



For information only — not an official document

## A HIDDEN EPIDEMIC: DRUG USE AMONG OLDER PEOPLE

### INCB highlights a global hidden epidemic: the use of drugs among older people

In its annual report for 2020, INCB highlights that today's ageing world population comes with a new challenge, namely an increased vulnerability of older people to drug use and drug dependence. Older people present a hidden demographic of substance users with specific challenges and treatment needs. Extended and integrated support is urgently needed to help reverse an alarming trend.

### The world population is rapidly ageing

The world population is increasingly ageing, and the trend is accelerating. According to data from the United Nations, there were 703 million persons over 65 in 2019. This number is projected to double by 2050 when it will reach 1.5 billion people. In 2050, 16 per cent of the total world population will be over 65, corresponding to one in six people on Earth.

The changing population age originally started in high-income countries, but the trend is now visible in low-income countries as well. According to data from the World Health Organization (WHO), it took France 150 years to transition from 10 to 20 per cent of its population being over 60 years old. Brazil, China and India are expected to make the same transition in just 20 years. INCB emphasizes that it is imperative to address the problems and challenges of substance use among older people today to curtail an alarming trend of drug use among this age group.

### Increased substance misuse among older people but lack of data in most countries

Booklet 4 of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) World Drug Report 2018, entitled *Drugs and Age: Drugs and Associated Issues Among Young People and Older People*, shows that over the past decade, drug use among older people has been increasing at a faster rate than among younger groups. Data from the United States and Europe suggest that this substance abuse increase occurred mainly in high-income countries and could be the result of the "baby-boomer" generation coming of age. (Baby-boomers are people who were born between 1946 and 1964 – a period of high birth rates). However, there are many gaps in epidemiological data for older people, particularly for lower-income countries. In the past, data surveys have mainly focused on young adults and at-risk groups between 15 and 65 years. There has been a tendency among scientists to ignore substance abuse for people who are over 65. INCB underlines that the paucity of data and information has resulted in a lack of government attention to this issue when developing policies and programmes.

### Defining older people who use drugs

Most industrialized nations consider a person older when they reach 65 years and associate the definition with retirement and receiving social security benefits. In its report, INCB points out



For information only — not an official document

that the health status of people who use drugs and the culture of the community may be more relevant in defining who should be considered older. Some studies in Europe have defined people who are over 40 and use drugs as older. In India, a review on alcohol disorders among older people included those over 50, and Norway has categorized people over 45 who receive opiate treatment as older people. INCB warns that this lack of consensus of who is an older person with substance use issues has a significant impact on how health practitioners and health services work with their patients. A study cited in the annual report for 2020 estimates that the ageing process can be accelerated by at least 15 years among people with substance use problems. This can cause affected younger people to have physical health problems that would normally be typical for much older individuals.

### Notable increase in drug use among older people over past decade

The INCB annual report says that substance use among older people in the United States has increased three times for most drugs over the past decade. Studies in the United States show that the use of pain relievers, tranquillizers, benzodiazepines and sedatives is higher for this age group than the general population. When comparing past-year drug use for people aged 65 and older in the United States, the use of cannabis increased from 1.2 per cent in 2012 to 5.1 per cent in 2019. Estimates on substance use in India and Nigeria show considerable use of non-medical pharmaceutical opioids and cough syrup among the 45–64 age group, and in Nigeria, the non-medical use of tranquillizers was most prevalent among people aged 60–64. A study in Japan recorded that prescriptions for sleep and anxiety disorders were disproportionately high among the older population and in the United States, people over 65 account for 30 per cent of all medical prescriptions, although they only make up 10 per cent of the general population. INCB warns that various health issues, premature development of a range of health conditions and an increased death rate are associated with increased substance use among older people.

### Reasons for drug use among older people

Generally, older people with substance abuse issues can be divided into two groups: “early-onset” users, who have a long history of drug use and continue to use substances into old age. “Late-onset” users are those who began using drugs later in life. The reasons for developing drug dependencies later in life are complex and are shaped by life experiences. Substance abuse issues can develop over time through overprescription of pain medication or misuse of prescribed medicines. They are often due to pain management problems stemming from chronic illnesses or surgery. Ongoing mental health disorders, such as depression and anxiety, also play a role in the gradual development of drug dependence later in life.

### Lack of attention of Governments to the problem

The INCB annual report for 2020 emphasizes that there is a general lack of attention by Governments to substance use among older people. This translates into a limited number of drug prevention and treatment programmes dedicated to this age group.



For information only — not an official document

At the same time, data suggest that drug use and drug-related deaths have increased among older people, and the number of older people seeking drug treatment has also increased.

## Older people who use drugs face specific challenges

Older people who use drugs have a different set of characteristics and face specific challenges. Polypharmacy or the mixing of five or more medications per day – either prescription, over-the-counter or illegal drugs – is becoming an increasing problem among older people. This misuse makes older people particularly vulnerable to developing health problems, such as respiratory problems, degenerative diseases, liver disease, diabetes and chronic mental health challenges. Other repercussions are falls, road accidents and difficulty conducting activities in daily life as well as isolation and depression. In many communities, stigma and shame, financial problems and the fear of judgement from others can lead to social isolation and loneliness. Finally, older people who use substances, particularly those who are mixing medicines, are at a higher risk of death from overdose, suicide and disease.

## More research and data collection are needed to accurately diagnose older people

The INCB annual report for 2020 stresses that three areas need to be addressed to combat drug use among older people: increased research and extended data collection, combating stigma, and age-appropriate care. To better diagnose substance abuse among older people, proper measuring and monitoring of their health and well-being is necessary. Substance abuse among older people has been referred to as “the silent epidemic”. INCB reiterates the importance of finding the hidden number of existing undiagnosed older drug users and related deaths so that age-appropriate treatment and integrated care can be developed. INCB recommends that:

- Existing monitoring systems be used to the fullest extent to gain better understanding of the demand for treatment.
- Monitoring systems be extended to prescription and over-the-counter medications to reduce multiple prescriptions and prescription-shopping.
- The common upper age limit of 65 be removed from general monitoring systems to include older people.
- Countries consider innovative and new care technologies. For example, telemedicine and online health-care providers could provide substance use services to older people living in rural areas.
- Medical personnel receive training to accurately recognize substance abuse in older people and be able to differentiate between similar symptoms of other illnesses and give age-sensitive care.
- Training to address stigma, remove barriers or discomfort of clinicians to probe for drug misuse with older people related to the culture and social setting of a community.



