

United Nations World Drug Report shows 22 percent increase in drug use since 2010, overdose death surge during COVID-19 pandemic

US activists join Global Day of Action calling for shift towards drug policies centered in public health and human rights.

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For Immediate Release**

New York, NY – As the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) releases its 2021 World Drug Report, thousands of drug policy reform advocates in 200+ cities in 86 countries across the world are rallying in support of public health- and human rights-based drug policies.

Today, the UNODC held launch events for its [2021 World Drug Report](#) in Vienna and New York. The report is released every year on the UN’s *International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking* (or the more commonly known “World Drug Day”) an observance [marked by the UN General Assembly in 1987](#) to express the international community’s determination to achieve its goal of an “international society free of drug abuse.”

This year’s World Drug Report shows significant increases in drug use across the spectrum, with 275 million people having used drugs in the past year – up 22 percent since 2010 – a number that is projected to increase further by 11 percent by 2030, revealing just how far we are from a “drug-free world.”

The report also shares findings on the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on drug-related health harms, most strikingly a sharp increase in overdose deaths associated with opioids in the US and Canada. In the US alone, opioid overdose deaths increased by 38 percent between June 2019 and May 2020, while Canada saw an increase of 62 percent in the early days of the pandemic – the highest increase in one quarter since 2016. The report also found that the pandemic left people who use drugs more vulnerable to mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, while social distancing measures reduced access to lifesaving overdose prevention services, support networks, and other health and social services. Finally, the report pointed out that in at least one US city, non-Hispanic Black individuals were more susceptible to opioid overdoses during the COVID-19 pandemic, and speculated this could be linked to “exacerbating pre-existing stressors, social isolation and economic deprivation disproportionately in Black communities” which may have contributed to increased drug use.

Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the “[Support. Don’t Punish.](#)” [Global Day of Action](#) will again be held around the world. In past years, New York City demonstrators [gathered in front of UN Headquarters to call on the UN](#) to address the global health crisis facing people who use drugs or affected by drug use.

“Support. Don’t Punish.” is a grassroots advocacy campaign that has grown into a massive global effort. With events in 237 cities in 86 countries this year, “Support. Don’t Punish.” offers advocates

and reformers the chance to “*take back the day*” by using the platform provided by World Drug Day to call for the implementation of humane, public health-based approaches to drug policies and the repeal of what many see as outdated and overly harsh punitive approaches.

This year, New York City activists will take their activism online, storming social media channels to advocate for public health- and human rights-based drug policies. They will be joined, for the first time, by organizations from all over the US calling on policymakers to make a “paradigm shift” away from criminalization of substance use towards enacting harm reduction, decriminalization, and racially-just drug policies.

For activists in the US, this “paradigm shift” requires doing away with heavy-handed criminal measures directed towards people who use drugs, in particular the disturbing trend in certain US states of [charging people who share drugs with friends who overdose with homicide](#) and laws that [unfairly target Black and Brown communities](#). US-based organizations are also calling for the continuation of [certain relaxations put in place during the pandemic](#) on the prescribing of life-sustaining medications such as buprenorphine and methadone. Others, such as the National Campaign for Harm Reduction Funding, are [calling for a substantial increase in funding for harm reduction services](#) across the US and for policy changes such as lifting [the federal ban on funding for syringe exchange](#) and the [exemption of overdose prevention centers from federal “crack house” laws](#). Still others call for broader ranging changes such as [international treaty reform](#) to make human rights and public health-based provisions, particularly harm reduction measures like syringe services and naloxone distribution, binding on UN member states.

The UN has been slow to recognize harm reduction as a solution for global drug-related problems. However, progress has been made in recent years, largely in response to global activism led by organizations like the [International Drug Policy Consortium](#) and [Harm Reduction International](#). The overall dialogue at the UN, once favoring “zero tolerance” policies around drug control, has shifted towards public health and human rights. In 2017, UN agencies came together under the leadership of Secretary-General António Guterres to adopt the [UN Common Position on drug policy](#). This document specifically calls for the expansion of harm reduction services, as well as for decriminalization measures, which member states have increasingly begun to embrace. In April 2021, for the first time, the US government joined the growing number of countries that support harm reduction in the fight against fatal overdose – calling for “modern solutions” such as the expansion of harm reduction services and the prioritization of racial equity in its [statement at the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs](#).

Activists are hopeful that this trend will continue, and that policymakers mean what they say. Reflecting on the UNODC’s theme for this year’s World Drug Day – “Share Facts On Drugs, Save Lives” – “saving lives requires not only sharing facts, but also acting upon those facts,” said Nazlee Maghsoudi, who is speaking at the launch of the World Drug Report in New York on behalf of the [New York NGO Committee on Drugs](#). “There is no doubt that evidence has shown harm reduction services improve health and prevent death among people who use drugs,” she continued, “and policies of criminalization have conversely had devastating impacts on affected communities while failing to reduce drug supply and demand. Following the facts to save lives requires a move away from punitive approaches towards drug policies that prioritize human rights, health, and harm reduction.”

Watch for the Global Day of Action – led locally by members of the New York NGO Committee on Drugs, the National Campaign for Harm Reduction Funding, and The Levenson Foundation – on Twitter and Facebook on Friday, June 25.

About the New York NGO Committee on Drugs (NYNGOC)

The New York NGO Committee on Drugs (NYNGOC) operates under the Conference of NGOs in Consultative Relationship with the UN (CoNGO) and represents over 100 civil society organizations across 30 countries. Since 1984, the NYNGOC has aimed to support civil society organizations in engaging with the UN system on international drug policy and practice, facilitating the exchange of information between civil society and UN agencies, member states, and other relevant UN bodies.

About the National Campaign for Harm Reduction Funding (NCHRF)

The National Campaign for Harm Reduction Funding is a growing coalition of non-profit organizations, service providers, academics, activists, and members of the faith-based community that have come together to form a national voice requesting \$15 billion of federal funding over four years to fund low-threshold harm reduction services across the US.

About The Levenson Foundation

The Levenson Foundation is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that works with the particularly disadvantaged worldwide, with a deep expertise in clinical treatment and addiction recovery processes.

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