SPECIAL POINTS OF INTERESTS

WORLD DRUG REPORT 2023
The year 2023 marks the midpoint of the work towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The global drug phenomenon continues to challenge both the implementation of SDG targets and efforts to promote peace, security and human rights.

**2023 WORLD DRUG REPORT: KEY MESSAGES**

World drug-related challenges are hindering SDG progress across all areas, from peace and justice to health and human rights, and the environment and equality.

Prevention and access to evidence-informed treatment and HIV and Hepatitis services must be stepped up; otherwise, drug-related challenges will leave more people behind.

Law enforcement responses need to keep pace with astonishingly agile criminal business models, as well as the proliferation of synthetic drugs, which are cheap and easy to bring to market.

Public health must remain the priority in the context of rapidly developing drug control regulation, in particular in relation to medical use, and countries must invest more in research to monitor the effects of policy and inform responses.
Opium processed into heroin
6,077–6,384 tons (2022)

Heroin production
509–739 tons (2022)

Opium bush
35% between 2020 and 2021

Opium poppy
28% between 2020 and 2021

Tons of pure cocaine, 2021
2,304
16% between 2020 and 2021

Tons of opium, 2022
7,800
3% between 2021 and 2022

NPS on the global market
618
NPS on the market in 2021...
87 were newly identified NPS

Class hallucinogen
40%
40% of which
15% stimulants
15% synthetic cannabinoids
15% synthetic opioids
15% other NPS

Global production
Global quantities of drugs seized, 2021

Change from previous year
4% morphine
112 tons
heroin
112 tons
pharmaceutical opioids
154 tons
opium
92 tons
cannabis resin
2,014 tons
cannabis herb
5,226 tons

Coca bush
315,200
ha coca bush, 2021
315,800
ha opium poppy, 2022

Global cultivation
Trends in quantity of drugs seized

CULTIVATION
PRODUCTION
NEW PSYCHOACTIVE SUBSTANCES (NPS)
SEIZURES
KEY FIGURES AT A GLANCE
Inequality and social and economic disparities continue to drive and be driven by the drug phenomenon, threatening public health and human rights. Disparities between the global North and South, urban and rural settings, and across subpopulations all contribute to the harms from drugs.

a. Disparities in access to and availability of medicines controlled under the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961 have remained. In 2021, 86 per cent of the global population lived in countries where availability of pharmaceutical opioids for medical use was below the minimum level.

b. Drug use disorders and other mental health conditions are closely interconnected: mental health conditions increase the risk of developing drug use disorders, and drug use poses a risk of exacerbating mental health problems if taken outside medical supervision. With an estimated one in eight people globally living with a diagnosis of mental health condition, the need to address mental health issues in drug use prevention and treatment has increasingly become a priority.

c. Young people remain the group most vulnerable to using drugs. Globally, in 2021, those aged between 15 and 16 had an annual prevalence of cannabis use of 5.34 per cent, compared with 4.3 per cent for adults. Drug use is also particularly harmful to young people. In some regions, young people are more severely affected by substance use disorder: in Africa, 70 per cent of people receiving drug treatment are below the age of 35.

d. The demand for treating drug-related disorders remains largely unmet and disparities in access persist. Globally, about one in five people with drug use disorders received treatment in 2021, with large disparities across regions and in the type and quality of treatment received. Not all forms of treatment respect human rights or are evidence-based. Women face barriers in accessing drug treatment services: in 2021, 45 per cent of those who used drugs, especially vulnerable and marginalized populations, are women.

e. Setbacks to service provision during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic left some without access to treatment or other services. Most countries that reported treatment delivery aggregates to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) before and after the pandemic noted a decline in the number of persons in drug treatment between the periods 2018–2019 and 2020–2021, with further declines within the period of 2020 to 2021.

f. Different patterns of drug use and unequal access to services exacerbate inequality in treatment provision. Although innovations in service provision that started during the pandemic appear to have resulted in early benefits, challenges remain due to the digital divide, especially in certain geographical areas and in certain marginalized populations that are hard to reach, including the homeless and injecting drug users. Other marginalized groups, such as those with a history of incarceration, people displaced by humanitarian emergencies and sex workers, face other barriers in accessing services. Moreover, use of drugs by marginalized populations may be more intense, putting them at greater risk to continued harms, relapse and other related health outcomes. For example, injecting drug use in 2020 was associated with a risk of contracting HIV that was 35 times higher than that associated with non-injecting drug use. Women who inject drugs are 1.2 times more likely than men to be living with HIV.

g. Different patterns can also be witnessed between urban and rural settings. For example, in some rural areas illicit drug cultivation and trafficking create opportunities for other crimes, including crimes that affect the environment, and impoverished and vulnerable populations are trapped in a vicious cycle with uncertain access to resources and the rule of law. For example, in the tri-border area between Brazil, Colombia and Peru in the Amazon Basin, drug trafficking organizations increasingly violate the human rights, safety and well-being of rural populations.

