



NEWS RELEASE from the EU drugs agency in Lisbon

ANNUAL REPORT 2005: FOCUS ON CRIME AND PRISON

Most EU countries report increases in drug law offences

(24.11.2005 LISBON) Violations of drug law ('drug law offences') have reportedly increased in the majority of the **25 EU Member States** and **Norway** since the late 1990s, states the **EU drugs agency (EMCDDA)** today in its **2005 Annual report on the state of the drugs problem in Europe**, launched in Brussels (¹).

This upward trend in 20 countries over the period 1998–2003 is particularly marked, says the agency, in **Estonia** and **Poland**, where reported drug law offences increased around ten-fold and three-fold respectively (²). However, in some countries, reports of such offences showed a decline in 2003: **Belgium, Spain, Italy, Malta, Austria** and **Slovenia**.

Drug-related crime is a broad concept that can refer to a variety of offences, explains the **EMCDDA**. It can encompass crimes performed under the influence of drugs, offences committed to finance drug use and crimes occurring in the context of illegal drug markets. But only in the area of drug law offences do routine data exist in the **EU**, albeit gathered through very different reporting practices.

In most **EU Member States**, drug use or possession (for personal use) account for the largest proportion of drug law offences, ranging from 39% in **Poland** to 87% in **Austria** and the **UK**. Yet in a few countries, drug dealing or trafficking represent the largest share: 46% in **Luxembourg** and 91% in the **Czech Republic**.

Drug law offences increasingly involve cocaine

The proportion of drug law offences involving cocaine increased in the period 1998–2003, according to available data. This proportion varies considerably from country to country, ranging from 1% in the **Czech Republic** and **Lithuania** to 32% in **Italy** (drug trafficking offences only). Only **Germany** reports the percentage of cocaine-related offences to have fallen during this period.

Cannabis remains the drug most often cited in drug law offences in most **EU Member States** and the proportion of drug law offences involving the substance has increased since 1998 in **Germany, Spain, France, Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta** and **Portugal**. But the figure has remained stable in **Belgium, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Sweden** and the **UK** and has fallen in **Italy** and **Austria**.

Heroin-related offences fell in all reporting countries in the period 1998–2003, except **Austria** and the **UK**, where they rose.

Up to one third of prisoners have injected drugs in prison

According to today's report, recent estimates for drug injecting in prison vary greatly, ranging from less than 1% to 34% of inmates, depending on the prison population studied. This means that, in the worst affected populations, one in three prisoners has injected while incarcerated, underlining the importance of harm-reduction measures to curb the spread of infectious diseases (e.g. HIV, HCV).

All EU Member States, Norway, Bulgaria and Romania now ensure assistance for drug users in prison, although services vary greatly in type and availability. A notable trend, says the report, is the increasing recognition that 'prisoners have the same rights as the rest of the population concerning access to healthcare, including assistance and treatment for drug use'. Possible services include drug-free programmes, detoxification treatments, substitution treatment, counselling and education.

Drug treatment options for prisoners, particularly substitution treatment, remain restricted, says the report. However, in **Spain**, 82% of problem opiate users in prison receive substitution treatment. Countries now reporting 'considerable increases' in the availability of this type of treatment in prisons include **France** (largely buprenorphine) and **Ireland**.

Countries increasingly opt for treatment over prison

For many problem drug users, prison can be a 'particularly detrimental environment', states the **EMCDDA** today in a special chapter on alternatives to imprisonment for drug using offenders. Most **EU Member States** and **Norway** have now adopted laws outlining a number of alternatives that may delay, avoid, replace or complement prison sentences (e.g. community work, driving bans, treatment for drug dependence).

Focusing specifically on treatment as an alternative, the agency highlights the now 'broad political consensus' to divert drug using offenders from imprisonment to treatment. Prisons are overcrowded in many countries, says the report, and the treatment option can prove a more cost-efficient way of sentencing. The option is largely applied to dependent drug users, reflecting a now common view of these individuals as patients with a treatable medical and psychosocial disorder.

Legislators offer treatment alternatives particularly to vulnerable young drug users. Yet still very few treatment programmes specifically target the needs of young offenders. **Germany, Luxembourg, Hungary, Austria** and the **UK** are the few countries reporting selective prevention programmes for first-time offenders (largely cannabis users), offering psychological support, training and counselling.

'Diverting drug-using offenders to treatment can contribute to reducing crime and other harms to society as well as to helping those with drug problems improve their health and social well-being', says **Wolfgang Götz, EMCDDA Director**. 'Adequate treatment facilities are essential to underpin this approach. But motivation on the part of the offender is also a vital component in making it a success'.

The new EU drugs action plan 2005–2008 asks **Member States** to 'make effective use of, and develop further alternatives to, prison for drug abusers who commit drug-related offences'.

Notes

For further information on the 2005 *Annual report* and all related products see <http://annualreport.emcdda.eu.int>

⁽¹⁾ See 2005 Statistical bulletin, Table DLO-1.

⁽²⁾ A change in law in Poland in 2000 may have contributed to the increase in reported drug law offences in that country.