International Journal of Drug Policy xxx (xxxx) xxx–xxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Drug Policy

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/drugpo

Drug supply indicators: Pitfalls and possibilities for improvements to assist comparative analysis

Nicola Singleton*, Andrew Cunningham, Teodora Groshkova, Luis Royuela, Roumen Sedefov

European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, Praça Europa 1, Cais do Sodré, 1249-289, Lisbon, Portugal

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Drug supply indicators
Policy analysis
Monitoring
Drug markets

ABSTRACT

Interventions to tackle the supply of drugs are seen as standard components of illicit drug policies. Therefore drug market-related administrative data, such as seizures, price, purity and drug-related offending, are used in most countries for policy monitoring and assessment of the drug situation. International agencies, such as the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) and the UN Office of Drugs and Crime, also monitor and report on the drug situation cross-nationally and therefore seek to collect and make available key data in a uniform manner from the countries they cover. However, these data are not primarily collected for this purpose, which makes interpretation and comparative analysis difficult. Examples of limitations of these data sources include: the extent to which they reflect operational priorities rather than market changes; question marks over the robustness of and consistency in data collection methods, and issues around the timeliness of data availability. Such problems are compounded by cultural, social and contextual differences between countries. Making sense of such data is therefore challenging and extreme care needs to be taken using it. Nevertheless, these data provide an important window on a hidden area, so improving the quality of the data collected and expanding its scope should be a priority for those seeking to understand or monitor drug markets and supply reduction.

In addition to highlighting some of the potential pitfalls in using supply indicators for comparative analysis, this paper presents a selection of options for improvements based on the current EMCDDA programme of work to improve their supply-related monitoring and analysis. The conceptual framework developed to steer this work may have wider application. Adopting this approach has the potential to provide a richer picture of drug markets, at both national and international levels, and make it easier to compare data between countries.

Background

Drug use and supply is a global phenomenon and this is reflected in the three International Drug Control Conventions (UNODC, 2013) – on Narcotic Drugs, Psychotropic Substances, and the Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances – within which most national laws, policies and interventions that seek to control these activities are developed. The conventions aim to maintain supplies for scientific and medical purposes while restricting production, supply and use of illicit drugs. Although requiring criminal penalties for trafficking they also include provision for alternatives to punishment for dependent drug users. The development of this international framework has been ongoing since 1961 and has influenced both the policies of the signatory nations and drug use patterns, supply and markets.

Within this framework, most countries' drug policies seek to tackle both demand and supply. This is mirrored at regional (supra-national) level; for example in Europe the EU Drug Strategy has both demand reduction and supply reduction pillars alongside the three cross-cutting themes of co-ordination, co-operation, and monitoring, research and evaluation (Council of the European Union, 2013). Interventions to tackle the problems associated with drug markets and the supply of drugs therefore are standard components of illicit drug policies. Directing, monitoring and evaluating these requires an understanding of the markets, how they operate and the crime associated with them, in addition to the activities being undertaken to tackle them. Thus a wide range of data will be relevant and a single data item may have multiple uses, for example contributing to describing the market to assist policy development or, in other circumstances, being used to assess the impact of activities. Therefore drug market-related indicators, particularly administrative data, such as seizures, price, purity and drug-related offending, are now used in most countries for policy monitoring and assessment of the drug situation.

International agencies, such as the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) also monitor and report on the

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: nicola.singleton@emcdda.europa.eu (N. Singleton).

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2018.02.003
Received 6 November 2017; Received in revised form 2 February 2018; Accepted 8 February 2018
0955-3959/ © 2018 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

drug situation cross-nationally and therefore seek to collect and make available key data in a uniform manner from the countries they cover. The data reported by different countries is collated, analysed and reported on and also made available to national governments and researchers for additional analyses to improve our understanding of the drug market, identify trends and new threats, for benchmarking, or to consider the impact of policies and programmes.

However, the illicit nature of the drug market limits the data available and interpreting them is challenging (Degenhardt, Topp, & Day, 2003; Royuela, Laniel, Vicente, Matias, & Carpentier, 2009). Administrative data that are not primarily collected for policy monitoring or evaluation, such as seizures, are open to different interpretations: is an increase in seizures a positive sign (more efficient law enforcement) or a negative symptom (of increased availability)? Can data from countries with very different legal systems, drug problems or geographical and economic situations be compared? Many of these circumstances are inevitable, so how can data repositories, such as the EMCDDA, discourage misuse or misinterpretation of these data and support appropriate analyses that improve our knowledge of both supply reduction activities and the drug market.