Reducing inequalities and the gap in access to treatment and comprehensive services to minimize the adverse public health and social consequences of drug use in a continuum of care for people who use drugs, especially vulnerable and marginalized populations, is critical.

- Large-scale drug-use prevention initiatives that are school- and community-based are needed to reduce the risk of increasing drug use disorders, in particular in view of the current high prevalence level of mental health conditions. Higher socioeconomic groups have shown a greater propensity to initiate drug use than lower socioeconomic groups but it is the lower socioeconomic groups that pay the higher price, as they are more likely to suffer from drug use disorders.

- In order to be effective, the approach to treatment service provision must be voluntary and based on human rights. As the drug phenomenon continues to evolve, Member States will need to redouble efforts to ensure access to quality services that are shown to reduce drug use disorders, both globally and nationally, and across all subpopulations.

- Reducing stigma faced by people who use drugs will make drug-related treatment and interventions more accessible and effective for people who need such services. Gains have been made during the pandemic to reduce barriers in accessing services, which have shown promise in attracting and retaining patients.

- Measures aimed at minimizing the adverse public health and social consequences of drug use.

- Prevention of drug use programmes.

**POSSIBLE RESPONSES**

**KEY FINDINGS AND POSSIBLE RESPONSES**

**INEQUALITIES, DISPARITIES, PUBLIC HEALTH AND HUMAN RIGHTS**

- Given the disproportionate levels of harm and the large gap in accessing services experienced by certain populations who use drugs, most intensively, additional effort is needed to design and implement policies and programmes addressing the specific needs of populations. It is important to tailor programmes to individuals, recognizing homelessness, sex workers, those suffering from trauma and others who face barriers in accessing services, including people with additional mental health conditions, those currently and formerly incarcerated and women who are pregnant.

- The importance of addressing mental health in efforts to prevent as well as treat drug use disorders needs to be given greater priority. Current scientific research and clinical trials involving psychedelics indicate their potential for treating some mental health conditions, but medical supervision is a critical component to ensuring their benefits while limiting harms.

- The record high number of displaced persons requires far greater investment in providing drug-use prevention initiatives and drug-related treatment and services to minimize the adverse public health and social consequences in a continuum of care in humanitarian settings.

- Political and financial commitments are needed to scale up interventions that address structural and economic inequalities, harmful sociocultural norms, gender-based inequalities and gender-based violence that drive HIV and hepatitis epidemics among people who use drugs.

**POSSIBLE RESPONSES**

**THE CONTINUUM OF DRUG-RELATED SERVICES**
Illicit drug economies, converging crimes, displacement and conflict are accelerating environmental devastation and degrading human rights, especially in vulnerable groups.

a. Drug trafficking is compounding criminal threats that harm vulnerable communities by degrading their rights to security and livelihood, as well as the right to live in a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, as recognized by the General Assembly in its resolution 76/300 of 2022:

- In the Amazon Basin, drug trafficking and production intersect with, and in some cases even finance, illegal or unregulated activities that are environmentally and socially damaging. These include, in some areas of the Amazon, illegal land occupation and cattle grazing, illegal logging, illegal mining, trafficking in wildlife and other crimes that affect the environment.

- Indigenous Peoples and other local communities are caught in the criminal nexus in the Amazon Basin, suffering displacement, mercury poisoning and other severe health impacts, as well as increased exposure to violence and victimization.

b. Drug challenges are posing greater threats in the context of conflict and displacement, coupled with economic slowdown, inflation and other intersecting crises. A record number of more than 100 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide in the first six months of 2022:

- Preventing and treating drug use disorders among displaced persons have become more challenging. Moreover, forcibly displaced populations are among the marginalized groups that suffer physical and psychological trauma and elevated levels of socioeconomic vulnerability, increasing the risk of developing mental health and substance use disorders;

- On the supply side, the potential for drug production and trafficking facilitates cycles of instability in conflict-affected areas. The armed conflict in Ukraine has displaced heroin and cocaine routes, but there is an emerging threat of increased manufacture and trafficking of synthetic drugs. In the Sahel, the illicit drug trade finances non-State armed and insurgency groups through “taxes” in exchange for protection. In Haiti, cocaine and cannabis traffickers take advantage of porous borders, with heavily armed criminal gangs targeting ports, highways and critical infrastructures.

