

Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (CCPCJ)

Combating opiate trade and
trafficking



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Introduction

Besides the medical uses of opiates, opiates are also sold as illegal drugs. This worldwide trade in opiates has emerged as a major transnational threat, posing significant risks to health, governance, and security on national, regional, and international scales. (UNODC). Five countries are majoritarily responsible for the overwhelming majority of opiates on the black market. These nations, where drug lords have vast production capabilities and distribution networks, fuel a global crisis that affects millions. The global opiate trade undermines public health systems, destabilises weak governments in less economically developed countries, and contributes to widespread violence and crime worldwide. This research report provides the essential context, country-specific information, and strategic tools needed to develop sustainable solutions for global peace and justice and for a safe and free world.

Definition of Key Terms

Opiate

Opiates are chemical compounds that are extracted or refined from natural plant matter (poppy sap and fibers). Examples of opiates include morphine, opium, and codeine.

Morphine

Morphine is a prescription pain reliever used to treat moderate to severe acute and chronic pain (Santos-Longhurst).

Opium

Opium is made from poppy latex, the milky substance in poppy pods. This sticky, smelly gum is sometimes eaten as is or manufactured into powder or syrup that's smoked, made into pills, or added to drinks (Santos-Longhurst).

Codeine



Codeine is used to treat mild to moderate pain and also diarrhoea. It's sometimes mixed with other drugs in over-the-counter (OTC) pain relievers, like acetaminophen, or cough syrup and cold medication (Santos-Longhurst).

Analgesics

Analgesics, also called painkillers, are medications that relieve different types of pain, ranging from headaches to injuries to arthritis. Opioid analgesics change the way the brain perceives pain (Cleveland Clinic).

Overprescription

The problem of doctors giving people drugs to treat medical conditions too often, or when it is not necessary (Cambridge Dictionary).

General Overview

Opiates have played a role in our history, culture, mythology, religion, biology, genetics, and psychology (Bandyopadhyay). An in-depth knowledge of these contexts is necessary for successful policy to combat opiate trade and trafficking.

History

The origins of the problems produced by opiates and the differing perspectives that persist now can be traced back to the 19th century. Friedrich Sertürner, a young apprentice German chemist, separated a component from opium in 1806, standardising its strength. In honour of the god of dreams, Morpheus, he gave this substance the name "morphine." An associate research professor at the Berman Institute of Bioethics named Travis Rieder, PhD, claims that "everything changed with the isolation of morphine from the poppy plant." In contrast to tablets, powders, etc., injectable morphine provided immediate relief (Schmitt). Moreover, it was overprescribed for all major illnesses, including the treatment of respiratory issues, anxiety, tuberculosis, and illnesses specific to women. Wounded soldiers, from the American Civil, British Crimean, and Prussian French wars, were allowed to abuse morphine. However, so many soldiers came to be totally reliant on opiates that the post-war morphine addiction was known as "soldier's disease. In 1898 a supposed 'non-addictive substitute' for morphine was created by the German company Bayer. It was called heroin, which was used primarily as a cough suppressant.

The perception of this alleged panacea eventually changed, becoming more widely regarded as a harmful influence on society. A significant factor in this shift was the fact that in the 19th century,



one third of all fatal poisonings were attributed to opiates. This led to public concern. During the 1870s, numerous articles in medical publications highlighted the risks of overprescribing opiates, echoing warnings made by Avicenna 800 years earlier. By the late 19th century, prior to the era of prohibition, the United States began to concentrate on eliminating the non-medical use of opium. This objective was pursued through legislative measures such as the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 and the Harrison Narcotic Act of 1914 (Seattle Pacific University).

Before delving deeper into the history of opiate trade and trafficking in the 20th century, there is a rather important streak of events throughout the history of opiates that could not be ignored: the Opium Wars. These were two armed conflicts in mid-19th century China between the Qing dynasty and Western powers, principally Great Britain (Pletcher). The first conflict was a result of the effort China had put forth to suppress the illegal opium trade, much to the disdain of Great Britain. The economy was suffering at the hands of a high number of addicts all around the nation as well as social disruption caused by the illegal opium trade. When the Qing dynasty made bids to overcome the issues inevitable, British traders, who were the primary source of the opium in China, got angry and the East India Company intervened. The second war was caused by the greediness of the French and British who desired additional commercial privileges. These wars resulted in the forced legalisation of opium in China and serve as an apt example of how foreign intervention influences the international drug market (Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada).

After the legislation and regulations imposed in the early 20th century, the story of opiates is one of crime and abuse. As a result of the federal ban on opium, black markets in Chinatowns of various American cities served as the major source of opium in the United States. The majority of illegal heroin in Europe as well as the United States came from China. India, Iran, and Vietnam also were major contributors to the worldwide opiate trade, although import from these countries to the Americas was significantly hindered by the Second World War (Public Broadcasting Service). During the Cold War, there was a massive increase in the access to illegal opium and heroin in the American and French markets, which has government policy as its cause. In order to combat the spread of communism in Asia, many deals were made with drug warlords, especially in South-East Asia. The United States and France supplied the warlords armies with arms, ammunition, etc. This increased power and influence made it easier for them to afford the high costs and danger of drug smuggling to western markets. After the Cold War, we see for the U.S. a dramatic increase in the drug flow from Mexico, while in Europe several Asian countries remain the most significant suppliers.

The contemporary opiate crisis



Nowadays, synthetic derivatives from opium have become increasingly popular. Experts speak of a new wave of overdose deaths since 2013 due to the increase of these opioids, namely fentanyl (Rowley e.a.). However, heroin is still one of the most commonly used drugs, in consequence of being one of the most addicting drugs in the world. The current opiate crisis has three main causes, these are: lobbying by pharmaceutical companies, overprescription of opiates, and inadequate regulation (The Lancet Regional Health - Americas). The result of this is that 6.4 out of every 100,000 deaths are caused by opiate overdose in North-America, with around 125,000 individuals dying from overdose in 2019 worldwide (World Health Organization), and this number continues to rise.

