

**Youth
Response
to the 2023
World Drug
Report**

DEVELOPED BY
PARADIGMA YOUTH COALITION



ABOUT US

Paradigma is a global coalition of youth-led organisations working towards a new paradigm in drug policy.

Paradigma's mission is to serve as a multilateral support system for young people in international drugs related policy advocacy by coordinating our efforts at the UN as well as educating and updating members about the processes in global drug policy making. The Paradigma Coalition was formed following the 2016 United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Drugs (UNGASS).

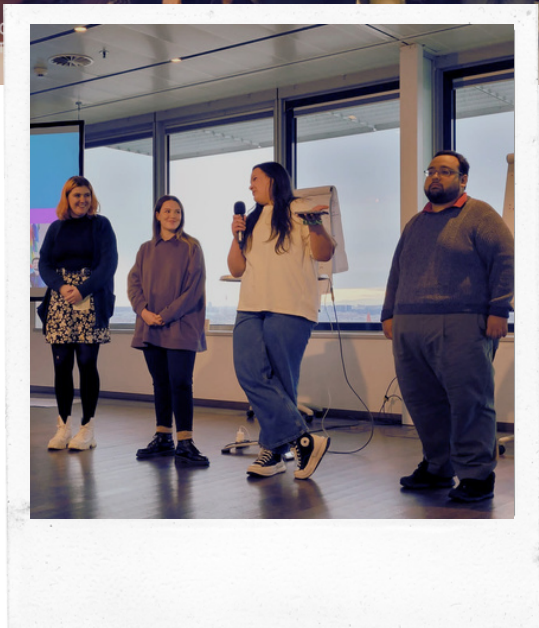
This Youth Response is the second of its kind from the Paradigma Coalition, with the release of our Youth Response to the [2021 World Drug Report](#) in 2021.

AUTHORS

Charity Monareng
Ruby Lawlor
Iulia Vatau
Rebeca Marques Rocha
Arvy Kumar
Rebeca Calzada
Jesse Hudspeth

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ACRONYMS, ABBREVIATIONS AND DEFINITIONS

- **YPWUD** - Young People Who Use Drugs
- **PWUD** - People Who Use Drugs
- **WDR** - World Drug Report
- **Harm Reduction** - Harm reduction refers to policies, programmes and practices that aim to minimise the negative health, social and legal impacts associated with drug use, drug policies and drug laws. Harm reduction is grounded in justice and human rights. It focuses on positive change and on working with people without judgement, coercion, discrimination, or requiring that people stop using drugs as a precondition of support.
- **Drug Checking** - Drug-checking services enable individual drug users to have their drugs chemically analysed, providing information on the content of the samples as well as advice, and, in some cases, counselling or brief interventions. Service aims vary, ranging from information collection to harm reduction by informing and warning users about the drugs on the market.

OPENING REMARKS

We would like to commend the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime on developing the World Drug Report (WDR), as it provides both governments and civil society with essential information on global developments in drug cultivation, trafficking and consumption, that in turn could inform future policy decisions.

Throughout this response, **the Paradigma Youth Coalition wishes to highlight the significant progress that has been made by the international community, whilst equally providing youth-informed insights** on ways the WDR could further enhance the provision of meaningful data and representation of young people that could, in turn, better advise governments, international bodies and civil society moving forward.

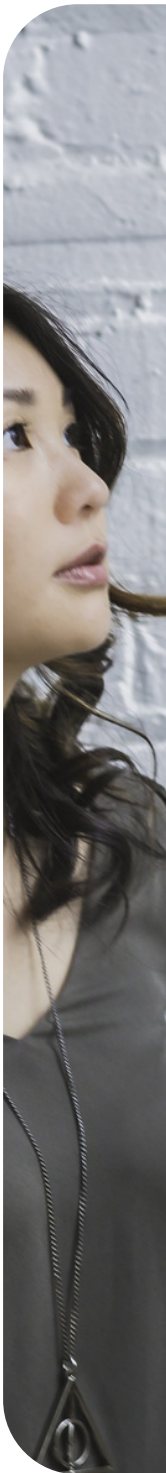
This response also highlights the welcomed focus on the inequalities exacerbating health problems associated with drug use, the intersecting harms of drug policy responses on the environment and on those impacted by conflict and crime, the illicit supply innovations being used by producers and manufacturers, and a focus on the shifting policies worldwide. We respond to these **highlights with recommendations on how to better frame these topics and explain the impact of these topics on young people, from young people.**