For information only — not an official document

## Treatment approaches and recommendations for Governments

The INCB annual report emphasizes that substance use among older people needs to be recognized as a global health challenge. Only then can substance abuse among this age group be reduced and treated and the stigma addressed. Advocacy and practical responses are needed to dispel stereotypes and tackle stigma. Public figures should be encouraged to speak out on the subject, and older people should be included in creating messages to combat stigma in their communities and find the right approach and tone.

Training programmes and continued professional development are necessary. Treatment programmes should be integrated and look at physical health, mental health and drug dependency together to support older people in the long term. Age-sensitive drug treatment programmes need to be oriented around the functional ability and well-being of older people and should include family members since most older people prefer to be cared for at home rather than in nursing homes. The INCB annual report underlines that targeted integrated treatment programmes taking family care into account can have a significant cost saving potential and reduce unnecessary suffering.

## The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic challenges the availability of controlled substances for medical and scientific purposes

Since February 2020, lockdowns, border closures and social-distancing measures adopted by most countries to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus have affected the global supply chain of medicines. Due to the disruption in the manufacturing of key active pharmaceutical ingredients in some major manufacturing countries as well as general logistical challenges, global supply was negatively affected.

The surge in demand for medicines necessary for the treatment of patients with COVID-19 further reduced the availability of some medicines containing controlled substances. INCB noted reported shortages of medicines such as fentanyl and midazolam in some countries. This was largely driven by the need to provide pain relief and sedation for patients admitted into intensive care units with COVID-19.

To address lower supply and greater demand, some countries put contingency measures in place. Increasing national stocks, resorting to alternative drugs and implementing temporary export bans were implemented, which in turn led to shortages of certain medicines containing controlled substances in other countries.

Since March 2020, INCB has received a number of requests by Governments to increase their estimates and assessments of licit requirements for controlled substances, and a greater number of countries registered to issue import and export authorizations in electronic form instead of hard copies.



For information only — not an official document

## People with mental health and substance use disorders are at risk

INCB draws special attention to the disruption in treatment and service delivery for people with mental health problems and substance use disorders. WHO found that more than 40 countries experienced disruptions in such services, including those related to life-saving emergencies. Lack of access to essential treatment services as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic is extremely worrisome, as prolonged social distancing and the associated social isolation impose greater emotional strain on people with mental health problems and substance use disorders and may increase the number of people suffering from such conditions.

Mobility restrictions to curtail the spread of COVID-19 have caused considerable disruption for drug users wishing to access drug treatment services. This has not only increased and aggravated drug use disorders but also the overall health of drug users. Heroin users who are unable to access opiate-substitution therapy were reported to have suffered severe withdrawal symptoms. Shortages in the supply of drugs have led to the use of alternative means of administration, for example, injection, which incurs the additional risks of the spread of blood-borne diseases such as HIV/AIDS and hepatitis C.

Measures introduced by Governments to combat the spread of COVID-19 have influenced illicit drug markets. Developments include a decrease in the availability of drugs and increased prices. Furthermore, law enforcement capacities have been impacted and the methods used by drug traffickers have changed.

Shortages of heroin may have led to the drug being substituted with other dangerous substances. As a result of drug shortages, purity of local drug supplies has decreased as dealers add bulking agents to meet persistently high demand. Adulterants are also used to artificially increase the perceived purity; the most common such adulterant is fentanyl and its many analogues, which could significantly increase overdose and death rates.

Consumption of drugs typically connected to nightlife and party scenes, such as “ecstasy”, has decreased, given the restrictions on gatherings and closure of venues as a measure to control the pandemic.

Open web and darknet markets, social media, secure encrypted communications applications and online forums seem to be playing a more prominent role in the sourcing of drugs at the user level. Home deliveries, less face-to-face dealing and less reliance on cash as a form of payment seem to be trends in individual transactions.

## Importance of continued provision of prevention and treatment services

INCB is concerned about the reported halting of treatment services in many parts of the world for people who use drugs, including as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. It urges Governments to ensure the continued provision of treatment services for mental health and substance use disorders as part of essential services. INCB recommends that Governments look at existing best practices and develop effective strategies to ensure that prevention and evidence-based treatment, rehabilitation, aftercare and social reintegration services continue to operate.



For information only — not an official document

## Effective drug control as a means of fostering peace and security

Under the pretext of the “war on drugs”, policies in some countries have led to disproportionate and overly repressive responses without respect for due process and the rule of law. Such responses have contributed to an increase in violence and related death rates. In its 2020 report, INCB highlights that States should implement a comprehensive, integrated and balanced approach in drug-related responses. Approaches should be based on principles of proportionality when determining penalties, shared responsibility, and respect for human rights, liberties and the rule of law to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular Goal 16 (promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels). States are encouraged to address the links between drug-related crimes and other forms of organized crime, including money-laundering, corruption and other criminal activities, in line with the international drug control and crime and counter-terrorism conventions.

## Continued consultations with the Government of Afghanistan pursuant to articles 14 and 14 bis of the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961 as amended by the 1972 Protocol

In the context of the consultations undertaken by INCB with the Government of Afghanistan under articles 14 and 14 bis of the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961 as amended by the 1972 Protocol, a delegation from Afghanistan participated in the 127th session of the Board in February 2020. As a result of the consultations, several specific areas were identified where financial and/or technical assistance by the international community is needed, including United Nations organs and specialized agencies and other donors and partners. The areas are described in broad terms in the annual report for 2020, and INCB stands ready to further facilitate support to Afghanistan through continuous engagement with the United Nations and other agencies, and with members of the international community at large. INCB stresses that efforts to stabilize the country will not be sustainable without effectively addressing the country’s illicit drug economy.

