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THE INTERNET POSES CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR DRUG CONTROL, PREVENTION AND TREATMENT, SAYS THE INTERNATIONAL NARCOTICS CONTROL BOARD

The international community faces both challenges and opportunities for drug control, prevention and treatment in the era of the Internet, the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) says in its 2023 Annual Report. The evolving landscape of online drug trafficking presents new challenges. Yet there are also opportunities to use online platforms to prevent non-medical use of drugs, raise awareness about the harms of drug use and support public health initiatives.

The Internet and especially social media have increased the availability of drugs on the illicit market, and criminal groups are exploiting online platforms for drug trafficking. The online presence of fentanyl and synthetic opioids raises serious concerns due to their high potency and the risk of overdose deaths.

Law enforcement authorities face a daunting task monitoring and prosecuting online drug activities due to encryption technologies and innovations. Offenders also exploit loopholes and differences in national regulations.

INCB is at the forefront of efforts to foster cooperation between Governments and online industries to deal with the misuse of legitimate e-commerce platforms for drug trafficking.

Training and information provided by INCB initiatives such as the GRIDS Programme, IONICS and Precursors Incident Communication System (PICS) on suspicious Internet posts have resulted in seizures of drugs and precursors and the dismantling of criminal networks.

Drug control treaties still relevant in the Internet age

Two of the three drug control treaties were adopted before the advent of the Internet and the third before major changes in information and communication technologies became global in reach. The Internet provides opportunities to support the aims of the conventions but also to undermine them.

As early as 2000, the Commission on Narcotic Drugs adopted a resolution on the misuse of the World Wide Web by the illicit drug trade. In 2009 INCB published guidelines for Governments on preventing the illegal sale of internationally controlled substances through the Internet.

The role of the Internet in drug trafficking and in the sourcing of precursor chemicals and equipment for illicit drug manufacture has not yet dramatically changed drug supply chains but it is evolving and could expand further in the future. International cooperation is vital to tackle this growing trend.

Opportunities offered by the Internet to prevent non-medical drug use

Telemedicine and Internet pharmacies illustrate the duality of challenges and opportunities. They both hold great potential for improving access to health care but simultaneously enable illegitimate actors to hide among legitimate providers.

Telemedicine, a fast-growing way of delivering health care, can help reach patients with drug use disorders and there is great potential for the online delivery of drug treatment services.





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Online discussion forums on drug-related topics are used by people to share tips and dosing advice. While this knowledge-sharing can strengthen efforts to reduce the adverse consequences of drug use, it is unlikely to reach the most vulnerable people who use drugs.

Drug checking services, which analyse samples, can communicate warnings using the Internet, reaching more people, when drugs are found to be adulterated with dangerous substances or have unusually high potency. This information can save lives.

However, instructions on how to manufacture drugs can also be shared online. People have posted how to extract precursors for methamphetamine production from processed products that are legal to acquire.

Challenges to drug control posed by the Internet

Drug traffickers can reach a large global audience by exploiting social media and other online platforms to advertise their products. The sheer scale of communications on these platforms makes it exceedingly difficult for regulatory authorities to monitor, even if the communication leaves digital traces.

It is complicated to take legal action and prosecute trafficking offences conducted online. Offenders can move their activities to territories with less intensive law enforcement action and lighter criminal sanctions or base themselves in countries where they can evade extradition.

Law enforcement agencies have successfully applied novel investigative measures such as setting up fake online advertisements for precursors or non-scheduled chemicals and the use of sting operations to gather information on both prospective buyers and sellers of related chemicals.

Organized criminal groups in Europe have exploited Internet-based technologies to traffic drugs, using modified smartphones, “cryptophones” with enhanced encryption methods. They believed they were communicating confidentially, but law enforcement authorities managed to decrypt their conversations and arrested several high-value targets beginning in 2021. In France alone, the National Gendarmerie collected over 120 million text messages from 60,000 mobile phones, with data tracing back to more than 100 countries.