INEQUALITIES EXACERBATING HEALTH PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH DRUG USE

Barriers to Accessing Treatment & Harm Reduction for Young People Who Use Drugs

We commend the UNODC for its focus during this year's WDR on the health impact of socio-economic inequalities. We firmly believe that such a thematic direction should continue to remain a priority in the organization's mission as stipulated in the 2016 UNGASS Outcome Document and the 2019 Ministerial Declaration. **We particularly appreciate that the WDR raises awareness on the lack of availability of pharmaceutical opioids for medical consumption in regions such as Asia and Africa** and thus highlighting continuing discrepancies between the Global North and South.

In the section on Barriers to Treatment, there is a welcomed focus on women who use drugs, as this is a population often silenced in regards to responses to drug use. Given the increasing documentation of the challenges in access to harm reduction, including treatment services, that YPWUD face, this WDR missed an opportunity to specifically mention these challenges, and to more broadly highlight the barriers to accessing harm reduction services. It is well known amongst our networks as young people who use drugs (YPWUD) that there are often severe barriers to non-forced or coerced treatment and harm reduction (especially for opioid substitution therapy) faced by YPWUD. **We implore UNODC to focus on highlighting these challenges in future publications.**



Some of the evidenced barriers to harm reduction and non-coerced treatment for YPWUD include, stigma and discrimination, privacy concerns, inadequate harm reduction and treatment services, fragmented and a lack of comprehensive youth-friendly and youth led services, and a concerning lack of information on the available services where they do exist. **Fear of stigmatization and discrimination from service providers result in YPWUD avoiding vital services and seeking healthcare.** YPWUD also have valid concerns over our privacy and it is evidenced that young adults are more likely than their older counterparts to report privacy concerns due to **fears of monitoring of their drug use and legal repercussions.**

The meaningful inclusion of young people who use or have used drugs is fundamental to ensuring accessible harm reduction. Youth continue to be excluded from harm reduction programming and policymaking; when they are included, it is often a tokenistic effort that **lacks clear expectations and equitable work conditions**, while rarely being afforded agency and autonomy over decision-making at the service and in policy that affects them.

To learn more about the barriers that YPWUD face in accessing harm reduction and treatment services can be found in this **article written by young people** working in harm reduction around the world. Further information on how harm reduction services are working to ensure their services are youth-friendly can be found in a **report by Youth RISE** about harm reduction services for young people who inject drugs.

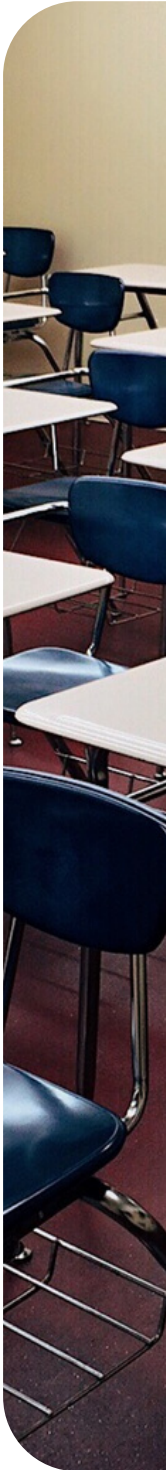
INEQUALITIES EXACERBATING HEALTH PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH DRUG USE

Drug Education in Schools

The 2023 World Drug Report mentions that drug use is generally higher amongst school students than the general population. Given this continued upward trend of adolescents and young people using drugs, we must ensure that they receive drug education in schools that keeps them safe from possible related harms. It is evidenced that the past, and for the most part current drug education modules worldwide that use **fear-mongering techniques and scare tactics do not serve their purpose of preventing drug use**. We must work together to create drug education modules that **provide essential harm reduction information**, and promote making informed and conscious decisions about using drugs.

