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Research

COVID-19 and the drug supply chain: from production and trafficking to use

Research and Trend Analysis Branch,
UNODC



How does COVID-19 affect drug markets?

- Mobility restrictions
- Significant reduction in legal trade
- Changes in law enforcement activities
- Long-term effects of the economic downturn

- Reports provided by 40 Member States to UNODC
- qualitative assessments made by UNODC field offices
- data reported to the UNODC Drugs Monitoring Platform
- anecdotal information collected through the media.



COVID-19 and drug production

Opiates

- Reduced opportunities to sell products onwards (Myanmar)
- In Afghanistan shortage of precursor substances possible (acetic anhydride)

Coca

- Reported shortage of gasoline in Colombia (essential chemical for cocaine)
- Drop in coca prices in Peru (trafficking impediments)
- Possible increase in Bolivia

Synthetic drugs

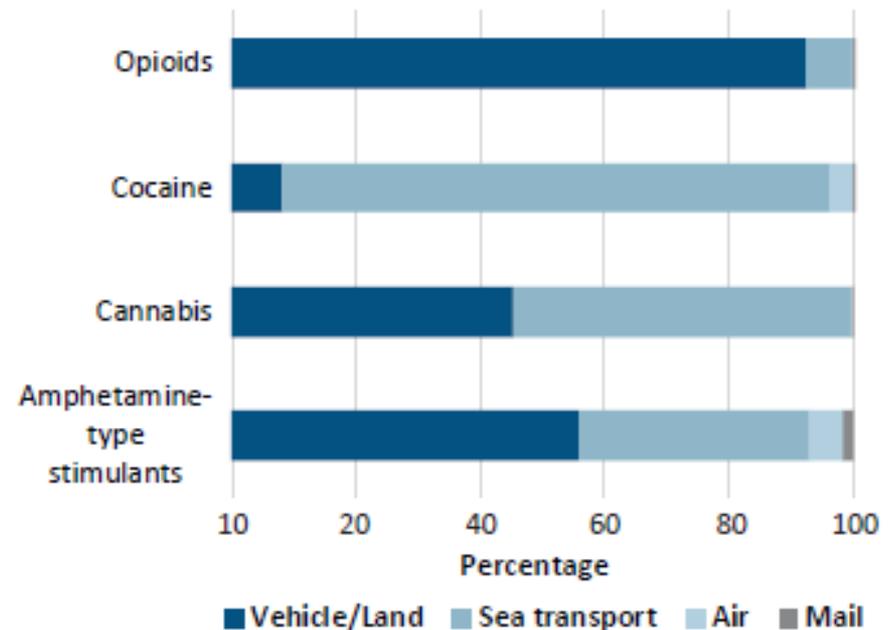
- Production possible in virtually all regions of the world
- Impact possible if chemicals (precursors) are imported from other regions
- No or only little disruption in South East Asia
- Shortages in Latin America (fentanyl and methamphetamine) and MENA region ('captagon' an ATS)



Changed risks and opportunities for drug traffickers

- Drug trafficking by air is likely to be completely disrupted (synthetic drugs, cocaine)
- Increased risks and difficulties for traffickers due to COVID-19 measures (e.g., I.R. of Iran, UK, Central Asia)
- Increased border controls in the Americas leading to a reduction in trafficking
- Lesser effect on maritime trafficking routes than on land routes

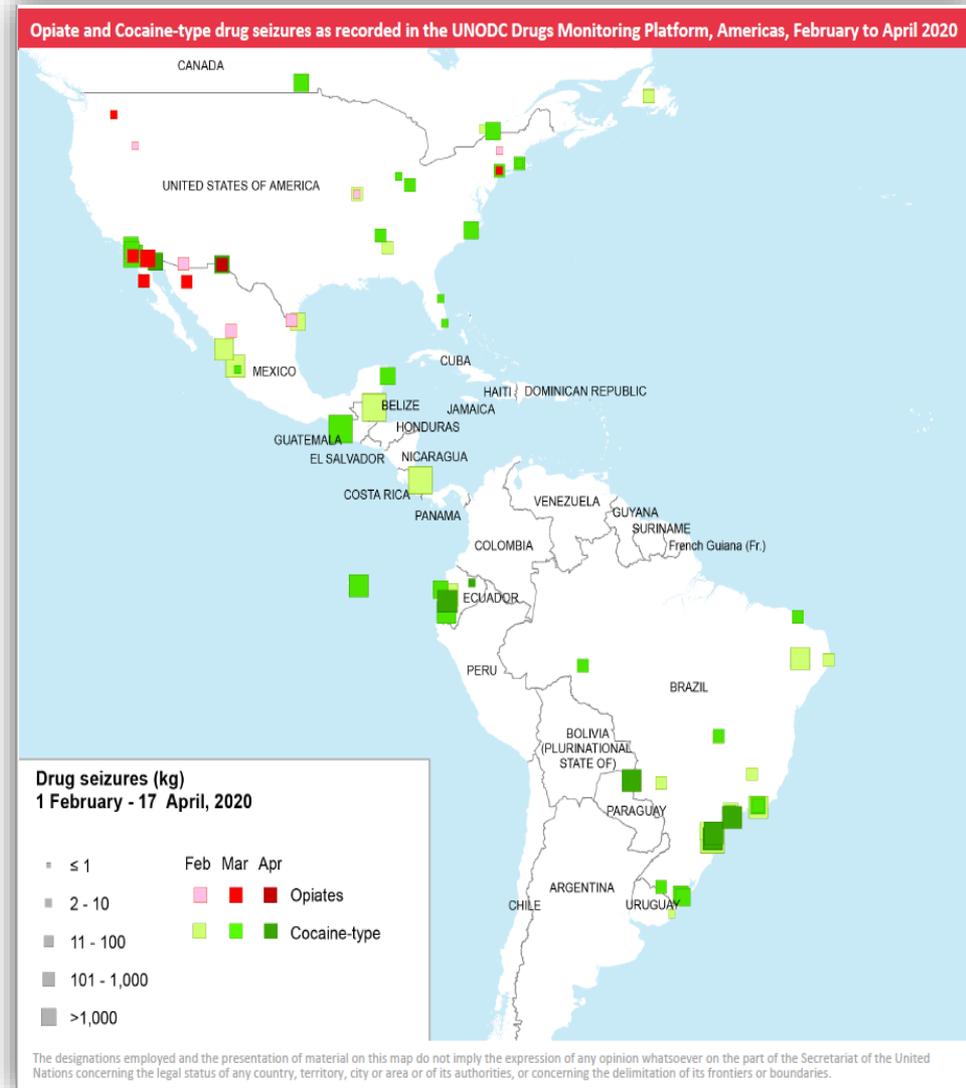
Modes of transportation used in significant drug seizures, by substance, January 2017–April 2020



