MAPPING THE CROATIAN DRUG MARKET: A MULTIDIMENSIONAL APPROACH TO ILLICIT TRADE AND SOCIAL IMPACT

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Abstract:

This article analyses the illegal drug market in Croatia, focusing on its legal, structural and social dimensions. It emphasises the importance of a comprehensive, interdisciplinary approach to understanding the illicit drug economy. Based on the results of a national research project conducted in 2017, the study analyses Croatia's role as an important transit country along the Balkan drug route, connecting Eastern European production areas with Western consumer markets. Croatia's recent accession to the Schengen area has further changed the dynamics of drug trafficking and created new challenges and opportunities for society, public policy and law enforcement.

The paper examines various components of the Croatian drug market, including supply chains, distribution networks, consumption patterns and the involvement of organised criminal groups. Particular attention is paid to new trends such as the rise of synthetic substances and the social impact of increasing cross-border mobility. These developments are considered in terms of their wider impact on communities, public health, criminal justice practise and social stability.

By summarising existing research and emphasising the interconnectedness of legal, economic and social factors, this study highlights the need for a multidimensional understanding of drug markets. It aims to inform evidence-based policy decisions and promote more effective, socially acceptable strategies to address drug-related challenges in national and international contexts.

Keywords: *Illicit drug market, Croatia, evidence-based research*

1. Introduction

In the context of drug market research, it seems important to emphasise that there is no single definition of the drug market, which should be considered when conducting drug market research at any level. Important for a scientific approach to drug market research is the definition of the drug market and its levels. One of the main shortcomings related to the definition of the drug market is the fact that there are no generally recognised definitions of the different levels of the drug market (Degenhardt et al., 2004), but the levels and their definitions vary from study to study. According to Ritter (2005), the term "illicit drug market" is frequently used in research related to drug abuse, but the meaning of the term is interpreted differently by scholars. An economist may have a very different understanding of what is meant by the drug market than an ethnographer, for example. Connolly and Donovan (2014) define the illicit drug market as "a concept that encompasses three loosely related markets". Firstly, the global or "international market" encompasses drug production and international trafficking; secondly, the "intermediate market", which includes the importation and wholesale distribution of drugs at the

national level (Pearson and Hobbs 2001; Connolly and Donovan, 2014:29); and thirdly, the "local market", which includes distribution at the retail level (Lupton et al. 2002; Connolly and Donovan, 2014:29). All the above authors point out that there can be a high degree of overlap in the individuals operating at these levels, with some individuals operating at multiple levels, creating the problem of duplication of data or omission of data for a particular level. Another major problem is the lack of information on the structure of the distribution process in different countries, on the way a particular market responds to changes in supply and demand, and on the specific impact of drug supply and demand reduction measures (Natarajan and Hough, 2000). Systematic and regular information on illicit drug markets is still limited, although it has been increasing recently (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction and Europol, 2012).

For the purposes of this article, the term drug market refers to all forms of illegal possession, distribution, trafficking and drug-related crime.

Understanding the drug market is important for several reasons. Understanding supply routes, price elasticity and the nature of competition is necessary for policy decisions. Knowledge of the higher levels of the market (production and distribution) can help shape interventions, interdiction and other drug law enforcement efforts. At the local level, understanding what is happening in the retail market can help design, evaluate, and improve harm reduction, treatment, and drug law enforcement efforts.

To understand the complexity of drug market research, this paper presents the results of a study conducted in 2017 on the illicit drug market in Croatia. The overall aim of the study was to collect data on the structure and dynamics of the drug market in the Republic of Croatia.

In line with the above, the specific objectives of this research were organised into several units:

- To create a self-report questionnaire as a tool for measuring the nature and extent of secondary criminality and certain aspects of the structure and dynamics of the drug market in the Republic of Croatia

- Gaining insight into some aspects of secondary crime with a particular focus on the motivation behind the offence committed, leading to a differentiation of the different levels at which drug-related crime occurs

- Insights into the structure and organisation of the drug market in the Republic of Croatia

- Insight into the way minors are involved in the drug market, the extent of involvement in the distribution of illicit drugs and the extent of involvement in a criminal lifestyle related to drugs

- Development of recommendations to improve the policy to combat drug-related crime and to improve the information system of the Ministry of Interior, which would significantly contribute to the quality of reports on secondary crime submitted to the EMCDDA

2. Methodology
2.1. Sample

As this was a complex research problem that needs to be analysed from different angles, the sample was divided into several sub-samples:

- 156 offenders convicted under Articles 190, 191 and 191a of the Criminal Code (illicit production of and trafficking in drugs, aiding and abetting drug use and illicit production of and trafficking in substances prohibited in sport) serving their sentences in Lepoglava Correctional Centre, Glina Correctional Centre and Zagreb Prison – sample of convicted drug addicts

- 24 minors in Turopolje Prison – sample of minors for quantitative analysis

- 15 minors in Turopolje Prison, 2 minors and 1 minor who is not undergoing treatment and has agreed to be interviewed – sample of minors for qualitative analysis

- 150 persons who committed criminal offences under the Law on Anti-Drug Abuse in the areas of Split Police Directorate, Zadar Police Directorate, Rijeka Police Directorate, Varaždin Police Directorate and Osijek Police Directorate (data from documentation) – sample of persons who committed criminal offences under the Law on Anti-Drug Abuse

2.2. Data collection

Data on the structure and dynamics of the drug market in the Republic of Croatia and on some aspects of secondary criminality in penal institutions were collected using the self-report method from a sample of convicted persons with a diagnosis of addiction and from a sample of minors. For this

purpose, a questionnaire was created specifically for adult offenders and a modified form of the questionnaire for minors.

The data in the prison in Lepoglava, the prison in Glina and the prison in Zagreb were collected by specially trained officers from the prisons, who had previously selected the potential participants in the survey and explained the purpose and objectives of the survey to them, after which the participants voluntarily completed the questionnaire. Data on a sample of minors in Turopolje Prison were also collected using the self-report method by specialised project staff who are not officers of the above-mentioned institutions. Data from the Ministry of the Interior on offenders who committed criminal offences under the Law on Combating Drug Abuse in the areas of the Split Police Directorate, Zadar Police Directorate, Rijeka Police Directorate, Varaždin Police Directorate and Osijek Police Directorate were collected by analysing available documentation from the aforementioned police stations based on a questionnaire from a previous study in the area of the illicit drug market in 2016. Part of the data on the role of minors in the drug market was collected using the interview method and subjected to qualitative data analysis.

2.3. Data analysis

The qualitative analysis included techniques of summarisation, structuring, interpretation and explication. The data were presented in the form of a story, very similar to the statements, but replacing slang terminology with specialised terminology, adapting the text to the written form while respecting grammar, and in a structure that more clearly presents the complex elements of the social phenomenon under study, but also links them together.

The interpretation of the information obtained refers exclusively to the interpretation from the perspective of the participants, in the way they themselves explain and relate different aspects of their role in drug trafficking, causal phenomena, their own attitudes or information that they have and were willing to share in the very specific circumstances of the research.

3. Results
3.1. Sample of convicted persons with a diagnosis of addiction

The analysis of the data collected showed that the age of the respondents ranged from 21 to 63 years, with an average of 35.8 years (SD = 8.019). All respondents were male.

In terms of educational structure, 59% of respondents had completed secondary school, while 26% had completed primary school. 6% of the respondents had completed high school and incomplete primary school, and only 3% of the respondents had a university degree.

In terms of marital status, 54% of respondents reported living independently, 20% were cohabiting and 13% were married. In addition, 3% said they were married but not living with their spouse, while 2% said they were widowed. The remaining 8% of respondents described their status as "something else".

Prior to serving their sentence, 50% of respondents were occasionally employed, while 26% were unemployed. 24% of respondents had a permanent job. The most common crime for which respondents were imprisoned was robbery (41.6%), followed by grand larceny (24.8%), illicit drug production and trafficking (21.5%) and theft (16.8%). Smaller proportions are attributable to aiding and abetting drug use (8.1%), robbery (6.7%) and aggravated murder (6.1%). The length of the sentences imposed ranged from 4 to 480 months, with an average duration of 78.37 months (SD = 81.44). The number of previous prison sentences served ranged from 0 to 10, with an average of 1.53 (SD = 1.68).

According to the information on the measures imposed, 47.1% of respondents had previously been sentenced to compulsory addiction treatment, while 39.6% had no such experience. A driving ban was imposed in 15.6% of cases, compulsory psychiatric treatment in 13%, psychosocial treatment in 6.5% and a ban on carrying out a particular activity in 2% of cases.

In 65% of cases, respondents were diagnosed with opiate addiction, while 35% had no such diagnosis. The same ratio applies to self-assessment – 65% of respondents consider themselves not addicted, while 35% are. When asked about occasional drug use, 55% of respondents described themselves as recreational users, while 45% did not.