Cryptomarkets

Cryptomarkets are online darknet marketplaces located on the Deep Web which allow people to browse the Internet anonymously and use encryption to mask emails and cryptocurrencies for payment. In 2021 the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) suggested that the total value of the drug trade on cryptomarkets was around 315 million USD annually.

Buyers have reported that they use these markets because they provide access to drugs with a more predictable quality. Both buyers and sellers perceive the transactions as less risky than street-level exchanges in terms of rip-offs, physical violence and threats. Cryptomarkets mostly serve national markets and buyers can pick up the drugs without ever meeting the seller.

Despite several highly publicized arrests of administrators of cryptomarkets, they have proved resilient, albeit volatile.





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Increased local availability through social media

Various conventional social media platforms are being used as local marketplaces by small-time dealers for selling illicit drugs and uncontrolled substances. But it is not known exactly how widespread this is, or in which countries it occurs most. What is clear is that this inappropriate content promoting drug use is widely accessible to children and adolescents.

The process of using social media to procure drugs can start with the buyers searching drug-related hashtags or following profiles that advertise drug sales. Using messaging apps with end-to-end encryption and temporary message capabilities, where the communication is deleted after a period, or virtual private networks, sellers can connect quickly and easily with local buyers and sometimes even offer home delivery of the illicit drugs.

This increasingly localized distribution in combination with rapid availability may prove to be more transformative in the longer run than other Internet-driven illicit drug supply models.

Legitimate e-commerce platforms

In the last few years, INCB global projects have promoted voluntary cooperation between Governments and e-commerce companies to prevent the misuse of their services for the illicit marketing of precursors, new psychoactive substances and non-medical synthetic opioids. These projects monitor the posting of offers by suspicious vendors and purchase requests by potential buyers on major legitimate e-commerce marketplaces.

By supporting Government cooperation with private sector representatives, the INCB GRIDS programme has created two sets of guiding documents with practical recommendations and easy-to-follow checklists to prevent the online targeting of the most vulnerable industries for trafficking in dangerous substances. The manufacturing, marketing, movement and monetization (4M) industries along with Internet-related services are considered vulnerable to such exploitation.

Practical results include arrests and seizures of high-dosage tramadol and ketamine hydrochloride offered for sale on a major e-commerce platform in a country in Africa. In Latin America multiple suspicious listings of a non-scheduled plant-based substance, kratom, were identified by a major e-commerce company, which led to the identification and arrest of the online seller. Such investigations are resource-intensive and in many cases, the contacted platforms simply delete such listings, usually within 24 hours.

Internet pharmacies

Prescription drugs are a commonly searched health topic on the Internet and the global trade in illicit pharmaceuticals is estimated to be worth 4.4 billion USD. A further simple online search for pharmacy, 'pharma' or 'pharm' can lead to Internet pharmacy websites advertising drugs for sale. Such sites, which are mostly illegal, offer to sell substances that require prescriptions as well as illicit drugs.





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Illicit Internet pharmacies threaten global patient safety by selling drugs of unconfirmed origins without a prescription directly to the consumer. Recent studies indicate two thirds of countries worldwide do not have laws that explicitly regulate Internet sales of medicinal products.

There is nothing to ensure the quality of products purchased online. It is impossible for consumers to assess whether drugs purchased from Internet pharmacies are counterfeit, unapproved or even illegal. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that half of medicines purchased from illegal sites are counterfeit.

Recommendations

The Board encourages Governments to use the full range of INCB tools and programmes to assist in their efforts to counter Internet-related illicit drug trafficking. To prevent substance misuse among young people in particular, the Board suggests that Governments conduct drug misuse prevention campaigns, using social media.

The global nature of online drug distribution makes collaborative efforts increasingly important for identifying new threats and developing effective responses. The Board calls for increased cooperation between international organizations, national Governments, regulatory authorities and private companies working in the relevant sectors to meet these evolving challenges.