



EVIDENCE-BASED STRATEGY CALLED FOR TO CURTAIL THE AFGHAN OPIUM TRADE

BACKGROUND

- Canada's ongoing military involvement in Afghanistan has highlighted the difficulty of controlling the massive supply of Afghan-produced opium, the profits of which help to bolster a resurgent Taliban.
- About 92% of the world's heroin supply is derived from Afghan opium, and because heroin is most often injected, Afghanistan's opium crop has profound global public health implications.
- In fact, according to UNAIDS, about one-third of all HIV infections outside of Africa are caused by injection drug use, and the majority of these injections involve heroin.
- A fierce debate rages on the best way to reduce the supply of Afghan opium. US officials have supported crop eradication by chemical spraying and other means. Independent analysts recommend assistance for Afghan opium farmers in switching to the production of alternative crops. Still others support regulating the Afghan opium crop to produce licit drugs such as medical morphine.

ARGUMENTS

- Missing from this debate, however, is a discussion of the evidence in support of conventional counter-narcotic strategies. For instance, there is little evidence that the US' Plan Colombia—an aggressive program aimed at the eradication of coca crops in Colombia—has had any effect on the price, purity, or availability of cocaine in the United States.
- Given the fragility of the Afghan state, the threat of the Taliban, and the millions of Afghans who rely on the opium trade for survival, the cost of failed strategy is high. That is why Canada and other members of the international community should use their presence in Afghanistan to ensure that strategies aimed at curtailing the opium trade take into account evaluations of previous programs and consider the likely negative effects of interventions currently in use.
- Bold programs such as the regulation of Afghanistan's opium crop should be given serious consideration.

QUICK FACT

REDUCING THE GLOBAL SUPPLY OF INJECTABLE HEROIN COULD ALSO CREATE POSITIVE PUBLIC HEALTH EFFECTS IN THE MANY COUNTRIES FACING INJECTION-RELATED HIV EPIDEMICS.

IMPLICATIONS

- Such leadership in evidence-based policy-making could profoundly improve security and development in Afghanistan.
- By reducing the global supply of injectable heroin, it could also create positive public health effects in the many countries facing injection-related HIV epidemics.

Werb D, Kerr T, Montaner J, Wood E. **The need for an evidence-based approach to controlling opium production in Afghanistan.** *Journal of Public Health Policy*, 2008; 29(4): 440-448.

