

Pandemic could lead to more narcotic use: UN

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The coronavirus pandemic could see a rise in the use and trafficking of narcotics as well as increased risks for users, the UN drugs and crime agency (UNODC) said on Thursday.

The virus could lead to an overall increase in [drug](#) use with a shift towards cheaper products and injecting, both of which could mean greater danger for users, the agency said in its 2020 World Drug Report.

The Vienna-based agency said there were lessons to be learnt from what happened in the wake of the 2008 [economic crisis](#).

The UNODC warned that [drug consumption](#) has already been rising at an "alarming" rate over the last decade.

It also warned that countries were more likely to further reduce drug-related budgets and to give less priority to anti-trafficking operations and international cooperation in the wake of the pandemic.

Rising unemployment and a lack of opportunities would increase the chances that poor and disadvantaged people "turn to illicit activities linked to drugs—either production or transport", the report said.

"The COVID-19 crisis and economic downturn threaten to compound drug dangers further still, when our health and social systems have been brought to the brink and our societies are struggling to cope," UNODC Executive Director Ghada Waly said in a statement accompanying the

report.

"We need all governments to show greater solidarity and provide support, to developing countries most of all, to tackle [illicit drug](#) trafficking and offer evidence-based services for drug use disorders and related disease."

'Very alarming'

The pandemic comes on the back of a trend of already rising drug use, especially in developing countries, with UNODC finding 269 million people in 2018 had used drugs at least once, up 30 percent from a decade earlier.

"This is a very alarming increase. Not just the increase in the amount of people using drugs, but there are more youths, adolescents, children using drugs," Waly told AFP on Thursday.

The UNODC said the pandemic could have a further "far-reaching impact".

Border closures and other measures linked to the virus have already caused shortages of drugs on the street, leading to higher prices and reduced purity, the report said.

Drug traffickers seemed to be relying more on maritime routes, including continuing direct cocaine shipments by sea from South America to Europe, but also now transporting drugs via rivers rather than roads in Latin America, UNODC official Angela Me told a press conference.

The report, which mostly examined data up to early 2019, said the use of cocaine and methamphetamine was rising, with growing

methamphetamine markets in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Global cocaine production again reached an all-time high, continuing its record-setting trend.

While the area under coca cultivation remained stable from 2017 to 2018, production has become more efficient, Me said.

Me also noted how the market in addictive drugs had become "bigger and more complex" because of an increasing number of substances being abused, some of which are currently legal.

Cannabis remains the most widely used drug worldwide with an estimated 192 million users in 2018.

But opioids, used by around 58 million people, remained the most harmful.

Opioids accounted for two-thirds of the estimated 167,000 deaths related to drug use disorders in 2017.

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