for social development through work. In a context of inequality and few opportunities where drug trafficking finds its “cheap labor” in young people (Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe, 2000; Nateras Domínguez, 2016a).

On the other hand, drug trafficking outlines those denied possibilities. It is configured as a model of identification, a place, a path of recognition and social prestige (Nateras Domínguez, 2016b). It is legitimized as something attractive and promising based on the imaginary of power (Ovalle, 2010b; Reyes et al., 2015, 2017). Youth participation in organized crime is constructed as a way to meet needs and the illusion of immediate enrichment (Rivera, 2022). In this way, drug trafficking gains social acceptance (Moreno et al., 2016) for its ability to offer a sense of belonging, of a future and of solving needs neglected by the State, beyond the economic aspect (Nateras Domínguez, 2016a; Ovalle, 2005; Reguillo, 2021; Villatoro, 2013).

Valenzuela Arce (2015, 2019) warns that precariousness and identity discreditation place youth in dispensable areas of illegality. This enables the construction of youthful bodies that do not

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<sup>5</sup> From the term *narcofosa* in Spanish, it refers to clandestine excavations for the disappearance of bodies.

deserve to live and therefore can be sacrificed, becoming victims of “juvenile homicide”, a structural and historical phenomenon that crosses Mexican territory (Berlanga, 2015).

Returning to the notion of juvenile homicide to understand drug trafficking implies recognizing the existence of a massive criminalization and violent death of young people who are subjected to conditions of vulnerability that push them towards illegality (Reguillo, 2015; Valenzuela Arce, 2015). Youth are discarded and easily replaceable (Valenzuela Arce, 2021). They are young people who end up being reduced to “figures of violence”, that is, victims without identity, without a face.

Returning to Almonacid (2022), it is pertinent to make a psychosocial approach to drug trafficking and youth in order to delve into its symbolic dimension: the experiences, practices, social thinking and forms of interpretation that give meaning to drug trafficking in the context where youth are located. From this perspective, it is also possible to explore the ways in which young people decipher, value and justify their contact with or participation in drug trafficking (Moreno, 2014; Zavala, 2012). Regarding this article, the following questions are raised: 1) How does the process of entry and permanence of young men and women in drug trafficking in Sinaloa occur, and what are their motivations, experiences, valuations, and justifications?; 2) What meanings do young people construct when entering and engaging in activities related to drug trafficking in Sinaloa?; 3) What are and how do they assess the risks and consequences of participating in drug trafficking in Sinaloa?

## METHOD

This qualitative research is oriented towards the sociocultural and biographical understanding of youth (Reguillo, 2012; Strauss and Corbin, 2002). As Carles Feixa (2003) suggests, it is an approach to social thought, daily practices and forms of meaning-making of young people who participate or have participated in drug trafficking in order to understand their experiences from the context in which they are situated.

Sixteen in-depth interviews were conducted with young men and women between the ages of 18 and 29. The interviews took place in Culiacán, Sinaloa in two periods: from October 2017 to February 2018 (Valdez, 2018) and from April to July 2019 (Esparza, 2020). The participation of the interviewees was voluntary. Prior to each interview, they were informed about anonymity and purpose of the study, as well as the conditions of their participation.

In this research, it was assumed that addressing the experience of youth in relation to drug trafficking is a sensitive issue. For Lee (1993) sensitive inquiries are those where the topic, the presence, and the research interests can be perceived as a threat or intrusive and difficult to access. In this case, when talking about drug trafficking, the interviewees may express discomfort when sharing incriminating experiences or discussing illegal practices. In addition, it is delicate when the shared experience poses a risk for the interviewer or the interviewee in the context where the research is being conducted.

Due to the sensitive subject matter, in some cases the participants were given the interview script in advance so that they could identify the thematic fields in detail. During the interviews it was made clear to them that they could avoid those topics considered sensitive. It was also emphasized that it was not necessary to go into compromising details, such as names, dates, places, or specific actions. In addition, their consent was requested to record the interviews, making it clear that the information would be used for academic purposes.