The duration of regular drug use ranged from 0 to 45 years, with an average duration of 13.85 years (SD = 8.20). The question about committing offences to obtain drugs revealed that 52.9% of

respondents committed theft, 15.7% threat or violence, 5.8% extortion, while 30.6% did not use any of the above methods.

The method of obtaining drugs shows that 68% of respondents acted independently, 21% in pairs and 11% in groups. In addition, 69% worked with people of a different nationality. The most frequently mentioned nationalities include Serbs, Bosnians and Albanians, followed by Bulgarians, Montenegrins, Turks, Austrians, Hungarians, Slovenians and other nationalities that were mentioned individually, such as Italians, Moroccans, French and Dutch.

A total of 59% of respondents stated that they were in a situation where they owed money for drugs. To repay the debt, 64.8% committed theft or robbery, 50.5% engaged in drug dealing, 14.4% committed embezzlement and a similar number lied to a doctor in order to obtain substitution therapy. Prostitution was practised by 1.1% of respondents.

Offences under the influence of drugs were admitted by 74% of respondents. The most used substances in these situations include combinations of marijuana and cocaine as well as marijuana and substitution therapy. Single offences were most frequently committed under the influence of heroin (11.3%), cocaine (9.6%), marijuana (4.3%), amphetamine (2.6%), substitution therapy (1.7%) and other substances.

The most common crimes committed under the influence of drugs include theft and robbery (67%), violent crimes (12%) and crimes against sexual freedom (1%).

The frequency of use of certain drugs shows that marijuana and hashish are the most used drugs (47.8%), followed by heroin (44.2%) and substitution therapy (41.3%). Ecstasy (43.7%), cocaine (31.4%), hallucinogenic drugs (31.3%) and amphetamines (23.8%) were used occasionally.

67% of respondents had experience with drug dealing. Marijuana (15.6%), heroin (9.2%), cocaine (7.3%), substitution therapy (1.8%) and hallucinogenic drugs (0.9%) were sold most frequently. Most respondents (65.1%) stated that they sold a combination of several types of drugs without limiting themselves to one substance. Selling drugs over the internet was admitted by 6% of respondents, while the same percentage confirmed buying drugs over the internet. The so-called "dark web" was used by 3% of respondents to buy drugs".

3.1.2. Results of the qualitative analysis
3.1.2.1. Structure and dynamics of the drug market: organisation, distribution and street sales

The analysis of the drug market indicates a complex distribution structure in which street dealers often have different types of psychoactive substances at their disposal. Although at first glance it can be concluded that all drugs are available from most street dealers, there is some form of specialisation between certain groups. For example, dealers who sell heroin often also sell cocaine and sometimes hashish and marijuana, while those who specialise in the sale of amphetamines usually deal in the so-called "cranks' such as ecstasy and speed. Such a division also reflects the different patterns of demand, as heroin and cocaine are often used by the same group of users, while other drugs are used by people with different patterns of use.

The supply on the market covers a wide range of substances, although not every substance is available from every single seller. A distinction is made between drugs that are used for recreational purposes, especially at weekends (marijuana, ecstasy, amphetamines), and those that are characteristic of long-term addicts, such as heroin. Although heroin is still circulating on the market, the quality of the available product is extremely low, resulting in less interest from users. Currently, marijuana is the most widespread drug on the market, followed by amphetamines and cocaine. The distribution network is organised hierarchically and functions according to the pyramid model - from the main supplier who controls the flow of substances into the Republic of Croatia, through the intermediate stages of distribution, to the street dealers who operate at the local level. Despite the division of tasks and specialisation at the higher levels, street dealers often have all types of drugs at their disposal, given the diversity of demand. Some specialise exclusively in marijuana, while others can quickly procure other substances thanks to flexible supply networks. Street dealers tend to operate in small, informal groups, with minors more often involved in the distribution of marijuana and amphetamines, while older people are more active in the cocaine and heroin trade.

3.1.2.2. Market levels and profiles of the players involved

The drug market is divided into three basic levels: Wholesale, secondary trade and retail. Wholesale and secondary distribution are managed by people with many years of experience and a stable position within the criminal hierarchy. These levels are characterised by a high degree of organisation, links to other actors in the chain and even to people within the repressive apparatus, including the police and military. Advancement within these structures is extremely difficult, and entry into the inner circle requires a high degree of trust and scrutiny.

