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The role of the Internet in drug trafficking and drug use is highlighted in the International Narcotics Control Board Annual Report

In its 2023 Annual Report, the International Narcotics Control Board:

- finds that online drug trafficking has increased the availability of drugs on the illicit market;*
- warns that patient safety is at risk from illicit Internet pharmacies selling drugs without a prescription directly to the consumer;*
- highlights the daunting task facing law enforcement authorities to monitor and prosecute online drug activities;*
- sees opportunities to use the Internet and social media for drug use prevention campaigns and to improve access to drug treatment services;*
- encourages governments to use the full range of INCB tools and programmes to assist in their efforts to counter exploitation of the Internet for drug trafficking; and*
- voices concern about the persistent regional disparities in availability and consumption of licit drugs for the treatment of pain.*

VIENNA, 5 March (UN Information Service) – The evolving landscape of online drug trafficking is presenting new challenges to drug control, says the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) in its Annual Report. There are also opportunities to use the Internet for drug use prevention and treatment to safeguard people's health and welfare, the Board says.

The increased availability of illicit drugs on the Internet, the exploitation by criminal groups of online platforms including social media, and the increased risk of overdose deaths due to the online presence of fentanyl and other synthetic opioids are some of the key challenges for drug control in the Internet era.

"We can see that drug trafficking is not just carried out on the dark web. Legitimate e-commerce platforms are being exploited by criminals too. We encourage governments to work with the private sector and INCB projects to prevent and detect trafficking of drugs and other dangerous substances online," said Jallal Toufiq, the President of INCB.

Using social media and other online platforms means drug traffickers can advertise their products to large global audiences. Various conventional social media platforms are being used as local marketplaces and inappropriate content is widely accessible to children and adolescents.

Encryption methods, anonymous browsing on the darknet and cryptocurrencies are commonly used to avoid detection, posing difficulties for prosecuting online trafficking offences. Offenders can move their activities to territories with less intensive law enforcement action or lighter sanctions or base themselves in countries where they can evade extradition. The sheer scale of online activity is an added complication. In one case in France, law enforcement authorities collected more than 120 million text messages from 60,000 mobile phones.

Patient safety is at risk from illicit Internet pharmacies which sell drugs without a prescription directly to consumers. It is impossible for consumers to know whether the drugs are counterfeit, unapproved or even illegal. The global trade in illicit pharmaceuticals is estimated to be worth 4.4 billion USD.

Opportunities for drug treatment and prevention

The Board sees opportunities to use online platforms to prevent non-medical use of drugs, raise awareness about the harms of drug use and support public health campaigns. Governments can use social media platforms to conduct drug use prevention campaigns to prevent substance misuse among young people in particular.

“There are opportunities to use social media and the Internet to prevent drug use, raise awareness of its harms and improve access to drug treatment services,” said INCB President Toufiq, “At the same time we are concerned about the increasing use of social media to market drugs including to children and the ways that criminals are exploiting online platforms for illicit activities.”

Telemedicine and Internet pharmacies could improve access to healthcare and help reach patients with drug use disorders and deliver drug treatment services to more people. Online platforms could also be used for sharing information about adverse consequences of drug use and communicating warnings of adulterated drugs which could save lives.

International cooperation essential to tackle this growing trend

The global nature of online platforms makes collaborative efforts vitally important for identifying new threats and developing effective responses.

INCB is encouraging voluntary cooperation between governments and online industries to tackle the misuse of legitimate e-commerce platforms for drug trafficking. Its initiatives such as the GRIDS programme have led to drug seizures and arrests as well as criminal networks being dismantled.

The manufacturing, marketing, movement and monetization industries are particularly vulnerable to being exploited by those trafficking in dangerous substances. The Board says that increased cooperation is needed between governments, international organizations, regulatory authorities and the private sector to meet these evolving challenges.

Persistent disparities in access to medicines for the treatment of pain

In many parts of the world there is not enough affordable morphine available to meet medical needs. These persistent regional disparities in opioid analgesics used for pain treatment are not due to a shortage of opiate raw materials but rather in part due to inaccurate estimates of the actual medical needs of their populations. Levels of consumption of pain relief medicine remain highest in Europe and North America.

There was an acute need for medicines containing internationally controlled substances in 2023 for people caught up in natural disasters and emergencies related to climate change and conflict. INCB urges governments to use simplified control procedures in such situations to ensure unimpeded availability of these medicines.

Notable developments in illicit drug supply

In Afghanistan, illicit opium poppy cultivation and heroin production declined dramatically. INCB says that alternative livelihoods need to be offered to affected farmers who may not have other sources of income.

The opioid crisis continues to have serious consequences in North America with the number of deaths that involved synthetic opioids other than methadone continuing to increase, reaching more than 70,000 in 2021.

Drug trafficking organizations continue to expand their operations in the Amazon Basin into illegal mining, illegal logging and wildlife trafficking.

Record levels of illicit coca bush cultivation were recorded in Colombia and Peru, rising by 13 percent and 18 per cent respectively. Seizures of cocaine reached a record level in 2021 in West and Central Africa, a significant transit region for cocaine.

Several European countries have continued to establish regulated markets for cannabis for non-medical purposes. These programmes do not appear to be consistent with the drug control conventions.

South Asia appears to be increasingly being targeted for the trafficking of methamphetamine illicitly manufactured in Afghanistan to Europe and Oceania.

Pacific island States have transformed from solely transit sites along drug trafficking routes to destination markets for synthetic drugs. This is posing significant challenges to communities and their public health systems.

Precursors report

As part of international efforts to prevent illicit drug manufacturers from replacing certain controlled chemicals with closely related substitutes, the Board is recommending that a total of 16 amphetamine-type stimulant precursors (two series of closely related chemicals) are put under international control.

Two fentanyl precursors have also been assessed and recommended for international control by INCB, following a request made by the United States. The Precursors report also shows a surge in non-controlled fentanyl precursors in North America in 2023.

The Commission on Narcotic Drugs will vote at its session in March on placing all 18 substances under international control, through placement in Table I of the 1988 Convention.

INCB is concerned about the lack of audits and inspections in certain free trade zones which are susceptible to misuse for illicit activities. The Board calls on governments to ensure proper oversight over these zones to prevent them being exploited for precursor trafficking.

INCB is the independent, quasi-judicial body charged with promoting and monitoring Government compliance with the three international drug control conventions: the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances, and the 1988 Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances. Established by the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961, [the thirteen members of the Board](#) are elected in a personal capacity by the Economic and Social Council for terms of five years.

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For further information, please contact:

INCB Secretariat
Tel.: (+43-1) 26060-4163
Email: [incb.secretariat\[at\]un.org](mailto:incb.secretariat@un.org)
www.incb.org