## Need for universal adherence to the international drug conventions

Although the three international drug control conventions remain among the most widely ratified international instruments, there are still a limited number of countries, especially in Africa, Asia and Oceania, which have not yet acceded to these instruments. INCB continues to engage with these States with the aim of supporting them in their efforts to accede to these important instruments without delay and to ensure the comprehensive incorporation of the conventions into national law. INCB encourages countries not yet having done so to take positive steps towards accession to the three drug control conventions.





For information only — not an official document

## Use of methamphetamine and opioids, and overdose deaths

INCB sees a continuing problem with the use of methamphetamine and synthetic opioids and related overdose deaths. In the past year, the number of drug overdose deaths from illicit drug use – especially fentanyl and methamphetamine – has increased in North America and some other regions of the world. The report notes that this crisis was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which is expected to contribute to increasing numbers of people struggling with mental health and substance use disorders, together with increases in depression, anxiety, trauma and grief. INCB again encourages Governments to work together with public health officials, pharmacists and physicians, manufacturers and distributors, consumer protection associations and law enforcement agencies to promote public education about the risks associated with improper use of prescription drugs, illicitly produced synthetic opioids and methamphetamine, and to adopt measures to decrease their use and risk of overdose.

## Non-medical use of cannabis

INCB remains concerned about steps taken or planned in some jurisdictions towards the legalization of cannabis for non-medical and non-scientific purposes. In close dialogue with States, INCB reiterated the fundamental provisions of the 1961 Convention as amended, the Convention on Psychotropic Substances of 1971 and the United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988. INCB emphasized the need to undertake legislative and administrative measures that limit the production of cannabis, its manufacture, export, import, distribution, trade, use and possession exclusively to medical and scientific purposes.

## Collective approaches to drug terminology

Advancements in science and evolving societal approaches to drug control have changed the drug-related terminology used since the entry into force of the drug control conventions. INCB takes note that the terminology used by Member States, intergovernmental organizations, academic institutions and civil society, in particular from the perspectives of prevention, treatment and rehabilitation, has shifted over time.

INCB emphasizes the importance of Commission on Narcotic Drugs resolution 61/11, entitled “Promoting non-stigmatizing attitudes to ensure the availability of, access to and delivery of health, care and social services for drug users.” The careful use of terminology can aid in preventing the stigmatization of drug use and dependence and promote the full protection of human rights.

INCB, in its annual report, urges Governments to continually examine their drug terminology for ambiguous usage or potentially stigmatizing effects that might have an impact on the ability of the international community to cooperate effectively on and jointly counter the world drug problem. INCB emphasizes that international cooperation in drug control requires a collective understanding of common challenges, as well as a common terminology to describe various aspects of the world drug problem.



For information only — not an official document

## REPORT ON PRECURSORS FOR 2020

### Scheduling of a pre-precursor of amphetamine and methamphetamine

Following the recommendation of INCB, the Commission on Narcotic Drugs decided in March 2020 to place MAPA, a pre-precursor of amphetamine and methamphetamine, in Table I of the 1988 Convention. Similar to the two related chemicals, APAAN and APAA, which had already been placed under control, MAPA has no known legitimate uses beyond limited research and can be classified as a designer precursor. In November 2020, this decision became effective for States parties and increased the number of precursors controlled internationally to 30. Several Governments have already enacted national legislation to implement the decision and have taken various measures to strengthen their national precursor control systems.

### Seizures of precursors under international control lower than quantities of drugs seized

Seizures of precursors for most drugs remain stable or are even declining. This aggravates the trend observed in previous years whereby quantities of precursors seized fell short of the seized quantities of drugs, in particular, methamphetamine, and indicates a shift to possible alternatives to the traditional, controlled chemicals. At the same time, there are promising signs of increased capacity of law enforcement authorities around the world to identify and confiscate these substances. This is evidenced by seizures of a methamphetamine designer precursor recently placed under international control in Viet Nam and, seizures of alternative acetylation agents in countries in West Asia, as well as alternative fentanyl precursors in Mexico.

### Alternative chemicals spread widely – joint global action needed

The use of non-scheduled chemicals, designer precursors and pre-precursors as alternatives to controlled precursors across all drug classes underscores the need for joint global action. Tools are available and their wider use by Governments can aid in the discovery of such substances and speed up the exchange of critical intelligence. Yet, implementation must be global. The Board took several initiatives including a critical analysis of possible approaches to address the proliferation of these substances and the initiation of consultations with Member States to build consensus on the topic.

### Some progress in addressing Internet-facilitated trade – but more needs to be done

Governments took steps to address the issue of the listing of precursors and equipment used for illicit activities involving drugs on business-to-business Internet platforms. The approaches taken ranged from awareness-raising initiatives involving companies to changes in laws requiring mandatory registration for the listing of precursor chemicals. However, the continued listings on some





For information only — not an official document

platforms of some internationally controlled precursors and some precursors not under control but with little or no legitimate use point to the need for more work in this area.

## Impact of COVID-19 on licit and illicit activities related to precursors

The global COVID-19 pandemic is having a temporary impact on the licit trade in precursors. The impact on trafficking is largely due to general disruption in the international movement of cargo. Two aspects of concern with lasting implications are: first, the customized manufacture of chemical intermediates of active pharmaceutical ingredients that may be immediate precursors of narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances as a result of governmental efforts to avoid future supply chain disruptions, and, second, the targeting by traffickers of manufacturing companies that have economic difficulties caused by the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic meant that innovative ways of functioning had to be adopted to remain effective and efficient in addressing chemicals used in the illicit manufacture of drugs. In his foreword to the report on precursors, the INCB President praises the responses of Governments to ensure that there were no far-reaching disruptions to supplies of precursors for licit purposes. INCB responded by providing assistance to Governments in a “virtual” or “hybrid” manner, turning the crisis into an opportunity to function in a smarter way. The President of the Board noted that the way forward would be even more technology-driven – as with the Precursors Incident Communication System (PICS), an online communication platform, and extensive online training under the Global Rapid Interdiction of Dangerous Substances (GRIDS) Programme and the INCB Learning initiative.

