

Addressing the Impact of Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking

Part 1: Findings and Possible Responses

Organized Criminal Groups and Armed Factions

- **Tri-Border Areas:** The 2024 World Drug Report highlights how criminal groups exploit regions with limited governance, such as the Golden Triangle (Myanmar, Thailand, Laos) and the Triple Frontier (Paraguay, Brazil, Argentina). These areas have become hubs for illicit drug activities due to their instability.
- **Golden Triangle:** Traditionally a center for opium production, recent conflicts have shifted production towards methamphetamine, cybercrime, and online scams. Methamphetamine seizures have surged, quadrupling between 2013 and 2022.
- **Environmental Impact:** The conflict and drug production in these regions have led to deforestation, toxic waste disposal, and increased opium cultivation, which exacerbates economic dependency and environmental degradation. Methamphetamine production alone contributes 1,900-3,800 metric tons of waste annually, harming ecosystems when released into waterways or burned.

Global Cocaine Supply

- **Supply and Market Trends:** Cocaine supply hit a record high in 2022 with over 2,700 tons, marking a 20% increase from 2021. North America remains the largest market, followed by Europe. The COVID-19 pandemic briefly impacted supply, but demand is now increasing rapidly.
- **Seizures and Trends:** Over 90% of countries have reported cocaine seizures. Asia and Oceania are experiencing rising cocaine demand and seizures. The increasing use of cocaine is leading to more hospitalizations and treatment needs, along with rising fatalities.
- **Transit Through Africa:** Africa is increasingly used as a transit route for cocaine, methamphetamines, and heroin, leading to growing domestic drug markets and increased treatment needs.

Drug Treatment and Violence

- **Treatment:** Women in treatment programs are more likely to identify cocaine as the substance used. Heroin remains the most common reason for drug treatment in parts of Asia. Overall, drug use disorders have increased by 3% over five years, with men more likely to receive treatment than women.
- **Violence:** Increased cocaine seizures in the Southern Cone have led to a surge in violence, particularly in Ecuador. The Caribbean and parts of Central America have also seen rising violence, though Central America has experienced a decrease in drug trafficking due to gang disbandment.

The Afghan Ban and its impact

In 2022, Afghanistan implemented a ban on opium production, resulting in the global production of opium falling by 74%, a decrease of 95% in Afghanistan and 36% increase in Myanmar.

Economic effect: Farmers experienced a 92% drop in income from opium, declining from 2022 to 2023. This exacerbated an already vulnerable socioeconomic situation.

Expected impacts: decline in quality of opium, increased overdose and treatment demand due to user switch to potent alternative opioids, and a possible switch of Afghan economy towards methamphetamines due to a struggle to respect the ban.

Synthetic Drugs and Market Trends

- **Methamphetamines:** Despite a slight decrease in 2022, global methamphetamine seizures remain high. The market for methamphetamines continues to expand, with notable increases in East and Southeast Asia, and emerging markets in the Near and Middle East.
- **New Psychoactive Substances (NPS):** The number of NPS has remained stable, though nitazenes, potent synthetic opioids, are causing concern due to their association with rising overdose deaths. Drug cocktails mixing multiple substances pose additional risks.

Proposed Solutions

1. **Holistic Approach:** Address market dynamics and criminal networks by investigating origins and recruitment methods. Strengthen governance in low-governance regions where crime thrives.
2. **Alternative Income:** Provide economic alternatives to drug cultivation and distribution to address underlying issues like poverty and lack of development.
3. **Law Enforcement Focus:** Shift resources from low-level actors to high-level individuals and groups central to the drug trade. Enhance international cooperation, anti-corruption efforts, and law enforcement capabilities.
4. **Technological Advancements:** Upgrade law enforcement technology and forensic capabilities to keep pace with evolving drug threats.
5. **Impact Evaluation:** Assess the effectiveness of seizures and law enforcement operations. Focus on disrupting drug shipments and routes and enhance international intelligence-sharing and joint operations.

Part 2: Drug Use Harms and Impacts

Increase in Demand for Stimulants

- **Usage Statistics:** Approximately 1 in 18 people reported drug use in the past year. Around 30 million used amphetamines, and 60 million used opioids. The rise in stimulant use, including ecstasy and cocaine, follows the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Drug Use Disorders:** There has been a 3% increase in drug use disorders globally since 2018, totaling about 64 million people. Opioids remain the primary contributor to the disease burden, while marijuana continues to drive individuals to treatment services. The diversity of available drugs has led to increased polydrug use.
- **Injection Risks:** In 2022, 13.9 million people engaged in drug injection, increasing their risk of HIV by 35 times compared to non-injectors. About 1 in 8 injection drug users live with HIV. Unsafe injections contribute to new hepatitis C infections, with hepatitis C-related liver disease causing over half of drug-related deaths.
- **Fentanyl Crisis:** Fentanyl and opioid use remain high, leading to significant mortality rates in North America.