It is also crucial that schools endure to be a safe place for young people, where they are not subjected to inhumane **strip searches for drugs**, and do not suspend or expel school-goers for drug use or possession, hindering their **ability to access education and personal development and isolating them from their peers**.

We look to the curriculum created by the Drug Policy Alliance and now hosted by Stanford Medicine REACH Lab, named: **Safety First: A Comprehensive, Harm-Reduction-Based, Drug Intervention Curriculum**. Unlike abstinence-only programs, Safety First is based on the philosophy of harm reduction. Abstinence is explained as the safest possible choice for young people to make regarding substance use, but this programme also provides adolescents with essential information to keep themselves and their peers safe if and when they do encounter alcohol or other drugs.



INEQUALITIES EXACERBATING HEALTH PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH DRUG USE

Cannabis Use Amongst Young People Who Use Drugs

The legalisation of cannabis has gained significant attention, with various countries and states adopting different approaches and while legalisation offers opportunities for regulation and control, it seems to not dissuade youth from consuming cannabis, as highlighted in the WDR. In light of this, and in light of the above mentioned concerns, there remain questions regarding approaches to **drug education and messaging aimed at young people to minimise harm and provide responsible cannabis use**. Cannabis-related messaging continues to focus on risk and harm and often adopts a narrow view of how young people may use cannabis. **The traditional risk-based messaging often does not resonate with the way many young people experience cannabis use.**

It should also be noted, and as highlighted by the [INCB's report on cannabis](#), that there is a greater willingness for individuals to report the use of cannabis when it is not illegal. As such, a higher reported rate of use, especially after legalisation, does not necessarily indicate that actual prevalence has increased. **It is therefore crucial to take into account the differences and similarities between the regions when assessing the effects of legalisation and the prevalence of cannabis use among young people** and to highlight innovative approaches that will reach a wide range of young people through youth inclusive education and harm reduction programs.

And although legalisation has not dissuaded youth consumption, it does afford a tremendous opportunity to **invest in new programming and partnerships that will promote young people's health literacy around cannabis consumption.**



ILLEGAL DRUG ECONOMIES: CONVERGING CRIMES AND CONFLICT

We commend UNODC for including a chapter in this year's WDR focusing on the environmental impacts of drug trafficking, taking the Amazon Basin as a case study. Such a topic had already been explored in previous research and reports by civil society and NGOs (for instance, [Transform Drugs](#), [TNI \[a & b\]](#), [OSF](#) and [WOLA](#)). **It is encouraging to see the debate gaining more prominence at the United Nations.**

Going forward, it is important to acknowledge and reflect on how the security policies used to respond to drug trafficking activities **are also bringing side effects to local communities and the environment in which they live.**

For instance, the WDR mentions the latest evidence regarding the impacts of forcibly eradicating illegal crops (through both manual eradication and aerial spraying). It acknowledges the negative effects of the practice on the environment, the health of local communities and population displacement while highlighting the failure of such policies in reducing illegal crops. In future publications, **a phenomenon that deserves exploration is how current drug policy approaches have fueled the so-called “Balloon Effect”**, a well-worn analogy used to illustrate the process by which drug production is displaced across national borders in order to evade eradication efforts. **We have seen such a phenomenon happen in Colombia and Peru.**



Therefore it is evident that ‘doubling down’ on drug eradication efforts in the name of the War on Drugs will continue to harm communities, the environment with little to no success in achieving actual eradication of crops. Moreover, the violence unfolded in contexts like Mexico has had negative effects on the research, protection, and preservation of flora and fauna in specific ecosystems.

Said violence also represents a threat to researchers, including young researchers. Recently, a report by [Mongabay](#) documented the murder of a young biologist (31 years old) in June 2023. He was collecting samples of a shrub he was investigating as part of his doctoral research. **During the same month, two other researchers were killed, and other students have also received threats.** This illustrates how conducting fieldwork in certain places has become increasingly risky and threatening for scientists.

