



Addressing the Human Rights Impact of Synthetic Drugs: Challenges for Vulnerable Groups in the Americas

Nick Boyce: Enforcement elevates risks and harms for people who use drugs and for their communities

Organized by México Unido Contra la Delincuencia, A.C. with the support of the Drug Policy Alliance, Elementa DDHH and the Washington Office on Latin America Hybrid

68th session of the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs
Tuesday March 11, 2025



1



Description

In the context of the increasing diversification of the drug market, compounded by the proliferation of novel substances, particularly synthetic drugs, countries across the Americas are confronted with a range of distinct human rights challenges. This side event aims to explore and expose the multifaceted impacts of these developments, emphasizing the resultant escalation of violence and public health crises. Special attention will be given to the disproportionate effects experienced by vulnerable groups, including drug users, women, indigenous peoples, individuals experiencing homelessness, among others. The event will conclude with a discussion of proven health approaches to address overdose deaths.

Speakers

- **Steve Rolles** is Senior Policy Analyst at Transform Drug Policy Foundation, an independent, UK-based charity working nationally and internationally towards a just and effective system of [legal regulation](#) for all drugs.
- **Nick Boyce** is Policy Director at the Canadian Drug Policy Coalition, a national, non-partisan organization working to advance drug policy grounded in public health and human rights in Canada.
- **Renata Demichelis** is Director for Mexico at Elementa, a human rights organization based in Mexico and Colombia working to address the impacts of drug prohibition policies and ensuring the right to truth, justice, memory and reparation for the victims.
- **Lisa Sanchez** is the Executive Director of Mexico United against Crime, a civil society organization advocating for citizen security, justice and peace in Mexico and Latin America.
- **Theshia Naidoo** is a director of policy advocacy at the Drug Policy Alliance, a U.S.-based organization working to address the harms of drug use and drug criminalization through policy solutions, organizing, and public education.



2

Welcome and introduction remarks

Moderator: John Walsh, WOLA

Prohibition and synthetic drugs (synthetic drugs markets as outcomes of prohibition itself)

Steve Rolles - Transform Drug Policy Foundation

Enforcement elevates risks and harms for people who use drugs and for their communities

Nick Boyce, Canadian Drug Policy

A crisis without borders: fentanyl overdoses and the difficult situation of people who use drugs on the Mexican side of the U.S. border

Renata Demichelis, Elementa DDHH

Beyond the United States: the harms of militarized responses to the fentanyl overdose crisis

Lisa Sanchez, MUCD.

Health approaches and declines in overdose deaths in the US

Theshia Naidoo, DPA (will discuss)

Q&A and closing remarks

3

Drug prohibition, scheduling and law enforcement drive expansion, diversification and toxicity of the unregulated drug supply

- Suppliers prefer:
 - Easier to produce drugs
 - Fields of poppies for heroin; small lab for fentanyl
 - Easier to traffic (more concentrated) drugs
- Ban drugs or precursor chemicals
 - Novel substances replace them
- 1920's alcohol prohibition
 - Quality beer → toxic moonshine



4

Have a listen...

CBC Radio: On The Go with Krissy Holmes

Jan. 15, 2025: Drugs crackdown strategy (12 minutes)

<https://www.cbc.ca/listen/live-radio/1-47-on-the-go/clip/16121507-drugs-crackdown-strategy>

5

February 2025: Canadian Border Services and Royal Canadian Mounted Police seizure of “synthetic opioids more potent than fentanyl”

<https://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/en/news/2025/cbsa-and-rcmp-joint-investigation-leads-criminal-charges-and-the-seizure-synthetic-opioids>

"This collaboration between RCMP Federal Police and the CBSA has resulted in a rapid response to protect the safety of our communities. We are very concerned that synthetic opioids are making their way onto our streets. This extremely toxic substance severely amplifies the risk of accidental overdose for all drug users. The RCMP is committed to battling transnational organized crime at all levels in Ontario, Canada and abroad."

