



## **IDPC Contribution to the Global Coalition to Address Synthetic Drug Threats**

The International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC), a global network of 196 members from 75 countries, has submitted the following four main recommendations and observations to the Global Coalition to Address Synthetic Drug Threats to support their work to generate actions and collaboration in response to the rise in synthetic drug markets. These submissions have been made via the open call coordinated by the Vienna and New York NGO Committees on Drugs.

### **1. Data**

Firstly, efforts to raise awareness of a fast-growing synthetic opioid overdose crisis must prioritise better data collection around the issue. It is a significant failing of UNODC and the World Drug Reports, that 2019 global data (around 500,000 drug-related deaths per year) are still being reported in 2023. In contrast, the IDPC ‘Shadow Report’ for the midterm review in 2024<sup>1</sup> highlights how out-dated this number likely is: available regional and national data point to an alarming rise, with more than 100,000 overdose deaths in 2022 in the USA alone. Better data will also clarify that this is a problem caused by fentanyl and other high-potency synthetic opioids – and not by tramadol and other synthetic drugs that are targeted by some governments, especially in Africa. Furthermore, data should be disaggregated by age, gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status, as preliminary research from civil society shows the disproportionate impacts of overdose poisoning deaths on people of African descent and people living in poverty.

### **2. Focus on Health**

Linked to the above, and building on the groundbreaking 2024 CND resolution on overdose,<sup>2</sup> this crisis has to be seen first and foremost as a health crisis that requires a robust, evidence-based health response. It requires greater access to, and funding for, essential and lifesaving harm reduction and treatment services: widespread access to naloxone (including peer distribution), drug checking services, needle and syringe programmes, overdose prevention sites / drug consumption rooms, low threshold access to opioid antagonist treatment, as well as safer supply programmes. These are the strongest lines of defence we have against escalating death rates. Energy and resources must not be misspent on scaling up punitive responses, law enforcement or the stigmatisation of drug use – these will simply keep people from accessing help, and place them more at risk.

### **3. Root Cause of the Problem**

Thirdly, the rhetoric around the response to rising synthetic drug use and supply continues to omit one key reality: these high-risk changes to drug markets are a direct result of the international drug control system itself. As early as 2008, UNODC acknowledged “unintended

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<sup>1</sup> <https://idpc.net/publications/2023/12/idpc-shadow-report-2024>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.unodc.org/documents/commissions/CND/CND\\_Sessions/CND\\_67/Documents/ECN72024L5Rev2\\_unedited\\_revised.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/commissions/CND/CND_Sessions/CND_67/Documents/ECN72024L5Rev2_unedited_revised.pdf)

consequences” of the system they oversee – including a lucrative, global criminal market, the treatment of people who use drugs as criminals, and “substance displacement” which was even back then identified as the cause of “the increasing popularity of synthetic drugs”.<sup>3</sup> Government attempts to arrest, incarcerate and punish as a way to overcome the overdose crisis are doomed to fail, and will simply be fuelling stigmatising, ill-informed mantras at the cost of human lives. Responding to the overdose crisis also requires decriminalising drug use and related activities, to remove all sanctions against people who use drugs - as well as the consideration of responsible regulation for all drugs - as recommended by the OHCHR<sup>4</sup> among others. This crisis should also be an opening for serious, honest international debate about how to modernise an out-dated drug control system to respond effectively to the current realities.

#### **4. Civil Society Engagement**

Finally, with the Global Coalition initiative set to end in 2024, it is essential that **civil society** is included in all future efforts. NGOs, and especially those with lived experience, have an irreplaceable role to play in designing, implementing and evaluating the response at all levels. Their engagement should not be an afterthought, nor a box-checking exercise – but a commitment to use their expertise and experience to help save lives.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.unodc.org/documents/commissions/CND/CND\\_Sessions/CND\\_51/1\\_CRPs/E-CN7-2008-CRP17\\_E.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/commissions/CND/CND_Sessions/CND_51/1_CRPs/E-CN7-2008-CRP17_E.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/calls-for-input/2023/call-inputs-ohchrs-report-human-rights-challenges-addressing-and-countering>