Their work is essential for understanding what is happening in nature and, consequently, for conserving species. **Scientific enrichment enables the conservation of flora and fauna that are currently endangered.**

It deserves to be highlighted how the local criminal trend in the Amazon basin is also, in part, the result of security responses to criminal networks. In Brazil, Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) and Comando Vermelho (CV) - the current leading drug trafficking groups in the region - have expanded their activities from São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro to the Amazon basin after Brazilian authorities moved their leaderships to the federal prison system in Manaus. **Such a move allowed for the establishment of alliances and fostered the expansion and innovation of transnational drug trafficking business models,** bringing along increased levels of violence and bloodshed - as acknowledged in the WDR.

The strengthening of gangs after zero-tolerance security policies is not a phenomenon exclusive to the Brazilian context. Across Latin America, the approach brought disastrous side effects and proved to be counterproductive in several experiences, such as in the [case of El Salvador and Honduras](#). Such examples provide clarity that the incarceration of leaders and high profile members of criminal networks does not achieve the aim of **reducing drug crime in the long term, and therefore the harmful impact of such approaches are far outweighing the desired successes that underlie such approaches.**

Studies have shown that the current “War on Drugs” contributes to the “professionalization” of crime, the overpopulation of the prison system, and the spread of gang presence. It also leads to the escalation and banalization of violence, justified by the “war on crime”, which fosters the image of gang members as “warriors”. Moreover, it feeds grievances among gang members, police force and civil society, undermining possibilities of building peaceful agreements (Barbosa, 2017; Erez, 2013; Fernandes, 2013; Zaluar, 2012; Guerardi, 2011; Rivera 2010).

The World Drug Report 2023 showed how violence levels are consistently rising in the region, and this is fueled by both illegal drug trades and zero-tolerance security responses. Indeed, it is mentioned how cities in the Amazon basin have homicide rates per capita higher than national averages. A [study](#) developed by the Institute of Applied Economic Research published in June 2023 during the Public Security Forum in Brazil estimated that each Brazilian has a 4.2-month reduction in their life expectancy due to the effects of the war on drugs. The sum of all lifetimes lost due to drug-related homicides amounts to 1.14 million years. **The same study also calculated that the country loses at least 50 billion reais (210 million dollars) per year as a result of the prohibition of drug use and repression of trafficking.**

We must think about the long-term impact that living in such a violent context casts on youth. The frequency of trauma, the different types of violence exposure in urban areas and their effects on the mental health of adolescents in developing countries are poorly investigated. **A recent study investigated the topic following adolescents living in underserved communities in Rio de Janeiro and frequently exposed to violent clashes between drug trafficking groups and the military police.** The research found that 7.8% of these teenagers experienced post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Such an investigation could be expanded in the next WDR.

Moreover, the recruitment of minors by gangs is a serious problem in countries in the region, with numerous reports from the area pointing to an alarming rate of child involvement in gang activity. For instance, in **Colombia** one of the most common ways in which children are involved in the drug trade is through farming illicit crops. In **Mexico**, children have frequently been employed as "sicaritos," or child assassins, to carry out hits and torture for drug cartels. Minors are frequently recruited by these activities due to different sentences attributed to crimes in the criminal justice system and also because young people are valuable assets for criminal groups. **A child or young teenager is far less likely to arouse the suspicion of authorities. They also represent a cheaper source of manpower than an adult.** Children are also far easier to manipulate than adults, especially if they are plied with narcotics. This is a common tactic, as evidenced by the **numerous accounts** of young recruits reporting that they were acting under the influence of drugs.

Such practices are enabled via a complex interplay of factors almost always linked to the child's survival. **A research carried out by the NGO Observatório de Favelas in 2018 investigated the profile of children and adolescents who are cooptated by drug trafficking** groups in Rio de Janeiro. With an average of 12 years old, most enter with the intention of earning income to support the family. **Clearly, economic and social factors should be addressed, including basic infrastructure and market access.** A number of alternative development programs relating to illicit crop production provide **important lessons** for policy makers in this regard. We encourage such lessons to be further explored in future publications of the World Drug Report.

