

UNODC

(United Nations Office on Drug and Crime)

Combating drug trafficking in Europe



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Introduction

Since the first and second world war, drugs have become a major issue for European countries. As of the 1930's, European governments began to fight against drug consumption and trafficking. Drug trafficking drastically expanded during the 1970's coexisting with narco-states' creation. Cannabis and cocaine have become the most used drugs during the last 30 years becoming a major issue for European countries. Drugs originating from the golden crescent enter Europe via Russia whereas drugs produced in South America gain access through primary ports in Europe. Drugs represent a major health issue for European countries as it causes addiction and desocialization. The most used drugs in Europe are cannabis, heroine, cocaine, amphetamine and ecstasy.

Definition of Key Terms

Drug Trafficking :

Global illicit trade involving the cultivation, manufacture, distribution and sale of substances which are subject to drug prohibition laws.

Opioids :

The term "opioids" includes compounds that are extracted from the poppy plant (*Papaver somniferum*) as well as semisynthetic and synthetic compounds with similar properties that can interact with opioid receptors in the brain. Opioids have analgesic and sedative effects, and such medicines as morphine, codeine and fentanyl are commonly used for pain management. After intake, opioids can cause euphoria, which is one of the main reasons for their use outside of medical prescription. Opioids include heroin, morphine, codeine, fentanyl, methadone, tramadol, and other similar substances. Due to their pharmacological effects, they can cause respiratory depression among other side effects. Opioid overdose can lead to death.

Cannabis :

Cannabis is a generic term used to refer to the several psychoactive preparations of the Cannabis sativa plant. Cannabis is by far the most widely cultivated, trafficked and abused illicit drug. Half of all drug seizures worldwide involve cannabis. The geographical spread of those seizures is also global, covering nearly every country.

Golden crescent :

The Golden Crescent is the name given to one of Asia's two principal areas of illicit opium production (the other being the Golden Triangle).

Narco state :

A nation state whose government, judiciary, and military have been effectively infiltrated by drug cartels, or where the illegal drug trade is covertly run by elements of the government. It can also refer to a region under the control of organized crime for the purposes of producing or trafficking drugs where legitimate political authority is absent. ‘Narco state’ is more of a journalistic phrase than an entity under international law. It is often used to describe countries in Latin America, e.g. Colombia, Suriname, or Mexico.

Soft drugs :

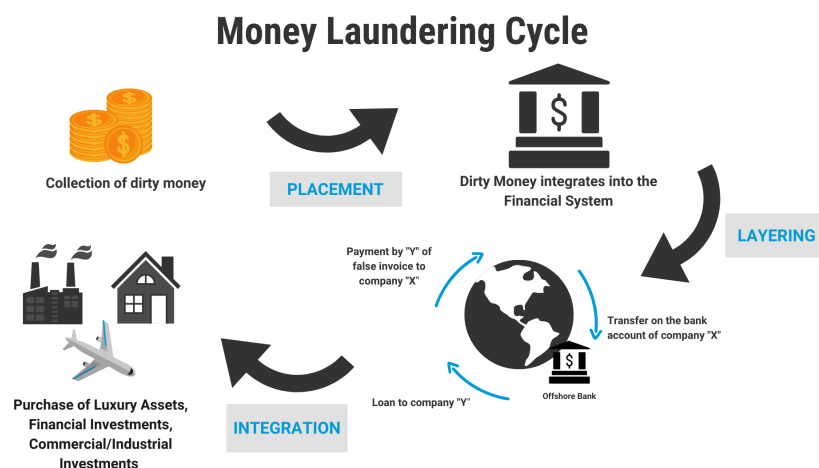
Soft drugs are less hazardous to health than hard drugs. Nonetheless, they are not harmless substances. They don’t induce risks as serious as those associated with hard drugs use. Soft drugs include, for example, hash, marijuana, sleeping pills and sedatives.

Hard drugs :

The risks associated with hard drugs are greater than those induced by soft drugs ; especially in terms of health hazards, addiction, and impact on public order. Hard drugs include, for instance, heroin, cocaine, amphetamine, LSD and ecstasy.

