



## Research Report

UNODC

“Addressing the issue of increasing  
drug addiction in children during  
production.”

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## Introduction

*The surroundings in which illegal drugs are manufactured, processed, transported, or trafficked are directly associated with the expanding global issue of drug addiction among children. Children are routinely exposed to dangerous substances in many areas where drugs play a significant role in the local economy, such as South Asia, Latin America, Africa, and portions of Europe. Many develop an addiction as a coping strategy against poverty, stress, and instability, while others are pressured by criminal organizations into producing drugs. The production of illegal drugs continues to expand both geographically and structurally, according to the United Nations Office on drugs and Crime (UNODC). This growth is accompanied by an increase in the number of young persons engaged in drug manufacturing, trafficking, and production. Children in Colombia's coca-growing regions are exposed to dangerous chemicals used in the processing of cocaine leaves. Children in areas where synthetic drugs are produced, such as parts of the Netherlands, Mexico, and India, may mix or package chemicals without wearing protective gear and children in Afghanistan's opium production fields breathe in fumes high in morphine. Such exposure greatly raises the chance of addiction.*

*Additionally, because children are easily manipulated, legally weak, and less likely to face harsh punishment, cartels, gangs, and traffickers deliberately target them. Criminal organizations in some areas purposefully expose kids to addictive narcotics to win their support, keep control, and guarantee future labour dependency. Many children use drugs to withstand long hours of labour, suppress hunger, or escape psychological distress in areas of war or extreme poverty.*

*Furthermore, to being a public health issue, drug addiction in children is a clear breach of international law, particularly the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which requires that children be protected from all forms of exploitation. Beyond addiction, children who develop a drug addiction are more likely to have long term health issues, exclusion from society, vulnerability to human trafficking, and recruitment into violent criminal networks. Persistent neglect and a lack of social and legal protections jeopardize their futures.*

*The growing number of child addiction in drug-producing areas is a serious moral, social, and legal dilemma that necessitates quick international attention and urgent action to safeguard these children's rights, prospects, and health.*

## Definitions of Key Terms

### **Addiction:**

*Compulsive involvement in stimulating behaviours despite negative outcomes is a persistent condition that frequently involves substances, activities, or both.*

### **Child labour:**

*Work done by someone under the legal minimum age that may be abusive or dangerous and interferes with growth, health, or education.*

### **Narcotics:**

*Substances having an elevated risk for abuse and addiction that work on the neurological system to induce sleep or ease pain.*

### **Trafficking:**

*The unlawful transportation or trade of individuals, products, or drugs; usually for exploitative purposes.*

### **Substance abuse:**

*The dangerous or damaging use of psychoactive substances, such as illegal drugs and/or alcohol.*

### **Crop substitution:**

*A development plan that motivates farmers to switch to profitable, legal crops in place of illicit ones like cocaine and opium.*

### **Synthetic drugs:**

*The drug known as MDMA, and synthetic opioids are examples of man-made substances that need to be chemically processed and frequently contain hazardous ingredients.*

## General overview

*A deeply embedded issue that cuts across continents and cultures is the rise in drug addiction among kids who are active in or live close to drug producing sites. Although this problem is not new, it has significantly worsened over the last 20 years because of expanding drug markets, the emergence of synthetic substances, ongoing poverty, poor governance, and the increasing sophistication of global criminal organizations. Children in many drug producing areas are not exposed to drugs voluntarily rather, they are raised in settings where drugs are grown, processed, or trafficked daily. Children are unavoidably exposed to narcotics and the hazardous chemicals used in their manufacturing, whether they are in cannabis fields in*

*Egypt and Malawi, opium villages in Afghanistan, coca-growing jungles in Colombia, or meth producing zones in Mexico. "Children in drug-producing areas are at high risk of both direct and indirect exposure to narcotics, which can result in early addiction," according to the UNODC (UNODC, 2024). This exposure may be natural, physical, or, in many situations, purposefully imposed by criminals. Children are present in homes where synthetic drug labs run without ventilation or safety precautions, touch hazardous chemicals in coca refining facilities, or breathe in fumes in opium processing rooms. Children may develop an addiction before they even comprehend the concept of drug use because of this accidental contact over time (WHO, 2022).*

