

COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND ILLICIT DRUGS

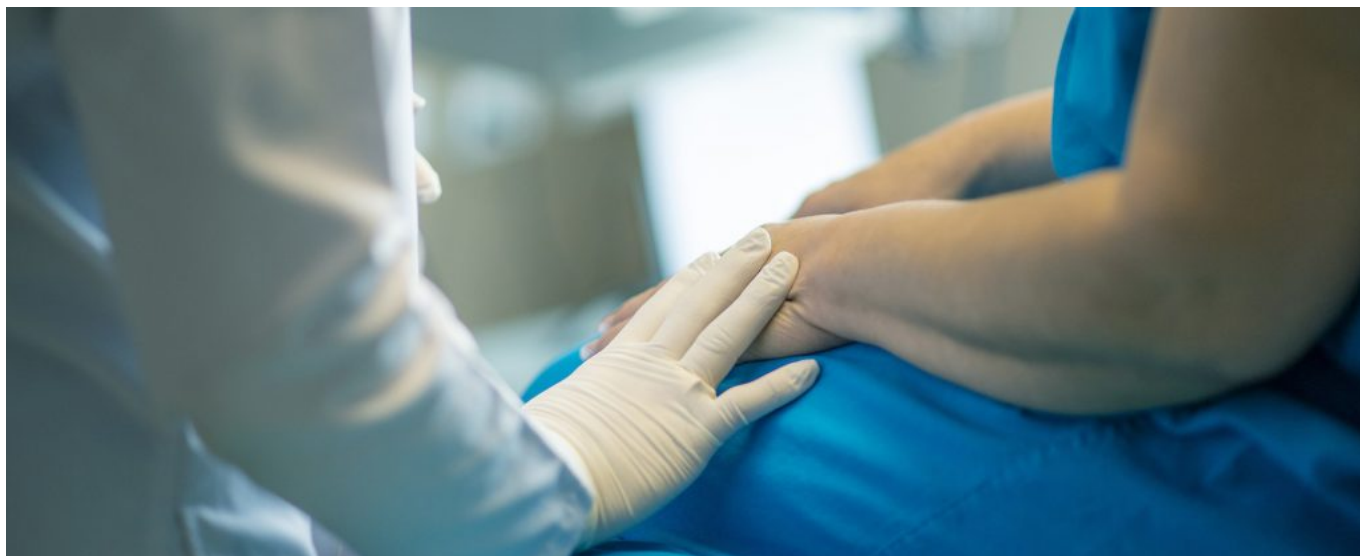


Lessons from Italy

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, no clear evidence has emerged of a significant decrease in the supply of drugs at the global level, including in Italy, even after the quarantine was extended to the entire country.

At the beginning of the outbreak, there were reports on both organized criminal groups and consumers stockpiling drugs to ensure availability on both ends. After a number of countries declared lockdown, difficulties in obtaining chemical precursors by criminal groups pointed to a possible slowdown in the availability for some types of drugs.

As the pandemic kept extending in both severity and geographical space, an adaptation of supply dynamics to the new scenario emerged, with varying characteristics. Decreased mobility and the limitations to public life imposed by quarantines made criminal activities more visible and as a consequence, most drug selling was reported to be moved to online or home delivery, or to designated places. Substances, mostly cocaine and heroin, were reported to be cut so that the stock could last longer, while various methods were reported as being disguised by street dealers to circumvent quarantine measures, from carrying drugs in shopping carts (only supermarkets were allowed to stay open), using taxis to avoid police checks on private vehicles, and using public transportation for “quick selling on the go”.



