



Message from the Director

from the EU drugs agency in Lisbon



EMCDDA DIRECTOR ALEXIS GOOSDEEL

What are the lessons to be learnt from the European Drug Report 2021?



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The new EU Drugs Strategy 2021–25 makes explicit that the European response to drugs should be evidence-based and delivered through a balanced and integrated approach, which ultimately must be judged on its impact on the health, safety and wellbeing of our citizens. The **European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA)** is tasked with helping to provide the evidence needed to ensure that European policies and actions on drugs are effective, well-targeted and responsive to new threats and challenges.

The *European Drug Report 2021*, launched today, arrives at a difficult time for meeting this objective, as the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted greatly on all areas of life, including the drug situation and our ability to monitor it. I am therefore extremely pleased that we

can still provide the detailed analysis presented in this report, which includes an early assessment of the effect of the pandemic on drug markets and drug use. However, I also believe the value of our work is not simply delivered through accurately documenting past events. We also need to look forward and consider what lessons emerge from the findings of the report in order to ensure that we continue in the future to provide the relevant and timely information required to keep our policies and actions commensurate with the growing challenges we face in the drugs area.

In 2019, the EMCDDA conducted, with its stakeholders, a foresight and horizon-scanning exercise to increase our awareness of how the evolution of the drug situation may impact on our work. Among the overarching conclusions of this work was that many of the factors that would shape the drug problems of the future were external ones. Globalisation, developments in information technology, demographic shifts, alongside issues like climate change and human migration, are likely to have important implications for the future drug problems we face. We already see this, as both the drug market and patterns of drug use are becoming ever more dynamic, complex and globally connected. This has made us reflect on the need for more timely reporting, and to consider if both the data sources we use and the targets we select for our analysis are sufficient to meet both current and future policy development needs.

What we did not expect was that the events of 2020 would demonstrate so profoundly the importance of this reflection. Within a few weeks, we needed to reorientate our work to support our stakeholders by providing enhanced resources for sharing information and best practices. The speed of developments required us to recognise that this could only be achieved through a more interactive model for knowledge co-production. I am proud of the work of the EMCDDA during this period, but I recognise that this was only possible because of the input we received from stakeholders across Europe. Particularly important

was the possibility provided by our [Reitox network](#) of national focal points to engage in an ongoing conversation on national responses to the pandemic. This highlighted the value of sharing experiences and preliminary information when there is a need for rapid action. Beyond this, we also launched a series of trendspotter studies to collate qualitative and emerging quantitative data to provide a near real-time complementary data source to accompany our routine monitoring information. The latest insights from our [third COVID-19 trendspotter](#), published recently, are summarised in the report. These results are preliminary, but they help us identify some of the possible longer-term effects of the pandemic on drug markets, drug use and our responses.

Despite interdiction efforts, all our routine indicators suggest that, at the beginning of 2020, the European drug market was characterised by the widespread availability of a diverse range of drugs of increasingly high purity or potency. This is illustrated by the large seizures of cocaine and other drugs we observed during 2020. We can also see from a range of indicators that patterns of use are becoming more complex, with people who use drugs being presented with a greater selection of substances. This is creating various health harms, as a result of the use of more novel substances or from the interaction of the effects when multiple substances are used in combination. This convinces me that we need to invest more in understanding the implications of patterns of polydrug use and how they can increase harm. An example of this is visible in the growing concerns around the misuse of benzodiazepines diverted from therapeutic use or appearing as new benzodiazepines on the new psychoactive substances market. These substances can be harmful in themselves but when combined with opioids or alcohol they also increase the risk of overdose, though their role may go undetected. This kind of polydrug use, and more generally the growing importance of synthetic substances, highlights the urgent need to further develop forensic and toxicological resources if we are to better understand and respond to the increasingly complex drug problems we face today.

As you will see from the data presented in the report, cannabis is another area in which the issues we face are growing in complexity, which is only likely to increase in the future. We are seeing, partly because of developments outside of the European Union, more forms of cannabis appearing and new ways of consuming them emerging. Within Europe, we also see concerns growing about the availability of high-potency products on the one hand, and how to respond to low-THC products on the other hand. Synthetic cannabinoids, and the health risks they pose, only complicate this picture further, as evidenced by deaths reported in 2020 linked to the use of these substances and the fact that we have recently had to release public health alerts warning of the presence on the market of natural cannabis products adulterated with highly potent synthetic cannabinoids. I believe that providing policymakers with the up-to-date and scientifically robust information they need in this area will be of growing importance for the work of the EMCDDA over the coming years.

Drug production and trafficking appears to have adapted rapidly to pandemic-related restrictions, and we have seen little evidence of any major disruptions in supply. Social distancing measures may have affected retail drug dealing, but this appears to have led to a greater adoption of new technologies to facilitate drug distribution, possibly accelerating the trend we have seen in recent years, where the market is becoming increasingly digitally enabled. More positively, technology has also created opportunities for responding to drug problems. We can see this in the way that many drug services in Europe have also demonstrated resilience by adopting telemedicine approaches to allow them to continue offering support to people who use drugs during this difficult period.

The EMCDDA is also increasingly incorporating innovative approaches to monitoring and developing new data sources that complement established indicators. This is essential, in my view, if we are to keep pace with the changes we are seeing and meet our stakeholders' needs by reporting on the role drugs play in exacerbating problems across a broader set of policy areas. Digitalisation also offers us greater opportunities, I believe, in the future for working more dynamically and interactively with our stakeholders to ensure that our policies and actions in the drugs area are informed by a sound understanding of contemporary drug problems and shaped by a shared understanding of the most effective responses.

In conclusion, the data provided by the *European Drug Report 2021* illustrate how much the drug situation has changed over the last 25 years. The events of the past year also highlight a growing need to respond

rapidly, and this requires us to increase our capacity for the early identification of threats emerging from an increasingly dynamic and adaptive drug market. Today, drugs have become a much more pervasive problem, one that impacts in some way across all major policy areas. We also see diversification, both in the products available and the people who use them. To ensure we are well-prepared to meet the future consequences of this hyper-availability, we need urgently to recognise that not only is a wider variety of people now personally experiencing drug problems, but drug problems are impacting on our communities in a wider variety of ways. This is why I believe it is crucial, across the areas of social, health and security policy, to develop the evidence-based and integrated responses envisioned by the new EU drugs strategy.

European Drug Report 2021 — Available in 24 languages at www.emcdda.europa.eu/edr2021