



For Immediate Release

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

***BMJ Open study shows illegal drugs cheaper and 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 price of illegal drugs, with few exceptions, generally decreased globally;
- In Europe, the price of opiates (including heroin) and cocaine declined by 74 per cent and 51 per cent respectively from 1990 to 2007;
- Seizures of cannabis, cocaine, and opiates generally increased in major drug production regions and major domestic markets.

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.

“This research should serve as a wake-up call to policymakers to legally regulate drugs as an urgent priority,” said Danny Kushlick, Head of External Affairs at Transform Drug Policy Foundation. “It’s way past the time for our political leaders in Europe to explore effective alternatives to the war on drugs, which has been proved a catastrophic failure. Billions of dollars and millions of lives are at stake if they fail to act.”

Many nations and jurisdictions have already taken steps to address ineffective drug policies and reduce the harms associated with drug prohibition. Early next year, Uruguay, as well as U.S. states Washington and Colorado, will implement the legal regulation of cannabis. In the Netherlands, where cannabis is available through the nation’s coffee shop system, only 14 per cent of Dutch cannabis users report accessing illegal drugs from individual cannabis dealers. Portugal, a country that has decriminalized the use of all drugs and, through the implementation of various public health strategies for addressing drug use and related harms, has successfully reduced a range of negative drug-related outcomes including dependence, criminal recidivism, and HIV transmission among injection drug users. And for many years Switzerland has operated a policy of wide-scale prescription of pharmaceutical heroin to dependent users – with significant benefits accruing.

“The drug policies of countries like Uruguay, the Netherlands and Portugal are clear examples of thoughtful, effective government responses to the problems posed by illicit drug use,” said Prof. David Nutt, Chair of the Independent Scientific Committee on Drugs. “The health and social problems associated with illicit drugs are exacerbated by enforcement-based approaches, and researchers and policymakers need to work together to develop and implement policies that will actually improve public health and safety.”

For a copy of the report or 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.

About Transform Drug Policy Foundation

Transform Drug Policy Foundation is a charitable think tank that seeks to draw public attention to the fact that drug prohibition itself is the major cause of drug-related harm to individuals, communities and nations, and should be replaced by effective, just and humane government control and regulation. Transform has emerged in response to the increasingly apparent failings of current UK and international drug policy. As illegal drug use and the problems associated with illegal drug markets have continued to grow, Transform is providing new thinking on alternatives to the current enforcement-oriented regime of prohibition. For more details, please visit www.tdpf.org.uk.