## Global trends: analysis affected by reporting limitations

Reporting by Governments to INCB for 2019 may have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, but a fuller and nuanced analysis of global precursor trends will require more detailed reporting, in particular on the circumstances of seizures and the suspected origin, or points of diversion, of the substances involved. At the same time, qualitative and quantitative improvements in exchanging intelligence have yielded tangible results by establishing links between government seizures to reflect the continued operation of trafficking groups over several years.

## Governments to fully utilize the provisions of article 12 of the 1988 Convention

With diversion from licit trade channels now being mostly domestic, an increased focus on domestic controls will help thwart attempts by traffickers to target legitimate chemical and pharmaceutical manufacturers to obtain chemicals for illicit purposes. This is particularly important to prevent traffickers from approaching legitimate manufacturers for the customized manufacture of pre-precursors or chemical intermediates of synthetic drugs such as fentanyl and amphetamines. The lack of understanding of the potential domestic market for such customized syntheses, as well as the lack of domestic controls over them, despite their international scheduling, undermines the purpose of such scheduling.



For information only — not an official document

## REGIONAL HIGHLIGHTS OF THE INCB ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2020

### AFRICA

**A growing number of countries in Africa are now permitting or are planning to permit the cultivation of cannabis for medical purposes.** Some of these countries intend to only export cannabis, while others allow the use of cannabis for medical purposes domestically.

**Many parts of Africa face the continuing problem of illicitly manufactured tramadol and its abuse.** Countries in North and Central Africa continue to report seizures of illicitly manufactured tramadol, a synthetic opioid not under international control.

**Many countries in Africa do not systematically collect data** on drug use or on availability of controlled substances for medical use and need to put systems and processes in place to better address their respective drug challenges.

### AMERICAS

#### Central America and the Caribbean

**Corruption, violence and social and political instability** remain serious issues in Central America and the Caribbean. Drug trafficking and other types of transnational crime, including the involvement of *maras* (street gangs), continue to be a cause of corruption, violence and social and political instability in deprived areas in the region.

**Measures implemented by Governments in the region in response to the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in decreased drug trafficking.** Seizures of cocaine increased in several countries in the region, including Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Panama in 2019, compared with 2018. Restrictive border measures implemented in 2020 by Governments in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in a significant decrease or disruption in drug trafficking by air and land. Attempts to transport cocaine by sea via the region have however continued.

**Monitoring of synthetic drugs and new psychoactive substances.** Synthetic drugs and new psychoactive substances that have become prevalent in Latin America and the Caribbean in the past decade now warrant the same level of monitoring and surveillance as cannabis, cocaine and other drugs under international control, as evidenced by the seizure of a total of 16.9 tons of amphetamine in Guatemala in 2019. The seized substance was allegedly destined for local markets and Mexico.

#### North America

**Drug overdoses and deaths continue to fuel a regional drug crisis.** Deaths from illicit drug use increased in North America in 2020, with trafficking and the use of fentanyl, cocaine and methamphetamine on the rise. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted North America's ability to respond to drug use challenges and provide adequate treatment for people who use drugs, including access



For information only — not an official document

to medications for opioid use disorders. The threat of opioids continues to be at epidemic levels, with the toxicity of illicitly manufactured drugs rising. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the vulnerabilities of drug users to negative health outcomes, with higher levels of concern about the drug supply and the quality, degree of contamination, potency and cost of drugs.

**Cannabis legalization measures and decriminalization initiatives in North America continue to evolve and shape the regional market for cannabis.** Local and national governments in the region passed measures to legalize and decriminalize the use of cannabis for non-medical purposes. Additional drug decriminalization measures pertaining to other illicit substances, such as psilocybin, were passed in Oregon and Washington, D.C., United States. In Mexico, at the end of 2020, draft legislation to amend the country's cannabis regulations permitting adult consumption for non-medical purposes continued to move through the Congress.

**Mexico's drug control policies and approaches are more focused on public health.** Drug control in Mexico continued in 2020 to be transformed through implementation of its National Development Plan for the period 2019–2024 and through adoption of new policies that are designed to take a preventive and responsive approach to the needs of vulnerable populations, especially those in prison settings, women and adolescents, and other groups disproportionately affected by drug use and associated health conditions.

## South America

**The COVID-19 pandemic has affected trafficking routes and micro-trafficking techniques as well as the supply of and demand for controlled substances in South America.** As COVID-19-related restrictions were imposed in the region, criminal organizations again demonstrated their capacity to adapt to new circumstances. While access to controlled substances became more limited and prices of drugs such as cocaine rapidly increased, illegal trafficking networks looked for alternative routes and production techniques to keep their businesses alive. Organized criminal groups that control more resources were better able to anticipate and overcome the repercussions of the lockdown.

**Total cocaine manufacture potential in Colombia increased by 1.5 per cent in 2019 despite a decrease in the area under coca bush cultivation.** This increase could be explained by improvements in cultivation techniques, which have resulted in an increase in the size of the coca leaf harvest, and the higher performance of cocaine manufacture sites.

**There has been a lack of official data on illicit coca cultivation areas in Peru since 2017.** The absence of updated information impairs the comprehensive assessment of coca cultivation trends in the Andean region. **INCB expresses its concern about the lack of measurement of the area under illegal coca bush cultivation in Peru in 2018 and 2019 and urges the country to complete and present the studies for the missing years.**

**The manufacture and presence of synthetic drugs is on the rise in South America, particularly in Chile.** It is expected that the economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic will move the patterns of drug use and trafficking towards cheaper and more addictive substances. The Chilean Observatory on Drugs has noted a possible increase in the illicit market of synthetic drugs that



For information only — not an official document

are cheaper to manufacture and easier to transport and distribute. This comes at a time when the presence of synthetic drugs such as “ecstasy” is becoming more evident in the region.

