



INTERNATIONAL CENTRE
FOR SCIENCE IN DRUG POLICY

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**New research shows war on drugs has failed
to reduce supply and access to illegal drugs in the US and internationally**

***BMJ Open study shows illegal drugs cheaper, more potent
despite law enforcement efforts***

September 30, 2013 – A new study published in the *British Medical Journal Open* finds that the prices of illegal drugs have generally declined while their purity has increased over the past twenty years, raising questions about the effectiveness of international law enforcement efforts to reduce drug supply.

Researchers from the International Centre for Science in Drug Policy reviewed two decades of global drug surveillance data, finding that the supply of major illegal drugs has increased, as measured through a decline in the price, while there has been a corresponding general increase in the purity of illegal drugs.

“These findings add to the growing body of evidence that the war on drugs has failed,” said study co-author Dr. Evan Wood, Scientific Chair of the International Centre for Science in Drug Policy and Canada Research Chair in Inner City Medicine at the University of British Columbia. “We should look to implement policies that place community health and safety at the forefront of our efforts, and consider drug use a public health issue rather than a criminal justice issue. With the recognition that efforts to reduce drug supply are unlikely to be successful, there is a clear need to scale up addiction treatment and other strategies that can effectively reduce drug-related harm.”

Researchers reviewed indicators of drug supply in consumer markets such as Europe, the United States, and Australia, and drug seizures in drug-producing regions such as Latin America, Afghanistan, and Southeast Asia. Data were derived from government surveillance systems. The study found that:

- With the exception of powder cocaine, the purity and/or potency of illegal drugs in the U.S. generally increased during the study period;
- The price of illegal drugs, with few exceptions, generally decreased globally; and,
- Seizures of cannabis, cocaine, and opiates generally increased in major drug production regions and major domestic markets.

In the United States, cannabis seizures have increased by 465 per cent between 1990 and 2009. Despite this, the average inflation- and potency-adjusted prices of cannabis decreased by 86 per cent over the same period, and the average potency of the drug increased by 161 per cent. In addition, the average inflation- and purity-adjusted prices of heroin and cocaine decreased by 81 per cent and 80 per cent respectively, whereas average purity increased by 60 per cent and 11 per cent. This occurred despite the fact that seizures of these drugs in major production regions outside of the U.S. generally increased. Similar trends were observed in Europe, where during the same period the average inflation-adjusted

price of opiates and cocaine decreased by 74 per cent and 51 per cent respectively.

“The punitive prohibitionist approach to global drug control has proven remarkably costly, ineffective and counter-productive,” said Ethan Nadelmann. “It has generated extraordinary levels of violence, crime and corruption while failing entirely to reduce the availability and use of psychoactive drugs. Fortunately a growing number of governments now recognize that drug policies grounded in science, health and human rights can produce better results, at lower cost, than persisting with futile prohibitionist efforts.”

The study findings brought renewed calls from the international community to re-examine the effectiveness of drug strategies that place a disproportionate emphasis on supply reduction at the expense of evidence-based prevention and treatment of problematic illegal drug use. To that end, the study authors suggest that rather than using indicators of illegal drug volume seized, price, or purity, governments could assess the effectiveness of their drug policies by using indicators of drug-related harm, such as the number of overdoses, the rate of blood-borne disease transmission (e.g., HIV and hepatitis C) among people who use drugs, or emergency room mentions of drugs.

“In response to a study like this, policymakers often say ‘drugs are harmful so they must be kept illegal’,” said Fernando Henrique Cardoso, the former President of Brazil and one of several past and present heads of state calling for drug policy reform throughout Latin America. “What they fail to consider is, as this and other research suggests, that drugs are more harmful – to society, individuals, and the taxpayer – precisely because they are illegal. Some European countries have taken steps to decriminalize various drugs, and these types of policies should be explored in Latin and North America as well.”

For a copy of the report, including a one-page summary and table of price and seizure data by country or region, please visit www.icsdp.org.

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About the International Centre for Science in Drug Policy

The International Centre for Science in Drug Policy (ICS DP) is an international network of scientists, academics, and health practitioners committed to improving the health and safety of communities and individuals affected by illicit drugs. The network includes leading experts from around the world who have come together in an effort to inform illicit drug policies with the best available scientific evidence. For more details, please visit www.icsdp.org.