# United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

*The role of pharmaceutical companies in creating drug epidemics*

## *Research Report*

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*"let us sing songs of freedom together"*

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## Introduction

People often expect that the making, transporting and selling of drugs is done by criminal organizations. And that the drug epidemics are fuelled by criminals. However, the role of pharmaceutical companies in creating and exacerbating drug epidemics often goes unseen.

In recent years, a wave of drug epidemics has sparked discussions about the involvement of pharmaceutical companies in these crises. The problem has been particularly highlighted by the opioid epidemic, where prescription painkillers, once hailed as medical breakthroughs, have become central to a pattern of addiction and overdoses. Allegations suggest that aggressive marketing, questionable prescribing practices and poor communication of risk by pharmaceutical companies have caused this crisis.

The problem is not just limited to opioids. Reports also point to the over-prescribing and misuse of benzodiazepines and other prescription drugs, pointing to a broader pattern of questionable practices within the pharmaceutical industry.

Understanding the role of pharmaceutical companies in creating drug epidemics is a critical step in understanding the roots of the problem and identifying potential solutions.

The ethical dimensions of pharmaceutical marketing and the impact of profit-driven motives on public health outcomes add additional complexity to this issue. However, addressing drug companies that contribute to drug epidemics poses complex challenges. Prosecuting multinational pharmaceutical companies requires navigating complex legal jurisdictions as their operations span multiple countries. Differences in regulations, differing standards and limited international legal frameworks complicate legal actions. In addition, it can be difficult to prove intent to cause harm, as companies often claim to comply with regulations.

Streamlining all different national responses is also complicated. As pharmaceutical companies often have economic influence in most of the countries, political considerations

can stand in the way of strict action. The complex interplay of legal, regulatory and economic factors makes fighting drug epidemics caused by pharmaceutical companies a complex issue.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Pharmaceutical companies

Pharmaceutical companies are organizations that research, develop, manufacture and distribute pharmaceuticals and medical products. These companies play a crucial role in healthcare by, for example, delivering medicines, vaccines and treatments for various diseases and conditions. In addition, they invest in scientific research to develop new drugs, conduct various tests to ensure safety and efficacy. Once approved, pharmaceutical companies manufacture and distribute these products on a global scale, contributing to advances in medical care and improving public health. Their work includes collaborating with scientists, healthcare professionals and regulatory agencies to provide innovative solutions for patients around the world.

### Drugs

Drugs are substances that can alter the functioning of the body and mind when consumed. They can be natural or synthetic and are often used for medical, recreational or therapeutic purposes. Drugs interact with the body's biological systems, affecting neurotransmitters, hormones, and other physiological processes. They can have a variety of effects, including pain relief, relaxation, stimulation, altered perception, or mood changes. Drugs can be divided into legal drugs (prescription and over-the-counter drugs) used for medical treatment, and illegal drugs (such as narcotics, stimulants, hallucinogens) that are often regulated or banned due to their potential for abuse and harm. Abuse of drugs can lead to addiction, health complications and legal consequences.

### Drug epidemics

A drug epidemic is a widespread surge in drug use, often causing addiction, overdoses, and societal harm. It involves rapid and substantial increases in drug-related problems, impacting public health and communities.

A drug epidemic is typically identified when there is a sudden and significant increase in the abuse of certain drugs, leading to substantial harm to public health and society. This includes a rise in addiction, overdoses, deaths, and broader societal consequences. The exact threshold may vary based on factors such as the severity of impact and the number of people affected.

# General Overview

The involvement of pharmaceutical companies in contributing to drug epidemics, particularly

exemplified by the opioid crisis, has emerged as a pressing global concern. This issue sheds light on the complexities of corporate practices, healthcare systems, and international regulations. Furthermore, the United Nations has taken steps to address this challenge on an international level.

## The opioid crisis

The opioid crisis is a tragic exemplification of the intersection between pharmaceutical companies and drug epidemics. It highlights how the pharmaceutical industry's actions, intended to alleviate pain and improve patient well-being, have led to unintended and devastating outcomes. Opioid medications, initially prescribed to manage severe pain, were heavily marketed by pharmaceutical companies, which fueled overprescription. This overprescribing, combined with inadequate monitoring and insufficient communication of risks, contributed to the widespread misuse, addiction, and overdose deaths.

