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**New research shows international war on drugs has failed
to reduce supply and access to illegal drugs**

***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:

- The purity and/or potency of heroin and cannabis in the U.S. increased during the study period;
- The price of heroin and cannabis, with few exceptions, generally decreased globally; and;
- The price and purity of cocaine in the U.S. fluctuated but remained essentially unchanged by the close of the study period; and
- Seizures of cannabis, cocaine, and opiates generally increased in major drug production regions and major domestic markets.

For example, seizures of coca leaf in the Andean Region (Peru, Bolivia, Colombia) increased by close to 200 per cent between 1990 to 2007. However, this did not lead to a massive reduction in powder cocaine in the United States, bringing into question the effectiveness of supply reduction-oriented efforts to control illegal drug flows. The study findings brought renewed calls



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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.

“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.”

To that end, the study authors suggest that rather than using indicators of illegal drug volume seized, price, or purity, governments could better 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.

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 (ICSDP) 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.