



## SCIENTISTS DEMAND A NEW APPROACH TO EVALUATING ILLICIT DRUG POLICY

*Leading international researchers call on governments to evaluate illicit drug policies by prioritizing indicators that measure their 'real world' impact on communities*

**Toronto, Canada** – Scientific experts from around the world are calling on governments to better align illicit drug policy goals with community concerns. According to an [open letter](#) released by the International Centre for Science in Drug Policy (ICSDP), while governments measure illicit drug policies primarily based on their capacity to reduce the availability of illicit drugs, this ignores the ‘real world’ impact of drug policies on the health, security, development, and human rights of affected communities. This call comes as the international community focuses unprecedented attention towards the world drug problem.

In advance of the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Drugs (UNGASS) – the largest international meeting on drug policy since 1998 – leading researchers are asking national governments and UN agencies to commit to revising the indicators currently used to evaluate drug control policies. Scientists held a [panel to release the open letter](#) at the United Nations Headquarters in New York City today, where the UNGASS will be held in April this year.

“To date, the impact of drug policies has traditionally been measured using a very narrow set of indicators totally detached from community concerns about health, safety, human rights and development,” said Dr. Dan Werb, Director of the ICSDP. “The scientific evidence suggests that conventional drug policies have little to no impact on patterns of illicit drug use. What’s equally important, though, is that these conventional indicators – like the amount of drugs seized or the price and purity of illicit drugs – totally fail to capture the most important ways in which drugs and drug policies affect communities.”

The open letter, signed by leading drug policy experts – including Dr. Michel Kazatchkine, Member of the Global Commission on Drug Policy, and Dr. David Nutt, former Chair of the United Kingdom’s Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs – outlines extensive scientific evidence that the indicators used to evaluate drug policy ignore some of the most important community impacts. In response, the open letter includes a preliminary set of suggested indicators that allow for governments to better assess the health, security, development and human rights impacts of their drug policies.

"Canada, like most other countries, has been counting arrests and drug seizures while remaining totally unaware of the fact that over-reliance on aggressive drug law enforcement creates violent drug markets and undermines addiction treatment and care," said Dr. Evan Wood, the medical director of addiction services at Vancouver Coastal Health and Providence Health Care, and co-director of the Urban Health Research Initiative at the British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS (BC-CfE). "Drug policies need to serve the public interest and be evaluated based on meaningful metrics of effectiveness that include reductions in overdose deaths and drug market violence rather than traditional indicators that have no real meaning."





Under the new federal government, Canada has taken preliminary steps towards adopting drug policy interventions that address community needs. Last week's [proposal by Health Canada](#) to make naloxone, an opioid overdose antidote, more widely available suggests that the federal government is prioritizing the health of drug-affected communities. "Although these developments are encouraging," noted Dr. Werb, "Canada has a long way to go towards setting up a comprehensive system to design and evaluate drug policies to maximize their potential benefits to community health and safety."

Dr. Julio Montaner, Director of the BC-CfE, added, "Criminalizing drugs and drug-related activity pushes it under the shadows of society, away from health services and other protections. It cannot be simply a coincidence some of the jurisdictions around the world with the most restrictive drug policies -- and the greatest resistance to evidence-based harm reduction practices -- have the highest rates of HIV. By opening up pathways to harm reduction and addiction treatment, there are opportunities to engage those living with HIV in sustained treatment and reduce their likelihood of spreading the virus."

According to the open letter, by adopting health, security, development and human rights indicators, governments will be better able to implement targeted and effective policies that align with community needs. The alternative is to continue the unacceptably high levels of drug-related harms, with grave implications for communities across the globe.

Members of the public are invited to join scientists in demanding that drug policies match community needs by adding their names in support of the open letter. The ICSDP has also created an online poll allowing the public to voice their top concerns when it come to drug policy.

## **About the International Centre for Science in Drug Policy**

The International Centre for Science in Drug Policy (ICSDP) is a network of scientists and academics from all global hemispheres committed to improving the health and safety of communities and individuals affected by illicit drugs by working to inform illicit drug policies with the best available scientific evidence. With the oversight of a Scientific Board made up of leading experts on addictions, HIV, and drug policy, the ICSDP conducts research and public education on best practices in drug policy. This work is undertaken in collaboration with communities, policymakers, law enforcement and other stakeholders to help guide effective and evidence-based policy responses to the many problems posed by illicit drugs.

## **About the British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS**

The BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS (BC-CfE) is Canada's largest HIV/AIDS research, treatment and education facility and is internationally recognized as an innovative world leader in combating HIV/AIDS and related diseases. BC-CfE is based at St. Paul's Hospital, Providence Health Care, a teaching hospital of the University of British Columbia. The BC-CfE works in close collaboration with key provincial stakeholders, including government, health authorities, health care providers, academics from other institutions, and the community to decrease the health burden of HIV and AIDS. By developing, monitoring and disseminating comprehensive research and treatment programs for HIV and related illnesses, the BC-CfE helps improve the health of British Columbians.

