

Information Bulletin

ONLINE SALES OF ILLICIT SUBSTANCES IN THE AMERICAS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Cybersecurity has become one of the critical global policy issues of the 21st century. The restrictions and lockdowns prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic have led to an exponential increase in the use of cyberspace, bringing to the forefront discussions about the benefits and potential risks associated with online activity. Because cyberspace as a medium offers both anonymity and speed of transactions, marketing illicit substances online has become increasingly prevalent. Indeed, criminal organizations increasingly use the Internet for marketing. As the 2022 World Drug Report warns (UNODC, 2022), The internet and evolution of online platforms have significantly impacted drug markets. Nevertheless, despite the growing role of cyberspace, there have been very few studies on illegal substances sold via the Internet (López Lío, 2019; García Sigman, 2017), and most existing studies are based in Europe. The OAS Hemispheric Drug Strategy encourages OAS member states to optimize mechanisms that identify and disrupt the trafficking of drugs and related crimes through illicit online sales; however, to do so effectively, research on the sale of illegal substances over the Internet in the Americas is necessary.

At the first meeting of the Technical Working Group on Drug Supply Indicators (TWGDSI), the member states advised the CICAD Inter-American Observatory on Drugs (OID, by its Spanish-language acronym), to collect data on internet drugs sales as an important area for drug supply data.

In accordance with that recommendation, this paper seeks to contribute to the body of literature analyzing illicit substance sales online in the Americas. This paper has four specific objectives: 1. Identify the types of illicit substances sold online and how they are marketed. 2. Outline how the internet is used by criminal organizations, both on the surface web and on the dark web. 3. Describe the means of payment used to purchase illicit substances marketed on the internet. 4. Analyze how trust mechanisms are forged between buyers and sellers.

The hypothesis underlying this analysis is that selling illicit substances online in the Americas is mainly associated with micro drug trafficking. The secondary hypothesis maintains that contrary to common belief, the surface web is used much more than the dark web for drug sales and that small to medium-sized organizations are the ones that make the most use of cyberspace.

METHODOLOGY

The document presents data from an exploratory study on internet drug sales. The researchers used three methods for data collection: a systematic literature review, in-depth interviews with experts, and fieldwork as non-participant observers on the dark and surface web markets.

The systematic literature review involved searching online databases for scientific articles, journalistic articles, press releases, and reports by international organizations. The researchers aimed to include information from countries in the Americas but found limited published works, particularly in the Caribbean subregion.

In addition to the literature review, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with experts on illegal drugs and held conversations with officials and specialists from OAS member states. Experts were identified through a purposive “snowball strategy”¹ to ensure specific knowledge of internet drug sales in Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Jamaica, Mexico, Peru, and the United States².

The fieldwork involved accessing different markets on the dark and surface web to observe but not participate in the transactions. The researchers gathered evidence on the types of illicit substances being sold, sought expert opinions on substance purity mentioned in online sales, and examined payment methods and trust-building techniques between sellers and buyers. Importantly, the anonymity of purchasers was respected, adhering to ethical standards.

The study has some limitations. First, there is a scarcity of research information in scientific literature and official data and reports in OAS member states. Second, the purposive sampling method may not provide representation across all OAS member states. The interviews were conducted remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, potentially influencing the information provided by interviewees. Furthermore, law enforcement agencies in some countries may not prioritize online drug sales due to their focus on micro-trafficking or counterterrorism operations. These factors may vary regardless of the prevalence of drug use in the countries.

¹ In social science, snowball strategies are used to identify subject populations that are unknown or difficult to contact. In this case, experts in the field identified other experts in order to identify a group of professionals knowledgeable about Internet drug sales.

² CICAD reached out to national drug observatories in Central America; however, none were able to identify a specialist with specific knowledge of internet drug sales.

1. THE ONLINE MARKET FOR ILLICIT SUBSTANCES

Cyberspace serves as a medium for criminal organizations to disseminate goods efficiently (López Lío, 2019). Illicit substance sales align with different web planes, just like the content found on the surface web³ and deep web⁴ (Mathur et al., 2020: p. 2). Social networks, forums, and online pharmacies dominate the surface web, while cryptomarkets thrive on the dark web (Garcia Sigman, 2017: p. 193; Mounteney et al., 2016).