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Harms to the environment and to remote and vulnerable communities call for more integrated responses to illicit drug economies at the local and national level:

- Protecting fragile environments that are used or exploited by drug traffickers and other criminal actors adds greater complexity and requires integrated efforts to address the drug-related and environmental challenges faced by Member States, in particular those in the Amazon Basin and other States with significant and endangered ecosystems in their territory.

- Tailored, community-level interventions for local and Indigenous communities should protect their rights to health and safety and to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, in line with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, while addressing their needs and providing sustainable alternatives to the illicit economy.

- Additional resources and strategies are needed to disrupt the cycle of instability and limited rule of law that enable drug traffickers and other criminals to prey on vulnerable populations and regions.

- Fragile and in conflict countries, such as Ukraine and Haiti, require continued monitoring and support to prevent developing or expanding illicit drug economies from contributing to conflict and instability or hampering recovery.

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Synthetics and innovations in illegal drug manufacturing and trafficking challenge justice responses

1. Illegal drug markets are transforming rapidly and, in some regions, radically, with synthetics drugs becoming increasingly dominant. Synthetic drug manufacture is cheap, easy and fast. As synthetic drugs are not tied to geographically fixed crops, using instead a wide array of precursors, supply can be relocated closer to consumer markets, and seized products can be quickly replaced, defeating drug law enforcement efforts:

   » Methamphetamine is the world’s dominant illegally manufactured drug, and criminals are employing novel synthesis techniques, establishing new bases of operation and using non-controlled precursors to circumvent law enforcement and regulatory responses.

   » Fentanyl, a powerful synthetic opioid, is transforming drug consumer markets, and seized products can be quickly replaced, defeating drug law enforcement efforts:

2. After several years of relative stability, an increase in the number of seizures and amounts seized involving new psychoactive substances (NPS) of synthetic origin was reported in 2021, almost 90,000 opioid-involved overdose deaths in North America, with the majority of those involving illegally manufactured fentanyl.

3. The latest data indicate near-record levels of illicit coca and opium cultivation but the drug ban in Afghanistan may have an impact on the 2023 opium harvest there, increasing the need for alternative development efforts. Global opium production remained high at 7,800 tons in 2022, mainly driven by high levels of production in Afghanistan. A combination of market dynamics and traditional production methods and modes, require law enforcement strategies that are more targeted and strategic.

4. Drug trafficking groups are increasingly fragmented, managing only parts of the drug supply chain, and law enforcement operations can be effective only if they target the wider ecosystem of illicit markets and seizures and amounts seized involving new psychoactive substances are still bought and sold online. An examination of blockchain transactions on darknet marketplaces suggests that the average transaction has increased in value from about $100 in 2018 to $500 in 2021 and, at the same time, there has been a notable decline in the number of active buyers and transactions overall.

5. Self-reported data from those who use drugs suggest a recent shift towards social media platforms for purchasing drugs, especially for cannabis, cocaine and ecstasy. New psychoactive substances are still bought and sold to a greater degree on darknet forums.

6. Fragmenting supply chains and loosely connected criminal groups are driving the expansion of drug supply, notably cocaine, with new hubs and markets, as well as increasing competition in traditional markets. Trafficking groups are less rigid and hierarchical, and more innovative and adaptable. Transformations in the ways that criminal groups are organized or operate may make them less susceptible to traditional law enforcement interventions, as parts of the supply chain or product can be replaced.

7. The data indicate that wholesale distribution, and retail transactions appear to be growing on social media platforms. An examination of blockchain transactions on darknet marketplaces suggests that the average transaction has increased in value from about $100 in 2018 to $500 in 2021 and, at the same time, there has been a notable decline in the number of active buyers and transactions overall.

The continuously shifting strategies and tactics used by criminal groups and traffickers, away from traditional production methods and modes, require law enforcement strategies that are more targeted and strategic.

