

International Drug Policy: The Facts

What is drug policy?

The term 'drug policy' refers to any policy whose aim is to control drug supply and drug demand. It can therefore have an impact on multiple areas, ranging from the treatment of drug dependence and other diseases, such as HIV/AIDS and cancer, to the production and trade in illegal drugs, and the levels of violence, incarceration and poverty worldwide.

International drug policy is based on three United Nations documents:

- The Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs (1961, amended 25 March 1972)
<http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/treaties/single-convention.html>
- The Convention on Psychotropic Substances (1971)
<http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/treaties/psychotropics.html>
- The Convention against the Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (1988)
<http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/treaties/illicit-trafficking.html>

In 1998, under the slogan 'A Drug Free World - We Can Do It!', the United Nations declared a set of goals including the elimination or significant reduction of the illicit cultivation of the coca bush, the cannabis plant and the opium poppy by the year 2008.



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Illicit drug use – facts and figures

- The global drug market is worth around \$320 billion. ⁱ
- An estimated 208 million people use illicit drugs each year ⁱⁱ
- Approximately 165.8 million people use cannabis which represents 3.9% of the global population aged 15-64 ⁱⁱⁱ
- Cannabis use in the United States and New Zealand is higher than in any other country (42% - lifetime use). 16% of US citizens have used cocaine at some point in their lives. ^{iv}
- There are an estimated 13.2 million injecting drug users worldwide. ^v
- 158 countries and territories have reported injecting drug use. ^{vi}
- The most commonly injected drugs around the world are heroin, cocaine and amphetamine-type stimulants ^{vii}.

Cultivation and production of illicit drugs

- Since 1998, opium production has increased 102%^{viii}. Afghanistan produced 92% of the world's opium in 2007. The total area under opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan covers 193,00 hectares.^{ix} Previously, most opium was produced in the 'Golden Triangle' of Laos, Burma, and Thailand.
- There has been an increase of 20% in coca production since 1998^x. Around 90% of world's cocaine is produced in Latin America.



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Illicit drugs and law enforcement

- In February 2003, the prime minister of Thailand launched a war on drugs. Over 2,500 extrajudicial killings of alleged drug dealers took place.^{xi}
- The United States has incarcerated the largest number of people on drugs-related charges. In 2005, 573,354 people were in custody on drugs charges (state, federal and local).^{xii}
- In the United States, black people are incarcerated at much higher rates than whites. African-American men are 12 times more likely to be in prison for a drugs-related offence than white men.^{xiii} However, surveys suggest that whites and blacks use drugs at similar rates (an estimated 49 percent of whites and 42.9 percent of blacks age 12 or older have used illicit drugs in their lifetime)^{xiv}.
- In several countries of the former Soviet Union, police are expected to fulfill an arrest quota. Arresting drug users for possessing syringes or planting drugs on known drug users is an easy way to do this.^{xv}
- More than thirty countries retain capital punishment for drugs. The majority of these countries are in the Middle East, North Africa and the Asia-Pacific regions^{xvi}. In Malaysia between July 2004 and July 2005, 36 out of 52 cases of capital punishment were for drug trafficking.^{xvii}

HIV prevalence and injecting drug use

- HIV rates among all prisoners are higher than among the total population, e.g. Lithuania – 0.2% in total population with 9.75% in prisons, Malaysia – 0.5% and 4%, Ukraine – 1.4% and 14%.^{xviii}
- 83% of all people registered HIV-positive in the Russian Federation in 2007 were reported to have been infected via injecting drug use.^{xix}
- Up to 10% of all HIV infections occur through injecting drug use. One third of infections outside Africa are due to injecting drug use. Globally, there may be up to 3.3 million people who inject drugs that are living with HIV.^{xx}
- In nine countries, over 40% of IDUs are HIV-positive: Estonia, Ukraine, Burma, Indonesia, Thailand, Nepal, Argentina, Brazil, and Kenya^{xxi}