The structure of the interviews was divided into three sections: 1) evaluations of the drug trafficking phenomenon and motivations for joining; 2) permanence, experiences and meanings surrounding the activities, risks and consequences of their involvement; 3) expectations and plans for the future, both within and outside of drug trafficking.

The interviews were conducted with young men and women from Culiacán, Sinaloa to delve into the context and sociocultural perspective they have on drug trafficking. Another aspect that was considered was that the interviewees had engaged in activities related to drug trafficking. At this point, it was valuable to learn from their own experiences, their knowledge about drug trafficking and their evaluations of entry, permanence, and risk perception. In Table 1 the sociodemographic characteristics of the interviewees are shown.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the interviewees

Participant	Gender	Age	Origin	Incorporation	Education
Alex	Man	18	Culiacán	Adolescence	High school
Irene	Woman	21	Badiraguato	Adolescence	Undergraduate degree
Mariela	Woman	22	Badiraguato	Childhood	Undergraduate degree
David	Man	23	Culiacán	Youth	High school
Antonio	Man	24	Badiraguato	Childhood	Undergraduate degree
Julián	Man	27	Culiacán	Adolescence	Undergraduate degree
Roberto	Man	28	Culiacán	Adolescence	Undergraduate degree
Sergio	Man	28	Badiraguato	Childhood	High school
Daniel	Man	29	Culiacán	Youth	Graduate degree
Rodrigo	Man	23	Mazatlán	Adolescence	Middle school
Miguel	Man	24	Badiraguato	Childhood	Graduate degree
Martha	Woman	27	Culiacán	Youth	Undergraduate degree
Dulce	Woman	25	Badiraguato	Youth	Undergraduate degree
Valeria	Woman	22	Culiacán	Youth	High school
Karely	Woman	23	Culiacán	Youth	High school
Rubí	Woman	19	Mazatlán	Adolescence	Middle school

Source: Own elaboration based on the sociodemographic data of the participants.

For the analysis phase, the interviews were transcribed and then the thematic contents were systematized and analyzed from a narrative logic (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Through an inductive coding process (Strauss and Corbin, 2002) the sociocultural meanings of drug trafficking were identified. Following Vázquez (1994), the categories were grouped into thematic fields based on their sense of affinity: 1) the reasons why young people enter drug trafficking; 2) the permanence

and evaluation of risks and consequences they face; 3) the future plans they construct both within and outside of drug trafficking.

## RESULTS

### *Psychosocial Proximity and Involvement in Drug Activity*

For young people, proximity and familiarity with drug trafficking are elements that facilitate involvement. This proximity is built in everyday life through interaction with family, friends and by maintaining contact with people who engage in activities associated with organized crime (Moreno & Flores, 2015). The conditions and context in which young people are situated are also relevant. Irene, during the interview, recounted that she started participating in drug trafficking in her teens by helping her family plant, harvest, and clean marijuana. For her, these activities were “just another job” that allowed her to have “her own money” and made it easier for her to continue with her studies. For the young woman, this work is a legitimate means “to survive” in the Sierra de Badiraguato:

It has a lot to do with the family environment. Because if you, from a young age, see that your father is involved in it, your brothers do it, you may not do it yourself, but it is what you see, it is what they teach you. They don't teach you anything else (Irene, personal communication, May 27, 2019).

From the same context, Mariela highlighted the few job opportunities as a reason for her involvement:

[They join] because of the need to survive, I think. I mean, to say “I have to succeed, no matter what”. Because, to be honest, for example, where I come from [Badiraguato], you either live off of that or you starve, because there is nothing else (Mariela, personal communication, May 24, 2019).