**Regulation of cannabis for medical and scientific purposes.** The Board is aware of several initiatives in the region to regulate cannabis for medical and scientific purposes. **The Board reiterates its view that, while the cultivation, production and use of cannabis for medical purposes are permitted by the 1961 Convention as amended, such activities must be carried out in a manner that is consistent with articles 23 and 28 of that Convention.**

**Uruguay is witnessing a rise in the number of regular and frequent cannabis users, and over a third of those users are considered to be dependent.** According to national reports, the average age of first use of cannabis has increased to 20 years and a total of 53,399 people are allowed to access cannabis through authorized means. However, the World Drug Report 2020 noted that the number of users who access cannabis through authorized means represents a small proportion of cannabis users in the country. **INCB expresses its concern regarding the increase in cannabis consumption as reported by the Government of Uruguay and wishes to reiterate that legalization measures or regulations that permit the use of any controlled substance, including cannabis, for non-medical purposes are inconsistent with the obligations of States parties.**

**In Brazil, resolution 03/2020 was issued by the Ministry of Health allowing therapeutic communities to provide treatment to adolescents suffering from drug use disorder.** According to a national study from 2017, 95 per cent of such therapeutic communities use non-evidence-based approaches to treat patients. In June 2019, the Government approved a law to enable the compulsory hospitalization of drug users. Under the new law, treatment of patients suffering from drug use disorders could take place without the consent of the patient in specific cases. **The Board discourages the use of compulsory treatment for the rehabilitation of patients suffering from drug use disorders and calls upon the Government of Brazil to implement voluntary, evidence-based treatment services with due respect for patients’ human rights.**

## ASIA

### East and South-East Asia

**Continuing increase in illicit manufacture, trafficking and use of synthetic drugs; purity increasing.** The Board expresses its concern over the continuing increase in illicit manufacture, trafficking and use of synthetic drugs, in particular methamphetamine, found increasingly in purer forms in East and South-East Asia. The drug problem had serious health, human rights, security and economic consequences for the countries of the region. **INCB urges countries of the region to take further action at domestic and regional levels to address this alarming situation.**

The decision taken by China in 2019 to schedule fentanyl-related substances as a class-wide group seems to have resulted in a sharp drop in the amount of those substances of alleged Chinese origin seized globally. It appears that traffickers have therefore moved to fentanyl precursors as a way of



For information only — not an official document

manufacturing these substances. Greater collaboration is needed to effectively deal with this trafficking challenge. **Regional cooperation and effective regulatory mechanisms, as well as border management and control, and forensic capacity regarding precursors and other chemicals frequently used in illicit drug manufacture, continue to be of particular importance within the region.**

**Data on comprehensive drug use prevalence and evidence-based drug dependence treatment programmes continue to be lacking in many countries.** In particular, in view of the COVID-19 pandemic, attention should be paid and resources should be devoted to continued drug use prevention and treatment efforts to sustain progress made and prevent an increase in additional vulnerabilities among the region's population.

**Drug control actions must comply with rule of law and human rights standards.** INCB has repeatedly expressed its concerns over serious human rights violations, especially regarding extrajudicial actions, committed in purported pursuit of drug control objectives. These violations contravene internationally recognized human rights standards and are inconsistent with the obligations of Governments under the three international drug control conventions. **INCB reminds all Governments that extrajudicial action, taken in purported pursuit of drug control objectives, is inconsistent with their obligations under the three international drug control conventions. All drug control actions taken to comply with these obligations should be undertaken with full respect for the rule of law and due process of law.**

## South Asia

**Major drug-related challenges are facing South Asia, including increased trafficking in heroin and methamphetamine.** During the reporting period, a shift from trafficking in narcotic drugs to trafficking in synthetic drugs, including amphetamine-type stimulants, and chemical precursors was reported. Methamphetamine remains the main drug of concern in many countries in the region. In 2020, Bangladesh continued to see significant seizures of “yaba” tablets, a mix of methamphetamine and caffeine. The trafficking of heroin from Afghanistan overland and subsequently along maritime routes continued. An increased use of courier services, as well as of darknet and Internet pharmacies, was also reported.

**Increasing heroin seizures.** India, Maldives and Sri Lanka have reported an increase in the number of seizures. The amount of heroin seized increased because drug traffickers used the southern route leading from Afghanistan through the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan and then by sea or air either directly to Europe or through South Asia, Africa and/or the Gulf States. The seizures were made on boats as part of maritime joint operations by law enforcement agencies of India, Maldives and Sri Lanka. Law enforcement authorities in India seized more than 3,212 kg of heroin in 2019, mostly in the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, along the southern route. Another concerning trend in the reporting period was an increase in heroin trafficking from Myanmar to India. During the reporting period, export consignments, including 20.8 million tablets of tramadol, were stopped by Indian authorities following the identification of forged import certificates.





For information only — not an official document

**Increase in the use of inhalants among street children. Approximately 20 per cent of the world's population aged 15–64 live in South Asia but the region accounts for more than one third of the estimated number of opioid users worldwide.** South Asian countries have also seen an increase in the use of inhalants among street children. As shown in the 2019 national survey on substance abuse in India, inhalants were the only category of substances for which the prevalence of use among children and adolescents (1.17 per cent) was higher than that for adults (0.58 per cent). Similar problems have been reported in Bangladesh and Nepal. In Bhutan, the use of solvents, particularly among schoolchildren, has been on the rise.

