



British Columbia
Centre for Excellence
in HIV/AIDS



New report finds drug prohibition, stricter law enforcement key sources of violence and gun crime

Proposed “tough on crime” policies such as mandatory minimum sentences will be costly for taxpayers and may actually increase violence in Canadian communities

Vancouver, British Columbia (March 23, 2010) – Canada’s war on drugs has failed to curb the illicit drug trade, and proposed legal interventions to disrupt the drug market will have no effect on drug supply and may actually boost rates of drug-related violence, according to a new scientific review.

Researchers at the Urban Health Research Initiative (UHRI), a program of the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS (BC-CfE), conducted a systematic review of all available English-language scientific literature to examine the impacts of drug-law enforcement on drug-market violence.

The systematic review identified 15 international studies examining the impact of drug-law enforcement on violence. Contrary to the prevailing belief that drug-law enforcement reduces violence, 87% of the studies (13 studies) observed that drug law enforcement was associated with increasing levels of drug-market violence.

“Widespread drug-related violence in places like Mexico and the US, as well as the gun violence we are increasingly seeing on Canadian streets, appears to be directly attributable to drug prohibition,” said co-author Dr. Evan Wood, a BC-CfE researcher. “Prohibition drives up the value of these substances astronomically, thereby creating lucrative markets exploited by organized crime. Any disruption of these markets through drug law enforcement seems to have the perverse effect of creating financial opportunities for organized crime groups, and gun violence often ensues.”

The review notes that drug prohibition has created a massive global illicit drug market, with an estimated annual value of US\$320 billion. Several of the studies reviewed suggested that violence stems from power vacuums created by the removal of key players from the illicit-drug market by law enforcement. As police use increasingly sophisticated methods to disrupt drug-distribution networks, levels of drug-related violence may rise.

The report's findings are also significant in the context of Bill C-15, which is currently before Parliament and would introduce mandatory minimum sentences for drug convictions. Research shows that similar sentencing policies in the United States have been ineffective in curbing the drug trade and have imposed a staggering tax burden through the escalating costs of incarceration. Despite the renewed emphasis on law enforcement in Canada's new National Anti-Drug Strategy and the proposal to implement mandatory minimum sentences for drug law violations, the evidence base to support these measures has not yet been articulated.

“In the era of evidence-based public policy it is remarkable that the federal government is proposing extremely costly interventions, such as mandatory minimum sentences, without any discussion of their costs or likely impacts on crime,” said Dr. Thomas Kerr, a BC-CfE researcher and co-author of the report. “This review clearly demonstrates that while these interventions will place an enormous burden on the taxpayer, they are unlikely to reduce crime and may actually increase violence in our communities.”

The report recommends that alternative models of drug control be considered if drug supply and drug-related violence are to be meaningfully reduced.

The report's findings have received support from across the political spectrum, including high-profile conservative voices.

“Drug-related violence is not a partisan issue, and all parties need to work together to increase the evidence base that goes into illicit drug policies,” said Senator Pierre Claude Nolin, former Chair of the Senate Special Committee on Illegal Drugs.

The report was externally peer-reviewed by conservative economists, including Professor Stephen Easton, who is a Senior Fellow at the Fraser Institute, and Harvard's Jeffrey Miron.

The full 26-page report, “Effect of Drug Law Enforcement on Drug-Related Violence: Evidence from a Scientific Review,” is available online at <http://uhri.cfenet.ubc.ca>.

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About the B.C. 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. The BC-CfE is based at St Paul's Hospital, Providence Health Care, a teaching hospital of the University of British Columbia. The BC-CfE is dedicated to improving the health of British Columbians with HIV through developing, monitoring and disseminating comprehensive research and treatment programs for HIV and related diseases.

About The Urban Health Research Initiative:

The Urban Health Research Initiative (UHRI), established in 2007, is a program of the BC-CfE. UHRI's mission is to improve the health of individuals and communities through research to

inform policy. UHRI research programs are based on a network of studies that have been developed to help identify and understand the many factors that affect the health of urban populations, with a focus on substance use, infectious diseases, the urban environment and homelessness.

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