Pharmaceutical companies often faced allegations of aggressive marketing tactics that downplayed the risks associated with opioids, focusing instead on their potential benefits. This led to an environment where healthcare professionals were incentivized to prescribe opioids without fully grasping the potential consequences. Additionally, the intersection of profit motives, healthcare practices, and regulatory frameworks created a complex web that facilitated the opioid crisis.

Between 1999 and 2021, nearly 645,000 people died in the US of an overdose involving an opioid, including prescription and illicit opioids. The increase in this number can be divided into 3 waves:

- The first wave began with an increase in opioid prescription in the 1990s, with prescription opioid overdose deaths increasing since 1999.
- The second wave began in 2010, with a rapid rise in overdose deaths involving heroin.
- The third wave began in 2013, with a significant increase in overdose deaths involving synthetic opioids, particularly those involving illegally manufactured fentanyl.

## Countries reliable on pharmaceutical companies

Pharmaceutical companies can make significant contributions to the economies of many countries, such as the United States, Germany, Belgium, Switzerland, India and China, generating employment, tax revenue and exports. This economic dependence has implications.

The fear of the economic fallout can lead to reluctance on the part of various countries to implement strict regulations or address unethical practices that can contribute to drug epidemics. It also plays a role in weakening regulation and oversight, which in turn can facilitate the proliferation of dangerous drugs or over-prescribing. The countries are afraid

that if they do introduce all this, there will not be enough money coming into the companies, which will affect their own economy.

This also has a major legal impact, because in countries where the pharmaceutical sector is an economic engine, legal action against pharmaceutical companies can be more complex. These companies may have the financial and legal resources to delay or evade legal proceedings.

Fortunately, there are also countries that have robust regulations and ethical business practices that work together to protect public health. However, it is critical that countries economically dependent on the pharmaceutical sector strike a balance between economic interests and the need to address health crises.

## UNODC

There are many legal and ethical issues involved in solving this problem. The unethical behavior of pharmaceutical companies in promoting drugs without due regard for safety and effectiveness raises serious ethical questions. This makes legal actions against these companies even more complex. This is because there are many opinions about when a pharmaceutical company is really wrong. This makes it difficult to provide comprehensive evidence. As a result, it is difficult to bring the pharmaceutical companies to justice. Effective solutions require a combination of strict regulations, ethical business practices, improved healthcare services and international collaboration.

The United Nations recognizes the global impact of pharmaceutical companies on drug epidemics and has taken steps to address this problem through international cooperation and policy initiatives. That is how the UNODC was founded. In 1997, the predecessor of UNODC was established as the Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention, in 2002 it changed to UNODC. The UNODC was established to help the UN better address a coordinated, comprehensive response to the interrelated issues of illicit drug trafficking and abuse, crime prevention and criminal justice, international terrorism and political corruption.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) plays a vital role in coordinating efforts to combat drug-related problems, including those arising from the involvement of pharmaceutical companies.

The United Nations response includes promoting cooperation among member states to strengthen regulatory frameworks, improve law enforcement and facilitate information sharing. UNODC's initiatives aim to align national policies to prevent overprescribing, regulate pharmaceutical marketing practices, and improve data collection on drug use and trafficking. By focusing on reducing both supply and demand, UNODC seeks to mitigate the impact of drug epidemics with an integrated approach.

## Previous attempts to solve the issue

The European Union (EU) established the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) to address critical public health concerns. EMA, founded in 1995, aims to ensure the safety, efficacy, and quality of human and veterinary medicines across the EU. EMCDDA, founded in 1993, focuses on understanding and responding to drug-related issues in Europe, encompassing both legal and illegal substances. It provides data-driven insights, trends, and analyses to support evidence-based policies, harm reduction strategies, and public awareness efforts. Through EMA and EMCDDA, the EU strives to safeguard public health by promoting safe and responsible use of medicines and addressing the challenges posed by drugs and drug addiction.