Cryptomarkets, as internet-based platforms, enable multiple sellers to operate and ensure user anonymity through encrypted payments and communications. They maintain trust by providing reputation metrics based on customer ratings (Barratt & Aldridge, 2016). Despite being concentrated in a few countries, the online drug sales business remains global, facilitated by shipments disguised among various goods (Rand Corporation, 2016).

The United States leads in revenue and traffickers related to online drug sales, followed by Canada. Overall, online drug sales, including cryptomarkets, constitute a small portion of total drug sales due to the expansion of online marketplaces to social media and e-commerce platforms (UNODC, 2021: p.2).

In terms of traded substances, cannabis, MDMA, and cocaine are prominent based on monitoring dark web cryptomarkets (Katyál et al., 2020)⁵. Contrary to common belief, online sale of illicit substances in the Americas is more concentrated on social networks and instant messaging applications rather than the dark web (Rand Corporation, 2016).

³ The surface network is accessible through link-based crawling techniques (Martín Ibañez, 2017: p.75). The surface network is the portion of the internet in which information is indexed by search engines and is accessible through traditional browsers such as Chrome, Firefox, or internet explorer (Garcia Sigman, 2017: p.192)

⁴ The deep web is that part of the internet that is not accessible through link-based search engines (its content cannot be indexed by search engines). To access its content, it is necessary to enter a direct query in a web search form that makes it possible to retrieve the content (Martín Ibañez, 2017: p.75). According to Garcia Sigman (2017) deep web is 500 times larger than the surface web. The dark web is a part of the deep web that was intentionally hidden and can only be accessed using specific software such as ToR (Garcia Sigman, 2017: pp. 192-193)

⁵ In that study, only markets operating in English were surveyed. In interviews with experts, it was suggested that the most traded substances in the region are marijuana, cocaine, and synthetic drugs, in that order (although there may be slight variations from country to country).

2. THE USE OF THE INTERNET FOR THE SALE OF ILLICIT SUBSTANCES

Illicit substances are marketed online through instant messaging applications, social networks, surface web internet sites, and dark web sites. The first three methods are located on the surface web and are popular among young people due to their accessibility and lack of technical knowledge required to navigate the dark web. Social networks and instant messaging services provide convenience for users to contact sellers and arrange delivery methods. These digital platforms offer a sense of security and anonymity, leading to a gradual increase in their use for acquiring illicit substances.

Anonymity plays a crucial role in online transactions, and deliveries are made through postal systems, couriers, or in public spaces after payment. Most sales on cryptomarkets involve quantities for personal use, although some discount policies exist for larger shipments; however, it is primarily micro-trafficking or drug dealing that dominates online illicit substance sales, with limited involvement from large criminal organizations⁶.

One exception is the purchase of precursor chemicals used in drug production, primarily sourced from websites in India and China. Precursor chemicals present challenges for control authorities as they are also used in the production of legitimate goods, making tracking more difficult⁷. Synthetic drug precursors, particularly designer precursors, have proliferated, posing additional challenges for control efforts. Criminal groups import unscheduled and unregulated chemicals to synthesize synthetic opioids locally in home labs, as reported by experts from Canada.

2.1. Instant messaging applications

Instant messaging applications play a significant role in online drug sales.⁸ In Latin America, instant messaging applications are widely used by sellers to inform customers about product availability⁹. Although, instant messaging often requires a traceable phone number, there are ways to acquire numbers without a SIM card. Some applications offer higher anonymity as accounts can be easily created and deleted without revealing the phone number. Messages can be mirror-deleted¹⁰, contacts blocked, and chats deleted to eliminate transaction records. Delivery systems are used for immediate dispatch, with both legal deliverers and illicit dealers using these platforms. Buyers often provide a delivery address or meet the delivery person at the entrance of a house or building, ensuring anonymity. Alternatively, blind deliveries are made in pre-arranged public places.

⁶ In one interview with a South American field expert, the use of the Internet as a vehicle for larger transactions was highlighted. Specifically, reference was made to the use of emails and WhatsApp to connect the various facilitators making up the supply chain.

⁷ A clear example is acetone, which is used to produce nail polish remover, but can also be used as a precursor.

⁸ Field experts interviewed cited WhatsApp, Telegram, and Snapchat as common apps used in drug sales. Specific reference was made to WhatsApp and emails to connect actors in the supply chain.

