

DRUG TRAFFICKING PROBLEMS AND APPROACHES TO PREVENTION IN ARMENIA: EXPERT OPINIONS*

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Abstract. In response to the alarming consequences of drug abuse and the persistent issue it poses within our nation, the Scientific Research Center of Applied Problems in Criminology, operating under the auspices of the National Bureau of Expertise of the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia, undertook a comprehensive expert survey. The primary aim of this survey was to ascertain the magnitude of drug trafficking in Armenia, identify the factors that contribute to its proliferation, determine the social groups most adversely affected, elucidate the prevalent types of drugs being used, investigate the mechanisms employed for drug sales, and formulate effective strategies to combat drug trafficking. To ensure a comprehensive and diverse perspective, the survey enlisted the participation of 16 experts hailing from various sectors, including the police, the Investigative Committee, and the prosecutor's office. These individuals brought their extensive knowledge, experience, and expertise in the field of criminology and law enforcement to the study, enabling a multifaceted analysis of the drug trafficking situation in Armenia. The findings of the survey encompass a thorough risk analysis that sheds light on the vulnerabilities within the current system, allowing for a more precise understanding of the factors that contribute to drug trafficking. This analysis takes into account both internal and external influences, such as socio-economic conditions, geographic location, international networks, and technological advancements, among others. By identifying and assessing these risks, policymakers and law enforcement agencies can develop targeted interventions and preventive measures to mitigate the spread and impact of drug trafficking in Armenia. Moreover, the survey incorporates the development of a methodology aimed at preventing drug trafficking within the regional context of Armenia. This methodology combines evidence-based approaches with innovative strategies to create a robust framework that addresses the multifaceted nature of drug trafficking. It includes elements such as intelligence gathering and analysis, enhanced interagency cooperation, community engagement, public awareness campaigns, rehabilitation and support services for affected individuals, and international cooperation to combat transnational drug networks.

Keywords: *drug use, Armenia, dependency, expert opinion.*

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Ս. գ. թ., ԵՊՀ սոցիոլոգիայի պատմության և տեսության ամբիոնի դոցենտ, ՀՀ ԳԱԱ փորձաքննությունների ազգային բյուրոյի քրեաբանության կիրառական հիմնախնդիրների գիտահետազոտական կենտրոնի սոցիոլոգ:

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Ամփոփում: Հաշվի առնելով թմրամիջոցների կործանարար ազդեցությունը և խնդրի առկայությունը մեր երկրում՝ ՀՀ ԳԱԱ փորձաքննությունների ազգային բյուրոյի քրեաբանության կիրառական հիմնախնդիրների գիտահետազոտական կենտրոնը փորձագիտական հարցման միջոցով փորձել է պարզել թմրամիջոցների ապօրինի շրջանառության ծավալը, դրանց վրա ազդող գործոնները, առավել հաճախ թմրամիջոցներ օգտագործող սոցիալական խմբերը և օգտագործվող թմրամիջոցների տեսակները, տարածման մեխանիզմները և թմրամիջոցների ապօրինի շրջանառության դեմ պայքարի մեխանիզմները: Այդ նպատակով հարցում է անցկացվել Հայաստանի ոստիկանության, քննչական կոմիտեի և դատախազության համապատասխան ոլորտները ներկայացնող 16 փորձագետների հետ:

Բանալի բառեր – *թմրամիջոցների օգտագործում, թմրամիջոցների ապօրինի շրջանառություն, Հայաստան, կախվածություն, փորձագիտական կարծիք*

ПРОБЛЕМЫ ОБОРОТА НАРКОТИКОВ И ПОДХОДЫ К ИХ ПРЕДОТВРАЩЕНИЮ В АРМЕНИИ: ЭКСПЕРТНОЕ МНЕНИЕ

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Аннотация. Принимая во внимание деструктивное воздействие наркотиков и наличие проблемы в нашей стране, Научно-исследовательский центр по прикладным вопросам криминологии при Национальном бюро экспертиз НАН РА посредством экспертного опроса попытался выяснить объемы незаконного оборота наркотиков, факторы, влияющие на них, социальные группы, наиболее часто употребляющие наркотики, и виды употребляемых наркотиков, механизмы сбыта и механизмы борьбы с незаконным оборотом наркотиков. С этой целью был проведен опрос с 16 экспертами, которые представляют соответствующую сферу полиции, Следственного комитета и прокуратуры Армении.

