

The Hidden Crisis: Uncovering the Illegal Drug Problem in Sri Lanka

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INTRODUCTION

The use of illegal drugs and its relationship with crimes is a complex and multifaceted topic. In the context of the use of illegal drugs, crimes examine the relationship between drug use and criminal behavior. Criminologists study patterns of drug-related offenses, the motivations behind drug-related crimes, and the impact of drug use on crime rates. There is a well-documented association between drug use and crime.

Drug use and criminal activity are often intertwined, with research indicating that while drug addiction does not necessarily transform non-violent individuals into violent criminals, the active use of drugs tends to elevate the frequency of criminal behaviors. This relationship highlights the complex and reciprocal nature of drug abuse and crime, where one exacerbates the other. To understand the full scope of this issue, it is essential to distinguish between two broad categories of crimes related to drug use: drug-defined crimes and drug-related crimes. Drug-defined crimes refer to offenses directly involving the illegal acquisition, possession, or use of controlled substances, while drug-related crimes encompass behaviors that arise as a result of the psychological, social, or financial consequences of drug use, such as theft, assault, or trafficking.

One of the key areas where drug use intersects with criminal activity is in the behavior of individuals with substance use disorders, particularly those dependent on heroin, cocaine, hashish, ice, or other opiates. These individuals are disproportionately involved in criminal behavior, especially acquisitive crimes, which are committed to support their addiction. Such crimes, including theft, robbery, and burglary, are often driven by the need to obtain money or goods that can be exchanged for drugs. The financial burden of sustaining a drug habit, particularly when the drugs

are expensive and hard to obtain, can push individuals toward criminal actions as a means of survival.

Substance abuse also plays a role in the commission of crimes that occur while an individual is under the influence of drugs. For example, drug users may engage in violent or reckless behavior as a result of the altered states caused by intoxication or withdrawal. In many cases, drugs impair judgment, lower inhibitions, and increase the likelihood of aggressive or irrational actions, leading to crimes like assault or domestic violence. Moreover, the physiological effects of drug use—such as mood swings, paranoia, and aggression—can provoke altercations and violent confrontations, further compounding the link between substance use and crime.

Another significant aspect of the relationship between drugs and crime is the involvement of organized criminal networks in the production, distribution, and trafficking of illicit substances. These activities often extend beyond individual criminal acts to encompass large-scale criminal enterprises, which engage in money laundering, political corruption, and violence to maintain and expand the drug trade. The drug market itself creates a criminal ecosystem in which illegal activities are necessary for its functioning, and the profits generated from drug trafficking are often reinvested into further illegal operations. Organized crime syndicates involved in the drug trade frequently engage in acts of violence to protect their interests, intimidate competitors, and exert control over drug distribution routes.

The high cost of illicit drugs, particularly those that are highly addictive, exacerbates the relationship between drug use and criminal behavior. Individuals who are dependent on these substances often feel desperate to fund their habit, and this desperation leads them to engage in a

variety of criminal activities. Additionally, the need for financial resources to purchase drugs or to maintain an addiction can perpetuate a cycle of criminality, making it difficult for individuals to break free from this pattern of behavior.

Ultimately, the connection between drugs and crime is multifaceted and deeply rooted in the social, psychological, and economic consequences of substance use. The pervasive need to fund drug habits, combined with the altered states caused by drug use, contributes to a range of criminal behaviors, from petty theft to violent crimes to large-scale organized criminal activity. Efforts to address this issue must take into account not only the legal consequences of drug use but also the broader social factors that drive individuals to engage in criminal acts in the first place.

ILLICIT DRUGS PROBLEM IN SRI LANKA

The illicit drug use problem in Sri Lanka has become a growing public health and social concern in recent years. Despite being a small island nation with a rich cultural heritage, Sri Lanka has not been immune to the global drug trade, which has led to increasing rates of drug abuse, trafficking, and related crimes. The use of illicit substances, including heroin, cannabis, methamphetamine, and synthetic drugs, has particularly surged in urban areas, affecting all segments of society, from youth to adults. The issue is further compounded by the ease of drug availability, the lack of sufficient rehabilitation services, and social factors such as poverty, unemployment, and family instability. The rise in drug-related crime, including violence, theft, and addiction-related health problems, has placed a strain on public health systems, law enforcement agencies, and communities.