⁹ The seller may post a photo in his/her WhatsApp that shows the availability of the product (for example, a photo of flowers when offering marijuana) or send a message to her/his customers to let them know that the merchandise is currently available.

¹⁰ In Telegram, messages chosen by the sender can be deleted both for the sender and the receiver without leaving a trace.

Parcel delivery services are also utilized¹¹, involving medium-to-long-distance shipments using passenger transportation companies. These shipments are rarely inspected and simulated legal sales on platforms are used for full or partial payment. Monetary remittance involving multiple individuals further masks the transaction. In the United States, a multimedia instant messaging apps are commonly used for sales, while email is used in Canada along with social messaging applications.

While home delivery systems are sometimes used in the United States, the postal service, particularly the United States Postal Service (USPS), is the most common method of delivery for online drug purchases due to its affordability and efficiency. Couriers are also utilized, with domestic shipping charges based on the weight and size of the package, making them accessible.

2.2. Social networks and the sale of illicit substances

Social networking platforms and dating apps, along with popular photo-sharing and video-sharing platforms, are where interactions related to drug sales were found.¹² Dating platforms offer anonymity and location-based features, some of them allowing users to specify search ranges for nearby contacts (López Lío, 2019). Photo and video-sharing platforms allows searching for substances through hashtags. Social networks host closed groups where limited illicit substance marketing can be found¹³. Video-hosting apps, primarily used by younger demographics, are emerging as a potential market.

All these networks utilize emojis to convey consumer preferences, facilitating connections between buyers and sellers (López Lío, 2019). Emojis serve as coded representations, such as the Canadian flag, flowers, and clover for marijuana, and symbols like noses and snowflakes for cocaine. The use of emojis helps ensure effective communication while avoiding network restrictions and legal scrutiny (López Lío, 2019). Some platforms have implemented restrictions on certain emoji combinations, such as Grindr's prohibition on posting flowers, pills, and alien images together (although flowers and aliens together are still allowed).

2.3. Use of surface Internet websites

Surface internet websites accessible through search engines openly offer illicit substances, but their legitimacy is uncertain, posing risks for both unsuspecting users and investigating agencies¹⁴. A qualitative rapid assessment in Jamaica found that students reported the internet as a primary source for obtaining “Molly.”¹⁵

This study identified two notable websites in the Hemisphere. The first site, named “cocaineonlineshop,” offers cocaine with discounts for bulk purchases, customizable origin options, and guaranteed purity. The site prioritizes discretion and accepts cryptocurrencies or money transfers as payment methods. It operates globally through regional partners who deliver goods via regular mail for enhanced safety. Another site, jamdeal.com, claims to be based in Jamaica but has an IP address located in Atlanta, USA¹⁶. It serves as a platform for various products, including drugs, with multiple sellers. While the site lacks customer ratings, it offers substances such as cocaine, MDMA, ketamine, new psychoactive substances (NPS), and methylamine.

¹¹ Depending on the country, postal services may also be used. Countries where state run postal services are inefficient, raise risk levels for buyers and sellers.

¹² Interviews with field experts indicated that Grindr, Tinder, Instagram, Tik Tok, and, to a lesser extent, Facebook are the social networks most used in Latin America.

¹³ Operations through Facebook are conducted by attracting users to the dark web and providing them with the address needed to be able to acquire the merchandise through The Onion Router (TOR).

¹⁴ The field experts interviewed described judicially supervised online purchases. In many cases, the drugs never arrived at their destination, and in other cases, they arrived with postage stamps from different countries (often from outside the region), making them difficult to trace.

¹⁵ National Council on Drug Abuse (NCDA), Jamaica (2022). The Voices of Adolescents: A Rapid Situation Assessment on Substance Use and Urgent Issues in Secondary Schools.

¹⁶ It is practically impossible to determine the real location of the business behind a web page as it is possible to “disguise” it by using VPN services, for example. Because of the way in which domains are acquired on the surface web, it is possible that certain illicit domains are associated with a specific country, although this does not imply that the country is in any way involved in the illegal activities generated from the website.