These experiences coincide with other research whose results highlight that economic conditions, lack of job opportunities and absence of support from the State favor the entry and participation in drug trafficking (Almanza et al., 2018; Gómez & Almanza, 2021). On the other hand, the cited excerpts highlight that Mariela and Irene participated in drug trafficking because of their family's teachings, care and consent. Their activities were punctual and for short periods of time. However, their families advised them to “focus on studying” and “get ahead”. These are young women who were gradually introduced to the activity, under the protection of a male member of their family, which is related to gender constructions in the distribution and assignment of tasks associated with drug trafficking (Valdez, 2018).

In contrast, for Julián the father figure served as a role model. For him, joining drug trafficking was a “logical path to follow.” In his teens he was fully aware of his father's activities.

There was a time when my dad worked in a newspaper. We lived humbly. Then he started working with a *padrino* [godfather drug trafficker] and that's where he prospered. It became

more of a business. He would go from one city to another (...) Closing deals (...) So, it's not like I wanted to get into it, but it's like you don't have another choice. Either you do things right or you stay here. You can't be against it, because in the end (...) almost everything has come from that (Julián, personal communication, June 3, 2019).

Julián took advantage of his father's experience and position to drop out of school, seek financial independence and enroll in aviation school to become a pilot. His goal was to move drugs without putting himself at risk in other activities. In this case, the family served as a setting to shape values, roles, and practices that allow continuity in activities related to drug trafficking (Valenzuela Reyes et al., 2017). Fernández Velázquez (2018, p. 99) points out that family dynamics unite and strengthen common principles "when it comes to life around an activity stigmatized by illegality."

Drug trafficking has permeated daily life and youth groups (Rincón, 2013). In addition to family, friendships are a means that facilitates the invitation and incorporation into drug trafficking. In Roberto's experience:

[I joined] when I was 14 years old because a friend invited me to work with him. I helped him wash the small planes. We only went on Saturdays, we washed between three and five planes, cleaning them inside and out, and well, I was always drawn to them. On the first day we went, my friend's uncle took us for a ride, and I was very excited. I had never been so excited before. I tell you, small planes have always caught my eye (Roberto, personal communication, January 10, 2018).

Roberto was attending middle school and worked with the aim of earning extra income to support his family. From that contact he informally learned how to fly planes until he became a pilot.

Valeria also joined drug trafficking through a friend. She started working at a currency exchange office. Later on, she worked for a group of drug traffickers to whom she exchanged dollars for local currency and received substantial tips for this activity:

I got in because of a friend I'd known since middle school. I needed work and well, one day she asked me if I wanted to work at what she did. I already knew what she did, but that day she explained it to me fully, and well, I said yes. Truthfully, it wasn't really complicated. One day she told me, she explained it to me, the next day I was already working and even getting paid (Valeria, personal communication, March 17, 2018).

For Chacón (2016) entry into drug trafficking occurs from precariousness, social vulnerability and marginalization. Faced with such conditions, young people decide to put their physical integrity at risk to serve someone of higher rank. Thus, drug trafficking becomes the school of death in which a pedagogy of violence is taught, rules, values and principles are incorporated and roles are adopted that ensure the functionality of the activity (Almonacid, 2022). According to Valdez (2018), friendships provide a sense of belonging for young people, they provide identity

elements and socialization codes that strengthen their social relationships and favor the dynamics within drug trafficking.

Drug trafficking provides not only economic power but also recognition and prestige (Nateras Domínguez, 2016a). Alex joined drug trafficking during high school “to experience it firsthand,” to “show off, have money and power.” He used the money he earned to go out with his friends and women. It was important to “prove” that he could buy expensive products, “show off” and be recognized among his friends. The following excerpts serve as an example:

Most of those who are joining lately, which are many (...) It’s because they want to show off or they want to have money. Or show that it is easy for them. Power, more than anything, is what foolish *plebes*<sup>6</sup> like nowadays (...) Because I have a friend that joined and he is rich, but he wanted power, he wanted respect. He wanted the intimidation that comes from being armed, being ‘*empecherado*’<sup>7</sup> (Alex, personal communication, May 6, 2019).