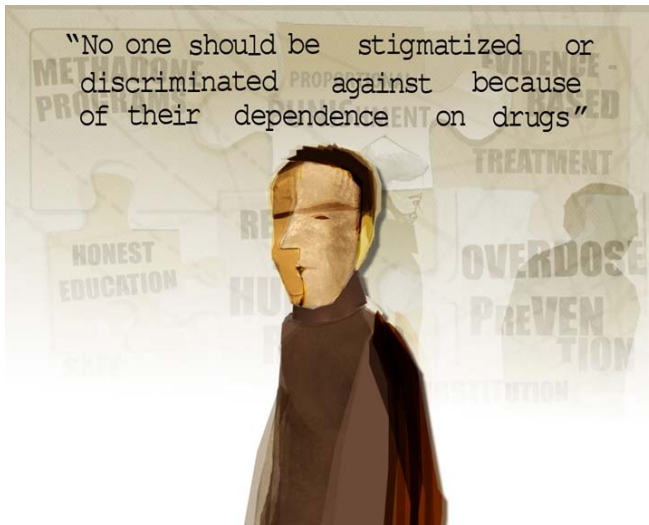
Drug dependence and treatment

- The disorder of opioid dependence is represented in the International Classification of Disease of the World Health Organization^{xxii}. It is a chronic or long-term and relapsing disorder^{xxiii}.
- Methadone, an synthetic opiate, has been used since the 1960s to treat drug dependence.^{xxiv} Regular use of substitution therapy has been associated with decreased injecting drug use, decreased criminal activity increased retention in treatment for chemical dependence, increased adherence to HIV medication, improved family relations, and successful return to employment.^{xxv}
- The World Health Organization added methadone and buprenorphine to their Model List of Essential Medicines in 2005.
- Methadone remains illegal in several countries, including in some countries with a high HIV prevalence among injecting drug users, e.g. Russia, Armenia and Tajikistan.
- Treatment is more cost-effective than sending a drug user to prison^{xxvi}. Injecting drug users leaving prison account for a substantial number of fatal overdoses.^{xxvii}

Harm Reduction

- 'Harm reduction' is a philosophy whose central aim is to reduce the harms of drug use. Two major harm reduction interventions are substitution therapy (methadone, buprenorphine, and, in some cases, heroin), needle or syringe exchange.
- The first needle exchange program was set up in the Netherlands in 1984. By providing clean needles and the chance to dispose of dirty ones, the chances of transmitting bloodborne diseases, such as HIV or hepatitis C, are dramatically reduced^{xxviii}.
- By 2008, at least 77 countries or territories had implemented/tolerated some form of harm reduction intervention - 63 had substitution

The Way Ahead



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Respect for human rights - *'No one should be stigmatized or discriminated against because of their dependence on drugs'* United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, Message on the International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking, 26 June 2008.^{xxx}

Principle of proportionality - Any measures taken must be proportionate. In other words, they must be no more than is necessary to achieve a legitimate aim and the penalty should fit the crime^{xxxi}.

Treatment, not punishment - If a drug user has committed no crime other than the possession of an illicit substance, the alternative of treatment, education, aftercare, rehabilitation or social reintegration (provided for in the 1988 convention, article 3, para 4) should be used instead of imprisonment.

Increased access to harm reduction services - Access to harm reduction services is needed in all countries where injecting drug use takes place in order to curb the HIV epidemic and reduce the harms and levels of drug-taking.

Alternative development - Realistic alternatives must be provided for farmers of illicit crops which allow them to draw in a reasonable income which include not only alternative crops, but also alternative forms of work, democratic education and the joint search for other solutions.^{xxxii}

'Nothing about us without us' - As HIV positive people are recognized as being part of the solution to the global HIV problem, drug users are similarly part of the solution for reducing drug-related risks.

Endnotes

- ⁱ World Drug Report 2005: <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/WDR-2005.html>
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- ^{xi} Not Enough Graves: The War on Drugs, HIV/AIDS, and Violations of Human Rights. Human Rights Watch. June 2004, Vol. 16, No. 8 (C)
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