Ключевые слова: *употребление наркотиков, Армения, зависимость, экспертное мнение*

Research Problem

According to the United Nations (UNODC, 2021), the global number of drug addicts in 2021 reached 275 million people, with 36 million suffering from severe health conditions as a result. Approximately 5.5 percent of the world population experimented with drugs at least once last year. Official statistics place Russia at the top of the post-Soviet countries in terms of drug use, with 1.8 million registered drug addicts. Ukraine follows with 317 thousand, and Kazakhstan with 94 thousand

(Gubernatorov, Tkachev, Poryvaeva, 2022). It is important to note that these figures fail to account for a significant number of unregistered drug addicts, which considerably inflates these statistics.

The motives behind drug use encompass various factors, such as escaping from personal problems, including familial issues, the pursuit of pleasure and freedom, the desire to conform, the inclination for experimentation, curiosity, and more. Typically, drug abuse proliferates swiftly among young individuals. For instance, 20% of drug addicts in Russia are schoolchildren, 60% are young adults, and the remaining 20% belong to other age groups. Alarmingly, even children aged 9 to 13 are included in the group of school-age drug addicts. Youth-oriented establishments primarily facilitate the distribution of drugs among minors and young people (Fedosova, 2021).

The statistics regarding drug use in the European Union are even more distressing. The table below illustrates the wide spread of cannabis, cocaine and then other types of drugs in Europe (European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Addiction, 2022).

Cannabis

Prevalence of cannabis use in the EU, 2019 or most recent year

Age	Last year use	Rate	Lifetime use	Rrate	Lowest	Highest
Adults (15-64)	22.2 million	7.7 %	78.5 million	27.2 %	n.a.	n.a.
Young adults (15-34)	15.8 million	15.4 %	n.a.	n.a.	3.4 %	21.8 %

Cocaine

Prevalence of cocaine use in the EU, 2019 or most recent year

Population	Last year use	Rate	Lifetime use	Rrate	Lowest	Highest
Adults (15-64)	3.5 million	1.2 %	13.8 million	4.8 %	n.a.	n.a.
Young adults (15-34)	2.2 million	2.1 %	n.a.	n.a.	0.2 %	4.6 %

MDMA

Prevalence of MDMA use in the EU, 2019 or most recent year

Population	Last year use	Rate	Lifetime use	Rrate	Lowest	Highest
Adults (15-64)	2.6 million	0.9 %	10.4 million	3.6 %	n.a.	n.a.
Young adults (15-34)	2.0 million	1.9 %	n.a.	n.a.	0.2 %	8.5 %

Amphetamines

Population	Last year use	Rate	Lifetime use	Rrate	Lowest	Highest
Adults (15-64)	2.0 million	0.7 %	8.7 million	3.0 %	n.a.	n.a.
Young adults (15-34)	1.4 million	1.4 %	n.a.	n.a.	0.0 %	4.1 %

Heroin and other opioids

Drug	High-risk opioid users	OST clients	Drug treatment requests	Opioids in fatal overdoses
Opioids	1 million	510 000	26%	76%

Although the vast majority of states, including Armenia, have made efforts to combat drug trafficking, it remains an issue that is regulated in accordance with international agreements and Armenian legislation (1961 United Nations Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances, 1988 Convention for the Suppression of Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances). The prevalence of drug use in our country continues to increase each year (Armenia reports an increase, 2018).

Studies have shown that the spread and use of all types of drugs, both mild and severe, are particularly prevalent during and after times of war. This is attributed to the need for stimulation, heightened risk-taking behavior, emotional detachment, and a desire to escape from a complex and negative reality (Andreas, 2019). For example, the UN reported an increase in drug distribution and consumption in Ukraine during the war, reflecting the patterns observed in society prior to the conflict (Conflict in Ukraine, 2022).

Considering the unprecedented socio-psychological challenges and stress caused by the defeat in the 2020 Artsakh war, domestic political instability, and worsening economic conditions, the desire to escape reality may lead even more individuals to engage in drug use and develop addiction (Movsisyan, Galoustian, Aydinian, 2022). Assessing and preventing the risks associated with drug use and distribution are vital issues for safeguarding public health, maintaining order, and ensuring effective governance in Armenia. These efforts necessitate professional interventions, continuous monitoring, and comprehensive research.

Research Results

Recognizing the significance and relevance of the problem, the Scientific Research Center of Applied Problems in Criminology at the National Bureau of Expertise, National Academy of Sciences of Armenia, conducted an expert survey involving 16 specialists from the police, the Investigative Committee, and the prosecutor's office.

When examining drug trafficking in our country, experts compared the situation in Armenia with that of other countries. In comparison, the occurrence of this phenomenon in Armenia is relatively less common and does not raise significant concerns in terms of volume. However, the scale of drug distribution can change, particularly with the rise of online technologies and the availability of drugs through platforms like the Telegram application.