The health of young people living in the region must be another priority in the drug policies employed in the region. The WDR has shown how criminal activities curb the access of local communities to life-saving health services, such as harm reduction. As we mentioned before, **the War on Drugs fosters the cooptation of minors by drug trafficking groups, and this often leads to early use of narcotics.** It also pollutes ecosystems with hazardous chemicals that can result in long-term health complications. Ensuring a positive future for the future generation in the Amazon basin means **investing less in security weaponry and more on health, education, and employment opportunities that can provide youngsters with the needed conditions for their full development.**

We appreciate the in-depth investigation of the impacts that drug trafficking and convergence crime have on local communities and the ecosystem in which they live. The focus on the rights and security of indigenous communities, which are especially impacted, is of vital importance. **This year's WDR has innovated in data collection by including new indicators and topics in its analysis.** It has also developed new online tools for interacting with the wealth of evidence gathered. We also encourage UNODC and government authorities to collaborate with existing civil society efforts for **collecting further data that enables the analysis of areas of knowledge that remain under-investigated.**

This year's WDR illustrates how drug challenges are deeply linked with other areas, such as security, health, development and the environment. The findings also provide evidence of how the phenomenon is connected to human rights' violations - briefly mentioned on page 13 of the WDR. In the future, **we encourage the inclusion of a chapter that further discusses the connection between drug challenges, control strategies and human rights.**

Challenging contexts call for multidimensional and holistic responses. **The WDR mentions how socio-economic factors such as lack of access to education, flawed state presence and unemployment may also contribute to the continuity of drug trafficking** and convergence crime. It is important that responses to tackle such challenges rely not only on security-led approaches, implementing innovative policies that focus on education, health, development and human rights.

With 2030 closer on the horizon, the impacts of climate change are being felt more frequently while much is being said about the sustainable development goals. Policies that keep the SDG in their sights should involve all affected stakeholders and center around promoting the well-being of all people on the long term.

Evidence-based drug policy starts with good evidence and ends with policy reform. This WDR is a first step to informing innovative policies that can shift the current approach and contribute to shaping a positive future for the next generations.

ILLEGAL SUPPLY INNOVATIONS AND SYNTHETIC DRUGS

The WDR equally raises awareness on recent shifts in supply chain production as a result of increasing synthetic drug production. Such developments have altered the structure of labor supply and shortened supply chains. The opioid crisis in North America continues, leading to 70,000 out of 80,000 overdoses from pharmaceutical opioids. At the same time, we see that new synthetic cannabinoids are entering the market to avoid current laws restricting cannabis use. **The 2023 EMCDDA Report also shows that the availability and production of synthetic cathinones in Europe is increasing.**

Such developments are reflective of current prohibitive policies and schedules that prevent product regulation and maintain barriers against access to treatment and drug checking services. In this context, as youth, we welcome more insights from UNODC on the systemic challenges that restrict the provision of these key forms of harm reduction and urge the international community to **reconsider the current schedules outlined by the 1961 and 1971 International Drug Control Conventions.**

As seen in peer-reviewed research from Loop UK, it is important to **provide drug-checking services to the most marginalized communities.** YPWUD are more likely to receive contaminated supply and less likely to use drug-checking facilities in safe consumption rooms. At-home reagent kits are also often insufficient to distinguish analogs, thus overlooking potentially significant differences in neurotoxicity and contraindication. **The current prohibitive conditions thus leave young people as particularly vulnerable.**



Access to drug checking is at the core of consumer rights and informed consent, rights which are weakened by the current illegal environment.

Providing streamlined access to informed use is crucial for any strategy that plans to offset the major public health costs of substance use in teenagers and young adults. Festivals, nightlife spaces, and youth recreation centers ought to benefit from access to such services. **The availability of drug checking resources and harm reduction driven education need to become a priority for policy stakeholders.**

We appreciate that the WDR also sheds light in this section on the growing platform constituted by social media and digital communication at large in low-level drug transactions.

