

ISSUE

# COMBATTING THE OPIOIDS CRISIS

Coordinating a global response to the opioids crisis

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Opioids cause the most severe health implications of any category of drugs .  
(UNODC, World Drug Report, 2017).

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime,  
“seventy percent of the global burden of disease caused  
by drug use disorders is attributable to opioid use.”

(UNODC, World Drug Report, 2017).

On top of all this, opioid abuse is at an all time high, particularly in wealthy countries. In 2016, 64,000 overdose deaths were caused by opioids in the United States alone. Not only is it a greater number of opioid deaths than ever before, it's more deaths than have ever been caused by car crashes, HIV/AIDS or gun violence in a single year (Katz, 2017).

In recent years, recreational opioid use and related deaths have seen a monumental rise. These drugs are expensive compared to their alternatives, and are therefore most prevalent in wealthy countries, particularly the United States. The increasing prevalence of fentanyl has been a leading cause of the rise in overdose deaths in recent years, as it is cheaper and more powerful than its predecessor, heroin. Fentanyl is often mixed into other drugs, including heroin, to increase profits for dealers and create customer loyalty by providing stronger product than competitors.

Status quo drug enforcement strategies are ceasing to be effective, largely due to the changing landscape of the drug trade. Globalization allows for drugs to be produced cheaply in countries with less strict labour laws and sold to users in wealthy countries, either through physical intermediaries or by way of the Internet. A 2016 study concluded that the volume of the darknet drug trade is growing consistently at an increase of 50% per year (Kruitfhof, 2016). In 2014, 25% of drug users purchased drugs via the darknet (United Nations, 2016). The online market is more difficult to combat than the physical drug trade. In response to government intervention that has taken down major players in the Internet drug trade, such as the website Silk Road in 2013, a new organization, or several, has taken over the void in the market, in a seemingly unbeatable cycle. The anonymity of the darknet makes the mandate of reducing the Internet drug trade a near impossible task.

Beyond the challenges associated with globalization and digitization, corruption is present at every level of the drug trade. It allows for the practices of fabrication and trafficking to thrive, which in turn fuels corruption (UNODC, World Drug Report, 2017). Although corruption plays a role in the survival of the drug trade, its elimination or reduction is more easily accomplished than other factors of the market.

## The United States of America.

Americans consume a greater volume of opioids per capita than any other country, due to the combination of national wealth and relatively weak government aid in the form of addiction services (Lopez, 2017).

## China.

American law enforcement agencies claim that the main supplier of American opioids is China, although the Chinese government disputes the claim (Reuters Staff, 2017). The country has unintrusive labour laws and high rates of corruption: market conditions perfect for the cultivation of an active drug trade.

## Portugal.

Europe's former "heroin capital" introduced a radical drug policy in 2001 that decriminalized all drugs. Since the decriminalization, "drug-related pathologies — such as sexually transmitted diseases and deaths due to drug usage — have decreased dramatically," to among the lowest levels in Europe (Greenwald, 2009).

## Estonia.

With far higher overdose rates than any other European nation, Estonia has a vested interest in resolutions that will regulate the market and keep their citizens safe from the effects of opioid addiction.

## Croatia.

The 2017 World Drug Report identifies that 40% of world opioid seizures take place while the drugs are in transit through the Balkans (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2017), meaning that the cooperation of Croatia and its neighbors is crucial to the shutdown of the global market. Beyond this, Croatia has a high rate of overdose death, and must play a cooperative role in the process of formulating a successful containment strategy to combat the epidemic.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime was established in 1997 and has been working to combat drug trafficking and abuse since. The annual publication of the World Drug Report is the authoritative source on trends in drug usage and trafficking trends. The Office's mandate is to aid member nations in the "struggle against illicit drugs, crime and terrorism" (UNODC, About UNODC).

The United Nations has participated in three complimentary conventions on drugs, which act as the guiding documents of the UNODC. The most recent convention was the United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, which took place in 1988. In 2009, UN member nations gathered for the 2009 Political Declaration and Action Plan, but the outcomes were largely an affirmation of the three existing conventions, and contained little adaptive policy framework (UNODC, Political Declaration and Plan of Action).

In 2017 the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs identified two fentanyl precursors (components) and one fentanyl analogue for international control (Dadge, 2017). Almost a year after the action, it is clear that it has done little to stem the tide of the epidemic.

## QUESTIONS A RESOLUTION SHOULD ANSWER:

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1. How will the international community cooperate to prevent the globalized spread of opioids?
  2. How will the UN countries combat the digitized nature of the drug trade?
  3. How will UN member nations combat the corruption that facilitates the opioid market?
  4. How will UN member nations prevent the spread of disease that often accompanies the use of unsterilized needles by drug users, and aid those experiencing such negative health implications?
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After thirty years of stagnant international drug policy, an updated convention is necessary to combat the tide of the international drug trade.

Resolutions must address the globalized, digitized nature of the world's drug trade.

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