The truth is that I always wanted that, to be recognized, respected like those of the *corridos*. That people recognize me and say, “that dude is *bien cabrón* (such a badass)” and I think that so far I have succeeded. My friends and family respect me. They know that I’m not afraid and that I am capable of doing anything, especially for them. And if one day the *catrina* (death) takes me, well, fine, but they will remember me as the badass that I am, and with that I have no complaints (Rodrigo, personal communication, February 9, 2018).

The previous fragments highlight social constructions associated with situated masculinities (Córdova & Hernández, 2016) in which power, virility, bravery and male domination are important (Urrecha et al., 2021; Valdez, 2018). In addition, the desire for distinction and social legitimation of drug trafficking is made visible (Córdova, 2005; Ovalle, 2010b; Reyes et al., 2017). As Moreno et al. (2016, p. 257) point out, consumption represents “a symbolic struggle that seeks to ‘make an impression’, ‘make believe’ and ‘inspire respect or trust’. Thus, clothing and consumption are social practices in which the economic power of drug trafficking world is made visible”. In the same way, access to ostentatious consumption reflects social ascent and becomes a motivation that justifies joining drug trafficking (Almanza et al., 2018; Gómez & Almanza, 2021).

In other experiences, joining is not voluntary. In areas marked by vulnerability, illegality and economic, social and structural inequalities, the forced recruitment of young people by criminal organizations is made possible (Rivera, 2022; Valenzuela Arce, 2019). The appropriation of individuals is a legitimate act of juvenile murder by drug cartels. Rodrigo, in his adolescence, was recruited as a hawk<sup>8</sup> and drug dealer:

They recruited me when I was in middle school. I lived in a neighborhood on the outskirts of Mazatlán. We would get together every afternoon to play baseball in the street. One afternoon the hitmen came to offer us to work with them and we said no. They left but the next day they

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<sup>6</sup> Refers to young people.

<sup>7</sup> Refers to wearing a bulletproof vest.

<sup>8</sup> Refers to a young person who watches over an area.

came back, and this time they didn't ask, they ordered us, and if we didn't agree, they were going to kill us and our families. That's how they threatened us and well, there's no way you can refuse (Rodrigo, personal communication, February 9, 2018).

### *Permanence and Professional Development*

In the narrative of young people, drug trafficking is configured as a way to develop professionally. For Ovalle (2010a) activities related to drug trafficking have the acceptance and legitimacy of broad social sectors. In this way, different tasks are conceived as an "occupation" or "economic activity" insofar as they require experience and work in exchange for remuneration.

Daniel joined drug trafficking while doing his university studies in chemistry. For him, the economic compensation of drug trafficking doubles the income that can be obtained in a formal job:

Finding a place where I earn what I earn here is very difficult. I tried to get into a medical laboratory, but the pay was very low for all the work we had to do. They exploit you and pay you very poorly. So, if I'm doing what I like here and I'm doing very well, why would I leave? (Daniel, personal communication, January 25, 2018).

As Ovalle (2010a) suggests, drug trafficking incorporates professionalization and specialized knowledge to enhance its market. According to the narrative of the interviewees, there are few job opportunities for professionals and precarious work and low wages prevail. In this context, being part of criminal organizations is a viable project where young people can develop professionally and labor-wise. This is described in the following experiences:

Well, look, [my husband] worked as a store manager, and well, we didn't lack anything, but we couldn't go on vacation, we couldn't buy ourselves clothes, we had many restrictions, and the truth is that's not life. It doesn't make sense to just watch others do well while you're struggling. Although I wasn't doing badly, I worked almost twelve hours a day and with my salary, I could live, but just barely. Here I'm pretty much doing the same thing I did in my previous job [as an accountant]. But here, I work half the time and get paid three times as much. No way I'm leaving (Valeria, personal communication, March 17, 2018).

I am not leaving because, well, this is what gave me the opportunity of being a pilot, which is what I love the most (...) And to be honest, in this country, under the conditions in which I grew up, if it weren't for the organization, I would have never gotten on a plane, not even as a passenger (Roberto, personal communication, January 10, 2018).

