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Research report

Forum: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
Issue: Addressing and counteracting the socio-economic factors driving youth involvement in drug trafficking

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Introduction

The issue of youth drug dealers and traffickers is a major problem around the world, such as in England where one in five teenage boys say they or people known to them are in contact with or have been contacted by gangs to work on drug related crimes such as production or distribution of different illegal substances such as weed or cocaine (BTP British transport police). We can also see that in lower economic areas, drugs tend to appear more often. In 2019, during the opioid crisis in America most of the overdoses came from lower economic zip codes (Grinspoon). In many cases the lower economic youth take these jobs to make money and to gain a new circle of friends through a gang life of crime. In a lot of cases, they do it because to them it seems cool. With the rise of "roadmen" culture through drill music and tv shows that depict the roadmen lifestyle the youth have started to look up to this way of life as if it was an amazing trend (thurrock.gov.uk). All of these have led to a lot of children from lower economic backgrounds turning to a life of crime as a means of escape, but this road is dangerous as this type of life can only end badly. So, in this report we will talk about how the youth join these drug empires and why and what can be done to prevent these gangs' expansion into the youth of our planet.

Definitions of key terms

Drug trafficking

The process of selling illegal substances called drugs in the black market.

UNODC

United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime.

SDGs

Sustainable Development Goals; set by the United Nations.

Socio-economic factors

Factors that affect the economy of a region and the society. These include for instance poverty, lack of education, social inequality.

Youth Vulnerability

Refers to the negative influences that can impact a child's mindset into dangerous habits due to lack of quality education and economic instability and negative growing environment.

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Social Inequality

This term is about the unequal opportunities and resources distributed due to discrimination. This is due to economic instability, unequal access to healthcare and education as well as differentiation in status. Economic hardship can lead people, especially youth, to getting involved in drug trafficking.

General overview

The proliferation of drug trafficking in general has rapidly become a problematic issue. Gradually, young generations have started participating in these illegal crimes due to various reasons. It is well-known that drug trafficking is a dangerous, illegal and violent crime field which can pose drastic measures for youth. These punishments include time in juvenile, a large fine, and long sentences (Bilchik).

This being said, young generations continue to be involved in these threatening illegal activities. A strong reason for drug trafficking in youth is due to poverty and economic disadvantage. Especially in less economically developed countries (LEDCs), multiple communities find themselves in extreme poverty. Due to lack of economic opportunities, adolescents tend to lean towards illegal crimes such as drug trafficking as a means of income (Poole). There are times where young teenagers aren't aware of what they have signed up for and regret their decision of being involved in this black-market industry (Li). Recruiters will assign youth as street-level dealers, couriers as well as distributors. Additionally, agents may threaten young adults to complete certain illegal tasks, and if not successfully accomplished, there will be physical consequences, or due to the lack of reliability of job, they can take away their houses, belongings, and relatives. With the combination of manipulation, financial exploitation, coercion and dependencies, recruiters take advantage of youth vulnerability ("Drug Addiction").

With poor access to quality education, young generations, especially in developing countries, have little to no knowledge revolving around drug trafficking. Recruiters can take advantage of this, to encourage youth to join certain groups for money, without stating the dangers of this job ("Drug Trafficking"). Additionally, due to limited job opportunities, it is difficult for adolescents to acquire a proper career distinctly due to poor access to quality education. Therefore, there are cases where young generations have been advocated towards black market jobs. In 2001, UNICEF conducted a survey in south-eastern Europe where 60% of youth who participated had little to no knowledge about the prevention of drug trafficking in their local communities. Also, they have claimed there is a lack of crucial information spread for drug trafficking awareness ("National Center for Drug").

Another reason why youth has become more involved in drug trafficking is due to the involvement in youth gangs, especially in underdeveloped parts in the United States of America. The rapid increase of these groups started in the 1980s. The OJJDP (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention) ran an investigation where they found that in the United States, the level of involvement in drug sales in a gang is 43% in age 15-17, and 30% in age 24-30. Referring to these statistics, it is clear that the majority of sales are held by ages 15 to 17, which are classified as minors ("National Center for Drug"). Furthermore, the OJJDP stated that there is a clear connection between crime and gangs in general, whether it specifically may be drug trafficking or other illegal activities (Bilchik).

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Moreover, the type of environment that young generations grow up in affects their mindset, and can affect their future as they grow older. In dysfunctional families, where there is a lack of parental supervision and exposure to drug use, it can be extremely harmful for the children to grow up in (“Drug Addiction”). Families can normalize the use of various drugs, which encourages youth to join as well, allowing them to possibly get addicted to the use of drugs, and can lead to drug dealer jobs (Li).

