

Forum: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

Issue: Addressing the global opioid crisis

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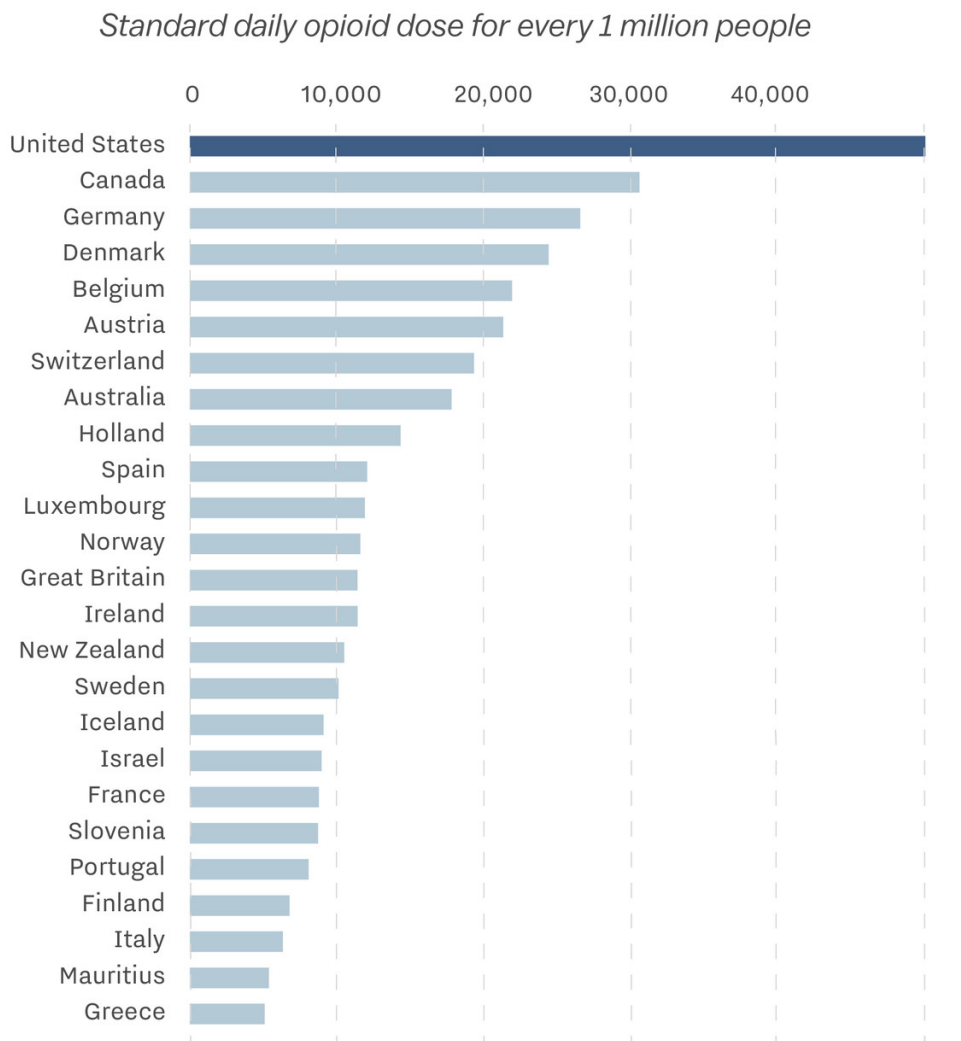
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Introduction:

The global opioid crisis is estimated to take 350,000 lives across the world each year, with 115,000 deaths being caused directly by opioid overdose. Some people refer to the opioid crisis as the 'war against drugs', but it is definitely a war humanity is losing, with more and more people dying due to the misuse of opioids each year. It is estimated that opioid-related deaths are increasing by 17% each year, a number that is highly alarming. Deaths caused due to overdose in the United States raised by 20% in 2021.

The United States currently have the highest overdose rates, followed by Scotland, Canada, Sweden then England/Wales. Governments are attempting to crack down on the global opioid crisis, and we have witnessed different approaches towards solving this issue, many of which have been rather unsuccessful. Some of these approaches include "supervised injection sites" that allow people to use illicit

recreational drugs in a safe manner.



Source: United Nations International Narcotics Control Board

Credit: Sarah Frostenson

Vox

Figure 1, Sarah Frostenson, Vox, June 2017.

Definition of Key Terms:

- 1. Opioids:** According to the American Society of Anesthesiologists, opioids are "medications prescribed by doctors to treat persistent or severe pain. They are used by people with chronic headaches and backaches, by patients recovering from surgery or experiencing severe pain"
- 2. Synthetic opioids:** According to the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), synthetic opioids are "substances that are synthesized in a laboratory"

and that act on the same targets in the brain as natural opioids (e.g., morphine and codeine) to produce analgesic (pain relief) effects. In contrast, natural opioids are naturally occurring substances extracted from the seed pod of certain varieties of poppy plants.” Some examples of synthetic opioids include fentanyl and methadone. Fentanyl is one of the most potent, and easily-accessible opioids, and is the leading cause of 60,000 overdoses in 2021 in the United States itself.