Table 1: Drug-Related Arrest by Provinces-2023

Province	Heroin	Cannabis	Methamphetamine	Others (Hashish, Cocaine, and others)
North Central	2646	3812	482	194
Western	41189	28167	19948	5456
Southern	5648	8007	475	1115
Central	3032	5540	709	1797
Northern	1016	1334	250	318
Eastern	955	3430	578	692
Sabaragamuwa	1946	3064	486	232
North Western	5345	7231	611	1363
Uva	783	4605	199	297

Sources: Annual Report, Police Narcotic Bureau, 2023

This table presents drug-related arrests by province in Sri Lanka, with a breakdown for several types of drugs, namely Heroin, Cannabis, Methamphetamine, and other substances (including Hashish, Opium, Cocaine, Psychotropic Substances, and others).

In 2023, a total of 162,088 individuals were arrested for drug-related offenses across the island. Of these arrests, heroin-related offenses accounted for 66,142 individuals, representing 40.81% of the total. Cannabis-related offenses led to 68,458

arrests, making up 42.23% of the total, indicating its widespread use and cultivation. Methamphetamine-related arrests were 26,096, with 16.1% of the arrests, reflecting a significant concern over the rise of synthetic drugs. Additionally, 118 persons were arrested for cocaine-related offenses, and 136 individuals were detained for offenses related to hashish. These statistics underscore the broad spectrum of drug issues facing the region and the extensive efforts by law enforcement to address them (NDDCB 2023).

HEROIN

Heroin remains a significant concern, with over 40% of drug-related arrests tied to it. Despite the rise of synthetic opioids and other drugs, heroin continues to be a major contributor to drug-related crime and public health issues. The high number could reflect both widespread use and the strong demand for heroin, possibly due to ongoing addiction issues and trafficking networks.

The highest number of arrests related to heroin is in the Western Province (41,189 arrests), followed by the Southern Province (5,648). This suggests that heroin is a significant problem in these regions, possibly due to urbanization or higher population densities in the Western Province.

CANNABIS

Cannabis offenses make up the largest portion of drug-related arrests (68,458), though cannabis is increasingly being decriminalized or legalized in various regions around the world. The high percentage of cannabis arrests could suggest that, while cannabis may be less harmful than other illicit substances, law enforcement is still heavily targeting it. The number might also be influenced by the legal and policy framework in place—if cannabis remains illegal in some jurisdictions but its use is widespread, it could lead to a high arrest rate for what some may consider relatively minor offenses.

Similarly, Western Province leads in cannabis-related arrests (28,167). Cannabis use seems widespread across provinces, with North Western (7,231), Southern (8,007), and Central (5,540) also showing high numbers.

METHAMPHETAMINE

Methamphetamine-related offenses account for 16.1% of the total, a significant proportion given the rise of synthetic drugs globally. Methamphetamine use is often associated with severe addiction issues, social disruption, and significant public health challenges. The increasing number of arrests related to methamphetamine could indicate growing concerns about its availability, use, and the violence or criminal behavior often linked to it. The 16.1% figure underscores its prominence in law enforcement's concerns about synthetic drugs.

The number of methamphetamine-related arrests is relatively lower overall. However, the Western Province has the highest count (19,948), followed by Central (709) and Southern (475).

Cocaine-related arrests make up a very small fraction (0.07%) of the total arrests. This suggests that, while cocaine is often associated with high-profile drug trafficking organizations and serious health risks, it may not be as prevalent in terms of arrests in this particular region. The relatively low number might also reflect that cocaine, in comparison to heroin, cannabis, and methamphetamine, has a smaller user base in this region, or perhaps law enforcement prioritizes other substances.

