

Commentary

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2010 World Drug Report: Tracking Global Drug Consumption and Supply

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), in collaboration with the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), is the guardian of the world drug treaties including the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, the 1971 Convention on Narcotic Drugs, the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances and the 1988 Convention against the Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances. These treaties are the foundation of drug laws and policies in the United States and around the world. Nearly all Member States of the United Nations have signed and ratified all three UN Conventions and are thus committed to significantly reducing the supply and the use of illegal drugs by 2019.

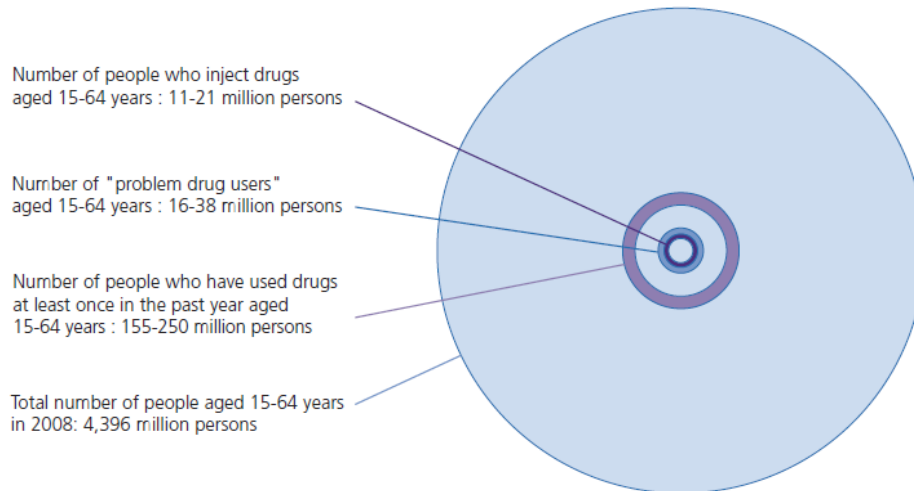
To track progress toward this goal, the UNODC publishes the annual World Drug Report of current data and trends on drug use and transnational drug trafficking worldwide representing its Member States.^a This comprehensive 300+ page picture of the global drug problem is a report-card for the world on the modern illegal drug epidemic.

The 2010 World Drug Report estimates that between 155 and 250 million people of the world's population age 15 to 64 used illegal drugs in the past year.¹ This corresponds to between 3.5% and 5.7% of the world's population. Unsurprisingly, marijuana remains the world's most used drug, with an estimated 129 to 190 million users, followed by amphetamine-type substances (13.7 to 52.9 million users), cocaine (15 to 19.3 million users) and opiates (12.8 to 21.8 million users).

Of the annual drug users worldwide, an estimated 16 to 38 million are labeled “problem drug users” meaning that they are either dependent or administered illegal drugs through injection, which according to UNODC puts them at the most serious social and health risks. Of problem drug users, only 12% to 30% received treatment in the past year. These estimates demonstrate the significant global problem of illegal drug use and the serious gap between the number of individuals who need treatment and those who receive it. (See figure below.)

^a The Annual Reports Questionnaire, on which the World Drug Report is based, was distributed to the 192 United Nations Member States. UNODC received 110 replies to the drug abuse section.

Illicit drug use at the global level, 2008



Although these rates of illegal drug use and “problem drug use” are disturbing, they are low in comparison to the global use of alcohol, a legal drug. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that there are about 2 billion people worldwide who consume alcoholic beverages and 76.3 million with diagnosable alcohol use disorders.² An estimated 2 million people die each year from drinking alcohol compared to an estimated 200,000 people globally who die from illicit drug use each year.³ Far from demonstrating that alcohol is more dangerous than illegal drugs, these comparisons show that the legalization of any of the currently illegal drugs would greatly increase the use of those drugs and related problems including drug-related deaths. The current levels of alcohol use and alcohol-related problems are signal warnings of the high cost of legalization. Alcohol policy is not an attractive model to be used for marijuana or other currently illegal drugs for the protection of the public health and safety.

The UNODC is committed to coordinated international efforts to reduce illegal drug use with an effective restrictive drug prevention strategy that balances demand reduction (prevention, treatment and research) with supply reduction (law enforcement focusing on illegal drug trafficking). This is a drug policy that has been followed in the United States for more than four decades with strong bipartisan support.

The 2010 World Drug Report demonstrates marked regional differences in the drugs that affect problem users. Over the past decade, the primary drug leading to treatment “has remained cannabis in Africa, cocaine in South America and opiates in Asia and Europe. The two notable exceptions are 1) North America, where a dominant drug for treatment demand does not emerge, and rather, the percentage breakdown of drugs has become more uniform over time, and 2) Oceania, which has experienced over time one of the biggest changes in the primary treatment drug from opiates to cannabis.”⁴

While the United States has about 5% of the world's population, it accounts for about 20% of the world's illegal drug users.^{b 5 6} In comparison, the US gross domestic product (GDP) is about 24% of the world GDP⁷ and the US uses about 25% of the world's energy supply.⁸ The UNODC report shows that US rates of illegal drug use are at the high end of use rates in developed countries and that they are far higher than use rates in most of the developing world. Illegal drug use in the US is a significant factor, but far from the only factor, in global drug demand for illegal drugs.

For more information about the Institute for Behavior and Health, Inc. visit www.ibhinc.org.

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¹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2010). World Drug Report 2010. New York: United Nations. (p.130) http://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/WDR_2010/World_Drug_Report_2010_lo-res.pdf

² World Health Organization Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse. (2004). Global Status Report on Alcohol 2004. Geneva.

http://www.who.int/entity/substance_abuse/publications/global_status_report_2004_overview.pdf

³ UN Information Services. (2009). World Drug Day focuses on reducing suffering and vulnerability. United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime. Retrieved November 16, 2010 from

<http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/press/releases/2009/june/worlddrug-day-focuses-on-reducing-suffering-and-vulnerability.html>

⁴ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2010). World Drug Report 2010. New York: United Nations. (p.130) http://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/WDR_2010/World_Drug_Report_2010_lo-res.pdf

⁵ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2010). World Drug Report 2010. New York: United Nations. http://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/WDR_2010/World_Drug_Report_2010_lo-res.pdf

⁶ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2010). *Results from the 2009 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Volume I. Summary of National Findings* (Office of Applied Studies, NSDUH Series H-38A, HHS Publication No. SMA 10-4586Findings).Rockville, MD.

⁷ Gross Domestic Product. World Bank, World Development Indicators.

http://www.google.com/publicdata?ds=wb-wdi&met=ny_gdp_mktp_cd&idim=country:USA&dl=en&hl=en&q=gdp#met=ny_gdp_mktp_cd&idim=country:USA&tdim=true

⁸ USGS Energy Resources Program U.S. Department of the Interior. Retrieved November 12, 2010 from http://certmapper.cr.usgs.gov/rooms/we/index.jsp?thePage=include_about.jsp

^b Numbers calculated from past year global illegal drug use estimates from United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime World Report 2010 and United States past year illegal drug use from the 2009 National Survey on Drug Abuse and Health. The US accounts for between 15.2% and 24.5% of the world's past year illegal drug users.