- 3. Prescription opioids:** Prescription opioids serve the main purpose of numbing moderate-severe pain. The most common forms of prescription opioids are methadone, oxycodone, and hydrocodone. Recently, the use of opioids for chronic and non-cancer pain has increased drastically. This causes a high risk of addiction, and the opioid-medicine lacks effectiveness. It is estimated that at least 2 million people are misusing prescription opioids and have an opioid use disorder (OUD).
- 4. Opioid use disorder (OUD):** According to John Hopkins Medicine, an Opioid use disorder is “a complex illness characterized by compulsive use of opioid drugs even when the person wants to stop, or when using the drugs negatively affects the person’s physical and emotional well-being.” This is, in simpler terms, an addiction to opioids.

Background Information

The rise of opioid usage

Opioid usage was stigmatized prior to the 1990s, and many feared that it had a high risk of addiction. This caused patients undergoing serious pain to frown on from opioid usage.

In the late 1990s, a pharmaceutical company, Purdue Pharma, promoted the use of opioids in medical usage and made countless bold claims, one of the most recognisable being that the risk of addiction when using opioids is less than 1%. They presented these studies to doctors and convinced them to paint a narrative of opioids being completely safe to use for all. Doctors supposedly receiving financial incentives and NGOs sponsored by these pharmaceutical companies were promoting the use of opioids, and had a mission to drive up sales. This 1% fact was

re-iterated to the public countless times by several profound doctors and health officials, yet lacked substantiative evidence and hand-picked case studies, permitting them to create such a narrative. Reports such as these led to opioids being over-prescribed. Pharmaceutical companies continued to sponsor events, reports, and doctors that promoted the usage of opioids throughout the 2000s. This led to many people becoming addicted to such substances.

Current Situation

Opioids are being prescribed at ever-growing rates, and more and more people are dying due to OUD's. May doctors have acknowledged the high-risk of addiction deriving from opioid usage in a medical scenario.

Purdue Pharma, the largest manufactures of Oxycodone (OxyContin), are currently facing lawsuits against them for promoting opioid usage and bribing doctors and health organisations. Oxycodone is a prescription opioid, and is one of the most abused drugs in the United States. Many events are still being sponsored by pharmaceutical companies, with an aim to increase sales. Most recently, Purdure Pharma just filed for bankruptcy, and are currently waiting for further legal action as this has been challenged in court.

Governments are increasing their adoption of supervised-injection sites, however many continue to question this decision as its efficiency is under dispute.

Supervised-injection sites (SIS)

The purpose of supervised injection sites is to allow people to try illicit recreational drugs while being supervised by medical experts. The aim of these sites is to reduce the number of overdose deaths and revoke the taboo of recreational drugs. These sites are operational in 11 nations in Europe, Australia, Canada, and the United States. The adoption of these sites is controversial, and many argue that governments shouldn't be spending on them as they haven't proven to be the most effective. These sites often have high overdose rates, and a majority of the time they are required to inject people with Naloxone, a drug that reverses the effects of opioids.

Usage of the young-generation

Reports suggest that mortality rates of teenagers due to opioid overdose have tripled in the last 18 years. Many teenagers don't understand the impact of opioids, and its easy accessibility in many countries allows nearly anyone to get their hands on it. Opioids also affect teenagers much more than they affect adults, as they are more sensitive to medicine. It is not uncommon practice for doctors to be prescribing small dosages of opioids to teenagers, and this also occurs when pain-severity isn't that intense.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

World Health Organisation

The World Health Organisation (WHO) is an intergovernmental organisation that serves as a specialised agency under the United Nations. Its aim is to promote public health for all global citizens through increasing accessibility and affordability to healthcare systems. The WHO has recommended all opioid users to carry naloxone (often referred to as Narcan), in the case there is a risk of overdose.

United States of America

The United States of America has the highest opioid overdose rates in the world. Opioids, specifically Fentanyl, continue to increase its presence amongst all age groups within the USA. USA has implemented SIS enabling people to use opioids in a safer environment. Opioids are currently illegal to purchase without a prescription, however, it is easily accessible. In some areas, it is common to see people casually injecting themselves with opioids and people that lack conscience lying on the streets. The United States is home to many large pharmaceutical companies, and strict, imposed legislation may affect their economy and power on a global level.

Canada

Canada is not far behind from USA, and its opioid usage rates are increasing rapidly. Canada has implemented SIS, yet still continues to have an ever-growing black market for opioids, especially Fentanyl. Canada's approach to SIS has

received an overwhelming amount of backlash.

