



## 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.

Dr. Kanna Hayashi, an HIV epidemiologist and Assistant Professor at the University of British Columbia, has spent the last seven years investigating the outcomes of drugs and drug policy on people who inject drugs in Thailand. “The spread of HIV/AIDS and hepatitis C amongst people who inject drugs in Thailand has long surpassed epidemic proportions, with prevalence having reached [around 20% for HIV](#) and [90% for hepatitis C](#),” said Dr. Hayashi. “Yet, in 2015, funding for essential health services to prevent blood-borne diseases among people who inject drugs was cut in half, while aggressive drug policing that heightens their risk of infectious diseases continues. Formally integrating health indicators into drug policy evaluation is an important first step that countries should take, followed by sufficient





budget allocation and rigorous evaluation.”

Like Thailand, most countries in East and Southeast Asia continue to prioritize a zero-tolerance approach towards drugs, with little regard for the resulting negative health impacts. An overreliance on law enforcement has come at the expense of evidence-based treatment services for people who use drugs, undermining the health and human rights concerns of communities.

“Many of the treatment services that are available for people who use drugs in Thailand are simply not evidence-based,” said Dr. Thomas Kerr, Co-Director of the Urban Health Research Initiative at the British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS, who has also researched drug and drug policy impacts in Thailand. “The use of compulsory detention centres for drug users remains widespread throughout East and Southeast Asia, despite the fact that these centres are ineffective at reducing rates of dependence and regularly use torture and other forms of cruel and inhumane punishment. Hence, the health and human rights impacts of drugs and drug policy are inextricably linked in the region, and both must be considered in national and international evaluations of drug policy.”

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.