Some young people, by conceiving drug trafficking as a "economic activity", they minimize the risk. They start by carrying out activities that are not classified as a crime by the Penal Code. Rubí's experience serves as an example:

I have a friend who got out and right now is doing fine, nothing has happened to her. But I don't leave because I really don't want to, I'm very comfortable here. Yes, I know it's illegal,

but it's my source of income. Besides, I have never killed anyone. I just do what I have to do and that's it (Rubí, personal communication, April 8, 2018).

However, as they continue and gain confidence, they might carry out other activities that, although more profitable, also involve more risks (Valdez, 2018).

### *Risks and Consequences*

Young people, when joining the drug trafficking, evaluate the dangers and possible consequences. The evaluation of the risks is compensated by the benefits, the economic gains, the recognition and the prestige of belonging to criminal organizations. This is how Julian put it:

First of all, the risk is that you can lose a lot. You risk almost everything, such as your assets, family relationships. There are several risks, but one knows the risks one takes. And it's like a game, you know what you're betting on and what you're not. You are gambling. You can win, you can lose. You can win, like, I am in harvesting, if I have a good harvest this season and I get good quality, I gain respect, I can win opportunities to get ahead, to do something bigger, with more support and with the support of the people (Julián, personal communication, June 3, 2019).

For Sergio, originally from Badiraguato, involved since childhood in the production of marijuana and poppies, drug trafficking is a "game" where death is a constant risk. In some cases, this risk is offset by a lifestyle of enjoyment and "living on the edge". See the following testimonials:

When you get into this business, you already know what can happen to you. You know that one day you are alive and the next day you may be buried. That's why you have to live life to the fullest, treat yourself, always being happy with your loved ones, because you don't know if you'll be here tomorrow. That's just how this game is, there's nothing else, and I decided to play it (...) Both my family and I are aware of this. As I mentioned, this is how this game is played (...) When I die I want them to put a picture of me on my tombstone and on my cross, so that when they come to visit me they see me and remember me, remember how good I was to everyone (Sergio, personal communication, January 19, 2018).

The day they *smoke* me,<sup>9</sup> I already told my loved ones that I don't want them crying over me. I want them to celebrate me, to have a three-day party, with beer, a band and *carne asada*. And that they build a house where I'm buried so that when they can come to visit they are all happy there with me. I'll always be waiting for them there, with joy, just as I did when I was alive, that is how I want them to remember me (Rodrigo, personal communication, February 9, 2018).

Youth in criminal organizations are the first to be sent to kill their rivals or die in confrontations (Valenzuela Arce, 2015, 2021). For Valencia (2010) it is a commodification of death where it is administered to "human subjects" belonging to the proletariat, located in marginalization; young

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<sup>9</sup> Meaning "the day they kill me."

people who make out of violence “a way of life, work, socialization and culture” (Valencia, 2010, p. 93).

It should be noted that not all young people necessarily become targets of violence and death. The risks and dangers vary based on the activities they perform: while for some may be getting caught, having the plane they are traveling in crash or having their merchandise stolen, for others it is kidnapping, disappearance, torture, killing, or dying in a dispute between rivals. This is how Julian narrated it:

The war begins and we start going to get people who have been shot or go deliver weapons. Once, I bought the newspaper (...) I was already seeing that so-and-so was arrested and a van pulled up with a group of *cholos*,<sup>10</sup> it was to fight, well, all of them were going to die and weren't coming back. And I saw them like that, a lot of people, not one of them ever came back (...) We took them to be killed, well, or to kill, because we already knew there was a war (...) They would go to the *peni*<sup>11</sup> and break out prisoners and we would take them there and they would come and *do*<sup>12</sup> them there (Julián, personal communication, June 3, 2019).

