Global Effort to Fight Illegal Drugs Deemed a Failure

A new report expresses disappointment with efforts at curbing drug production and addiction.

October 27, 2018 By Casey Halter

Ten years ago, the United Nations set an international target date by which to “eliminate or reduce significantly and measurably” illegal drug markets around the world. That date was 2019. Now, less than a year before the clock runs out, a report by the International Drug Policy Consortium says this goal has been “spectacularly missed,” according to a recent press release from Human Rights Watch.

The Consortium’s report, compiled and signed by a coalition of 170 nongovernmental organizations working on drug policy issues, expresses disappointment with global efforts at curbing drug production and addiction around the world. The paper draws on data from both government and nongovernment sources, provides a comprehensive evaluation of the 10-year United Nations drug strategy and concludes by urging U.N. member states to conduct their own honest and thorough assessments of efforts to combat the crisis.

How bad a failure has the effort been? According to U.N. data analyzed in the report, illegal cultivation of opium and coca bush increased globally by 130 percent and 34 percent, respectively, between 2009 and 2018. The number of adolescents and adults who have used drugs increased by 31 percent between 2011 and 2016, and drug-related deaths rose by 145 percent from 2011 to 2015. Meanwhile, the global drug market takes in an estimated $426 to $652 million a year, of which law enforcement seizes less than 1 percent.

The report also shows that rates of HIV, hepatitis C virus and tuberculosis infection among people who use drugs continue to be much higher than those of the general population; what’s more, many countries lack prevention and health services. Experts say drug criminalization also continues to prevent people from accessing health or addiction services across the globe.

The report ends by recommending that the U.N.’s next global drug strategy not focus on creating a “drug-free world” but instead on improving health outcomes, human rights, and promoting development, peace and security around the world.

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