Money laundering :

Money laundering is the processing of criminal proceeds to disguise their illegal origin. This process is of critical importance. The estimated amount of money laundered globally in one year is 2 - 5% of global GDP, or \$800 billion - \$2 trillion in US dollars. Due to the clandestine nature of money-laundering, it is however difficult to estimate the total amount of money that goes through the laundering cycle.



General Overview

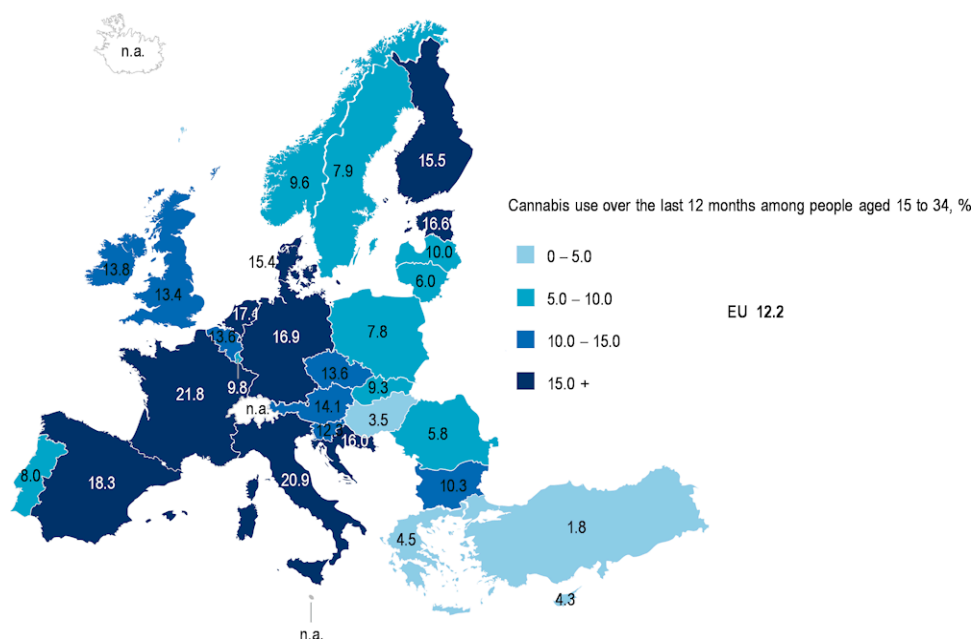
Drugs are a major issue for European countries. Drug trafficking brought insecurity especially in the main European ports such as Antwerp or Marseille. Due to drug trafficking, criminality is increasing, in relation to quarrels for the control of drug distribution. Drug trafficking can have dire consequences on security, e.g. gang rivalry, crime, corruption, violence. However, Drug trafficking remains a valuable source of income (30B/ year in Europe).

Drug issues are not only a matter of insecurity but rather a cause of many public health issues, such as addiction, infection risk, mental health problems or HIV transmission. Moreover, low-income countries cannot afford health and education programs to deal with the problem of drug production and addiction. This can often have negative impacts on the country's social and economic development.

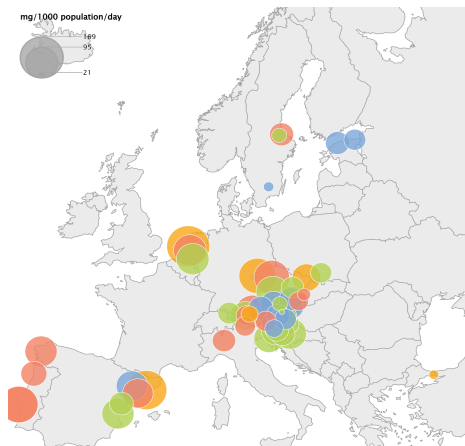
Drug trafficking is a global illicit trade subject to drug prohibition laws. This illegal market is a major threat to society in terms of violence, corruption, and health. Most of the drug trafficking coming to Europe starts its journey in the Middle East or South America. Europe is both a major consumer and path for illicit drugs. This illegal trade is a significant challenge in Europe (organized crime groups, porous borders, diverse drug markets). The European Union and its member states have taken many measures to fight against this issue but it is still threatening public health and security across the continent.

