



## NEWS RELEASE from the EU drugs agency in Lisbon

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### NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN DRUG POLICY AND LAW

#### Growing concern over impact of drug use on our communities

(24.11.2005 LISBON) There is growing concern in many European countries surrounding the wider impact of drug use on the communities in which we live, says the **EU drugs agency (EMCDDA)** today in its **2005 Annual report on the state of the drugs problem in Europe**.

In a special review on drug-related public nuisance, the **EMCDDA** points to a new tendency for drug control policies to focus, not only on reducing the use of illegal drugs, but also on targeting drug-related behaviours which have a negative impact on the community as a whole.

'Behaviours, situations and activities associated with drug-related public nuisance have long existed in most of the **EU Member States, candidate countries** and **Norway** and are not new phenomena', says the agency. 'What is new is the growing tendency among policy-makers in some countries to group these under a single umbrella concept to be tackled within national drug strategies'.

**EMCDDA Chairman Marcel Reimen** says: 'When we talk about drug-related public nuisance we are not only referring to crime, but also to a broader range of anti-social behaviours that disrupt the safety, health and tidiness of a community, jeopardising the quality and enjoyment of life of its inhabitants. The current concern over drug-related public nuisance that we are now witnessing in the policy arena is a response to these negative influences in our own neighbourhoods'.

The most commonly reported drug-related behaviours impacting negatively on people's feelings of personal safety or community stability, says the **EMCDDA**, are: public drug taking; visible drug-related intoxication; street dealing; crime committed under the influence of drugs; open drug scenes; discarded injecting equipment; as well as intrusive verbal contact from users and dealers and their proximity to children.

A 2003 **European Commission** report on EU citizens' opinions on public safety and exposure to drug-related problems and crime revealed that, across the **EU-15**, the proportion of those feeling 'very unsafe' on the streets rose from 8% in 1996 to 12% in 2002 <sup>(1)</sup>. A 2004 **Eurobarometer** survey on young people's perceptions of drugs found that 63% of them considered it easy to procure drugs near their homes <sup>(2)</sup>. Perception is a key element in the issue of public nuisance, says the review, but may not reflect objective levels of disturbance and criminality.

#### Tackling drug-related public nuisance

Five countries – **Belgium, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands** and the **UK** – have now made reducing drug-related public nuisance a key objective of their overall national drug policy and implement a coordinated approach, combining health, social, public security and environmental components.

Although the majority of **EU countries** do not report public nuisance (labelled as such) to be a central target of their national drug strategy, they do address the various acts covered by the term under the broader title of security and public order. Within this group, most countries, largely the **new EU Member States**, address the issue with non-specific interventions and laws, tackling issues such as intoxication in public or noise pollution.

Meanwhile other countries – e.g. **Germany, Greece, France, Ireland** and **Austria** – have developed ad hoc initiatives to reduce public nuisance, such as consultation and coordination between citizens and all actors involved in local drug policy-making.

Further responses include the adoption of laws against drug-specific public nuisance (**Spain, France, the UK** – e.g. regulations at raves; against littering of drug paraphernalia); local policing initiatives (**Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Cyprus** and **Finland**); measures to eliminate open drug scenes (**Denmark** and **Germany**); and harm-reduction measures explicitly targeting drug-related public nuisance (**Luxembourg** and **Hungary**).

‘The extent to which this new drug policy category is the result of a real increase in drug-related public nuisance, as opposed to a growing intolerance in our communities towards drug users is presently unclear’, says the **EMCDDA**. The absence of a common definition of drug-related public nuisance EU-wide, and of reliable indicators to collect data, means it is still difficult to measure the problem objectively. ‘But what is clear’, the agency concludes, ‘is that protecting local communities from the negative consequences of drug use, addiction and trafficking is now emerging in parts of Europe today as a very real political concern’.

## Overview of new developments in drug policy and law

Other new developments in drug policy and law are addressed in Chapter 1 of the 2005 *Annual report*.

- 26 out of the 29 countries covered by the report operate their drug policy according to a national plan, strategy or similar document. The greatest difference of opinion surrounds harm reduction: the issue features prominently in 12 of the documents, is included in a further nine and not mentioned in five.
- New national drug strategies became operational in seven countries: **Estonia, France, Cyprus, Lithuania, Slovenia** and **Finland** (2004) and **Luxembourg** (2005).
- More countries are now measuring progress by evaluating implementation of their strategies. Adoption of formal strategies and increased evaluation has led to a rise in drug-related expenditure in some countries (e.g. **Hungary** and **Luxembourg**).
- In several Member States, new national laws were adopted in 2003 and 2004 to help reduce young people’s exposure to drugs (**Czech Republic, Denmark, Spain, Latvia, Hungary, Poland, UK**).
- In 2003 and 2004, several countries passed laws touching on the issue of harm reduction (**France, Luxembourg, Finland, the UK** and **Norway**).
- In 2003 and 2004, some countries changed their penalties for cannabis use (**Belgium** and the **UK** – lower penalties; **Denmark** – higher). In 2003, **Greece** lowered the maximum penalty for drug use from five years to one year, while **Hungary** removed the offence of drug use from its penal code (although drug use is still punishable through acquisition and possession offences).
- Penalties generally increased for drug trafficking and drug-related offences threatening minors.
- Two countries reported moves to legislate on drugs in the workplace (**Finland** and **Ireland**). Drug prevention in specific settings like the workplace is highlighted in the new EU drugs action plan (2005–2008). For more on the EU drugs strategy 2005–2012 and action plan see also Chapter 1.

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## Notes

The review on drug-related public nuisance is one of three ‘Selected issues’ complementing the 2005 *Annual report* (<http://issues05.emcdda.eu.int>). The other two cover the use of buprenorphine in substitution treatment (see news release No 11) and alternatives to imprisonment for drug using offenders (see news release No 13).

<sup>(1)</sup> *Public safety, exposure to drug-related problems and crime*, European Opinion Research Group Report (EORG), 2003 prepared for the European Commission ([http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/public\\_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs\\_181\\_en.pdf](http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_181_en.pdf)).

<sup>(2)</sup> *Young people and drugs*, Flash EB 158, 2004 ([http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/public\\_opinion/flash/fl158\\_en.pdf](http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/flash/fl158_en.pdf)).