The aim of this commentary is to highlight some of the potential pitfalls that those using supply-related data for cross-national analysis should be aware of, while also suggesting some opportunities for improvements, through increasing the range and quality of available data, contextualising it and providing analytical tools to assist research, monitoring and evaluation. A discussion of the different, but equally challenging, issues that surround the use, and potential misuse, of the data by those analysing and interpreting the results of such analyses is beyond the scope of this commentary.

A conceptual framework for drug supply indicators

The EMCDDA has been working on developing the existing supply indicators for some time, in collaboration with a range of experts in the field (EMCDDA, 2010; EMCDDA, 2017a). These are conceptualised as covering three broad thematic areas:

- Drug markets, drivers and facilitators – encompassing the whole supply chain, from illicit production/cultivation to trafficking and sale and considering both drivers of participation in these activities and enablers of drug supply, including different processes, actors, and environmental factors, such as weak governance;
- Drug-related crime, harms and other consequences – extending beyond drug law offences to consider other types of drug-related offending (Goldstein, 1985) and harms to communities, such as the environmental impact of the dumping of waste from drug production; and
- Drug supply reduction and responses – the law enforcement and other activities that are undertaken to tackle and disrupt drug markets and supply.

Within each of these thematic areas we identify two broad types of data (Fig. 1). Firstly, core data, which are collected on a regular basis. These core data include both quantitative data and qualitative information. Qualitative data can provide important contextual information to help understand routine data collections or additional information on the operation of the market (for example information on organised crime groups known to be operating in the country). Some data sources may provide insights relating to more than one indicator. For example, seizures data can provide information about the drug market in a country as well as about drug supply reduction activity. Secondly, non-routine data from a wide variety of sources, such as external experts, periodical reports and research findings and also potential new data sources, such as open source data, may provide valuable insights into the operation of drug markets and supply chains.

What are the main challenges to the interpretation of supply indicators?

Using administrative data

Drug seizures, drug law offences, price and purity data can be seen as basic drug supply indicators and have been collected by the EMCDDA for many years. However, within countries these data are primarily collected for administrative purposes and changes may reflect operational priorities or changes in policy direction rather than changes in the drug market or responses. The increase in drug possession offences when the performance of police forces in the UK was being measured against a target for offences brought to justice is one such example (Sosa, 2012). Similarly, increased numbers of seizures and drug supply offences may reflect a temporary crack-down or improved intelligence rather than any change in market activity. On the other hand, one very large drug seizure, which may have occurred as a result of a chance stop and search activity, can lead to a big increase in the total quantity seized. Such issues are compounded at the regional level by cultural, social and contextual differences between different countries, such as the legal systems and cultural norms on drug law offences. For example, within Europe and elsewhere, there are not only differences between countries in the law with regard to cannabis possession and use but also with respect to the priority given to enforcing these laws ("laws in practice") that need to be considered when making cross-national comparison of drug law offences (EMCDDA, 2017b; Belackova, Ritter, Shanahan, & Hughes, 2017).

Differing recording and reporting practices

These differences in legal frameworks and operational practice and priorities clearly impact on data collections and to these are added differences in recording and statistical reporting practices that affect the data available, which may not be obvious to the unwary analyst. The ways in which crime recording practices can vary both within and between countries are many, for example whether the recording of supply offences includes a record of the type of drug involved and, if multiple substances are involved, how these are recorded. The development of protocols and guidelines for reporting and enhancements to data collection tools can improve the quality of data collected. However, they will not overcome differences in recording practice at the local level, which may stem from varying legal or organisational requirements.

Kilmer, Reuter, and Giommoni (2015) highlight a range of issues with both drug law offence data and seizures data, including different international bodies applying different inclusion and exclusion criteria when collecting data that makes ostensibly similar data actually quite different. For example, both Eurostat (the statistical office of the European Union) and EMCDDA collect drug law offence data but there were marked discrepancies between their published statistics. Investigation revealed differences in the offence codes being included, such as the exclusion of civil penalties in the Eurostat but not the EMCDDA data collection process. Work is underway to map and as far as possible harmonise data collection through the use of a single data collection process for the two agencies. However, differences will remain in reported figures because of the different uses of the data and the need to maintain time trends, so analysts need to understand the detail of sources and definitions when making use of different statistical data sources.

Timeliness and robustness concerns

Questions can also be raised concerning the robustness of and consistency in data collection methods for supply indicator variables. For example, the price data submitted to EMCDDA by member states is collected in a variety of ways: test purchasing; user surveys; police

Download English Version:

https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7511678

Download Persian Version:

https://daneshyari.com/article/7511678

Daneshyari.com