The retail trade is run by minors, addicts and people looking for an additional source of income. These often include people with regular employment who enter vending to earn extra income, to entertain themselves or to solve financial problems. New street vendors, especially minors, are recruited through conversation, persuasion, false promises, offers of money or goods. Addicts, especially those without a stable income, most often get involved in selling in order to secure their own consumption.

At higher levels, dealing becomes a primary source of income and a means to invest in other activities, both legal and illegal. People involved in the wholesale trade are often perceived as part of the local social elite and use their relatives, brothers and other people close to them in the network. New players entering the market with larger quantities of drugs are subject to strict control and monitoring, after which it is decided whether they are authorised to work together.

In the retail sector, the recruitment of minors by other minors is becoming increasingly common. Individuals sometimes engage in drug distribution on their own initiative, motivated by quick and seemingly easy profits. Consumers also appear to be suitable for distribution in small quantities as they are motivated to secure their own access to drugs. Larger quantities are distributed by members of criminal organisations, but also by individuals at the retail level who have the ambition to move up in a criminal career.

The relationships between the players in the drug market are characterised by the simultaneous existence of competition and cooperation. Although traffickers often compete with each other due to the division of territory and the type of substances available, co-operation occurs in situations of common interest. According to the interviewees' perception, co-operative relationships prevail - dealers trade with each other, exchange information about routes and distribution channels and help each other to protect themselves from police intervention. This creates a network of mutual support that goes beyond formal hierarchical relationships.

3.2. Sample of minors

A total of 24 male respondents between the ages of 15 and 19 (M = 17.37, SD = 1.18) took part in the study. All respondents were serving a sentence in a correctional facility.

The most common offences leading to the imposition of a prison sentence were theft (n = 7) and robbery (n = 7), while some respondents had committed other offences, including grand theft (n = 1), assault on an officer (n = 1), murder (n = 1), rape (n = 1), drug abuse (n = 1), domestic violence (n = 1) and assault (n = 1). In one case, several offences were recorded, but the specific structure of these offences was not specified.

The educational measures imposed lasted between 2 and 36 months, with an average duration of 7.75 months (SD = 7.52). According to the data, 74% of respondents had previously been subject to educational measures or sanctions. The most common measures were referral to a correctional facility (n = 17), increased supervision and monitoring (n = 15) and referral to a correctional facility (n = 12). The less frequent measures included referral to a disciplinary centre (n = 7) and the imposition of a court reprimand (n = 7).

In terms of diagnosis of addiction, 33% of respondents stated that they had been diagnosed with addiction or had been tested for substance abuse, while 67% had no such experience. When asked if they considered themselves to be addicted, 77% of respondents answered no and 23% answered yes. In terms of recreational or occasional drug use, 54% described themselves as occasional users, while 46% said no.

The most common age at which respondents first used drugs was 15 years, followed by 14, 13 and 11 years, and one respondent stated that they first used drugs at the age of 9.

The data on frequency of use show that marijuana and hashish are the most commonly used substances, which were used several times a day in 76.2% of cases. New psychoactive substances were used in 44.4% of cases. Ecstasy was most frequently used once a day (16.7%), but also 3–4 times a week in 50% of cases. Cocaine, hallucinogenic drugs and amphetamines were most frequently used at weekends, and new drugs were used in the same pattern in 16.7% of cases.

A total of 79% of respondents stated that they had committed an offence under the influence of drugs. They were most frequently under the influence of combinations of different substances listed under the "other" category. These combinations include hashish and new drugs; heroin, ecstasy and amphetamines; cocaine and amphetamines; marijuana, hashish and ecstasy; marijuana, cocaine and amphetamines; marijuana, hashish, substitution therapy and new drugs. Of the drugs specifically mentioned, marijuana and new drugs are the most commonly used.

The most common offences committed under the influence of drugs include theft, violent crime and offences relating to the unlawful possession, manufacture and trafficking of drugs and substances prohibited in sport.

When asked about the drugs they most frequently resell, 67% of respondents ticked "other". A combination of marijuana, hashish, ecstasy, amphetamines and new drugs was mentioned most frequently. Cocaine and substitution therapy were sold less frequently. The new drugs were identified by trade names such as "blow", "sharp", "atomix", "galaxy" and "rainbow", indicating the presence of new psychoactive substances. The most distributed drugs were marijuana and hashish.

Motivations for starting to resell included a combination of fun, financial gain and the need to support one's addiction. A smaller number of respondents cited only one of these three motives, and only 5% cited debt collection as their primary reason for starting to resell.