*Due to severe poverty, a lack of infrastructure, and the lack of viable economic options, families in these areas frequently depend on narcotic crops for survival. UNICEF states that "many families in drug-producing regions rely on child labour in cultivation and processing to sustain basic income needs, often exposing children to dangerous substances" (UNICEF, n.d.). Because the family's livelihood depends on it, parents may involve their kids in jobs like gathering cocaine leaves, transporting supplies, sorting opium plants, or cleaning equipment used in drug labs. Particularly in areas where drug production has been accepted for centuries, the distinction between exploitation and economic need becomes unclear (Human Rights Watch, 2021).*

*Criminal groups intentionally recruit, force, or addict minors, worsening the issue. Children may be purposefully exposed to narcotics by armed organizations in Colombia, cartels in Mexico, or trafficking networks in South Asia to secure loyalty and prevent escape. Children become more entangled in cycles of abuse, dependency, and criminal activity in places with weak governments, corrupt law enforcement, or ongoing conflict. Addiction turns as a breakdown of society symptom as well as a tool of control (UNODC, 2024).*

*The world's financial dependence on illegal crops is another major element contributing to kid addiction in drug-producing regions. Drug manufacturing is not only a local industry but also the foundation of entire local economies in many rural areas. According to World Bank research, if legal markets fail, drug crops can make a substantial contribution to household income in nations like Afghanistan and Colombia. Because of this economic dependence, drug manufacture becomes common throughout generations, leading kids to view it as a necessary component of everyday life rather than a risky or illegal activity. Addiction is*

*frequently one of several concerns in these settings, including with exposure to violence, dangerous labour, and starvation.*

*likewise, children in these areas are far more vulnerable due to their lack of access to formal schooling. Low school enrolment and high dropout rates are common in many drug-producing locations, either because of children having to work, long commutes, or insecurity. According to UNICEF research, children are much more likely to be attracted into hazardous or labour-intensive economic activities, such as drug production, when educational systems fail. Children who are not educated also have fewer sources of trustworthy information about the risks associated with drug use, which makes them more vulnerable to addiction and manipulation by traffickers.*

*Another level of risk is created by the fact that public health systems in drug producing countries are usually underfunded or non-existent. WHO claims that in isolated places where drug cultivation takes place, even basic healthcare services like immunizations, emergency care, or drug-use therapy are rarely available. Early indications of addiction in youngsters go unnoticed and untreated when they lack access to medical professionals or social workers, allowing chemical exposure and reliance to worsen uncontrolled. In certain areas, the stigma associated with addiction also keeps family from getting treatment, perpetuating cycles of suffering and silence.*

*There are serious consequences for your health. Children who are exposed to drugs or hazardous substances experience developmental delays, skin burns, neurological damage, respiratory diseases, and weakened immune systems. The psychological effects are as significant, ranging from anxiety and trauma to long term dependence and memory loss. The effects on society go beyond individuals. Whole communities are caught in stubborn cycles of drug-based economies, poverty, and addiction (WHO, 2022). Human rights organizations, UNODC, UNICEF, and WHO have all conducted research that continually emphasizes the fact that drug-production zones frequently correspond with areas lacking social services, healthcare facilities, educational institutions, and protective legal frameworks. In the lack of these organizations, children's rights are routinely abused, and addiction develops into a hidden, enduring epidemic. The issue is going to get worse if the world's drug demand keeps rising despite major international action and long-term structural reform.*

*Lastly, it is impossible to overestimate the long-term impact on society of kid addiction in drug-producing regions. Addiction among minors adds to poverty cycles that last into*

*adulthood, lowers future economic output, and raises the possibility of continuing involvement in unlawful activities. Communities where juvenile addiction is pervasive.*