» Drug trafficking groups are increasingly fragmented, managing only parts of the drug supply chain, and law enforcement operations can be effective only if they target the wider ecosystem of illicit markets rather than single cells or single shipments. This requires sophisticated analytical operational analysis and trust-building within and between national law enforcement agencies in order to share intelligence and ensure smooth and prompt national and international cooperation when required.

» Given the increase in levels of drug trafficking through waterways and maritime routes in containerized shipments, ports continue to be important nodes where drugs are smuggled across borders, warranting more effective control targeting potential chokepoints.

» Continued expansion of synthetic drug manufacture within new regions using new methods demands redoubled efforts to monitor changes in drug markets and to respond with more targeted policies aimed at reducing access to precursor chemicals and new psychoactive substances.

» Drug interdiction may have less and less impact on supply, as criminal groups can replace the seized drugs easily and cheaply. The role of law enforcement authorities in assessing the quality and type of drugs sold in markets therefore becomes increasingly important to better understand the ways in which suppliers are shifting their strategies and the risks faced by those who use drugs.

» Greater focus on access to chemicals, including improving oversight of large industries and efforts to curb corruption, is critical to reducing the supply of the inputs required for the manufacture of synthetic drugs.
New research on the use of controlled drugs in treating mental health conditions shows that such treatments have potential but regulators run the risk of increasing harm if public health is not prioritized over commercial interests.

a. Clinical trials involving psychedelics for the treatment of mental health and substance use disorders are proceeding in some jurisdictions at an unprecedented pace, giving some hope that these compounds could be effective in addressing certain treatment-resistant psychological conditions. However, the rapid pace of developments increases the risk that people, in particular young people, will perceive such substances as being “safe” or not harmful, regardless of the context, which in turn could encourage unsupervised, non-medical use.

b. Prioritizing public health concerns remains a challenge in the face of growing commercial interest in developing and profiting from new, legal drug markets. If frameworks for medical use are not well designed and adequately resourced, ensuring access and availability of the drugs for medical purposes, approaches could contribute to the creation of illicit markets through limited supply or diversion of therapies for non-medical use.

c. Diverse approaches are being taken to regulate the medical use of cannabis. The choices that regulators make when defining a medical market determine the porosity of the market. The types of products allowed in the medical market, who gets to produce for the market and who has access to use cannabis under which medical conditions are important considerations and can shape the size and scope of a medical cannabis regime.

d. Regulatory approaches can be designed to ensure sufficient availability of products with proven safety and efficacy, while at the same time restricting access to legitimate medical needs. Such approaches may also limit potential spill-over into a non-medical or recreational use market.
THE WORLD DRUG PROBLEM
COMMON CHALLENGE
LOCAL DYNAMICS
high level of opioid-related overdoses
increasing use of methamphetamine and opioids
manufacture of methamphetamine
and cocaine production and trafficking
cocaine use disorders
high prevalence of HIV among people who inject drugs
use of synthetic stimulants
heroin and cocaine trafficking
heroin in transit spilling over into local heroin use
high prevalence of HIV among people who inject drugs
high prevalence of opioids use
expanding ATS market
non-medical use of tramadol
high prevalence of use of stimulants (methamphetamine and cocaine)
high prevalence of HIV among people who inject drugs
expansion of NPS and synthetic drug markets
high prevalence of HIV among people who inject drugs
opiates production, trafficking and use
increasing methamphetamine trafficking and use
high prevalence of HIV among people who inject drugs
Captagon trafficking and use
high prevalence of HIV among people who inject drugs
large methamphetamine market
high prevalence of use of stimulants (methamphetamine and cocaine)

While cannabis trafficking and use affect all regions worldwide, other drug issues pose additional threats in different geographical locations.
Fragile and conflict-affected areas are noted by the presence of UN peacekeeping and political missions.

- Amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS)
- Cannabis
- Captagon
- Cocaine
- Khat
- Methamphetamine
- Opiates/opioids
- UN peacekeeping
- UN political missions

General disclaimer: The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.
CANNABIS

An estimated 22 million people used cocaine in 2021, representing 0.2 per cent of the global adult population.

Cocaine use remains the highest in North America, where the number of people aged between 15 and 64 used the drug in 2021, representing 0.4 per cent of the global adult population.

Cocaine remains by far the world's most trafficked drug, with Africa's role in global supply on the rise. Seizures are increasingly being carried out closer to production sites in South America, with maritime routes for opiates, with individual drug seizures the world's most trafficking routes.