**A central component in the design of effective prevention and treatment programmes throughout South Asia remains the collection of drug-related data by centralized agencies.** Although the amount and quality of information regarding drug use patterns in the region have greatly improved, more research on consumption patterns and trends is needed to tailor treatment initiatives to local needs. **INCB reiterates the need for capacity-building in the field of treatment and rehabilitation of people with drug use disorders in the region.**

## West Asia

**Afghanistan's illicit production of opium remained high in 2020.** The area under opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan decreased for the second year in a row in 2019, declining by almost 47 per cent, from 263,000 ha in 2018 to 163,000 ha in 2019. However, it is estimated that the production of opium in 2019 remained at almost the same level as in 2018, possibly owing to higher yields. Afghanistan has accounted for almost 84 per cent of global opium production over the past five years and, to date, there have been no indications of a reduction in the supply of heroin of Afghan origin to consumer markets globally. INCB notes with concern that continued large-scale opium poppy cultivation and opium production in Afghanistan, coupled with limited eradication efforts, further undermine the efforts of Afghanistan and its partners to promote peace, security and sustainable development in the country.

**COVID-19 pandemic impacted drug use patterns.** The measures introduced to contain the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in drug shortages on the illicit market in the region and may have caused increased consumption of harmful domestically produced substances, pharmaceutical drugs and other harmful substances by people with drug use disorders.

## EUROPE

**COVID-19 pandemic has boosted the use of the Internet and darknet to buy drugs illegally.** Travel restrictions and other social-distancing measures put in place to curb the COVID-19 pandemic seem to have resulted in shortages of and higher prices for some drugs on the illicit market, mostly at the retail level. Growth in online drug dealing through encrypted communications reflects the adaptations by organized criminal groups to ensure uninterrupted supply at the wholesale level, posing additional challenges for law enforcement entities, according to reports and intelligence of law enforcement authorities, the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction and Europol.





For information only — not an official document

**Innovative treatment services.** COVID-19 hindered the availability and provision of treatment services but wherever possible services were partly supplemented by telemedicine and other innovative treatment models to continue providing drug treatment services across the region.

**Illicit synthetic drug manufacture increasingly taking place in Eastern Europe, evidenced by the dismantling of both small- and large-scale operations.** A disconcerting trend is the increasing detection of illicit synthetic drug manufacture in Eastern European countries, as opposed to the traditional origin countries for amphetamine-type stimulants found in Northern and Western Europe. Clandestine operations of various scales have been dismantled in Belarus, the Russian Federation and Ukraine.

**Cannabis and cocaine are the most commonly used drugs in Europe; drug injection rates in Eastern Europe are the world's highest.** Over a quarter of the European Union population, more than 92 million individuals aged 15–64, were estimated to have tried illicit drugs during their lives, according to the European Drug Report 2018. Cannabis remains the most used illicit drug in the region, with an estimated annual prevalence of 5.4 per cent in the same year. Cocaine is the second most popular illicit drug used in Europe, and Western and Central Europe registered a past-year prevalence rate of 1.4 per cent for cocaine in 2018. Eastern Europe continued to be the subregion with the highest worldwide prevalence of people who inject drugs among those aged 15–64, roughly 5.5 times higher than the global average.

**Several European countries are taking steps towards the legalization of the use of cannabis for non-medical purposes.** Several countries are exploring or establishing non-medical cannabis programmes. The Netherlands became the first European country to legalize, although temporarily for a trial period of four years, the cultivation and sale of cannabis for non-medical purposes in 10 municipalities in selected “coffee shops”. Cannabis is required to be locally sourced from government-licensed Dutch producers, with the earliest harvest expected in 2021. Other countries exploring the legalization of cannabis for non-medical purposes include Luxembourg, which continued to work on draft legislation, and Switzerland, which has approved a long-term study to examine the possible impacts of such a measure. **INCB reminds all parties to the 1961 Convention as amended that article 4(c) of that Convention limits exclusively to medical and scientific purposes the production, manufacture, export, import, distribution of, trade in, use and possession of drugs and that any measures allowing for the non-medical use of cannabis are in violation of the legal obligations incumbent upon parties.**

## OCEANIA

**Drug trafficking through Pacific island countries and territories continues; growing domestic demand for methamphetamine and cocaine.** Drugs continue to be trafficked in large quantities through Pacific island countries and territories and routed to Australia and New Zealand. There is also increased trafficking in methamphetamine. Domestic demand for methamphetamine and cocaine is growing in Pacific island countries. Data on the extent of drug use and treatment demand in Pacific island countries and territories remain virtually non-existent.



For information only — not an official document

**Not all Pacific island States have signed the three international drug control conventions.** The absence of this international legal framework, coupled with growing domestic demand for drugs and limited national and regional capacities of Pacific island countries and territories renders these countries and territories more vulnerable to drug trafficking, illicit drug manufacture and related crimes, including money-laundering and corruption. **INCB is urging all Pacific island States that are not yet parties to the conventions to accede to them as soon as possible.**

**Australian Capital Territory: legislation permitting cultivation of cannabis for personal non-medical use entered into force in January 2020.** The use of cannabis for non-medical purposes remains a criminal offence under Australian federal law. INCB recalls that developments permitting non-medical use of cannabis are in contravention of the provisions of the international drug control conventions. **A proposed cannabis legalization and control bill was rejected in a referendum in New Zealand.** The Medical Cannabis Scheme of New Zealand came into effect on 1 April 2020 allowing access to medicinal cannabis products for patients with medical prescriptions.

**COVID-19 pandemic impacts drug use patterns.** Analysis of wastewater provided information on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on drug consumption among about 56 per cent of the population of Australia. Record high levels of methamphetamine and heroin consumption were recorded outside of capital cities while record high levels of cocaine and cannabis were recorded in capital cities. Overall cannabis consumption increased and use of “ecstasy” decreased.