Source: UNODC, Drugs Monitoring Platform.

Drug traffickers adapt

- Heroin trafficking along land routes riskier, leading to a possible shift to southern route
- Reduced trafficking of cocaine along land routes; increased trafficking by sea and container cargo, and use of light aircrafts
- Continued supply with cannabis, potential increase





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COVID-19 and drug use

Availability of drugs

- Reported heroin shortages (e.g., I.R. Iran, Czechia, Italy) with lower quality and higher prices
- Some countries reported a stable situation (e.g., in the MENA region, some European countries)
- Reports and indications for increased demand for cannabis (Belgium, the UK and North Macedonia)
- Decreased demand for drugs used recreational settings such as bars during lockdown
- Reports of novel ways to distribute drugs (Europe) and increased use of postal services (Nigeria)

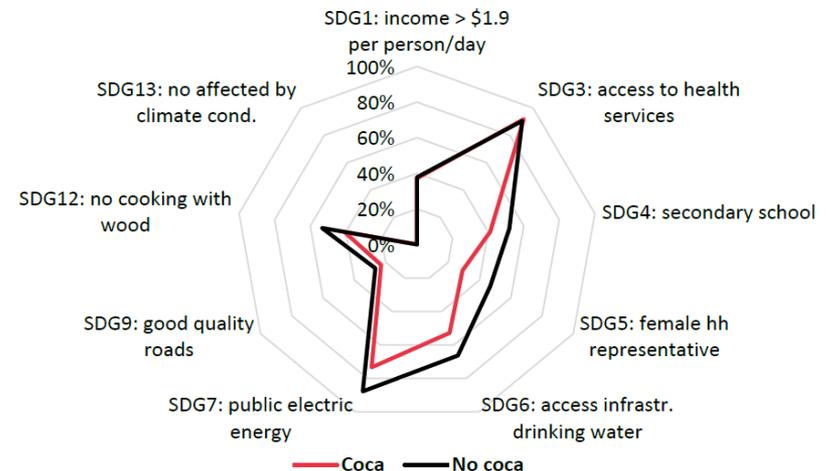
Health consequences for people who use drugs

- In the past, reduced availability of drugs has triggered more harmful patterns of use in the past (e.g., increased use of fentanyl, homemade injectable opioids such as ‘krokodil’)
- Lockdown measures may reduce access to treatment options and medications
- Member states reports point to several mitigation measures such as increased low threshold services, more flexible dispensation of substitution treatment (Czechia, UK)
- Reports from others point to a very challenging situation



Threat

- Risk for low-cost, high-quality drugs from stockpiles when restrictions are lifted
- Drug production and often trafficking is related to precarious situation of the local (rural) population
- Worsening of living conditions in producing countries may lead to an increase in drug production and manufacture on the long run





The threat

- On the short term, drug use may be decreased, although specific problems for marginalised groups remain
- On the long term, the looming economic crisis may lead to a lasting transformation of use markets
- Poverty, unemployment and a more precarious socio-economic situation can be conducive to substance use and to related (often criminal) behaviour
- Studies from the 2008 financial crisis showed that
 - Drug use patterns became more harmful
 - A shift to cheaper drugs and towards injecting drug use
 - and government budgets to address the drug problem decreased





Implications for policy

- The economic crisis may increase drug production and trigger more harmful drug use, while at the same time decrease the capacity of member states to fund supply reduction measures (e.g., alternative development) and drug treatment and prevention programs
- Tackling drug trafficking remains an international responsibility, requiring a concerted effort targeting the COVID-19 related challenges
- Close monitoring of the dynamic situation is needed to allow for adaptive, evidence based policy development