Gender Disparities

- **Men vs. Women:** Men are generally more likely to use drugs and engage in drug trafficking. Women, accounting for 25% of global drug users, often use non-medical pharmaceuticals and are more likely to experience rapid progression to problematic drug use. Women face greater barriers to accessing treatment, including stigma, lack of awareness, gender-specific facilities, and financial constraints.
- **Regional Differences:** Drug use patterns vary by region. For example, only 9% of cannabis users are women in Asia, compared to 45% in North America. Women who use injectable drugs are 1.2 times more likely to be HIV-positive than men.

Impact on Young Adults

- **Cannabis Use:** Concerns are rising about cannabis vaping among youth, particularly in North America. Post-legalization, increased availability of vapes and edibles has led to more hospitalizations for cannabis-induced psychosis and withdrawal.
- **Synthetic Drugs:** Young men are a high-risk group for synthetic drug use due to peer pressure, performance enhancement, and ease of access through home delivery and social media.

Proposed Solutions

- **Prevention:** Addressing drug use requires tackling underlying issues like family instability, trauma, poor parenting, negative social norms, mental health issues, and violence. The International Standards on Drug Use Prevention provide evidence-based guidelines for effective interventions, particularly for children and adolescents.

- **Treatment:** Drug use disorders should be managed similarly to chronic diseases, with continuous, evidence-based care to improve health outcomes. Effective treatments can reduce negative health and social impacts.
- **Comprehensive Interventions:** The WHO, UNODC, and UNAIDS guidelines offer comprehensive approaches to prevent and reduce drug-related harms. These interventions can significantly lower HIV and other infections and aid in overdose management.
- **Prison and Post-Release Care:** Ensuring drug-related treatment and care for those in prison and recently released is essential. Services should be tailored to specific groups, such as women, children, and minority communities, while addressing barriers like stigma and discrimination.
- **Human Rights Approach:** A rights-based approach requires drug services to be available, accessible, acceptable, and high-quality, ensuring non-discrimination, participation, and dignity. This framework allows for a humane and effective response to drug use, respecting the rights of all individuals involved.

Part 3: Drug Policy Responses

Drug Use and Law Enforcement Encounters

- **Global Statistics:** Drug use remains a primary reason for encounters with law enforcement. In total, 7 million people worldwide interacted with the police over drug offenses:
 - 4.7 million for drug use or personal use.
 - 2.7 million prosecuted for drug offenses.
 - 1.6 million convicted.
- For every 100 men and 100 women who come into formal contact with the law due to drug trafficking, 59 women are prosecuted compared to 55 men. In cases of drug possession or use, 16% of women are prosecuted compared to 32% of men, and 9% of women are convicted compared to 21% of men
- **Regional Differences:**
 - **Globally:** Prosecution and conviction rates for drug trafficking are higher than for drug use and possession.
 - **Asia and Africa:** prosecution and conviction rates for drug use are higher than for trafficking.
 - **Europe:** High rates of arrest, prosecution, and conviction for drug trafficking and use or possession.
 - **Americas:** Second-highest arrest rate (144 per 100,000 population) but lowest conviction rate for drug use or possession.

- **Demographics:** Men account for approximately 90% of drug offense arrests. Women represent 9% of arrests for drug trafficking and 12% for drug use possession.

Treatment Gap

- **Global Access:** Only 1 in 11 people with a drug use disorder receive treatment globally.
 - **Asia and Africa:** Treatment coverage is particularly low; about 2.8% of individuals with a drug use disorder in Africa and 5.1% in Asia received treatment in 2022.
 - **Gender Disparities:** In 2022, 1 in 18 women received drug treatment compared to 1 in 7 men.

Access to Opioids for Medical Use

- **Global Disparities:** Significant gaps remain in access to pharmaceutical opioids. 87% of the global population lacks adequate access for pain management.
 - While methadone and buprenorphine accessibility has improved over the past twenty years, their availability for medical use has remained relatively unchanged since 2019.