When considering the volume of drug trafficking, experts referred to the figures from other countries, which indicated that Armenia, considering its population size, falls significantly behind many other nations.

In the fight against drug trafficking, law enforcement agencies adhere to a plan of measures implemented until 2022 to combat drug addiction and illegal drug trafficking in the Republic of Armenia (RA Government's Decision on Approving, 2022). Although the problem may be insignificant in scale, it presents unique challenges, requiring a comprehensive approach. The police, the National Security Service, and the Office for Combating Smuggling work in sync to combat drug trafficking.

Various state bodies collaborate in the field of drug trafficking, including the police of the Republic of Armenia, the National Security Service, the State Revenue Committee, Penitentiary Institutions, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, expert centers, specialized centers, and the Republican Center for Narcology. These entities provide statistical data on drug consumption.

The National Security Council oversees an interdepartmental committee that involves all relevant departments, including the police, ministries, and other bodies. Through such cooperation, the effectiveness of anti-drug efforts is significantly enhanced.

Combating this pervasive issue is a shared responsibility. As it directly affects our country's future and the well-being of future generations, it is a global issue requiring collaboration with various organizations, both domestically and internationally. Cooperation exists not only among domestic departments but also with international organizations such as the UN and European drug control centers. Joint efforts with counterparts in the United States, European countries, and other countries in the CIS and CSTO are conducted through seminars, meetings, and the exchange of experiences to enhance the organization and effectiveness of drug control measures. Additionally, collaboration with institutions like the US DEA, the International Criminal Court, and the UN further strengthens international cooperation. Special programs, such as the Ion program for new drugs, are designed to identify emerging substances and include them in special watchlists. Currently, there are approximately 30 new drugs that have been identified, and a commission of experts provides evaluations to determine

Some experts struggled to provide a definitive answer regarding the latency of drugs in the context of illegal trafficking, while others initially underestimated it due to the small volumes involved and the effectiveness of the ongoing efforts to combat the issue.

I cannot pinpoint any specific figures regarding the latency. I believe that there will naturally be some latency, but it is likely to be a small percentage. This is because almost all cases are currently being documented due to the active fight against drug trafficking. We have operational information, and law enforcement personnel are dedicated to recording, registering, and exposing each case - an expert from the Armenian Police.

The low percentage of latency can also be attributed to the limited number of import routes. Since we do not have a sea route, importation is only possible via air or land. There are only two available land routes: through Iran and Georgia. While importers use various routes, the Iranian route carries the highest risk and accounts for the largest percentage of imported drugs, surpassing all other countries combined. Opium, as well as drugs like amphetamines and methamphetamines, are primarily imported from Iran. In contrast, the sphere of air importation is broader, including routes from the USA, Canada, European countries, Russia, and Turkey. Importation from other countries is rare. The American and French directions are particularly active in terms of volume, serving as sources of heroin, cocaine, and recently, other drugs. Experts attribute this circumstance to the presence of a strong Armenian community in these countries, through which drugs are smuggled into Armenia using various methods.

For instance, we have a sizable Armenian community in France, which means we also have friends and relatives seeking to expand their business ventures. Criminal elements exploit these connections, enabling people from our country to establish ties and receive tablets from France that are prescribed by doctors as medicine. These tablets are then used intravenously as drugs in Armenia - an expert from the Armenian Police.

The substantial amount of drug importation from Iran can be attributed to its border with Afghanistan, a major hub for drug exports. Additionally, Iranians play

a significant role among importers.

Ground transport typically involves hiding drugs in secret compartments within cars or concealing them in luggage. The air method primarily entails concealing drugs in premises, clothing, or even within the body (such as the stomach or intestines).

Frequently, drugs are stored within organs or swallowed in the form of strips, which are later excreted upon arrival or held in the rectum after special preparation. Similar concealment methods are employed for drugs coming from Russia or European countries. There are also cases where drugs are concealed in chewing gum, sweets, or openly placed in electronic cigarettes and sent - an expert from the Armenian Police.

To ensure maximum efficiency, strict control measures are crucial at customs checkpoints to identify and apprehend individuals involved in drug purchase and sale. Inspection stations have also been established to facilitate thorough searches of vehicles, individuals, and clothing.

Several anti-drug measures are carried out with the involvement of relevant departments. For instance, the "Konopla-Mak" operation is conducted to detect and destroy wild hemp plants. Furthermore, as part of the CSTO countries' cooperation, the *Canal* anti-drug program is regularly implemented to combat drug trafficking through information sharing and mutual support among CSTO member states.

