News release

from the EU drugs agency in Lisbon

NEW EMCDDA REPORT: THE INTERNET AND DRUG MARKETS

Virtual markets — changing the dynamics of how drugs are bought and sold

(11.2.2016, LISBON **EMBARGO 12:00 CET**) How do online drug markets function? What technologies do they use? How do they relate to the traditional drug market? How can they be monitored and controlled? Today the **EU drugs agency (EMCDDA)** unravels some of the complexities of these questions in a new report: ***The internet and drug markets*** ([1]).

Over the last decade, virtual markets have been changing the dynamics of how drugs are bought and sold. Although it is estimated that most illicit drug transactions are still played out offline, online drug markets have the potential to transform drug sales in the future, in the same way as online shopping has revolutionised the retail experience. According to the report, a wide range of factors appear to be driving developments in internet drug markets 'mostly linked to technology, globalisation and market innovation'.

Dimitris Avramopoulos, European Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship, says: 'Almost any kind of illegal drug can be bought today on the internet and delivered by mail, with no face-to-face contact between buyer and dealer. The illicit market is evolving, and so should our efforts to eliminate it. We should stop the abuse of the internet by those wanting to turn it into a drug market. Technology is offering fresh opportunities for law enforcement to tackle online drug markets and reduce threats to public health. Let us seize these opportunities to attack the problem head-on and reduce drug supply online'.

This new **EMCDDA** investigation into the world of online drug markets brings together state-of-the-art evidence from over 20 experts — from academia, journalism and frontline practice — and contributes to the knowledge base on this part of the supply chain.

Alexis Goosdeel EMCDDA Director says: 'Whether in open drug scenes or a dealer's flat, low-level drug sales have historically been associated with real people and real places. While most dealing remains firmly rooted in this physical world, virtual marketplaces are now expanding the boundaries of drug supply, offering wider options to potential buyers. This is a worrying development as digital literacy increases, technologies advance and the range of available drugs diversifies. The EMCDDA will continue its close monitoring of the fast-changing world of internet drug markets and highlight gaps for future research. Bringing together the latest international expertise, this report represents our first detailed exploration of the issue'.

The report describes how online drug markets operate on the 'surface web' (accessible via common search engines) as well as the 'deep web' (inaccessible via standard browsers)([2]). The report also explores 'dark net' markets residing on the 'deep web'. Otherwise known as 'cryptomarkets', these allow goods and services to be exchanged between parties who use digital currencies (e.g. bitcoin) and digital encryption software (e.g. Tor) to conceal their identities ([3]). The growth of social media has also seen online fora and mobile 'apps' emerge, where drugs are discussed, advertised and sometimes sold.

According to the report, the 'surface web' is primarily associated with the distribution of non-controlled substances (e.g. new psychoactive substances/'legal highs', medicines, precursor chemicals), or substances around which there may be legal ambiguities (e.g. due to differences in national legislation). By contrast, most sales activity linked to illicit drugs appears to take place on the 'deep web'.

Interventions to reduce both supply and demand for drugs have been gathering pace on the 'surface web' (e.g. online information campaigns)[4]. Health and law enforcement professionals are also seizing opportunities on the 'deep web'. The report describes the growing interest in the provision of health-related interventions to 'dark net' users [5]. Law enforcement agencies are also building up experience in the area of monitoring online drug markets and are tackling supply by disrupting markets, reducing trust around anonymity and prosecuting 'cryptomarket' sellers [6].

The report concludes: 'The speed with which the internet allows transformation to occur in drug markets will continue to present major challenges across the board, to law enforcement, public health, research and monitoring agencies'.

The **EMCDDA** will continue to explore questions posed by this dynamic environment and contribute to understanding of the current online supply of drugs.

Coming soon: On **5 April**, the EMCDDA and Europol are joining forces to launch their second *EU Drug Markets Report* in Brussels. The 2016 report will be launched by European Commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos. The Commissioner will be joined at the press conference by EMCDDA Director Alexis Goosdeel and Europol Director Rob Wainwright.

Notes:

[1] See EMCDDA Insights 21 at www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/insights/internet-drug-markets
[2] The deep web is accessed by conducting a search within a particular website. Government databases and libraries, for example, contain huge amounts of 'deep web' data.
[3] Tor (The Onion Router) is an example of a software that enables online anonymity by hiding a computer's IP address. It has many societal benefits, such as enabling users to avoid censorship and allowing anonymous communication with victims of abuse, but it is also used for illegal matters, such as drug dealing.
[4] For example, European Commission campaign around buying medicines online: http://ec.europa.eu/health/human-use/eu-logo/index_en.htm (Chapter 11).
[5] See Chapter 7.
[6] See Chapters 8 and 10.