

New HRB report indicates that research could help disrupt illicit drug markets

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A new report on the illicit drug market in Ireland was published today by the Health Research Board (HRB). Written as an overview, the report compiles information from existing data sources and research on illicit drug markets, identifying trends over time and highlighting knowledge gaps in this area.

Despite huge global investment in measures aimed at eliminating it, the illicit drug market continues to expand, said Johnny Connolly, criminologist and research officer in the Drug Misuse Research Division of the HRB. One explanation for the persistence of the drug problem is the profitability of the illicit drug market. Huge profits mean that initiatives aimed at deterring criminal organisations from involvement face major challenges. Knowledge about how these markets operate is an important prerequisite for effective interventions and responses to them, he explained.

The material pulled together in the report includes information on drug seizures, prices and purity, as well as on production, trafficking, supply routes and trends. The report analyses surveys of local drug availability, drug-dealing sites and drug sources. The information was obtained from a variety of sources, including the Garda Sochna, the customs authorities, the Forensic Science Laboratory and drug users themselves.

Cannabis has consistently been the principal drug seized in Ireland, accounting for 58 per cent of all seizures in 2003, the latest year for which figures are available. The number of heroin seizures decreased from 802 in 2001 to 660 in 2003, whereas that of cocaine seizures rose by 1,200 per cent between 1995 and 2003. Since 2000, the quantity of cocaine seized has increased by approximately 500 per cent.

Regional variations in the number of drug-related prosecutions over time can indicate trends in the drug market. Ecstasy is widely spread throughout the State, but the number of ecstasy-related prosecutions dropped in all Garda regions in 2003. Heroin-related prosecutions fell in the Dublin Metropolitan Region, but increased in the areas immediately surrounding Dublin. A review of localised studies in Dublin shows that the impact of the drug problem is felt disproportionately in urban poor communities that are already characterised by major socio-economic problems.

This study also examined data to estimate the approximate monetary value of the illicit drug market in Ireland. These estimates are based on the actual amount of drugs seized by the Garda Sochna in 2003, price estimates provided by the Garda National Drugs Unit and the application of the commonly used estimation that the amount of drugs seized in a year represents approximately 10 per cent of the total amount imported. This calculation results in the following estimates of market value for the following drugs for 2003: cannabis resin 374m, ecstasy 129m, cocaine 75m, heroin 54m, amphetamine 10m, cannabis herb 4m and LSD 3,300.

These figures, which are likely to be an under-estimation and which do not cover all of the drugs available in the illicit drug market, give some indication of the scale of the problem, said Mr Connolly.

The National Drugs Strategy aims to address the harm caused to individuals and society by illicit drug use; the research pillar of this strategy seeks to eliminate gaps in knowledge to ensure that policies are based on sound evidence. In order to improve research, which will in turn provide evidence to disrupt drug markets and reduce their scale, a combined approach to data collection by all the agencies involved is required, he stated.

Data currently collected within the criminal justice system is collated mainly for internal operational purposes and to facilitate criminal prosecutions. This can lead to gaps in information and a lack of consistency in processes throughout the system, said Mr Connolly. Annually compiled information from all the data sources previously mentioned would help to improve our understanding of how the drug market works and of its economic dynamics, such as market differentiation, profit margins and economic vulnerabilities. It would then be possible to identify how best to disrupt the market and assess the impact of law-enforcement efforts, he said.

For example, take the local market low-level distribution networks are the principal way that drugs become available in a neighbourhood. Research into the characteristics of these markets throughout the country could facilitate a better understanding of local market differentiation and supply routes, he explained. This is a vital market level to tackle because Irish research consistently shows that many people start taking drugs in a familiar social context at a local level.

A balanced focus on drug-related harm and continued efforts to disrupt the operation of the drug market and reduce its scale are complementary objectives. Success in these areas requires a better understanding of market dynamics in order to respond strategically, said Mr Connolly. Improving the compilation and reporting of key data sources and further in-depth research will facilitate such analysis and understanding and will be a necessary component of future work in this area. It is

hoped that this report can contribute to the development of such a knowledge base into the future, he concluded.

The full report is available at :

Source: www.hrb.ie

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