



Trends in Illicit Drug Use in Sweden, summary

Using statistical indicators and surveys, this report describes how use of illicit drugs (narcotics) has developed in Sweden in the 2000s. The aim is to provide the most comprehensive assessment possible, although it may be difficult to provide definitive descriptions of trends and the current situation using the information available.

The number of convictions related to narcotics-related crimes has tripled in the 2000s. Minor offences increasingly dominate. The number of narcotics seizures have also tripled in the same time period. It should be noted that the volumes of, e.g., cannabis, amphetamine, and cocaine have increased by roughly ten-fold since the turn of the millennium. The increase is even larger for pharmaceuticals classed as narcotics. The main share of these volume increases has occurred in the last five years.

Despite increased seizure volumes, the prices for narcotics have seen no general increase in recent years. On the contrary, narcotics are now cheaper than in the early 2000s. This, combined with the continuous introduction of new synthetic drugs and the facilitation of narcotics sales provided through digitalization, leads to the conclusion that narcotics availability is currently high.

Compared with the crime statistics, indicators regarding morbidity and mortality are showing a much less dramatic development in the 2000s. These measures show increases of around 35 percent for the entire period. Since 2015, the situation as regards the number of deaths and treatment episodes related to narcotics has improved slightly. The drop is likely in part due to interventions made that have influenced morbidity and mortality in a positive direction. This notwithstanding, these indicators reveal a much less alarming picture than the seizure and crime statistics.

Results from various surveys show that the increase in narcotics use in the population seen during the 1990s has partially continued during the 2000s. However, one conclusion from the surveys is that there are signs that, compared with the time before the pandemic, narcotics use is slightly lower in the population as a whole, not least in the age group 16–29 years.

That narcotics use seems to have become less widespread among young people is also indicated by the fact that the share of suspects of narcotics-related crimes who are younger than 30 years old has dropped (from 66 percent to 56 percent between 2019 and 2024). The share under age 30 years has also decreased in the statistics on mortality and morbidity, compared with the time before the pandemic. This suggests that recruitment of new drug users has slowed in



recent years, which is supported by a drop in first treatment demands for a narcotics-related diagnosis with 13 percent between 2019 and 2023.

In a broader perspective statistics on first treatment demands however show a relatively stable trend throughout the 2000s, although some decreases have been noted in recent years. Special analyses of the number of persons with problematic drug use in the period 2007–2020 show that this figure has annually been around 70,000, with no major changes during the period.

In summary, it can be stated that the statistical indicators related to crime show large increases in the 2000s. Availability of illicit drugs have also increased during the period. However, no matching increases in registered morbidity or mortality is seen. Nor do the surveys reveal any larger increases in the 2000s. Furthermore, the latter sources indicate decreasing levels in the last five years.

An overall assessment is that consumption of narcotics increased during the 2000s, but far from to the extent that crime statistics may be interpreted as suggesting. Although problematic use is higher today compared with the years around the turn of the millennium, the statistics on mortality and morbidity do not indicate any further worsening since 2015. Among people under the age of 30 years in particular, the situation appears to have improved somewhat in the last five years.

International comparisons of problematic drug use are hard to make, as such data are basically non-existent. However, the results of surveys can be compared. For instance, it is clear that experience of narcotics is much lower in Sweden than in the USA, among both teenagers and adults. Compared with European countries, Sweden is usually in the half of countries where prevalence is lower. However, experience of cocaine and amphetamines is around the European average among adult Swedes. It can also be seen that the prevalence rates of illicit drug use among younger people have decreased in recent years also in Europe and not least in the USA.

In addition to analysing development of use, the report also concludes that men are overrepresented in many of the data sources, but if pharmaceuticals classified as narcotics are also included in the analyses, the gender differences decrease. As in the past, urban regions are still overrepresented as regards narcotics use, though the gap has decreased in the 2000s.

Another conclusion is that there are obvious socioeconomic differences in narcotics use. This is apparent in particular as regards frequent use, hazardous use, addiction/substance use disorder, and consequences in the form of morbidity and mortality, which are more common among people with a lower socioeconomic status. For more sporadic use, this pattern is not as evident. As has been concluded many times before, this report finds that people who use narcotics to a greater extent than others also use other substances.