Similarly, hashish-related arrests are very low (0.08%), indicating that hashish is either less common in the region or that arrests for hashish offenses are relatively rare. The number could also reflect regional differences in the legal status of hashish or lower levels of enforcement specifically targeting this substance.

DISCUSSION

The high number of drug arrests in urbanized areas like Western Province may indicate a growing issue with drug trafficking and usage, particularly in economically active areas. The relatively lower figures in rural and less urbanized provinces, such as Northern, could suggest either less drug abuse or insufficient monitoring and reporting mechanisms.

The overwhelming majority of drug-related arrests are associated with cannabis and heroin. Together, they account for 83% of the total drug-related arrests (68,458 + 66,142). This could suggest that law enforcement is focusing significant resources on these two drugs, which are both prevalent and potentially harmful in terms of addiction and social impact.

The proportion of methamphetamine-related arrests (16.1%) points to the growing concern over synthetic drugs. Methamphetamine use has been on the rise in many countries, with implications for public health, law enforcement, and social welfare systems. Methamphetamine is often linked to violent crime, property crime, and severe mental health issues, making it a major target for law enforcement agencies.

Both cocaine and hashish-related arrests make up an extremely small portion of the total, raising questions about either their relative rarity in the region or differences in law enforcement practices. It's possible that these drugs are less widely used or that they are subject to less rigorous policing compared to heroin and cannabis. Additionally, in some countries, the legal status of cannabis and hashish is evolving, leading to shifts in law enforcement strategies.

In regions where cannabis use is being decriminalized or legalized, one might expect a drop in cannabis-related arrests. However, the high number here suggests that enforcement policies may be more aggressive or that cannabis remains a target for law enforcement even in regions where it might be considered less harmful than other drugs.

The high number of arrests for heroin and cannabis offenses raises concerns about the burden on the justice system, including the impact on courts, jails, and social services. The emphasis on cannabis in particular could also reflect socio-political issues around drug policy, especially in areas where cannabis laws may not have kept pace with changing societal attitudes.

CONCLUSION

The details reflect that drug use and related arrests are more prevalent in densely populated and urbanized provinces, particularly for heroin and cannabis, while methamphetamine arrests are more localized to the Western and Central provinces. There is a need for tailored drug control strategies based on regional variations.

The data illustrates significant challenges posed by drug users in the country, particularly with cannabis and heroin. While the numbers show widespread use of these drugs, they also reflect law enforcement's continued focus on them. Methamphetamine's increasing share of arrests

also highlights growing concerns about synthetic drugs, suggesting that policy and law enforcement efforts may need to adapt to shifting trends in drug use. Addressing these challenges effectively may require a more balanced approach, incorporating both law enforcement and public health strategies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The government may need to focus on combating the prevalence of heroin and cannabis in urbanized areas, especially in the Western and Southern provinces. Public awareness campaigns, rehabilitation programs, and law enforcement efforts could be focused on these drugs.

There is a noticeable difference in drug-related arrests across provinces, suggesting that some regions may need more targeted interventions. For instance, more support for the Northern and Eastern provinces might be necessary to address potential underreporting or emerging drug-related issues.

The high proportion of arrests for cannabis suggests a potential mismatch between law enforcement priorities and evolving social views on cannabis. Lawmakers may need to reconsider the criminalization of cannabis use, focusing on more health-oriented approaches like harm reduction and treatment for addiction.

Given the rising concern about methamphetamine, law enforcement may want to focus more on combating synthetic drug production, trafficking, and distribution networks. Public health campaigns and addiction treatment services could also be critical to curbing the growth of methamphetamine use.

To tackle issues like heroin and methamphetamine addiction, efforts should go beyond law enforcement. Investment in addiction prevention, mental health services, and rehabilitation programs could help reduce the demand for such substances in the long term.

REFERENCES

- [1] National Dangerous Drug Control Board (2023), Annual Report, Rajagiriya: NDDCB.
- [2] Police Narcotics Bureau (2023), Annual Data, Colombo: PNB.