### *Future Plans*

Drug trafficking allows young people to make short, medium and long term plans, either inside or outside the organization. In some interviews, participation in drug trafficking was referred to as a “transitory activity” that allows them to study, work, save, invest, and create lawful businesses. From Mariela's experience:

There are some young people who are very open-minded who do see themselves doing something else. Right now I've heard that young people no longer want to stay there [in the mountains]. They strive to finish school to come back and look for other opportunities (...) I've heard that many people, even entire families come. Entire families that say “this isn't working anymore” [drug trafficking]. So, they come to find another way to live, another job (Mariela, personal communication, May 24, 2019).

For David, studying for a Bachelor's degree represents a viable project that allows him to distance himself from risky activities:

I don't expect anything from the degree, but I do expect something from myself. I hope I can succeed and that (...) it's something I really like, because I like land. But I hope I like [some of the] science they teach there (...) I want to make a tomato, pineapple, and chili greenhouse, that's what I'd like, it's really what I hope to learn (Daniel, personal communication, January 25, 2018).

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<sup>10</sup> Young gang members.

<sup>11</sup> Penitentiary.

<sup>12</sup> Understood as “...fight them/ shoot them there.”

On the other hand, there are young people who project their future by staying in drug trafficking; they seek to carry out the same or other activities in which they started and move up in the structure of the organization. See the following testimony:

I am interested in doing it, harvesting medicinally, because there are two types of harvesting across the border,<sup>13</sup> medicinal and recreational (...) When you do it medicinally, everything you harvest is for yourself, you can't sell it, but since you can harvest everything for yourself, you have more. You have more and better-quality product without losing profits. So you don't have to sell everything you have (...) because you have people who are in charge of distributing it and you already have more profits (...) Legalization is something that I'm also looking forward to. As long as it's illegal right now, well, you have to keep doing it, because you can't wait (Julián, personal communication, June 3, 2019).

I know people who live day to day. How can I explain it? They are working right now, and say, well "maybe tomorrow they shut it down,<sup>14</sup> and I won't have anything to do anymore." So, I don't see them having future projects (Mariela, personal communication, May 24, 2019).

The last testimony refers to the non-future (Esparza, 2020) that occurs in the weakest link where young people are used, exploited, and precariously employed (Almonacid, 2022) and do not have plans beyond the immediate present.

## CONCLUSIONS

The incorporation of young people into the drug trafficking occurs from close interactions and meanings situated in a specific sociocultural-historical context. In Sinaloa, the drug trafficking represents for young people an ideal of a successful life, based on access to economic goods: for the ostentatious lifestyle, the access to cultural consumption that provides prestige, and in turn, acceptance, legitimacy and recognition due to activity in context.

Drug trafficking has disrupted the daily lives and socialization scenarios of young people. As Moreno and Flores (2015) suggest, young people maintain a "high contact" with drug trafficking, that is, its presence in the immediate environment is accepted and their incorporation is considered viable and legitimate. In the narratives of the participants, the context, friendships, and family environment are important references for the entry, permanence, and exit from criminal organizations.

The youth who join and participate in drug trafficking activities find themselves located and trapped in precarious and dispensable areas of illegality (Nateras Domínguez, 2016b; Valenzuela Arce, 2021). Drug trafficking allows youth to build plans for the future, adopt certain lifestyles and creates a space for social identification. The results show that for young people drug trafficking is a scenario that allows them to develop professionally and work within criminal organizations.

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<sup>13</sup> Meaning the U.S.

<sup>14</sup> Their jobs.

Drug trafficking is strengthened as a space for employment in a context where inequality increases, unemployment is accentuated, working conditions are precarious, and future projections are nullified.

Young people participate in drug trafficking knowing, facing and accepting the risks and consequences; they do it to acquire economic goods or to gain recognition and prestige in front of others. For the youth of Sinaloa, death is a latent risk when participating in drug trafficking. Young bodies have become a valuable workforce and are treated as currency to produce, distribute, win or defend territories. At the same time, they represent the weakest link in the drug trafficking structure and from there they guarantee economic profits for criminal organizations.

Translation: Erika Morales.

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