In America, they created the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) on July 1, 1973 as an agency of the US Department of Justice. The DEA's main responsibility is to enforce federal laws and regulations related to controlled substances, including opioid drugs.

Since 2017, the U.S. government has recognized the opioid epidemic as a national health crisis and has taken several initiatives to address the problem, including educational programs and limiting the prescription of opioid drugs. The government has also expanded access to naloxone. Naloxone is a drug that is used to counteract the effects of an opiate overdose, such as morphine.

Other countries, for example in Asia, have also laid down rules or established agencies. However, despite these attempts, there is still much room for improvement. After all, the opioid crisis is still going on and pharmaceutical companies are still guilty of human lives every day. And especially for the rules of suing and adjudicating pharmaceutical companies, there is still a lot to be achieved.

## Major Parties Involved

### The United States

The United States has experienced serious drug epidemics, including the opioid crisis. The country is also home to many of the major pharmaceutical companies leading to aggressive marketing and simultaneous over-prescribing of opioids.

### European Union

Several European countries have been affected by the rise of opioid use and other drug problems. The EU also deals with the regulation of the pharmaceutical industry and tries to follow regional and international coordination.

### Canada

Like the US, Canada has faced an opioid crisis. Canadian authorities have taken steps to tackle opioid misuse and are investigating the role of pharmaceutical companies.

### Asia

Several Asian countries are identified with problems of pharmaceutical drug abuse and drug epidemics. India and China are major producers of pharmaceutical products and therefore also play a role in this issue.

### Latin American Countries

Countries in Latin America are analyzed with different drug problems, including the production of narcotics. They can also be affected by pharmaceutical advancements that contribute to epidemics.

### United Nations

The United Nations tried to deal with this underground problem. Organizations such as the UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime) are involved in similar published work.

### Switzerland

The pharmaceutical industry is an important part of Switzerland's economy. The gross value added achieved in Switzerland in 2018 amounted to around 36.0 billion francs, accounting for 5.4 % of Switzerland's total economic output.

## Timeline of Events

***1973*** Establishment DEA

***1993*** Establishment of EMA

***1995*** Establishment of EMCDDA

***1997*** establishment of ODCCP.

***1999*** start of the opioid crisis.

***2002*** ODCCP changes in UNODC.

***2017*** The U.S. government declares the opioid crisis a national public health emergency.

## Possible Solutions

International standards and regulations: The United Nations can play a conventional role in developing international standards and regulations for pharmaceutical marketing and prescription practices. This could form the basis of ethical guidelines and requirements that could be adopted by countries to prevent and implement aggressive marketing tactics. For example, the UNODC can work with health organizations to create a set of global standards that drug companies must follow to combat responsible marketing and distribution of drugs.

Addressing the influence of pharmaceutical companies on drug epidemics can be achieved through educational programs targeting healthcare providers, patients, and the general public. These initiatives should emphasize informed decision-making, evidence-based prescribing practices, and awareness of the risks and benefits of prescription drugs.

For healthcare providers, programs can offer updated information on medications, highlighting potential addiction risks and promoting evidence-based prescribing.

Programs can provide clear information about prescribed medications, their potential risks, and the importance of open communication with healthcare professionals. Empowering patients to make informed choices and discuss their medication concerns can curb unnecessary use.

Expanding the initiative to the general public can combat stigma, fostering awareness of prescription drug misuse dangers. Campaigns can emphasize alternative pain management methods, reducing reliance on prescription medications.

An effective solution for pharmaceutical companies responsible for their contribution to drug epidemics is to establish an international independent committee or agency. This agency would be tasked with investigating evidence and rare claims against pharmaceutical companies, focusing on their marketing practices, risk communication and prescription patterns. The committee would have access to internal documents, communications and statistics to make a thorough assessment.

This agency would work with national regulatory and legal systems to remove international charges and address complex cross-border claims. It would provide whistleblower protection to implement testimonials and information from within the industry. The agency's independence and international cooperation allow it to contribute to a consistent and fair approach to drug companies contributing to drug epidemics, while also having confidence in regulation and accountability for the industry's recovery.

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