For information only — not an official document

## INCB INITIATIVES TO SUPPORT MEMBER STATES

### INCB Learning supports Member States in ensuring the availability of controlled substances in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic

Between December 2019 and November 2020, **INCB Learning** held one in-person and two online training activities reaching 19 countries in four regions: Central America and the Caribbean (8), Eastern Europe (1), South America (3) and West Asia (7). The virtual sessions were organized to continue supporting Governments through capacity-building with a special focus on the availability of controlled substances challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the reporting period, government officials of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belize, Guyana, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Panama, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan received training for the first time by INCB Learning to enhance understanding and compliance with the three international drug control conventions.

Since March 2020, the **INCB e-learning modules** have been available in Spanish as well as English. Although the demand for INCB Learning online training modules has increased since the outbreak of COVID-19, restrictions have affected the ability to carry out face-to-face training. In less than a year, 812 government officials of 101 countries and territories enrolled in e-learning modules. The modules are free of charge and available for competent national authorities upon request at [incb.learning@un.org](mailto:incb.learning@un.org).

### Role of International Import and Export Authorization System highlighted by COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the important role that the International Import and Export Authorization System (I2ES) plays in the international drug control system. Many countries initiated emergency procedures to expedite the authorization process for licit trade in narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances in order to respond to heightened demand stemming from the pandemic.

INCB established a secure forum within the I2ES platform to enable competent national authorities to exchange information regarding their special measures to ensure the availability of controlled substances during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the 12-month period to 1 November 2020, 23 Governments registered with I2ES, bringing the total to 87 Governments registered with the system.

I2ES is a web-based electronic system, developed by INCB and UNODC with financial and technical support from Member States, to promote paperless trade in internationally controlled substances by facilitating the online exchange of import and export authorizations. The system helps competent authorities reduce errors in data entry and save time and communication costs.



For information only — not an official document

## INCB GRIDS Programme supports rapid exchange of information and alerts among participating countries and provides practical solutions to stop trafficking in dangerous non-scheduled substances

The Global Rapid Interdiction of Dangerous Substances (GRIDS) Programme supports the rapid exchange of information and alerts among focal points networks under the INCB initiatives Project Ion and the global Operational Partnerships to Interdict Opioids' Illicit Distribution and Sales (OPIOIDS) project. It facilitates bilateral and multilateral operational actions that assist with investigations and provides participating agencies with practical solutions to stop trafficking in non-scheduled substances.

In 2020, 11 confidential global alerts and special notices were circulated to GRIDS Programme focal points, including a notification in May 2020 on the emergence of and increased reporting on encounters involving isotonitazene, a potent synthetic opioid and one of the etonitazene analogues not under international control. Isotonitazene was placed under temporary scheduling in the United States, effective August 2020; the European Commission initiated the process to ban it across the European Union in September; and the WHO Expert Committee on Drug Dependence reviewed it for international control at its forty-third meeting, held in October 2020.

The GRIDS Programme continued to provide officials worldwide with access to and training on the Board's intelligence tools throughout the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, through distance-learning technologies. Between 1 January and 1 October 2020, 50 training sessions attended by 1,108 officials representing 104 Governments and international organizations were held under the Programme on topics including information exchange using the Project Ion Incident Communication System (IONICS), intelligence development, awareness of new psychoactive substances, and safe handling and interdiction methods for opioids.

In 2020, the GRIDS Programme held several expert group meetings and events bringing together Internet domain name registries and registrars, Internet search engine companies, social media companies, private postal and express mail operators and express courier services to collaborate with Member State Governments to prevent the exploitation of legitimate industries by traffickers of fentanyl and other dangerous substances.

Under the Programme, INCB released a list of 144 fentanyl-related substances that have been trafficked or seized, encountered in illicit Internet sales, or manufactured and found in toxicology or related incident reports. INCB encourages Governments and industry partners to refrain from manufacturing, marketing, importing, exporting or distributing any of the substances listed.

Under the GRIDS Programme, INCB facilitates access by law and regulatory enforcement officials to the Board's IONICS platform for the secure exchange of real-time information related to trafficking in dangerous substances and the communication platform for INCB-coordinated intelligence-gathering operations. The annual report provides information on two operations coordinated by INCB: Operation Fast Forward and Operation Trance. These focused on the trafficking of fentanyl, fentanyl analogues, non-medical ketamine and tramadol.



For information only — not an official document

## INCB continues to support Governments in addressing illicit drug manufacture through Project Prism and Project Cohesion; record number of interlinked seizures of acetic anhydride

In the period covered by the 2020 report, 10 special alerts on illicit manufacture and trafficking were circulated to Governments participating in the INCB Projects Prism and Cohesion, which bring together operational focal points from more than 140 Governments to address the diversion of chemicals used in the illicit manufacture of synthetic drugs (Project Prism) and heroin and cocaine (Project Cohesion). Issues highlighted in the alerts included: illicit manufacture of methamphetamine in Afghanistan; precursor trends in the illicit manufacture of fentanyl; trends in increasing efficiency of P-2-P-based methamphetamine manufacture; suspicious shipments of chemicals destined for Myanmar; and awareness-raising interventions for the sale of equipment for illicit drug manufacture over e-commerce platforms.

In 2020, cooperation between INCB, Europol and the authorities of Bulgaria, Iran (Islamic Republic of), the Netherlands and Turkey resulted in the identification of suspected links between six seizures of acetic anhydride made in Europe and West Asia since 2017. The six cases, involving almost 22,000 litres of acetic anhydride, represent the largest number of interlinked seizures of precursors identified so far on the basis of intelligence communicated through a Project Cohesion alert and PICS.



For information only — not an official document

## **INCB SPECIAL REPORT MARKING THE SIXTIETH AND FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARIES OF THE SINGLE CONVENTION ON NARCOTIC DRUGS OF 1961 AND THE CONVENTION ON PSYCHOTROPIC SUBSTANCES OF 1971**

The report summarizes achievements of the international community and highlights challenges to be addressed.