Globally, while it is difficult to project the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on illicit drug markets, it is not unreasonable to presume that in the short period an increase in the prices will manifest – demand will still be there, while modalities to distribute in any large quantity may be impacted. As with most markets, legal and illegal, this could be complicated by the pandemic's unpredictable evolution and by the shift in the interest of criminal groups for more lucrative, and easily accessible, markets, especially those connected to the Covid-19 emergency response. During quarantine, while petty crime rates have decreased by up to 70%, organized crime has been turning greater attention to legal markets. For instance, law enforcement and anti-mafia agencies have warned about trafficking of masks and other health protection equipment, as well as the cash acquisition of hard-hit businesses, allowing criminal enterprises to facilitate money laundering.

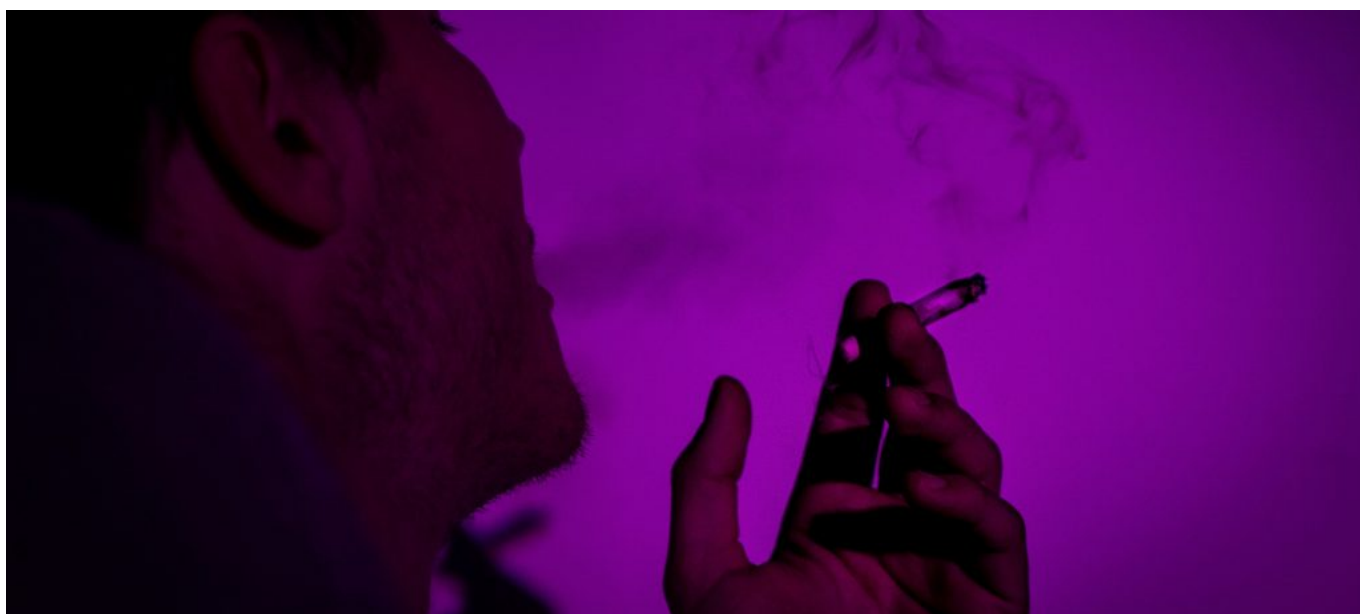
In other instances, for example in Mexico, organized criminal groups have been reported to offer food and other consumer goods to disadvantaged groups, and particularly hard-hit communities, in order to engender community support.

A temporary decrease in the demand for recreational drugs might be projected as a consequence of home confinement as well as due to the economic shutdown, and related reduced income. In light of this, a temporary fall in prices for main recreational drugs could be predicted. Notwithstanding this, organized criminal groups will likely use the pandemic as an opportunity to stockpile and resell at higher prices when the crisis is over, or least when certain restrictions are lifted.

Globally, governments have continued to take measures to reinforce

police operations and international cooperation against drug trafficking and organized crime in general. Seizures of drugs have continued both nationally and in the context of international police operations. In February, Italy has promoted an international meeting of Heads of police forces to exchange best practices on anti- narcotic operations.