Policy Changes and Challenges

- **Examples of Policy Changes:**
 - **Germany:** Legalized social supply of non-medical cannabis.
 - **Oregon:** Reversed the decriminalization of all drug types.
 - **US States:** Some states allow "quasi-therapeutic" use of psychedelics.
- **Challenges:**
 - Policy changes reflect the complexity of drug policy and the need for nuanced approaches that balance public health, legal, and social considerations.
 - Psychedelic-led tourism and communities

Possible Responses

- **Principles of International Drug Conventions:**
 - Ensure controlled substances are available for medical and scientific purposes.
 - Prevent misuse of these substances.
- **Promoting Science-Based Understanding:**
 - Provide accurate, science-based information to:
 - **Reduce Fear:** Address concerns about addiction and misuse, which can restrict access to opioids for pain management.

- **Educate Youth:** Help young people make informed decisions about drug use risks and consequences.
- **Recommendations:**
 - Develop drug policies that adhere to international conventions while incorporating scientific understanding.
 - Improve accessibility to drug treatment services, especially in regions with significant gaps.
 - Address global disparities in medical opioid availability and refine policies based on evidence and regional needs.

Gender and Youth Inequalities in Drug Use and Policy

Gender Inequalities

- **Prevalence and Patterns:**
 - **Men:** Generally, more likely to use drugs and are predominantly involved in drug trafficking. They account for approximately 90% of all drug offense arrests.
 - 1 in every 7 men who suffer from a drug use disorder actually receive treatment
 - **Women:** Represent about 25% of global drug users. Women often use non-medical pharmaceutical drugs such as sedatives, tranquilizers, opioids, and stimulants. Patterns vary significantly by drug type and region:
 - In Asia, only 9% of cannabis users are women.
 - In North America, women constitute 45% of cannabis users.
 - Women progress to problematic drug use faster than men and face more severe health and social impacts. In countries with sex-specific data, about 20% of injectable drug users are women, who are 1.2 times more likely than men to be HIV-positive.
 - 1 in every 18 women who suffer from a drug use disorder actually receive treatment
 - Among people who use drugs women represent 16% of opioid users, 24% cocaine, 24% cannabis, 28% “ecstasy type-substances, 25% amphetamines and 43% non-medical pharmaceutical opioids users.
- **Barriers to Treatment:**
 - Women face unique barriers to accessing drug treatment services, including:
 - Limited awareness of available services.
 - Stigma and discrimination related to seeking help.
 - Insufficient gender-specific treatment facilities.
 - Financial constraints and lack of support systems.

Youth Inequalities

- **Increasing Use of Stimulants:**
 - Resurgence of stimulant use, including ecstasy and cocaine, has been noted post-COVID-19 pandemic. Approximately 1 in 18 people reported using drugs in the past year, with about 30 million using amphetamines and 60 million using opioids.
 - There has been an increase in ketamine use among youth in the United Kingdom and Australia
- **Drug Injection and Risks:**

- In 2022, 13.9 million individuals engaged in drug injection, significantly increasing their risk of HIV infection and contributing to new hepatitis C infections. Unsafe drug injection practices were linked to a higher incidence of hepatitis C-related liver disease and increased mortality rates.
- **Impact of Drug Innovations:**
 - **Marijuana:** Early adolescence, a critical phase of brain development, sees gradual neurological changes. Initiating cannabis use during this period, especially with high-potency cannabis, increases the risk of cannabis use disorders, psychiatric issues, and other developmental challenges in adulthood. Notably, global cannabis use rates among 15 and 16-year-olds (5.5%) surpass those of adults (4.4%), particularly in Oceania and Europe.
 - The popularity of cannabis vaping among youth in North America has raised concerns about its long-term effects on brain development. Increased availability of vapes, concentrates, and edibles post-legalization has contributed to health risks.
 - Higher proportions of young individuals undergoing drug treatment in Africa, Central America, the Caribbean, and South. Drug use disorders at a young age are especially troubling as they can create a harmful cycle involving reduced educational achievement and hindered prospects for social reintegration.
 - **Synthetic Drugs:** Young men are a high-risk group for synthetic drug use, driven by peer pressure, performance enhancement, and accessibility via home delivery and social media platforms.

Addressing Gender and Youth Inequalities

- **Targeted Interventions:**
 - Develop and implement gender-sensitive treatment programs that address the specific needs and barriers faced by women.
 - Create youth-focused prevention and education programs to address the unique risks associated with drug use during critical developmental periods.
- **Support Systems:**
 - Enhance support systems for women and youth, including improved access to gender-specific and age-appropriate treatment services.
 - Address stigma and discrimination that impede access to treatment and support.
- **Policy and Program Recommendations:**
 - Integrate gender and youth considerations into drug policy and treatment programs.
 - Ensure that policies are inclusive and address the distinct needs of different demographic groups to improve overall health outcomes and equity in drug use and treatment services.