



MISLEADING AND IRRESPONSIBLE DRUG PREVALENCE STATISTICS

The Global Commission on Drug Policy's provocative claims of non-existent rises do not further rational drug policy debate.

The Liberal Party Conference (2011) policy motion 24, **Protecting Individuals and Communities from Drug Harms**, emphasised the need for evidence-based policy making on drugs in support of their calls to liberalise drug use through a variety of legalising and decriminalising proposals.

It cited the recent Report of the Global Commission on Drug Policy - a newly emerged body whose members include former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, former heads of state of Colombia, Mexico, Brazil and Switzerland, the current Prime Minister of Greece and a former US Secretary of State – as a source of such evidence.

The central assertion of this report is that international drugs control policy has failed to curtail consumption. The key 'evidence' to back this claim is set out in a table at the start of the report (page 4 of the 24 pages) titled "United Nations Estimates of Annual Drug Consumption, 1998 - 2008." It shows dramatically rising global drug consumption (opiates, cocaine and cannabis), specifically in the decade 1998 -2008. The inference from the title is that these are 'official' figures. However, no specific source is given. Nor is the basis on how they were arrived at, or calculated, provided anywhere in the subsequent text. A subsequent textual reference could lead the informed reader to suppose their source to be the UNODC (2008) 2008 World Drug Report: Vienna, United Nations.

The Global Commission's argument supported by its dramatic figures and its influential backers has been **widely reported in the media**. The United Nations source of this evidence has been accepted as reliable and, indeed given prominence, adding to their apparent authority. Indeed they **continue to be widely quoted** even following complaints to the Press Complaints Commission.

But searches back through UNODC World Drug Report statistical tables for 2008 - and all other years - singularly fail to elicit the evidence for the Global Commission's claimed rises of 34.5% for opiates, 27% for cocaine and 8.5% for cannabis.

Data defined by reference to other documents and sources, that the majority of the reading and listening audience, including the media, are not expected to have read, can be data to be beware of. This is a case in point. Following a request for clarification from the UNODC, our worst fears as to the provenance and reliability of the Global Commission's figures have been confirmed.

We now have the UNODC's own detailed analysis of the figures that the Global Commission misleadingly attributed to the United Nations. Their investigation into how the Global Commission generated the figures shows that global drug consumption, in terms of drugs consumption prevalence, far from rising between 1998 and 2008, remained stable. Their best estimates of the number of cocaine and opiate users show prevalence rates for annual opiate use remaining stable at around 0.35% and for annual cocaine at 0.36 %, in the population age range 15-64, between 1998 and 2008.

The Global Commission's statistics are not just over-blown, they are contrived and misleadingly attributed.

The UNODC's polite explanation for the disparity they found is that the Global Commission calculated their figures 'on the basis of a flawed methodology'.

The UNODC analysis and explanation is set out verbatim below (their '**bold**' has been kept):

Clarifications regarding the estimates of drug use presented in the Report of the Global Commission on Drug Policy and attributed to UNODC.

The Global Commission's report presented the following numbers on the evolution of drug use to support its claim of rising drug use:

	Opiates	Cocaine	Cannabis
1998	12.9 million	13.4 million	147.4 million
2008	17.35 million	17 million	160 million
% increase	34.5%	27%	8.5%

According to these numbers the increase would have been particularly strong for opiates and cocaine. The paper did not give precise references, but attributed these numbers to UNODC. After some research, it appears that the source for the 1998 figures was UNODC 2002 Global Illicit Drug Trends¹ (which gave numbers for the period 1998-2001, rather than for 1998 only, as presented by the authors of the commission's report).

As for the 2008 figures used in the paper, they appear to have been calculated by the authors of the paper, as mid-point of the statistical ranges presented in UNODC 2010 World Drug Report. It is not correct to assume that the mid-point of statistical range necessarily represents the best point estimate. As a matter of fact, in the same issue of the World Drug Report, UNODC did present best estimates for cocaine and opiate use, with 15.42 million users for cocaine² (as opposed to 17.35 million in the commission's report), and to 15.9 million for opiate users³ (as opposed to 17.2 million in the commission's report).

¹ UNODC, *Global Illicit Drug Trends*, 2002, p.213

² UNODC, *World Drug Report*, 2010, p.71

³ UNODC, *World Drug Report*, 2010, p.40 (11,314,000 for heroin users, and 4,119,500 for opium users)

Based on UNODC published best estimates of the number of cocaine and opiate users, the number of annual users for opiates increased, between 1998 and 2008, by 19.6% (as opposed to 34.5 % as presented in the Global Commission's report) and by 18.7 % for cocaine (as opposed to 27% as presented in the Global Commission's report).

	Opiates	Cocaine	Cannabis
UNODC 1998-2001 best estimate (Global Illicit Drug Trends 2002) in millions of people	12.9	13.4	147.4
UNODC range of annual users in 2008 (World Drug Report 2010) in millions of people	12.84 – 21.88	15.07 – 19.38	128.9 – 190.75
Mid-points calculated by the Global Commission for 2008 in millions of people	17.35	17	160
Increase 1998-2008 in %	34.5 %	27 %	8.5 %
UNODC best estimate for 2008 (World Drug Report 2010) in millions of people	15.42	15.9	(not calculated)
Increase 1998-2008 in %	19.6 %	18.7 %	
Increase in world population age 15- 64 from 1998-2008 in %		18.5 %	

Moreover, the extent of drug use is not measured and tracked through absolute numbers only. The prevalence rate expresses drug use as a proportion of the population (the age group 15-64 years old is normally used). During the period 1998-2008, the world population aged 15-64 grew by 685 million people, or + 18.5 %. Even if the prevalence of drug use remains the same, the increase in population would mean that the absolute number of users would increase proportionally. This important fact was not taken into account by the authors of the Global Commission's paper.

Based on UNODC published best estimates of the number of cocaine and opiate users, the prevalence rates for annual use in the population age 15-64 remained stable at around 0.35% for opiates and 0.36 % for cocaine between 1998 and 2008.

UNODC did not present a best estimate for the number of cannabis users, but one can note that the increase calculated in the Global Commission paper (+8.5%) is actually below the 18-64 age group population increase (+18.5 %) which would translate in a decline of the prevalence rate of use for cannabis.