When asked if they were recruited to resell, 43% of respondents answered yes, and most of them (86%) were recruited by friends or acquaintances. The remainder said that they entered the world of resale independently or without prior acquaintance with the people who recruited them. Communication with the people who recruited them was most often done by "some other means" (43%), followed by communication via mobile phone (36%) and through friends and acquaintances (21%).

Places of resale included private parties, concerts and festivals, public places (streets, parks), enclosed public spaces (cafés, clubs) and schools. Most respondents ticked all the options offered, indicating a high degree of flexibility in distribution locations.

According to the information provided, 55% of respondents obtained drugs through theft, 45% through threats and physical violence, 15% through extortion, while 25% stated that they did not use any of these methods.

To obtain money for drugs, 63% of respondents reported that they had committed theft, 37% had used threats and physical violence, 10% had used extortion and 16% had not used any of these forms. In addition, 38% of respondents admitted to committing a crime to collect a drug debt.

Of the collection methods mentioned, physical force (61.5%) was the most used, followed by theft (46.2%), threats (30.8%) and blackmail (15.4%).

Respondents who were in debt due to drugs (62%) reported various ways of obtaining money. Of these, 77% committed theft and/or robbery, 39% engaged in the resale of drugs, 15.5% lied to doctors to obtain a larger amount of substitution therapy for the purpose of resale, and the same percentage of respondents reported engaging in prostitution. Embezzlement was mentioned by 7% of respondents as a way of obtaining money to repay debts.

3.2.1. Results of the qualitative analysis
3.2.2. Patterns of drug use and availability

According to the participants, drug use among young people is frequent and widespread, especially at weekends and during holidays, but also in the everyday lives of certain groups of young people who regularly attend neighbourhood meetings, cafés and other informal meeting places. Depending on the social circles in which the young people move, it is estimated that between 10% and 50% of high school students use marijuana, while in primary schools around 5 of students come into contact with marijuana for the first time, mostly through older friends.

Participants pointed out that in some neighbourhoods, especially in the outskirts of Zagreb such as Dubrava and Sesvete, drug use is extremely high, with estimates of 80–90% of minors. Marijuana is

perceived as a gateway drug, while cocaine and amphetamines are increasingly used in the higher school years. Regular marijuana users often have their own stash and engage in distribution, while more intensive users develop a lifestyle centred on the acquisition and use of drugs, often accompanied by other criminal activities such as theft, extortion, gambling and prostitution.

3.2.3. Procurement methods and types of drugs consumed

Marijuana and synthetic cannabinoids (e.g. Galaxy, Rainbow, Spice) are the most readily available, while some dealers also offer amphetamines, hallucinogenic mushrooms and even cocaine. Many of them can procure almost any type of drug quickly, including new psychoactive substances. Drugs are most acquired by gathering money, often from legal sources such as pocket money or gifts, but also through theft, various services and resale.

Young people most often use marijuana, and when it is not available, they turn to synthetic cannabinoids. There is a tendency to underestimate the dangers associated with the use of synthetic drugs, although participants are aware of the possible serious consequences such as hallucinations, aggressive behaviour, epileptic seizures and death. Nevertheless, such risks are often attributed to "weak" individuals, while they do not personally recognise themselves as being at risk. Amphetamines, hallucinogenic mushrooms and so-called "trips" are occasionally consumed, mainly at events and parties. The combined use of several substances in one evening is not uncommon. Cocaine is used less frequently, especially by people with greater financial means. Hashish and so-called "glinamol" (a chemical substrate consumed as a drug) are perceived as extremely strong substances, while heroin is very rare. Subutex is used occasionally and is obtained by older addicts.

3.2.4. Recruitment strategies, consumption and distribution

Young people who use multiple types of drugs, and more frequently, often become part of the trafficking chain as small-scale dealers, couriers or participants in other illicit activities. Involvement in resale often begins spontaneously and then develops through relationships within the criminal milieu. In these circumstances, debt poses a significant risk as users become financially and operationally linked to criminal groups.

Entry into the distribution structures can be the result of initial "test" assignments, but also the deliberate recruitment of younger minors led by slightly older peers. Underage dealers sell drugs in public and private places, especially in summer and among tourists. Distribution is dispersed and is best described as "ant distribution". Some minors come from criminally structured families with already established contacts and distribution channels.

The timing of marijuana use among adolescents includes both weekend and everyday circumstances. Some teens use marijuana occasionally, while others progress to daily or multiple daily use. Frequent drug use is associated with dropping out of school, moving away from family and becoming involved in crime.