Socio-economic impacts of opiates

The socio-economic effects of drug addiction, especially by opiates, are dramatic. The economic cost of drug abuse in the United States alone was estimated at \$193 billion in 2007 (The White House). Furthermore, the opioid epidemic has led to reduced labour force participation, decreased employment, and increased dependency on social security. One estimate shows that this crisis accounts for 43% of the decline in men's labour force participation, and 25% of the decline for women. Thus, combating the illegal opiate trade, national economies could prosper once again. If you look at the social consequences, illicit drug use in general also results in lower school performance, especially for college students. It is however worthy to note that soft drugs like marijuana are much more popular than opiates with youth below 25.

Major Parties Involved

Afghanistan

Afghanistan used to be the main global supplier of opium. It used to be Afghanistan's main export. However, since the Taliban have total control over Afghanistan after the fall of Kabul in 2021, they have implemented a nearly complete ban against the cultivation of opium poppy. Anyone violating the ban would have their field destroyed and be penalised according to strict Islamic law (Limaye). In this way, the Taliban could do what the United States couldn't after a twenty year long war on drugs in the country (Byrd). This does raise the question: is this ban a counter-narcotics victory or will it have negative economic and humanitarian consequences? This is up to much debate.

Myanmar

In 2023, Myanmar has overtaken Afghanistan as the world's biggest producer of opium. It produced an estimated 1,080 metric tonnes of opium last year alone (France24). The 'Golden



Triangle’ region, made up by the countries Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand, have been a hotspot for the production of illicit drugs for many decades, but their production recently has undergone a switch from methamphetamine to opium. The estimated value of Myanmar’s opiate economy rose to between \$1 billion and \$2.4 billion.

United States of America

While Myanmar and historically Afghanistan have served as centres for the production of opium, most of its users are found in the United States. It is the nation with the most people that are addicted to opiates and with the largest number of people dying of them (National Institute on Drug Abuse). To ensure a hard-working population with proper education, to ensure a prospering economy, and to ensure a free and safe country, the United States has to take the most action to secure their borders and influence the foreign production.

Mexico

Mexico has traditionally been an opiate heartland, being responsible for a major flow of heroin to foreign nations. However, a 2020 study found 93% of 59 heroin samples collected in Tijuana were laced with fentanyl (Gottesdiener and O’Boyle). There is a development away from opiates to synthetic drugs going on in the country. Furthermore, it is worthy to note that Mexico has so far avoided a consumption epidemic within its own borders, while still exporting a significant number of drugs.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

The UNODC is the United Nations Secretariat entity responsible for supporting Member States in their efforts against drugs and crime (UNODC). As such, they have written many advice papers to different governments and have passed several relevant resolutions on this issue. The UNODC also has an integrated opioid strategy that could be expanded upon and implemented. It includes coordination the international response to the crisis, reducing supply of opioids for nonmedical use, capacity building in support of national law enforcement interventions, etc.

Timeline of Key Events

Date	Description of event
1839-1842	The First Opium War
1856-1860	The Second Opium War
1909	The International Opium Commission convened for the first time
1912	The International Opium Convention is signed at The Hague
1997	The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime is established
2016	30th Special Session of the General Assembly on the World Drug Problem
2021	Fall of Kabul; Taliban takes full control over Afghanistan



2023

Myanmar overtakes Afghanistan as world's biggest opium producer

UN involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

- Final act of the United Nations Opium Conference, 8 March 1953 (457)
- Promoting efforts by Member States to address and counter the world drug problem, in particular supply reduction-related measures, through effective partnerships with private sector entities, 2020 (RES/36/1)
- The need for a balance between demand for and supply of opiates used to meet medical and scientific needs, September 2007 (ECOSOC/RES/2007/9)

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

There were numerous previous attempts to solve the issue of combating opiate trade and trafficking. In general, these can be categorised into international efforts, like the 1912 International Opium Convention, national policies, including the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906, law enforcement initiatives, and public health strategies, such as methadone maintenance treatment and the naloxone distribution project. The first international commission focusing on opium was already convened more than 100 years ago in 1909 in Shanghai (UNODC). Furthermore, the United States has been regulating the production of drugs since the administration of Theodore Roosevelt (Weill Cornell Medicine). In Afghanistan, the United States used to locate and bomb opium fields in order to combat opium production (Limaye).

Possible Solutions

National governments should take an all-of-Government approach concerning the epidemic and declare the opioid crisis a public health emergency (The White House, Ending America's Opioid Crisis). Furthermore, necessary funding should be provided to the developing countries where the opiates are mainly produced, such as Myanmar. Strengthening prescription monitoring programs and providing comprehensive education on opioid misuse can also help prevent new cases of addiction. A community-based strategy to combat the epidemic is to reduce the supply in households through organised disposal efforts such as drop boxes and take-back events (Wake Forest University School of Medicine). We should embrace creativity and innovation by exploring



diverse national programs to create new global solutions. For instance, in India, Dr. Hemant Bhargav from the Integrated Centre for Yoga at the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS) conducted a study to develop a yoga module aimed at reducing opioid use. After 12 weeks of intervention, it was observed that participants in the yoga group were 2.68 times more likely to test negative for opioids in urine screenings (Department of Science & Technology). Additionally, increased international cooperation to track and intercept drug smuggling routes and to implement stricter regulations is of the utmost importance. Finally, global advocacy is crucial in raising awareness on this issue and promoting unified efforts to address the opioid crisis on a worldwide scale.

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