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INCB continued to support and promote initiatives in this area and conducted a survey to compile global best practices and case scenarios related to industry cooperation on precursors.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had minimal impact on the supply of chemical precursors for illicit drug manufacturing

Global reported seizures of ephedrine confirmed the declining trend observed in recent years. By contrast, reported seizures of MAPA, the latest substance to have been included in Table I of the 1988 Convention, confirmed a continuing shift towards the use of designer precursors. The same development also continued for precursors of fentanyl, fentanyl-related substances and methaqualone. Seizures of potassium permanganate, traditionally the principal precursor used for the illicit manufacture of cocaine, and of acetic anhydride, the key heroin precursor, remained unaffected by COVID-19 restrictions.

The INCB Precursors Incident Communication System helps share information in real-time

The INCB Precursors Incident Communication System (PICS) provides users with a platform for the secure exchange of real-time information related to the trafficking of precursors. PICS also offers information on internationally controlled precursors and drug manufacturing equipment. In this way, PICS can help authorities identify new trends, trafficking routes and alternative precursors even if the details and circumstantial evidence provided in the annual seizure statistics are insufficient.

REGIONAL HIGHLIGHTS OF THE INCB ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2021

AFRICA

If current levels of drug use continue, a higher number of people using drugs is expected due to population growth on the continent over the next decade, according to UNODC.

The number of States in Africa permitting the licit cultivation of cannabis for medical purposes continues to grow. Most of these countries intend to only export cannabis while others allow the use of cannabis for medical purposes domestically.

AMERICAS

Central America and the Caribbean

No evidence of drug traffickers using human trafficking networks in Central America and Mexico was found by the International Organization for Migration.

Lack of availability of narcotic drugs for medical purposes. The availability of opioid-analgesics used for medical purposes in Central America and the Caribbean in 2020 was one of the lowest among all regions.



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Lack of data to indicate prevalence of drug use. Most countries in the region lack recent estimates of drug use prevalence. The use of cannabis and cocaine, the proliferation of new psychoactive substances and the use of controlled drugs without a medical prescription continue to be issues of concern.

North America

The number of deaths from drug overdoses continued to rise in Canada and the United States. In the United States, there were an estimated 100,306 drug overdose deaths during the 12-month period ending in April 2021, an increase of 28.5 per cent on the year before. The estimated number of overdose deaths from opioids increased to 75,673 during the same period, up from 56,064 the year before. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an increase in opioid overdoses and deaths in Canada mainly due to an increasingly toxic drug supply. The worsening overdose crisis in these countries has been marked by increases in the number of deaths involving psychostimulants, such as methamphetamine.

Changes to cannabis regulations continue to be adopted throughout North America. In Mexico, new regulations on the use of cannabis by adults for non-medical purposes has been under review based on a Supreme Court decision from June 2021. In the United States, despite federal control of cannabis, regulations have been signed into law at the state level to permit the use and possession of cannabis by adults for non-medical purposes in six more states during the previous year.

South America

Larger quantities of cocaine and chemical precursors were seized. Organized criminal groups in the region increased shipment sizes to illicit markets both inside and outside the region to compensate for the financial losses suffered during the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Europe and Africa, authorities have reported an increase in the quantities of cocaine coming from South America.

The number of routes and networks used by traffickers increased despite COVID-19 restrictions. Air and sea routes have become the preferred method of transporting internationally controlled substances. Criminal organizations appear to be trafficking cocaine from Bolivia (Plurinational State of) by exploiting the Paraguay-Parana Waterway System, which consists of 3,400 km of uninterrupted rivers connecting Argentina, Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay to the Atlantic Ocean. There has also been an increase in the use of the Internet, especially the dark web and social media, to sell drugs. These drugs are sold online and are distributed through postal and courier services.

The area under coca bush cultivation continues to decrease in Colombia, while the Plurinational State of Bolivia and Peru reported increases. The reduction in Colombia could be due to various reasons, including eradication efforts by the Government. In Bolivia (Plurinational State of) and Peru, the increase could be caused by the suspension of eradication efforts during COVID-19 restrictions, increasing economic uncertainty and political instability.

Governments in the region prepare to establish cannabis industries. More Governments in the region regulated the cultivation, manufacturing and trade of cannabis for medical, scientific and



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industrial purposes. Some Governments intend to establish cannabis industries to aid post-COVID-19 economic recovery efforts.