In the fight against drug trafficking, a significant amount of work is carried out through operational-search measures, such as wiretaps, surveillance of individuals at border crossings, and investigative actions, including interrogations. These measures are conducted by experts from the Investigative Committee of the RA.

While experts consider the measures implemented in the fight against drug trafficking to be sufficient, they believe that tightening control at checkpoints and customs services should be supplemented with a consistent study of new knowledge and international experience. Criminals constantly improve their qualifications, utilizing the latest technologies, and are always one step ahead.

In the current period, we are implementing a set of measures that were necessary, but offenders are attempting to improve their methods of concealment, acquisition, and importation. We can say that we are lagging behind by one or two steps, as the issue concerns the preservation of the national gene pool. Therefore, continuous annual events are crucial, according to an expert from the police.

Since narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances are often imported by mail, experts focus on informing the population through the media about the illegality of such imports. In our country, when a person involved in drug use or trading is detected, a search is conducted, and they are then sent to the appropriate expert department. Only based on the expert's conclusion can the type of drug be established, and this department is also responsible for initiating a criminal case. This process takes a significant amount of time.

As an additional and effective measure, experts suggest acquiring equipment available in different foreign countries. The use of such equipment greatly facilitates faster identification and preliminary disclosure of the type of drug. It is also necessary to increase the number of staff members, improve the material and technical resources, prioritize business trips to enhance professional knowledge, study foreign experiences, and familiarize oneself with new methods and tools. Experts also emphasize the importance of legislative changes.

In my opinion, it is necessary to create a legislative framework that will be approved by the National Assembly. Changes in drug quantities, increases, or the inclusion of new drugs that are becoming more popular should be considered, - an expert from the RA police.

International cooperation, experience exchange, and additional financing are also of considerable importance, as mentioned before. Another significant observation is that a large percentage of drug use and sales occur within criminal-executive institutions. Therefore, special attention should be paid to these institutions during the implementation of measures.

Penitentiary institutions have numerous events. For instance, in today's drug trafficking, mobile phones play a crucial role. If individuals in penal institutions are unable to use mobile phones and are cut off from the outside world, they cannot organize drug-related activities. Expert, the prosecutor's office of Armenia.

Constant monitoring of changes in the assortment of drugs necessitates legislative changes. While most experts consider the existing legal norms sufficient, they must be continually improved over time due to the emergence of new types of drugs. Since legal regulations provide for intervention in the presence of any drug from the list, newly emerged drugs should also be added to the existing drug list to enhance the effectiveness of the fight against drug trafficking.

We have also dealt with cases related to drugs that were initially considered medicinal, but later we discovered that when these drugs with medical significance are abused, they become equivalent to illicit drugs. Medications containing codeine, which were previously ordinary medicines for common ailments like headaches, have become a significant source of abuse and have already been included in the list of substances under special control through legislative initiatives, as confirmed by an expert from the police.

In this regard, the United Nations Office for Narcotic Drugs provides significant assistance by informing all countries about new types of drugs worldwide.

In the context of combating drug trafficking, it is crucial to have legal regulations in place to ensure the effectiveness of the efforts.

While some countries have legalized certain types of drugs, particularly marijuana, due to their use in medicine, experts' opinion regarding the legalization of any mild drug, such as marijuana, in our country is generally and unambiguously negative. Firstly, from a medical standpoint, even an extremely small dose can have a positive effect. Secondly, considering the influence on the human body, it is not

justified since it varies from individual to individual. There is also concern about the emergence of negative consequences, which could have a detrimental impact on future generations. Additionally, there is an increased risk of influencing minors.

The legalization of drugs will not prevent their use by minors, as they often unknowingly succumb to temptation, leading to addiction and irreversible consequences. This viewpoint is shared by an expert from the RA police.

The importation of a large number of drugs from Iran poses a problem for preserving the nation and maintaining a healthy society. Currently, there is a promotion of a healthy lifestyle, the use of environmentally friendly products, engagement in sports, and more. Therefore, illegal drug use can only lead to negative consequences. Whether it is marijuana or any other mild drug is irrelevant since each individual's reaction is unique, and it is not for an expert from the police to decide.

In general, experts believe that the legalization of mild drugs will have certain negative consequences. The main concern is the impact on the future generations' health and the potential for widespread manifestations. As previously mentioned, legalization would have negative effects on physiology and overall human well-being. Refraining from drug use contributes to the improvement of our nation's gene pool. This perspective is shared by an expert from the RA police. In essence, experts unanimously view drug addiction as a problem that threatens the existence of our nation, and they approach combating this issue through various mechanisms.

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