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People who use drugs (PWUD) – People with drug use disorders (PWDUD)

Home confinement during a health emergency might increase feelings of anxiety and fear, that may constitute vulnerability factors for the onset of mental health conditions. Symptoms might be exacerbated in PWUD and PWDUD who could already be affected by psychiatric and physical comorbidities. Such scenario might in turn increase not only drug related risk behaviours but also additional vulnerability to Covid-19 mortality, due to a compromised immune system. During the Covid-19 pandemic, overdoses did not diminish in Italy, and indeed in some parts of the country, they reportedly an increase, a clear sign that drugs remained regularly available.

With regard to treatment services, while public drug treatment services seemed to undergo some difficulties in ensuring continuity of service to their patients, therapeutic communities seemed to offer a more viable model to cope with the Covid-19 emergency and the consequences of quarantine. Risk reduction services increased their distribution of safe injecting tools, such as syringes and needles, and many self help groups organized their meetings online in order to retain patients. In some cases, the Covid-19 pandemic proved to be a catalyst for some drug users to stop using the substance and to access rehabilitation.

In prison, deaths caused by illicit substances or OST overdoses were reported during a series of riots that erupted after the government restricted external visits for fear of creating or worsening infections rates, particularly within overcrowded incarceration facilities.

UNICRI has been supporting Member States in addressing drug use problems for more than 25 years, with programmes spanning from training on drug prevention and treatment addressed to professionals, promoting gender responsive drug policies, building capacity of national administrations to counter illicit drugs and the implementation and exchange of tools to facilitate the sharing of knowledge and best practices among professionals and policy makers. Over the years, research reports have included studies on the functioning of drug markets, and on the economic and human costs of addiction to the criminal justice system. Alternatives to incarceration for minor drug related offences has been another research area where UNICRI has developed evidence-based research which has included focuses on juvenile justice. More recently, UNICRI is carrying out a research study with the aim to identify good practices for family-oriented interventions to support healthy lifestyles and prevent drug use among youth.

Therapeutic communities seemed to offer a more viable model to cope with the Covid-19 emergency and the consequences of quarantine

Conclusions and Recommendations:

Official law enforcement and credible media reports indicate that the Covid-19 pandemic has not prevented drug traffickers from continuing to carry out their illicit businesses. This reflects a high degree of organizational flexibility by organized criminal groups, capable of

adjusting their illegal business models even in the face of such a sudden and global crisis. International co-operation among law enforcement, investigative and judicial organizations is paramount to counter illicit drug markets and the involvement of organized crime groups.

Member States should ensure that plans for a quick and efficient transition to continuity of care during emergencies are in place, particularly for those suffering from drug addiction or who are affected by drug use disorders. Such plans should include reinforcing safety and security measures for staff in drug treatment services, ensuring low-threshold and risk-reduction services, take-home opioid substitution medication programmes, home visits or calls, virtual psychological support platforms and helplines, medication and equipment supply via pharmacies, public awareness campaigns to help ensure that the population is informed about such services, with particular regard to vulnerable groups such as sex workers, prisoners and the homeless.

Media outlets

Direzione Centrale per i Servizi Antidroga, Ministero dell'Interno

Direzione Nazionale Antimafia e Antiterrorismo, Ministero della Giustizia

Direzione Generale per la Prevenzione Sanitaria, Ministero della salute

EMCDDA "Implications of Covid-19 for people who use drugs and drug use providers" March 2020

CDC: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/homeless-shelters/plan-prepare-respond.html>

WHO Coronavirus disease 2019, Country and Technical advice (www.who.int)

EUROPOL How criminals profit from the Covid-19

<https://f3magazine.unicri.it/?p=2112>

pandemic, March 2020

INTERPOL “Dealers using food delivery services to transport drugs during Covid-19 lockdowns, April 2020

UNODC and WHO International Standards for the Treatment of Drug Use Disorders, March 2020