There has been an increase in ecstasy-like drugs, along with an increase in new psychoactive substances in the region. Argentina, Brazil and Chile recorded the largest seizures of ecstasy-like drugs between 2015 and 2019. Of particular concern is the rate of consumption among high school and university students. There have also been reports of an increase in new psychoactive substances, which are being sold under the names of different drugs.

ASIA

East and South-East Asia

Illicit manufacture, trafficking and the use of synthetic drugs persists; emergence of new drugs. INCB is concerned about the increase in the illicit manufacture, trafficking and use of synthetic drugs, in particular ketamine, methamphetamine and synthetic cannabinoids. The drug problem has serious health, human rights, security and economic consequences for the countries of the region.

China begins using a generic definition to control synthetic cannabinoids. Following a decision in 2019 to schedule fentanyl-related substances as a class-wide group, which contributed to a sharp drop in the use of those substances, China started to control synthetic cannabinoids using a generic definition in 2021.

Countries in East and South-East Asia rank low in the availability of the most common opioid analgesics. Other countries in the region are not adequately reporting on the consumption of psychotropic substances. The Board recalls that there is insufficient availability of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances in many countries of the region and emphasizes the importance of ensuring sufficient availability of and access to internationally controlled substances for medical purposes.

Data on drug use and treatment demand continue to be lacking in many countries in the region. INCB encourages Member States in the region to prioritize the collection of data on drug use trends and treatment demand to inform the development of evidence-based decisions in the area of prevention and treatment, and encourages bilateral partners, regional and international organizations to provide support to this end.

INCB reiterates in the strongest possible terms its view that extrajudicial responses to drug-related criminality are in clear violation of the drug control conventions, which require that drug-related crime be addressed through formal criminal justice responses and strict adherence to internationally recognized due process standards. In view of the relevant international conventions and protocols and the resolutions of the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council and other United Nations bodies on the application of the death penalty, **INCB reiterates its call upon all States to consider the abolition of the death penalty for drug-related offences and to commute death sentences that have already been handed down.**



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South Asia

Pharmaceutical opioids continue to be seized in large quantities in the region. The substances most commonly seized were codeine and codeine-based cough syrups. This is followed by tramadol, an opioid not under international control, fentanyl and methadone.

The global trend of purchasing drugs on the Internet appears to have spread in the region. Individuals engaging in this activity exploit darknet trading platforms and use cryptocurrencies to purchase drugs.

COVID-19 restrictions do not appear to have led to more seizures of heroin in the region. During the slowdown of the global economy during the pandemic, organized criminal groups adapted their strategies by using new methods of drug trafficking, such as using shipping containers and postal services, and by using the darknet for transferring earnings through cryptocurrency payments.

South Asia continues to have one of the highest rates of opiate use in the world. According to UNODC, 1.1 per cent of people between the ages of 15 and 64 in the region use opiates. According to statistics for 2019, there were 21.7 million annual users of heroin and opium in Asia. This constituted nearly 70 per cent of the 31 million past-year opiate users worldwide.

COVID-19 restrictions were a barrier to accessing drug treatment in some countries of the region. The lockdowns and lack of access to health care made it difficult for people with substance use disorders from disadvantaged backgrounds to access treatment.

Technological advances help provide treatment services. In India, doctors received online training for opioid agonist treatments. Internet-based educational materials on opioid disorders were developed and made freely accessible to health-care professionals.

Lower levels of availability of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances for medical and scientific purposes in the region. Countries in South Asia have been reporting low consumption of such substances. INCB reiterates the importance of ensuring adequate levels of availability of internationally controlled substances for medical purposes, particularly for pain management. INCB wishes to remind States in South Asia of the necessity of collecting and regularly providing data and statistics on drug use prevalence rates and of the need to provide affordable and accessible drug treatment services across the entire territory of their countries.

West Asia

Afghanistan retains its status as leader in the illicit production of opium. With potential opium production of 6,800 tons in 2021, Afghanistan remains the country where the highest amount of opium is illicitly produced. Despite the total area of illicit opium cultivation having decreased by 21 per cent in 2021, opium production increased by eight per cent compared to the previous year.

Central Asian States continue to face increased trafficking and misuse of synthetic drugs. Central Asian States continue to face challenges in the trafficking and misuse of synthetic drugs, including amphetamines, synthetic cannabinoids and various other new psychoactive substances. Traffickers have turned to the Internet and social media to advertise and sell these substances. The reason for the increasing demand for synthetic drugs in this region appears to be the reduced availability of cannabis and opiates during the pandemic.