Afghanistan and Myanmar

Afghanistan and Myanmar are the two largest opium-producing nations. The Taliban's new government in power, although lacking recognition, has imposed bans on farming opium plants, and destroys hundreds of fields each day. This is as selling drugs goes against their religious and conservative ideologies. Myanmar continues to grow opium plants, and the number of fields increased by 33% in 2021.

Africa

Africa is facing a huge crisis with opioids, however, it is far different from the ones in the USA and Canada. Africa doesn't have a high usage of fentanyl or heroin, yet has high usage of a synthetic opioid called tramadol. Tramadol's high usage is often for labour, as it reduces the physical pain hard labour brings to people in the region. Governments in Africa have been taking steps towards seizing imports of tramadol, reducing people's addiction and reliance towards the substance.

UN Involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

The UN had not voted on any resolutions specifically on opioids, however, has adopted programs led by the UNODC in terms of addressing the global opioid crisis.

- **Opioid Strategy, June 2018**
 - The opioid strategy, led by the UNODC, is an inter-agency mission to tackle the opioid crisis. It aims to internationally control some synthetic opioids (see image below).

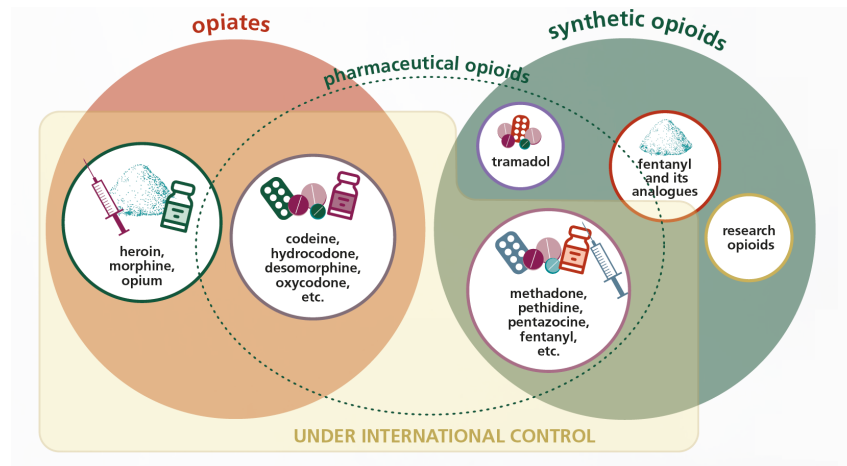


Figure 2, UNODC, The Opioid Strategy, June 2018

- **Synthetic Drug Strategy**

- The synthetic drug strategy is a mission led by UNODC and aims to tackle the exponential increase in the usage of synthetic drugs. It is important to note that this doesn't target opioids specifically, yet rather all synthetic drugs that are produced.

Possible Solutions

Create a timeline for the opioid strategy to take place

The opioid strategy is built on five key pillars, however, it has never been presented as an actual resolution in the house. Creating a timeline allows governments a guideline for a series of steps towards reducing the usage of opioids, while also incentivising and holding them accountable to address this pressing matter. Delegates should ensure all five pillars of the opioid strategy are addressed in this resolution.

Permitting Safe-Injection Sites to only operate with significant restrictions

Safe-Injection Sites (SIS) have received their share of criticism due to its questioned effectiveness. In some cases, drug-users steal drugs from such places due to a lack of security, and resell these on the streets, permitting them to buy stronger opioids they want. SIS need to be more regulated, and there should be restrictions on who is able to access such locations. However, governments should not be afraid of such sites, as they have a strong potential to reduce the illicit trade of opioids on the black market. More information about this can be found under the useful links section.

Imposing stricter legislation on the legal distribution of opioids, potential for opioid bans

Many doctors have succumbed to the pressures of large pharmaceutical companies, and have started to overprescribe opioids. It is a must that doctors, regardless of whether or not they receive financial compensation or aid, have strict penalties for overprescribing opioids. Prescribed opioids often end up in the black market, and also lead to many people becoming addicted to such substances. Some nations have also considered banning the sale of some more potent opioids, such as Fentanyl. Currently, only few opioids have outright bans in limited countries.

Limiting International drug trade

All nations should consider strengthening their border security. Drug smugglers are always inventing new ways to bring drugs into a country, and nations should push an agenda to decrease the international supply of drugs. Some african nations have taken this approach in their attempt to crackdown on opioids, and it has seen great results.

Bibliography

Useful Links

1. [Opioid overdose](#) - WHO's take on Opioid's and risk of overdose
2. [Safe-Injection Sites](#) - An article on the effectiveness of safe-injection sites
3. [Why America's opioid epidemic is going global](#) - An investigation into the malpractices of pharmaceutical companies, and its effect on America and the global population.
4. [Response to the Opioid Crisis](#) - UNODC's response to the opioid crisis. This includes links to the Opioid strategy and the synthetic drug strategy
5. [Safe Supply drugs making it onto the streets and black market.](#) - Global News, Youtube. This short video gives us a real look on how Canada's safe supply (their version of a SIS) is being abused.

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