Widely accessible classified advertisements websites have also been used for illicit drug marketing, with buyers and sellers establishing communication through keyword searches and subsequent face-to-face transactions. Legitimate sales platforms have also been identified as channels for illicit substance sales, although these legitimate businesses and websites make efforts to prevent such activities. Collaborative measures between the private sector and governments are essential to control and eliminate illegal drug advertisements and catalogs on the Internet (UNODC, 2021).

2.4. Use of the dark web for the marketing of illicit substances

Contrary to popular belief, the dark web plays a marginal role in the online sale of illicit substances in the region due to several factors. These include the technical knowledge required to access the dark web, the use of anonymity software, and the need to acquire cryptocurrencies for payment. Deliveries from the dark web are not immediate and often come from remote countries, adding to the complexity. It is worth noting work done by David Decary-Héту at that includes reports of anonymous purchases on the dark web and the status of the delivery (whether the shipment arrived at its destination or not). The site uses voluntary reports from buyers who have placed orders in the past 12 months. It lists the place of origin of the shipment, the destination, and the drug being traded. While the objective has to do with assessing the disruption that the COVID-19 pandemic may have caused to the delivery of illicit substances, there is valuable information regarding the countries from which different types of drugs are shipped¹⁷. Users' fears about potential dangers and the lack of knowledge further discourage engagement with the dark web (Barrata & Aldridgec, 2020; Garcia Sigma, 2017).

Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that some drug users opt to purchase substances on the dark web due to the anonymity and security it offers. The United Nations highlights the convenience of avoiding physical contact with sellers and reducing inhibitions for certain customers (UNODC, 2020). Observational fieldwork used the Tor browser DuckDuckGo which has encrypted and anonymous searching capabilities¹⁸. The fieldwork confirmed that accessing the dark web is challenging and requires knowledge. Dark web sites have stringent security measures, requiring registration and employing difficult captchas¹⁹.

Two main categories of dark web sites were identified in this study: those that bring together multiple sellers offering various products and those that directly sell their own products. These platforms resemble Amazon in its early years, with drugs, weapons, fake passports, and even human beings available for sale. Examples include platforms like We The North, specializing in illicit goods including drugs, and Cannazon, specializing in cannabis. The Silk Road 4 and Tor2door are platforms that bring together sellers from different origins. Another site, "The peoples drug store," sells a range of illicit substances directly, with a focus on heroin.

The actual geographic location of these websites may differ from the operations, making it challenging to trace the origin of supply and shipments; however, the centralized nature of the dark web facilitates gathering evidence for law enforcement, particularly in Canada and the USA. Collaboration between the two countries exists when illegal operations span their shared border. Meanwhile, the surface web offers ample opportunities for criminals to conceal their activities within the vast volume of legitimate and illicit transactions over time.

¹⁷ <https://drugroutes.com/>

¹⁸ TOR is a browser that defines itself as a platform that allows browsing with privacy, which promotes the defense of network surveillance and traffic analysis. The browser blocks trackers, prevents others from seeing where you are browsing (they can only see that you are using TOR) and is encrypted in multiple layers (hence the onion idea) so that traffic is forwarded and encrypted three times as it passes through TOR. The browser allows access to the TOR network. <https://www.torproject.org/es/>

¹⁹ CAPTCHA - Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart. This is a security mechanism to ensure that a real person, not a computer, is accessing a webpage.

3. PAYMENTS, SHIPMENTS, AND TRUST MECHANISMS

Based on the evidence, payment mechanisms, shipment methods, and trust mechanisms vary depending on the platform used for marketing and purchasing substances. Instant messaging applications provide less anonymity compared to social networks. Instant messaging apps require users to share phone numbers and maintain a record of conversations and transactions²⁰. Some social networks offer more anonymity, allowing anonymous arrangements for meetings, with adjustable geo-references; however, others offer little anonymity and rely on interpersonal trust for sales.

Online sales on the surface web target less technically savvy individuals without the contacts for instant messaging or social network transactions. These sites often lack mechanisms for delivery performance or merchandise quality. On the dark web, sales platforms require more knowledge but offer systems to ensure delivery and product quality. Ratings and feedback from previous buyers help establish reliability. Cryptocurrencies are the dominant payment methods on the dark web, with escrow accounts used to guarantee payment.