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EUROPE

Law enforcement agencies gain access to encrypted communications devices revealing important information on the activities of criminal groups. Several operations by law enforcement agencies resulted in the seizure of encrypted communication devices used for criminal activities. Officials were able to gain access to the encrypted devices and to hundreds of millions of messages giving law enforcement valuable information on the activities of criminal groups. The information led to a clampdown on criminal activities in Europe and other regions and large seizures of drugs and precursor chemicals and the dismantling of illicit laboratories.

Evolving legislative landscape broadening the use of cannabis for medical and scientific purposes. The European Court of Justice recently ruled that CBD extracted from the cannabis plant should not be considered a drug under the 1961 or 1971 Conventions. Several States are already in the process of adjusting their laws to align with that ruling. Several European Union member States have enacted legislation to broaden the use of cannabis products for medical purposes. Several countries in the region have either discussed or taken steps to consider widening cannabis use to non-medical purposes, in contravention of the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs. **INCB reminds all parties to the 1961 Convention that under article 4(c), the production, manufacture, export, import, distribution of, trade in, use and possession of drugs are limited exclusively to medical and scientific purposes.**

COVID-19 restrictions have had limited impact on the illicit supply of and demand for drugs. Levels of synthetic drug manufacture and the availability of cocaine remained stable despite COVID-19 restrictions in Europe. Changes in trafficking routes were also observed, most notably in the shift from land to sea for the trafficking of heroin from West Asia and of cannabis resin from Morocco to Europe. Although levels of most drug use decreased during the initial lockdowns, they increased once restrictions were lifted.

Patterns of drug use in the region also became more complex due to the availability and accessibility of a variety of drugs. This increase in availability and variety has led to diverging patterns of polydrug use, where people who use drugs consume more than one type of drug at the same time or different types of drugs sequentially. Another emerging trend is the non-medical use of benzodiazepines, at times in combination with opioids or alcohol, among high-risk people who use drugs, prisoners and other groups.

OCEANIA

Transnational crime, including drug trafficking, continues to increase in the Pacific islands. Organized criminal groups are using small boats to traffic drugs, particularly to Australia and New Zealand. Pacific island States are also emerging as transit points in the trafficking of synthetic opioids to Australia, the United States and countries in Europe.

The majority of non-parties to the drug control conventions remain concentrated in Oceania. Of the 10 States yet to accede to the 1961 Convention as amended, seven are in Oceania. Of the 13 States not party to the 1971 Convention, eight are in Oceania. And, of the seven non-parties to the 1988 Convention, four are in Oceania.



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New Zealand adopts Drug and Substance Checking Legislation Bill (No.2). This bill replaces a temporary bill that was enacted in December 2020 with the aim of permitting drug and substance-testing services during the 2020–2021 summer festival season.

INCB GRIDS Programme provides training to the Oceania Customs Organization (OCO) and its members throughout the Pacific as part of an agreement between INCB and OCO to facilitate the sharing of information and development of actionable intelligence for customs officers.

National authorities in four countries register for INCB Learning e-modules. Drug control officials from Australia, Kiribati, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea have registered for the e-modules which cover narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances, precursors, and the international drug control framework.

Low-dose CBD preparations rescheduled from Schedule 4 to Schedule 3 in Australia. This change will allow a maximum of 150 mg per day of such preparations, approved by the Therapeutic Goods Administration, to be supplied by a pharmacist over the counter for adult consumption without a prescription.

Australia and New Zealand account for the largest number of seizures in Oceania. However, seizures in neighbouring Pacific island States illustrate their exploitation for the trafficking of drugs into Australia and New Zealand.

Resurgence in the methamphetamine market in Australia. In April 2021, wastewater analysis covering 56 per cent of Australia's population indicated a resurgence in the illicit methamphetamine market. The analysis also indicated decreases in fentanyl and oxycodone consumption to record low levels.

Decrease in methamphetamine use in New Zealand. Wastewater monitoring covering 75 per cent of the population indicates that methamphetamine use in the first quarter of 2021 decreased by 14 per cent from the previous quarter and by 30 per cent compared to the same period in 2020.

Low levels of availability of internationally controlled drugs for medical and scientific purposes in Pacific island States. Although the level of opioid consumption in Oceania remains among the highest in the world, primarily due to consumption in Australia and New Zealand, lower levels of consumption are seen in the Pacific island States.