Consumption in Europe :

The illegal drugs trade represents a global health issue in Europe. There are plenty of people using illegal drugs such as cannabis (16,4 Million young adults), cocaine (2,6 Million adults), or opioids (1,7 Million young adults). Cocaine is now Europe's second most commonly consumed illicit drug, after cannabis, with a market retail estimated at €10.5 billion. Cannabis legalization can result in a growth of cannabis consumption.



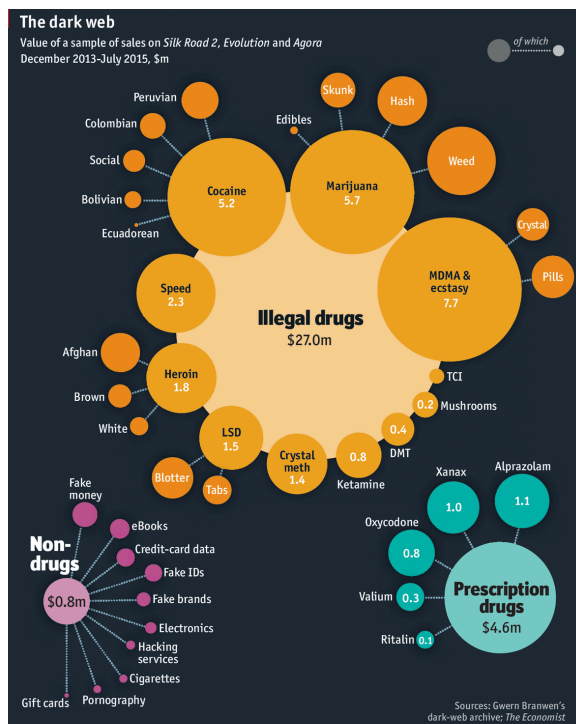
Water contamination :



One of the negative effects of drugs in Europe is also the contamination of water because of drug trafficking. Many major cities in Europe, especially major ports, suffer from water contamination. There is still a lack of studies. Nonetheless, water contamination by drugs could have negative effects on the environment or public health, for example.

Cannabis residues in wastewater

The rise of markets on the dark web:



The digital era we are living in brings innovations that can be helpful to our modern society. However, it comes with its downsides as criminal networks found a way to renew their illegal activities. Drug trafficking was not left behind this modernization. The evolution of dark web drug markets paired with their unprecedented methods (fake names, crypto money, etc) is a significant challenge in the fight against drug trafficking in Europe. These online platforms are hidden, allowing users to anonymously buy and sell unlawful drugs. These platforms can be accessed easily which is a point of major concern.

The role of airports :

Drug trafficking in airports refers to the illegal act of transporting illicit drugs through airports with the intention of distribution or sale. Drug traffickers try to smuggle these illicit substances by bypassing the airports' security. This can involve hiding drugs in their luggages, clothes or even in their body which can be dangerous. Airports' security are vigilant in detecting these activities within the airports. Nevertheless, between 10 and 30 % of the drugs in 2023 are shipped by plane.

Historical position in Europe :

Most European countries have laws that classify drugs into different categories based on their potential for harm and abuse. These laws enforce sanctions for the production, trafficking, and possession of substances. For example, in the United Kingdom, the *Misuse of Drugs Act 1971* classifies drugs into three categories (Class A, B, and C), with various penalties for crimes committed in each category.

Decriminalization or Legalization :

Some European countries have implemented policies that decriminalize or legalize certain drugs, most of the time cannabis, often with a focus on harm reduction and public health. For example, Portugal decriminalized the possession and use of small quantities of drugs in 2001, Same situation for cannabis in Germany in 2023 and the Netherlands in 1973.