Surface internet sites may offer bank transfer or payments via a peer-to-peer money transfer app, but these methods do not ensure anonymity and may indicate scams. Classified advertisements websites often start with public place deliveries and progress to home deliveries as trust develops. On the dark web, sites appear and disappear quickly, potentially evading law enforcement or indicating scams. Trust is higher in sales through instant messaging or social networks, with payments usually made in cash or through peer-to-peer money transfer apps. Deliveries occur in person or through couriers and postal services, posing challenges for law enforcement due to the volume of mail and the need for court orders to intercept shipments.

²¹ The only exception is Telegram, where evidence disappears. An expert interviewed said that WhatsApp has recently included the ability to delete certain evidence and have it become unrecoverable. This was corroborated in the case of photos that can be sent to be viewed only once and then disappear.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The sale of illicit substances through the web is one of many forms of marketing by criminal organizations. The activity on the web appears to involve mainly micro-trafficking or small-scale drug dealing, with some intermediate-level sales on the dark web. Large criminal organizations, whether traditional mafias, cartels, or the major criminal structures operating in the region, appear not to operate on the web but maintain the traditional form of supply and distribution. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that these large organizations use the Internet to supply themselves with precursor chemicals needed to produce synthetic and plant-based drugs.

It is also important to note that not all consumers are willing to use online drug purchasing. This may be due to two factors: time and discretion. Online purchases take more time. Substances purchased through the dark web or surface websites arrive after a certain number of days, if they arrive at all. Online purchases are not tailored to meeting immediate demand, but they provide better safeguards to the consumers' anonymity.

In contrast, social networks and instant messaging apps connect sellers and consumers in the same geographic area and deliver the product within hours of making contact. Therefore, for social networks and instant messaging apps, the main determinant in the amount of time the delivery takes are the level of trust that has been built up. If it is a new customer and a meeting or deposit in a public place is required, shipment will take longer, whereas, in the case of someone with a purchase history, a shipment can be made in hours or even minutes. It should be noted that intermediaries who buy in larger quantities for resale are likely to take greater precautions because, if law enforcement discovers it, the penalty will be more severe.

The online sale of illicit substances is a thriving business in the Americas. Marijuana, cocaine, and synthetic drugs top the list of sales, according to the experts consulted. It is worth noting that the Latin American and Caribbean market probably differs from that of Canada or the United States. This is because the postal service is efficient in the latter two countries, and there is possibly a cultural bias favoring greater anonymity of the drug user. In Latin America and the Caribbean, there appears to be a declining perception of risk associated with the use of some drugs. Furthermore, the inadequate performance of postal services and the prohibitive cost of couriers cause buyers to seek other retail supply options.

Although the sale of illicit substances online seems to have made things easier for consumers, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, some risks need to be considered. First, despite the security framework surrounding these transactions, it is very difficult to identify scams, and many users get swindled. Second, while security is higher when buyers do not contact a dealer in person, the buyer becomes more vulnerable once trust has been built and security mechanisms are relaxed. Usually, this occurs because they receive the merchandise at home (or an agreed-upon location) and are no longer anonymous. Time is another factor that, as we mentioned, depends on the virtual platform used for the transaction.

Like any other marketing mechanism, online sales of substances have advantages and disadvantages for sellers and consumers. Using an electronic device does not necessarily protect the person making the transaction. Buyers may not be certain that what they ordered and purchased is the same quality, purity, or even substance that is received. The deaths from fentanyl intoxication in the United States show how difficult it is to distinguish between a "seller who does not intend to defraud" and one who cuts or adulterates the product for the sake of a bigger profit. Nevertheless, this danger is not exclusive to online sales, as demonstrated by the carfentanyl intoxication suffered by cocaine users in Greater Buenos Aires, Argentina in early February 2022.

Despite these risks, it appears likely that online substance sales will continue to grow via social networks and instant messaging and may have the potential to replace the local salesperson typical of the pre-pandemic period. The same growth rate is not expected in the use of the dark web because it requires technical knowledge and more flexible timing than the other options. It is undoubtedly necessary to raise awareness among the young people these sellers target about the risks associated with purchasing and using drugs from online sources. Prevention is essential to stop this business from continuing to grow, especially considering that drug use is appearing at younger ages across the Americas (CICAD, 2019; p.ii). It is also necessary to train law enforcement personnel to monitor and reduce the supply of illicit substances online, collaborate with private companies, and enlist the judiciary's support in procedures aimed at arresting and prosecuting sellers.

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