It is essential to acknowledge that while darknet marketplaces account for a small share of drug transactions, they nonetheless pose unique problems in light of their volatility and specialized focus. In line with our previous points, **we believe that important discussions need to be conducted within the international community regarding the influence of our currently rigid drug laws over the creation of these illegal market conditions.** We also recognise the opportunity that these digital marketplaces provide, to conduct harm reduction counselling on these platforms, as outlined in **EHRA's Peer-to-Peer Counselor Manual for Online Consultations.**

Overall, it is our hope that the valuable data already displayed in the 2023 World Drug Report in relation to Illegal Supply Innovations will be supplemented by more in-depth discussions on supporting access to harm reduction interventions including high quality drug checking services, as well as peer-to-peer education both virtually and in-person, particularly for young people who have been amongst the groups most severely impacted by current market conditions. **Reform, especially with regard to current international schedules, needs to be at the forefront of the international policy agenda.**

SHIFTING POLICY AND RESEARCH

The World Drug Report notes the success of innovations in drug service provision during the COVID-19 pandemic, this is a welcomed note as communities fought hard to ensure that PWUD could still receive their essential services. These peer-led innovations are documented by INPUD and sparked the global campaign titled [#PeersInThePandemic run by INPUD](#) at the end of 2020 which called for reforms to harm reduction and treatment systems in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is much concern for the impact of cannabis regulation efforts around the world in this year's WDR, stating that the public opinion is changing and people are more open to legalisation of non-medical use of cannabis (in places where markets are minimally regulated). **It is important to note our significant concerns around cannabis regulation - corporate capture** (although it is mentioned in this WDR that there is a concern over corporate capture of psychedelics), **and further marginalization of indigenous communities and people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, which is lacking in this WDR.**

The World Drug Report states that regulatory approaches that ensure limited product availability, with proven safety and efficacy, can address 'legitimate' medical needs by making available medical products for the conditions for which scientific evidence is available. They also state that such approaches may also limit potential spillover into a non-medical or recreational use market. **This demonstrates a disconnect between earlier parts of the WDR where it is acknowledged that harsher regulation of drugs results in the growth and diversification of illicit markets.**



UNODC is concerned that the perception of psychedelics as remedies for mental health disorders is moving faster than scientific evidence is accumulated to support and guide these remedies. This demonstrates a continued lack of recognition of these remedies being used and documented by indigenous communities for thousands of years and the continued use of these remedies in these communities after prohibition.

It appears to continue a trend of a lack of concern for Black, Brown and Indigenous communities, as now that use of psychedelics is increasing amongst white people and becoming more accepted amongst this population, governments (particularly in USA states) are starting to be concerned about 'lack of scientific evidence' and health concerns. It is also important to note that said scientific evidence could have been collected and analyzed prior to this increased use of psychedelics remedies, **but the drug conventions and related national laws halted these research efforts.**

We implore governments and international bodies to ramp up their scientific evidence gathering and analysis to match the use of psychedelics as remedies, and to meaningfully include Indigenous communities in this research.

CONCLUSIVE REMARKS AND KEY TAKEAWAYS

We greatly welcome the chapter of this year's WDR on **Illegal Drug Economies: Converging Crimes and Conflict**, as it is essential we look at **the impact that the current drug policy regimes** have had on Indigenous communities, young people, the local economies and the degradation of the environment. We wish to see this focus continued and expanded, **and for a shift in the framing of these challenges from a punitive perspective to one that showcases the root cause of these impacts - the War on Drugs**. In the future, we encourage the inclusion of a chapter that further discusses the connection between drug challenges, control strategies and human rights.

We call for more insights from UNODC on the systemic challenges that **restrict the provision essential life-saving harm reduction, including drug checking**, and urge the international community to reconsider the current schedules outlined by the 1961 and 1971 International Drug Control Conventions. In regards to the continued increase in use of digital markets for drugs, we urge the UNODC to highlight the **opportunities to promote harm reduction messaging on these platforms, as outlined in EHRA's Peer-to-Peer Counselor Manual for Online Consultations**.

Finally, we urge governments and international bodies to build up the scientific **evidence on psychedelic therapy, and include Indigenous communities in this research**.

