

UN Drug Report: Cannabis Legalization Could Reduce Illicit Market

NEW YORK – A new United Nations (UN) report on worldwide drug trends acknowledges that marijuana legalization in the U.S. and Canada may have helped to shrink the size of illicit markets, while significantly reducing the number of people arrested for cannabis offenses. It also notes the emergence of what it calls a “psychedelic renaissance.”

Key Findings on Cannabis Legalization

The 2024 World Drug Report, published by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), indicates that in jurisdictions where marijuana has been legalized, the size of the illegal cannabis market appears to be decreasing. The report also points out that in the United States, both the number and rate of cannabis-related arrests are dropping.

Persisting Racial Disparities and New Concerns

Despite the overall decrease in marijuana arrests, the UNODC report highlights ongoing racial disparities. Legalization has also led to the popularity of new marijuana products, such as vapes, high-THC concentrates, and infused edibles, raising concerns about youth use.

Global Legalization Trends

As of early 2024, several UN member states, including Canada, Uruguay, and 27 jurisdictions in the U.S., have enacted laws permitting the production and sale of cannabis for non-medical use. Additionally, some European countries offer varying degrees of regulated access to non-medical cannabis.

Focus on International Cooperation

The UNODC report aims to foster international cooperation to address the global drug problem’s impact on health, governance, and security. It seeks to assist member states in anticipating and mitigating threats posed by drug markets.

The Psychedelic Renaissance

The report also highlights a resurgence of interest in the therapeutic use of psychedelics. Controlled substances under international drug conventions are being explored in clinical trials for treating various mental health disorders. This renewed interest has led to policy changes in a few jurisdictions in the U.S., Australia, and Canada, allowing access to psychedelics for therapeutic use.

Increased Access and Commercial Interest

Within the broader “psychedelic renaissance,” there is growing commercial interest and an enabling environment for broad access to unsupervised, quasi-therapeutic, and non-medical use of psychedelics. This movement is distinct from traditional Indigenous use and is driven by desires for mental health, mindfulness, spirituality, and overall well-being.

Cannabis Use Statistics

The report names cannabis as the world’s most commonly used drug, with an estimated 228 million users globally, representing about 4% of the world’s population. In North America, nearly 1 in 5 people (19.8%) aged 15 to 64 used cannabis in 2022.

Medical Cannabis Effectiveness

The UNODC acknowledges evidence supporting the effectiveness of cannabinoids in treating certain conditions but notes that for many others, the evidence is limited. The regulatory approaches to medical cannabis vary widely among countries.

Concerns Over Youth and New Drug Delivery Methods

The report raises concerns about new methods of drug delivery impacting young people, particularly the increase in cannabis vaping among adolescents. It highlights a rise in hospitalizations for cannabis-induced psychosis and withdrawal, with young adults being disproportionately affected.

Treatment Gaps for Substance Use Disorders

Globally, there is a significant gap between the number of people with substance use disorders and those receiving treatment. Only about 1 in 11 people with drug use disorders received treatment in 2022, a decrease from 2015. Treatment coverage is especially low in Africa and Asia and is also lower among women globally.

Cannabis Use Disorders

The report states that cannabis accounts for a substantial share of drug-related harm globally, with an estimated 41% of drug use disorder cases attributed to cannabis use disorders as of 2019.

Ongoing Law Enforcement Contact

Simple drug use and possession continue to be the primary reasons for contact with law enforcement globally. In 2022, approximately 7 million people were in contact with police over drug offenses, with two-thirds of these cases due to drug use or possession.

Call for a Shift in Drug Policy

The report arrives shortly after a separate UN document urged member states to abandon the war on drugs and adopt harm-reduction policies, such as decriminalization, supervised consumption sites, and the availability of overdose reversal drugs. The UN special rapporteur on the right to health, Tlaleng Mofokeng, advocated for a compassionate, evidence-based approach to drug use and disorders.

Advocacy for Legalization and Harm Reduction

Amnesty International and several Latin American and Caribbean nations have also called for the legalization of all drugs, emphasizing health and harm reduction. A report from an international coalition of advocacy groups highlighted how global drug prohibition has contributed to environmental destruction and undermined climate crisis efforts.

The UNODC's 2024 World Drug Report underscores the complex dynamics of global drug trends, emphasizing the need for coordinated international efforts to address the challenges and opportunities presented by drug markets and emerging therapeutic uses.

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