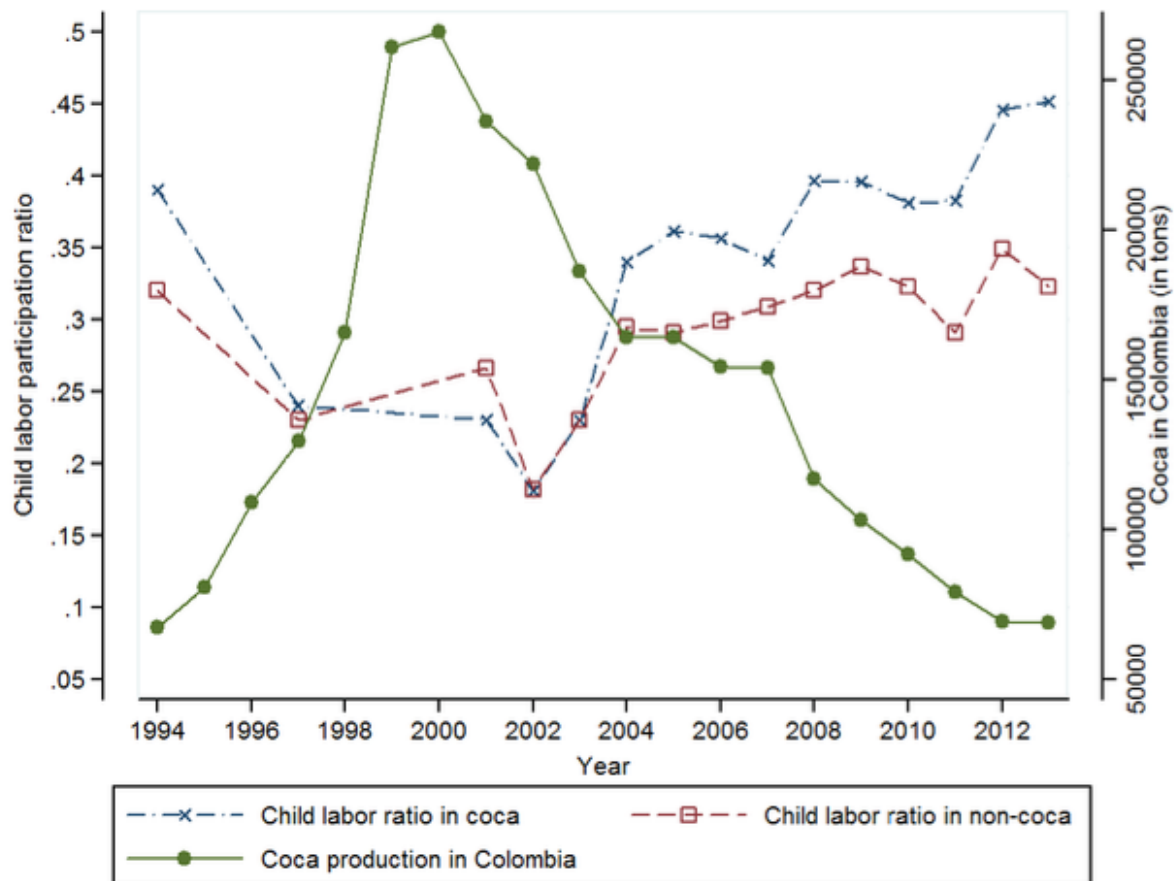
*frequently experience decreased trust in institutions, increased violence, and diminished social cohesion. As a result of these impacts, drug production eventually becomes both a cause and a symptom of a larger system collapse, increasing the urgency of intervention.*

## **Major parties involved**

*Many nations are crucial to the problem because they are significant manufacturers of drugs, transportation centers, or conflict areas where children are particularly vulnerable to drug-related addiction.*

*(1) As the world's leading producer of opium, **Afghanistan** continues to be among the most affected nations. Due to poverty and conflict, many families in isolated Afghan districts depend on opium farming for income, and children are often addicted because of continuous exposure to opium-processing fumes (UNODC, 2024).*

*(2) Another important nation is **Colombia**, which is home to large-scale cocaine farming and cocaine-paste factories where armed groups recruit children to collect leaves or help with chemical processing (Human Rights Watch, 2021).*



(Child labour in coca and non-coca districts in Peru versus production in Columbia)

(3) **Mexico** is a significant producer of fentanyl and methamphetamine, where cartels run hidden labs that expose kids to hazardous chemicals and potent synthetic narcotics, frequently leading to addiction or long-term health problems (UNODC, 2024; WHO, 2022).