The places of use are varied and include public areas (streets, parks, courtyards), private spaces (rooms, friends' homes), restaurants and cars. Consumption often takes place inconspicuously and without much regard for parental or police supervision.

Minors from rural and socially disadvantaged areas are involved in marijuana cultivation, either "in the wild" or with the help of their parents in backyards and greenhouses. In more advanced cases, they use equipment for controlled conditions ("grow tents"), but such activities are usually carried out at the expense of older people. The production of new synthetic drugs, such as homemade "crystals" from cleaning products, is increasingly common, although minors are not directly involved but act as testers and distributors.

3.2.5. Social dynamics, motivations and Attitudes towards consumption, distribution and prevention

Underage drug users often come from unstable family backgrounds, feel neglected and find in drug use a way to express rebellion and create an identity. For them, drugs are a means of gaining a sense of belonging, satisfaction and even symbolic resistance against a society that perceives them as problematic.

Attitudes towards marijuana are extremely liberal. It is considered more acceptable and less harmful than alcohol and tobacco, and it is openly discussed among young people and in public. Negative attitudes only arise in the case of personal negative experiences.

Underage dealers do not necessarily see themselves as perpetrators of a criminal offence, especially when it comes to small quantities or income for living expenses. They differentiate between "real" distribution and "procurement" for themselves and friends, whereby the boundaries of criminal behaviour are relativised.

In terms of prevention, the participants believe that parents and the family environment play a key role. A good relationship with parents, supervision and being a positive role model were cited as protective factors. School is not perceived as a central prevention space, and drug content in an educational context is even seen as an incentive to experiment. The biggest authorities whose messages are accepted are peers and sports stars.

Participants do not see media content as the main cause of drug use. They emphasise personal responsibility and contextual factors in lifestyle choices. They attribute responsibility for the availability of drugs to institutions, especially politicians and the police.

Conclusion

This mixed-methods study provides one of the most detailed portraits to date of the Croatian illicit drug market and its interconnectedness with secondary criminality. By combining self-reports from incarcerated adult drug users, quantitative and qualitative data from juveniles and police records, we have mapped a hierarchically organised yet highly adaptable distribution system, ranging from well-connected wholesalers to loosely connected street dealers. Cannabis, amphetamines and cocaine dominate the retail market, while heroin — although still available — has lost ground due to its persistently low purity. Dealers operate in small, flexible cells that combine competition with pragmatic co-operation. Many players, including minors, operate on several levels, which illustrates the fluid boundaries of the market.

Young people are both a vulnerable and influential population group. The onset of drug use is frequently before the age of 15, daily use of cannabis and synthetic cannabinoids is widespread, and two-thirds of the adolescent sample have already trafficked drugs — mainly for profit, 'fun' and to fund personal use. Recruitment is carried out by peers, and adolescents quickly become involved in larger criminal structures through debt or intimidation. These findings highlight the limitations of classroom-based prevention alone and emphasise the need for family-centred surveillance, credible peer-led messages and community interventions targeting recreational settings and online spaces where drugs are marketed.

Among adults, a long drug career (mean = 13.9 years) and high opioid dependence create a cycle of acquisitive crime: 74% were convicted of offences while intoxicated and 59% accumulated drug debts, which they repaid mainly through theft, robbery or dealing. The permeable interface between Croatian drug traffickers and regional networks — especially Serbian, Bosnian and Albanian groups — confirms that national counternarcotics strategies need to be embedded in broader Southeast European co-operation frameworks. Intelligence-led policing at points of entry, an improved Ministry of Interior information system and standardised indicators for EMCDDA reporting would improve early warning and evaluation of supply reduction measures.

Several limitations limit the generalisability of the results: unrepresentative prison-based samples, potential over-representation of serious offenders and cross-sectional data collected in 2017 that cannot capture the post-COVID increase in the supply of potent synthetic opioids or novel psychoactive substances. Future research should combine longitudinal ethnographic studies with digital trace analysis to monitor emerging online marketplaces and explore gendered pathways given the almost exclusively male samples in the present study.

Despite these limitations, the study provides usable insights. Priority should be given to the following topics:

- Early, family-centred prevention that interrupts the trajectory of polydrug use;
- Diversion programmes that break the debt–violence spiral among young dealers;
- Integrated treatment and vocational support in prisons to reduce reoffending; and

- Systematic collection of data on price, purity and seizure along the Balkan route.

If implemented together, these measures could reduce the retail space, disrupt wholesale logistics and ultimately reduce the social and economic damage associated with the Croatian illicit drug market.

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