Drug trafficking on the Internet

Chloé Carpentier
Chief of Drug Research Section, UNODC

The criminal misuse of information and communications technologies for illicit drug-related activities is increasing – Thematic discussion, 21 October 2021
Online sales of drugs on the clear web, the deep web and the dark web

**THE INTERNET: CLEAR WEB, DEEP WEB AND DARK WEB**

- **Internet**
  Infrastructure consisting of a standardized set of data transfer protocols for digital information exchange.

- **Clear web (surface web)**
  Content indexed by standard web-search engines, accessible to anyone using the Internet.
  - social networks
  - public pages / profiles

- **Deep web**
  Content not indexed by standard web-search engines; content can be located and accessed by a direct URL or IP address but may require a password or other security access to get past public-website pages; includes many very common uses such as web mail, online banking, private or otherwise restricted access content and profiles.
  - online banking
  - social networks
  - restricted pages / profiles

- **Dark web (darknets)**
  Darknets, or overlay networks within the Internet that can only be accessed with specific software, configurations, or authorization, and often use a unique customized communication protocol. Two typical darknet types are social networks (usually used for file hosting with a peer-to-peer connection), and anonymity proxy networks such as Tor via an anonymized series of connections.
Dark web purchases of drugs are increasing among some consumers

Proportion of people purchasing drugs over the dark web among surveyed Internet users who used drugs in the past year, global average and selected countries, January 2014 to January 2021 (or latest year available)

*Data for either January 2014 or January 2021 were not available; data from the most recent year available were taken as a proxy.

Source: UNODC calculations based on Global Drug Survey 2021 data (and previous years); detailed findings on drug cryptomarkets.

Note: The Global Drug Survey is based on a convenience sample of 100,000 to 500,000 people every year, of whom 20,000 to 90,000 replied to questions on drug purchases over the dark web (24,000 in January 2021). All regional averages are weighted by the population of each country. North America: averages based on information from respondents in Canada and the United States; Europe: averages based on information from respondents in 26 European countries (not included are data from the Russian Federation, which are only available for 2018 and 2020); Oceania: averages based on information from respondents in Australia and New Zealand; Latin America: averages based on information from respondents in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia and Mexico.
Dark web markets come and go, but drug sales are rising.
Dark web markets selling drugs can be very large with leading vendors with sales worth several millions.
Cannabis and stimulants dominate sales on the dark web.
Fluctuations dominate sales on the dark web in 2020, though increase in sales of cannabis and stimulants vs 2019.
Dark web markets are spreading geographically.
Online sales of substances for synthetic markets on the clear web and alternative platforms

Substances supplying synthetic drug markets

Controlled and uncontrolled

Continuous adaptation of vendors

Research chemicals; custom synthesis

Shift from clear web to alternative platforms
Thank you for listening!

World Drug Report 2021 (unodc.org)