Both cannabis cultivation and the manufacture of synthetic drugs have increased in **India**, children who live in crowded cities or agricultural areas are often exposed to drug production environments without proper supervision or protection (UNICEF, n.d.).

(4) The extensive cannabis cultivation in rural **Malawi** and **Egypt**, where children assist with planting, drying, and packing, puts them in settings where drug use is accepted and addiction is more likely (UNICEF, n.d.). According to Human Rights Watch (2021) and UNODC (2024), each of these nations has a distinct mix of poverty, weak government control, and strong criminal networks that sustain children's involvement and addiction in drug-production situations.



## Timeline of Key Events

*1961- The Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs*

*Created the first international framework for controlling the production and distribution of drugs, but it did not particularly address the vulnerability of children in areas where drugs are produced*

*1988- UN Convention Against Illicit Trafficking in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances*

*Connected drug trafficking to organized crime, exposing structural problems that had an indirect impact on children's exposure, although the role of children was still mainly ignored.*

*1989- The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*

*Established a legal structure for child protection in drug-producing situations by formally recognizing nations' obligations to protect kids from exploitation.*

*2010- UNODC World Drug Reports Start Recording Child Involvement*

*Highlighted the expanding issue of kids being involved in or exposed to drug manufacture, offering data to guide intervention and laws.*

*2023/2024- Global Acknowledgment of Child Addiction in Drug Production*

*Human Rights Watch, WHO, UNODC, and other international organizations have openly recognized the increase in child addiction in production zones and called for immediate action.*

## Previous attempts to solve the issue:

Both nationally and internationally, many attempts have been undertaken, but the majority have failed because of structural limitations. Although UNODC programs have performed research, supported prohibition activities, and helped on child safety, their implementation in remote or conflict-affected areas is still lacking (UNODC, 2024). The existence of organized crime and poverty frequently overwhelms UNICEF's efforts to develop child-protection networks and lessen child labour.

Medical services are either non-existent or scarce in many drug-producing regions, despite WHO's publication of guidelines on teenage substance misuse and promotion of early diagnosis and treatment programs (WHO, 2022). National governments have tried a range of tactics. Mexico has established social programs and specialized security units to prevent children from being recruited by criminal groups, Afghanistan has tried opium elimination campaigns and farmer substitution, and Colombia has implemented cocaine substitution and rural development programs (UNODC, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2021).

While Malawi and Egypt have passed anti-trafficking legislation and restricted child labour enforcement, India has carried out anti-drug trafficking operations and awareness programs



(UNICEF, n.d.). Despite these initiatives, significant progress has been hindered by corruption, economic reliance on drug crops, geographic isolation, and a lack of funding.

## Possible solutions

1. *Increase the number of law enforcement in areas at risk and impose severe punishments for engaging minors in drug manufacture.*
2. *Provide kids access to community centres, schools, and vocational training as alternatives to working in the drug industry.*
3. *Provide children who have been exposed to drugs with trauma therapy, addiction treatment, and health monitoring.*
4. *To reduce the dependency on illegal drug crops, implement agricultural replacement programs, loan programs, and sustainable livelihood programs.*
5. *Increase international cooperation to break up criminal networks, offer technical assistance, and finance healthcare and education programs for affected populations*

## Further Readings

- (1) [https://www.euda.europa.eu/publications/european-drug-report/2024\\_en\(1\)](https://www.euda.europa.eu/publications/european-drug-report/2024_en(1))  
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