The prevalence of use and the number of users of amphetamines is highest in North America, with the second largest number of users being in East and South-East Asia.

An estimated 20 million people used ecstasy-type substances in 2021, representing 0.4 per cent of the global adult population.

The level of use of psychoactive substances (NPS) is lower than that of most other drugs, with NPS identified for 2,304 tons (pure cocaine) in 2021, of which 87 were identified for fentanyl, reaching unprecedented levels during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The use of ketamine, which is still among the most used drugs in East and South-East Asia and, possibly, Africa is likely experiencing mid-term increases in use.

The gender gap in treatment is particularly acute for women who use ATS, as women account for almost one in two users of amphetamines but only one in four people in treatment for ATS use disorders.

Methamphetamine manufacture and use have continued to spread beyond the traditional markets for the drug, mainly East and South-East Asia and North America, most notably into South-West Asia, Europe and Africa.

AMPHETAMINE-TYPE STIMULANTS (ATS)

An estimated 60 million people used opioids in 2021, representing 1.2 per cent of the global adult population. The three main consumers are in South Asia or South-West Asia.

Seizures of cannabis herb declined in 2021, after a record high in 2020 but remained the second highest level ever reported.

The global area under opium poppy cultivation increased by 28 per cent in 2022. Opium production decreased by 3 per cent in 2022, but following the drug ban in Afghanistan a substantial decrease may be expected in 2023.

The two epidemics of non-medical use of tramadol and related substances (NPS) is lower than that of most other drugs, with NPS identified for 555 NPS identified in 2020 to 618 in 2021, of which 87 were identified for fentanyl, reaching unprecedented levels during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The market for ‘captorone’ in the Near East and Middle East continues to flourish, with seizures reaching a record high in 2021.

There is evidence of the effectiveness of approaches to medical cannabis differ widely among those countries.

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The majority of opioid users in other parts of Africa are people who inject drugs (7 per cent), which is well below the global average of 5.3 per cent of the adult population reporting past-year opioid use (10.9 million users) in 2021.

Use of cannabis is particularly high in West and Central Africa, with the annual prevalence of methamphetamine use (3.2 per cent) being one of the highest worldwide (3.2 per cent), compared with the global average of 5.3 per cent. In Western Europe, the NPS market expanded in 2021, with record levels of manufacture of cannabis resin trafficking to Western Europe; there are substantial imports of cannabis from North America and South America. India has one of the highest levels of prevalence of opiate use and of people who inject drugs living with HIV.
For the first time since its conception, this year the World Drug Report presents the latest global, regional and subregional estimates of and trends in drug demand and supply in a user-friendly, interactive online format. The new online segment is designed to both enhance and simplify access to the wealth of information provided in the report by presenting the data in the form of succinct key findings supported by interactive graphs, infographics and maps.

While Booklet 1 takes the form of an executive summary based on analysis of the key findings of the online segment and the thematic booklet 2, the Special points of interest offer a framework for the main takeaways and the conclusions and policy implications that can be drawn from them. In addition to providing an in-depth analysis of key developments and emerging trends in selected drug markets, including in countries currently experiencing conflict, booklet 2 focuses on contemporary issues related to drugs. The booklet opens with a look at the challenges posed to law enforcement by synthetic drugs, both in terms of their increasing potency, adaptability and ease of manufacture and their shorter supply chains, reduced risk and lower production costs compared with drugs of natural origin. Other law enforcement challenges are considered in the context of the increasing use of social media for buying and selling drugs online. Booklet 2 also examines approaches to regulating the medical cannabis market in different countries and assesses recent developments surrounding the therapeutic, spiritual and non-medical use of substances known as “psychedelics”. The remainder of the booklet focuses on issues related to drugs in specific contexts, including the Amazon Basin, where the convergence of drug crime and crimes that affect the environment poses a threat to natural and human ecosystems. The risk factors for and vulnerability to substance use disorders among forcibly displaced populations are also discussed in the booklet, and the interim outcomes of innovations and modifications of services for people who use drugs during the COVID-19 pandemic are summarized.

The World Drug Report 2023 is aimed not only at fostering greater international cooperation to counter the impact of the world drug problem on health, governance and security, but also at assisting Member States in anticipating and addressing threats posed by drug markets and mitigating their consequences.

The World Drug Report 2023 is published on the UNODC website:

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