### **Near universal adherence and virtually no diversion of narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances from licit international trade**

The international system of drug control, established by the 1961 and 1971 Conventions, has been able to achieve international control of licit production, trade and consumption of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances. Today, almost all Member States are parties to the three drug control conventions, representing some 99 per cent of the world's population. Furthermore, there has been virtually no diversion of licitly manufactured and internationally traded drugs to illicit markets, even though the number of drugs controlled under the international drug control system has increased substantially over the past decades. Throughout the world, the licit cultivation of narcotic plants as well as the production, distribution of and trade in licit narcotic drugs has been successfully limited to the estimated quantities required for medical and scientific purposes.

### **Challenge for States to achieve a balanced approach to drug control**

INCB recognizes that one of the main challenges for States when implementing their obligations under the conventions is to achieve an appropriate balance between ensuring the availability of medically needed drugs and preventing abuse, illicit production and trafficking. However, INCB stresses that integrated and balanced approaches have existed since the inception of the treaties and have come to the forefront of international drug control in recent decades.

### **Persistent global gap in consumption of controlled medicines used for treatment**

INCB estimates that 92 per cent of morphine is consumed in high-income countries by only 17 per cent of the world population. In contrast, 75 per cent of the world population – mainly in low- and middle-income countries – has limited or no access to proper pain relief. The increase in the use of synthetic opioids in several high-income countries, associated with overconsumption and an overdose crisis in some countries, has not been matched by an increase in the use of affordable morphine in low- and middle-income countries.

It is estimated that about four out of five people in low- and middle-income countries who need mental, neurological or substance abuse treatment do not receive it. Despite an increasing number of people living with anxiety disorders and epilepsy around the world, the majority of countries





For information only — not an official document

reported that the availability of some essential psychotropic substances used to treat these conditions has declined since 2012. The difference between countries with the highest and lowest reported consumption rates of psychotropic substances widened between 2012 and 2016. INCB found that medication-assisted treatment services for opioid dependence are either not accessible or not sufficiently available in all countries where there is a significant prevalence of people who inject drugs.

## Drug use prevention initiatives insufficient in many countries

In many parts of the world, prevention initiatives are insufficient or lacking. Treatment provision is poor, and there are insufficient mechanisms to combat stigma and to foster social reintegration. Stigma is exacerbated by a disproportionate and often unnecessary recourse to criminal law approaches to deal with drug users. This is inconsistent with the principle of proportionality.

## Drug control measures must be proportionate and respect human rights

The annual report notes that some States parties have implemented measures associated with militarized law enforcement, disregard for human rights, overincarceration, the denial of medically appropriate treatment and inhumane or disproportionate approaches as part of the national drug control response. INCB states that such policies have had negative repercussions, stigmatizing and marginalizing people affected by drug use. Human rights violations committed in the name or under the guise of drug control have not occurred because of the drug control conventions but rather in spite of them.

INCB stresses that extrajudicial responses to drug-related criminality can never be justified under the international drug control conventions, which require that drug-related crime be addressed through formal criminal justice responses consistent with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which require adherence to internationally recognized standards for due process. INCB also notes that there are still States that retain capital punishment for drug-related offences.

The report recalls that human rights are inalienable and can never be relinquished and reiterates that if drug control measures adopted by States violate internationally recognized human rights standards, they also violate the international drug control conventions.

As a positive development, INCB notes that many States have adopted alternatives to conviction and punishment for drug-related offences of a lesser gravity and have recognized drug dependence as a chronic relapsing condition that can be prevented and treated.

## Increased focus needed on illicit drug activity at the national level

INCB stresses that drug control efforts must increasingly focus on illicit production, manufacture and distribution, and the risks of diversion at the domestic level. Illicit cultivation of opium poppy and coca bush as well as drug trafficking continue to be a threat to political, economic and social stability in a number of countries. Corruption also seriously hinders drug control efforts in these countries. Preventing the diversion of controlled precursors for the production of heroin and



For information only — not an official document

cocaine remains a serious challenge. Illicit cultivation of cannabis continues to take place and must also be addressed. Furthermore, there is increased use of synthetic drugs, which often do not have any legitimate use but can be readily produced in any country. The Internet and social media are used to illicitly market and sell drugs, including potent fentanyl, on darknet platforms using cryptocurrencies. These are additional challenges that need to be addressed and were not foreseen in the conventions at the time of their creation.

## New psychoactive substances continue to pose risk to public health

The continuing emergence of many new psychoactive substances (NPS) on the global drug market poses a significant risk to public health and is a challenge to the implementation of control measures. NPS use is often linked to health problems leading to hospitalizations and overdose deaths. Chemists who support illegal traffickers have become increasingly creative, moving up the chemical synthesis chain. They are now able to manufacture controlled chemicals and precursors through easily purchased substances.

## Medical use of cannabis permitted by conventions; Governments must ensure licensing, control and monitoring measures are in place

The annual report notes that the medical use of cannabis is allowed under the international drug control conventions only if States comply with the treaty requirements that are designed to prevent diversion to non-medical use, including licensing and control. Governments that allow the medicinal use of cannabinoids should monitor and evaluate the effects of those programmes and monitor the extent of diversion of cannabinoids to non-medical use – particularly their diversion for use by young people.

## INCB warns that legalization of cannabis for non-medical purposes undermines the conventions

Developments in a few countries that have legalized or permitted the use of cannabis for non-medical purposes or that have tolerated its legalization at the subnational level undermine the universal adherence to the three international drug control conventions. Any increases in non-medical cannabis use will have an adverse effect on public health.

## International drug control system is key to protecting health and welfare of people worldwide

INCB emphasizes that achieving the objectives of the international drug control conventions requires countries to put the health and welfare of people at the core of drug policies. Governments should apply comprehensive, integrated and balanced approaches to drug control policy, promote human rights standards, and prioritize prevention, treatment and rehabilitation. Furthermore, additional measures to respond to the changing nature and magnitude of the global drug problem are needed. The reduction of the negative consequences of drug abuse should be in focus and international cooperation based on common and shared responsibility should be strengthened.