Concrete measures :

The United Kingdom implemented the *Misuse of Drugs Act*. This law strengthens penalties for drug trafficking and provides law enforcement to combat drug-related crime, including increased surveillance and measures to disrupt criminal networks.

Major Parties Involved

Afghanistan :

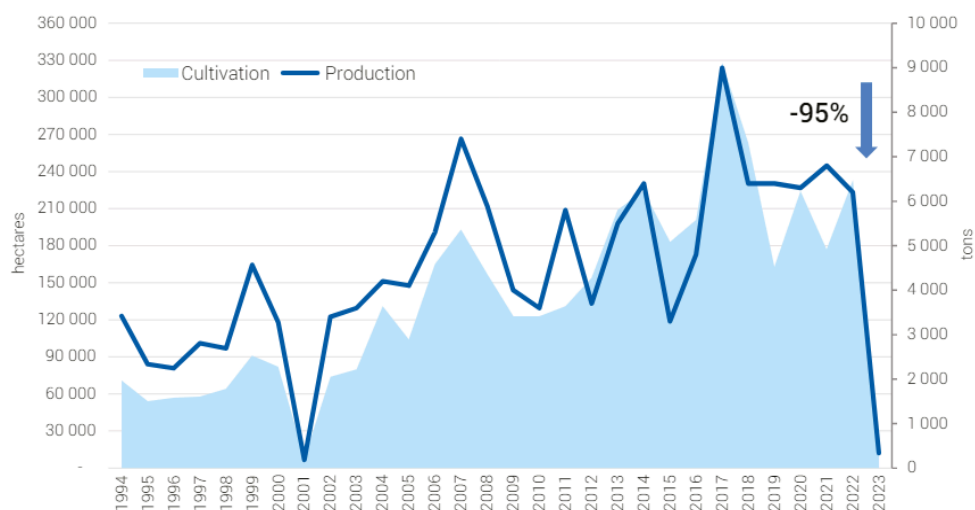
Drugs come mostly from countries situated in Central Asia, i.e. Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. The paths for heroin trafficking linking Afghanistan to the markets of Russia and Western Europe are the Balkans. The Balkan route often passes through Iran, Türkiye, Greece, and Bulgaria; then Southeastern Europe and ends its journey in the western european market. Afghan's drugs are also exported in south asia (e.g. Sri lanka).



The Afghan drug industry stands out on a global scale due to its economic significance; its extensive influence on the political, economic, and social aspects; and its ability to create an environment characterized by insecurity and lawlessness. The country produced a huge majority of the world's opium production. In recent years, Afghanistan's opium production accounted for 80% to 90% of the global production.

Notwithstanding, the institution of an Islamic regime has shifted the country's drug production dynamics. Afghan opium cultivation dramatically decreased following the de facto authorities prohibition of "Poppy Cultivation and All types of Narcotics", in April 2022. Historically, opium poppy growing part of Afghanistan underwent a total discontinuation, or at least a sharp reduction of activities. On a national scale, area under cultivation declined by 95% to a total of just 10,800 ha, indicating that farmers were complying with the ban. Thus, supply of opium and export of heroin coming out of the 2023 harvest were severely reduced. Opium production saw a similar decline from 6,200 tons produced in 2022 to 333 tons in 2023. The total 2023 opium harvest could be converted into 24-38 tons of heroin of export quality (50 – 70% purity). In 2022 that amount was 350-580 tons. This prohibition, while diminishing opium trafficking in Afghanistan, put many rural households at greater economic risk as it provided an important source of income for rural populations.

Opium cultivation and production in Afghanistan, 1994-2023



The Russian Federation :

Russia's size is important as a transit route for drug trafficking between Asia, particularly Central Asia as well as Afghanistan, and Europe. Heroin, opium, and other drugs produced in Afghanistan are sent through Central Asian countries and into Russia to transit to European markets. Drug trafficking also supplies illicit drugs to the domestic market within Russia.