The harsh impact of the proliferation of drug trafficking in youth is that exposure can lead to unwanted violence, mental health illnesses and addictions to substances. The continued use of drugs can lead to detrimental both physical and mental problems, which will later on hurt the economy as there will be less suitable, healthy young people to take over high responsibility and high-pressure jobs (Whitesell). These mental problems include the possibility of depression, anxiety as well as irreversible illnesses like schizophrenia and can trigger psychosis (“Drug Trafficking”).

Lastly, it will also affect the mindset of future generations. As new generations start to enter the planet, they look up to older generations as an example figure. If they grow up in a fully drug affiliated community, there is a high chance that they will end up adhering to the community's patterns (Poole).

Major parties involved

UNODC

This branch of the UN deals with drugs and crime, so they are heavily involved with the prevention and the capture of criminals that recruit or sell to minors, such as with their UNODC's Children's Project that has helped children kick of drug addictions and prevent other children to get hooked on too these substances(UNODC).

OJJDP (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention)

Although this department is located in the United States, there are many counterparts in other nations. These types of departments deal with juvenile crime, so they are very important to this case through their actions with prevention and rehabilitation.

Educational institutes

Educational institutions are responsible for educating the youth of tomorrow and making sure they don't go down this rabbit hole. They have a huge standing as they are supposed to make sure that children do not end up turning to criminal life. The programs they teach can help prevent it such as the D.A.R.E program in America responsible for anti-drug messages in school.

The youth

This is the group that is most affected. These kids that join these crime organizations can end up ruining their life as having a criminal record, especially one with organized crime can deny

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them many life opportunities. This lack of opportunities can further keep them in with the crime organizations making the problem even bigger and bigger.

The media

In our modern world, younger generations are most influenced by the media that they consume as is the case with drill. Drill is a type of music within the genre of hip-hop and tends to contain extremely violent lyrics. Reports have found that drill music with references to specific gangs and specific violent act can have an impact on youth, violence, and gang warfare (Calufri and Olajide 2022). This can help us understand that the media has a great amount of power over this problem as they are the ones that shape the modern youth.

Timeline of Key Events

1800s	Beginning of drug trafficking emerging from China
1980	OJJDP - the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention delves into significant issues of youth gangs in terms of drug trafficking
1987s	The US initiate “War on Drugs”, which turned out to be a failure
1900s	Rise of various NGOs to start implementing drug prevention programs at school
1997	Establishment of UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime)
2001	UNODC’s Global Programme on Drug Abuse Prevention promotes community-based interventions.

Previous attempts to solve the issue

There have been many previous attempts to solve this issue. One of the most notable being one that was carried out by the United States Department of Justice. The Department of Justice has funded programs to help youth programs that could give these children training for life skills as well as substance abuse counseling mentoring and outreach for people that were already part of

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the criminal empire (DOJ). This program has helped many people however it's still not able to help everyone as it is underfunded and does not possess enough resources to provide enough outreach for everyone in the areas or in the nation as a whole.

There are many organizations that work with similar ideas. One such organization is called GRASP (Gang Rescue and Support Project), which is a project that helps at-risk adolescents to try and stay clear of the criminal underworld. Through many tactics such as introducing these children to incarcerated gang members and through shock advertising that make the kids afraid of the gangs and want to renounce and reject them (GRASP). They also offer programs that help these kids get job skills and other things they need to survive however this program as well does not have far enough outreach and still leaves many children to rely on gangs to make enough money to survive and to support their families and themselves.

Possible solutions

Possible solutions could be to help these children in lower economic areas to gain access to more safe and legal job opportunities, such as working at their local supermarket or other jobs that are still safe and doable for these children but also give these children enough money to help support their families. There should also be educational programs to help show these children how these youth gangs and cartels are exploiting them and that these activities that they are considering being part of are extremely dangerous. These activities could lead to huge amounts of trouble running in with the law. If children knew these facts, then it would be safe to assume they would join these organizations at a much lower rate.

Further reading

Youth drug report - <https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/39442/1/Youth-Response-2023-World-Drug-Report%20%281%29.pdf>

Drugs and development: The global impact of drug use and trafficking on social and economic development-

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0955395906002556>

Adolescent drug abuse - Awareness & prevention-

https://journals.lww.com/ijmr/fulltext/2013/37060/Adolescent_drug_abuse_Awareness_prevention.1.aspx

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