- Inspector Nicole Noonan, Officer in charge of Federal Policing - Integrated Response & Organized Crime, Royal Canadian Mounted Police



6

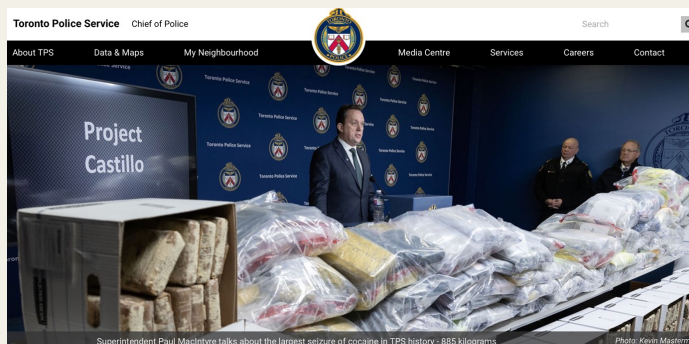
January 2025: Largest Cocaine Seizure in Toronto Police Services History

<https://www.tps.ca/media-centre/stories/largest-cocaine-seizure-in-tps-history/>

A five-month investigation has resulted in the largest cocaine seizure in Toronto Police Service's history preventing violence and saving lives across the country.

"I can tell you that getting 835 kilograms of cocaine off our streets will make a huge difference for the well-being of our communities. And not only our communities in Toronto but across the country, as we know that some of these drugs were destined for other regions, from Newfoundland to British Columbia. When we get illicit drugs off our streets, we literally save lives. We protect people, we prevent violence and we break up criminal networks. This will always be our top priority."

- Chief Myron Demkiw



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7

January 2025: Largest Cocaine Seizure in Toronto Police Services History

<https://www.tps.ca/media-centre/stories/largest-cocaine-seizure-in-tps-history/>

"The reduced accessibility means fewer opportunities for these drugs to enter and infiltrate vulnerable communities. As you know, the illicit drug supply fuels Canada's ongoing public health crisis.

Each kilogram of cocaine removed from our streets represents lives potentially saved from overdose."

- Organized Crime Enforcement Superintendent Paul MacIntyre



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8

Law enforcement arrests and seizures

Underlying assumptions/narratives:

- Interrupt organized crime groups
- Reduce crime
- Reduce drug use
- Reduce drug related harms such as overdose
- Saves lives

Realities of “drug busts”

People still want or need drugs

- Withdrawal / reduced tolerance / different supply
 - Increases risk of fatal and non-fatal overdose
- Need to purchase drugs
 - Increases engagement with unregulated illegal drug market and criminalized income generation

Suppliers / organized crime

- More sales - more income
- “Turf wars” - increases gang violence

Harm reduction / treatment efforts

- Complicates peer-based outreach
- Complicates withdrawal and treatment as new drugs introduced to markets

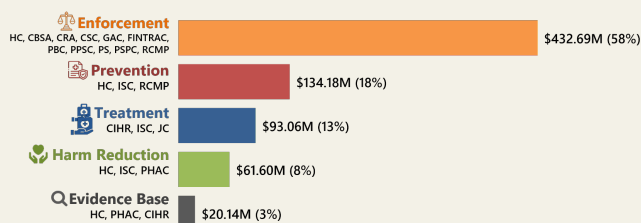
Prohibition / Criminalization = STIGMA

- You can not destigmatize something that is criminalized

Resources

- Despite huge investments in drug interdiction and policing
- We have never stopped the supply of drugs
- Drives an increasingly synthetic, variable, potent illegal drug supply
- Non-investment in social determinants of health
 - Housing, daycare, mental health, income security, family supports
- Prohibition does not address demand for drugs or reasons people use

CDSS Actual Spending by Pillar (% of Total Actual Spending), 2017-2022



Amounts exclude internal service costs and lead role.

Source: <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/corporate/transparency/corporate-management-reporting/evaluation/canadian-drugs-substances-strategy.html>

11

Readings...

A scoping review of law enforcement drug seizures and overdose mortality in the United States, Manuel Cano et al.

- Int J Drug Policy. 2024 Feb
- <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/38211403/>

Spatiotemporal Analysis Exploring the Effect of Law Enforcement Drug Market Disruptions on Overdose, Indianapolis, Indiana, 2020–2021

- AJPH, July 2023 113 750-758
- <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/10.2105/AJPH.2023.307291>

Police seizure of drugs without arrest among people who use drugs in Vancouver, Canada, before provincial 'decriminalization' of simple possession: a cohort study

- Harm Reduct J. 2023 Aug 30;20(1)
- <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/37644428>

Effect of drug law enforcement on drug market violence: a systematic review

- Int J Drug Policy 2011 Mar;22(2):87-94
- <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/21392957>

12

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