Furthermore, drug use historically was not as widespread in Russia as in some Western countries, there has been a significant increase of drug abuse in recent years, particularly among young people. Drug trafficking in Russia is often associated with organized crime groups. These groups are involved in all aspects of the drug traffic, from production to sale.

The Russian government has implemented various measures, such as law enforcement efforts, border security, and penalties for drug use, to combat drug trafficking and drug abuse.

Belgium :

Shipped from South America (Panama, Ecuador, Colombia, etc), the drugs' entry gate in Europe is Antwerp's port in Belgium. In 2023, in Antwerp, 116 tons of cocaine, with a street value of more than €9 billion, were seized. Belgian authorities are trying to reduce the influence of gangs, that are a threat for the population because of their violence (e.g. gang wars), by leading anti-gangs operations. Belgium accounts for around 40% of all cocaine detected in Europe, but seizures likely represent only 10-20% of the total amount of the drug in circulation.

The Netherlands :

The Netherlands is also a major drug entry gate in Europe, with ports such as Rotterdam or Amsterdam. In the Netherlands, it is a criminal offense to possess, sell or produce drugs. However, the Netherlands tolerates the sale of soft drugs in designated areas named 'coffee shops'. A coffee shop is an establishment where cannabis is sold under certain strict conditions. In the Netherlands, as elsewhere, drugs cause nuisance and crime. The government is responding by imposing tougher rules on coffee shops, dismantling cannabis-growing operations, and curbing the production and trafficking of hard drugs.

Colombia :

The difficulty for the Colombian Government in combating illegal drug trade is the robustness of drug cartels. These cartels protect their business with illegal paramilitary groups and provide financial capital to government officials, generating a corrupt political system. Although the state government has attempted to control drug production, the government's weak state capacity has proven to be ineffective in controlling illegal drug trade and production. For example, the Colombian government has tried to eliminate erythroxyllum (coca) plants by spraying chemicals. Colombia is the top coca cultivator in the world, producing 60% of the world's cocaine. Belgium is the preferred point of entry for Colombia's biggest drug cartels to exploit the European market.

EMCDDA (the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction) :

The [EMCDDA](#) provides the EU and its member states with a factual overview on European level concerning drugs, drug addiction and their consequences. This organization provides a solid evidence base to support drug policy making on European and national level .

Possible Solutions

Decriminalization or legalization of soft drugs :

Many countries in Europe such as the Netherlands or more recently Germany chose this option by legalizing the consumption of cannabis, for example. The sale of cannabis takes place in controlled and registered institutions that are specialized in the sale of drugs and follow strict norms. In the Netherlands the legalization of cannabis does not seem to have increased the use of cannabis. It can also provide more money from taxes in addition to a reduction of police spending. However, we still don't know the long-term effect that legalization can have. Moreover, in Germany there are some places, such as areas situated near schools or pedestrian streets, where cannabis use is prohibited.



Increase control over drug entry points and distribution points in europe :

Increasing control over drug entry points could be effective, especially against hard drugs that come from the Golden Crescent or South America. For example, fighting against corruption or gangs can reduce import of drugs in Europe. In France, the government sets a “clear space” operation in order to control distribution points. However, the high cost and lack of guarantee of efficiency can lead to second-guessing this action. Moreover, on January 24th, 2024, the European Commission, together with the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU, launched the European Ports Alliance to step up the fight against drug trafficking and organised crime. This partnership aims to bring all relevant stakeholders together, to form solutions to protect ports.

Set up strong anti-gangs operations in producing countries :

Helping governments in difficulties against drug cartels could be a very efficient solution. This help could be set up by sending repressive means to the government in difficulties or money in order to reduce corruption in producing countries. However, there is a risk of embezzlement because of corruption in some narco-state.

Reinforce control over financial transfers in order to stem money laundering flows :

Anti-money laundering efforts conforming to the recommendations of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), would make the process of financial transaction more difficult, in the context of drug trafficking. Such action would slow down the criminal affairs, giving the authorities more time to proceed in search, seizures and arrests.



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