



**MINISTRY OF NATIONAL SECURITY  
STRATEGIC SERVICES AGENCY**

**AN EXAMINATION OF NARCOTIC OFFENDING TRENDS IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO:  
A REVIEW OF THE DRUG INFORMATION NETWORK REPORT OF TRINIDAD AND  
TOBAGO (DIN-TT) 2022**

**Overview:**

For the five-year period, 2018-2022 the local narcotics landscape was characterised by fluctuating reports of possession, trafficking and crime displacement<sup>1</sup>, including the spread of drug trafficking and retail across multiple communities in both Trinidad and Tobago (T&T). Additionally, the national security apparatus continued to encounter difficulties in the detection/interdiction of narcotics at both legitimate and illegitimate ports of entry (sea and air), urban centres and suburban/agrarian communities. On one hand, declines in narcotic seizures, eradications<sup>2</sup>, as well as increases in the number of arrests for possession and trafficking and convictions may reflect the positive impact of the State's intervention and mitigation measures to disrupt and dismantle drug trafficking networks. Conversely, these trends could indicate greater adaptability and innovation by drug trafficking networks to circumvent law enforcement (LE) tactics. Further, the full impact of COVID-19 on drug challenges remains unknown, as the pandemic produced socio-economic hardship that possibly made illicit drug cultivation more appealing. Economic strain and above average rates of unemployment post-COVID-19 may be a key push factor for drug retail by the average citizen, towards financial support<sup>3</sup>. Again, the pandemic-induced rise in inequality, poverty, and mental health conditions particularly among vulnerable groups, possibly pushed more

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<sup>1</sup> Crime displacement is the relocation of crime from one place, time, target, offense, or tactic to another as a result of some crime prevention initiative. [Analysing Crime Displacement and Diffusion \(asu.edu\)](https://www.asu.edu/analyzing-crime-displacement-and-diffusion)

<sup>2</sup> Cured cannabis, fully grown cannabis plants, cannabis fields and cannabis seedlings

<sup>3</sup> Silvermist. "Millennial Addiction Risk Factors | Silvermist Recovery." Silvermist Recovery, n.d. <https://www.silvermistrecovery.com/2017/07/are-millennials-more-at-risk-for-addiction/#:~:text=Millennials%20are%20at%20a%20high,percent%20of%20millennials%20use%20drugs.>

people towards drug consumption<sup>4</sup>. Thus, effective intervention strategies to reduce the effects associated with the emergent increases in drug consumption and drug trafficking requires a multi-agency approach.

### **Narcotic Seizures and Eradications**

Narcotic seizures year-to-year fluctuation over the 5 years was mainly in response to continuous anti-trafficking LE strategies, increased Latin American migrant flows<sup>5</sup>, enhanced border security measures, the decriminalisation of marijuana<sup>6</sup> and the restrictions on movement imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The impunity with which drug trafficking networks and criminal gangs had become accustomed was possibly affected by the implementation of Public Health Ordinances (PHOs) in 2020 in conjunction with the limited State of Emergency (SoE) in 2021, which restricted the public's movement. This condition disrupted normal trafficking operations, supplemented by concentrated and intensified LE interdiction strategies at both legal and illegal ports of entry, contributing to the decline in narcotic ventures and thus seizures recorded between 2019 and 2020. Despite this, reports state that drug trafficking increased globally during the period<sup>7</sup>, suggesting that traffickers may have altered their modus' to accommodate these restrictions resulting in less detected drug trafficking offences. As these restrictions were lifted, and LE strategies adjusted, the drug trafficking groups appeared to resume their activities via traditional methods as observed in the increased seizures in 2021. Again, the decline in seizures in 2022 is possibly due to LE's renewed efforts to destroy marijuana fields as well as local producers' possible gravitation towards indoor cultivation. Thus, seizures rely upon the authorities' abilities to detect within the evolving narcotics landscape.

Detection will continue to be a challenge for LE, as there remains a largely hidden and undetected trafficking economy as well as re-emergent cultivation/growing economy within both the forested and rural areas of T&T. From 2019-2022, the decrease in total amounts of eradications of cured cannabis, fully grown cannabis trees, cannabis fields and cannabis seedlings, may reflect alternative cannabis sources. That is, open sources confirmed that illicit levels of technology aided indoor cultivation became more popular during the pandemic, and increasingly supplemented local consumption demands<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, as T&T continues to be a transshipment point between the narcotic manufacturers/producers in the South (Latin America) and narcotic consumer markets in the North (United States of America, Canada and Europe), traffickers exploit the local trafficking and retail economies. Intelligence indicates the presence of transnational organised groups operating in T&T that facilitate these transshipments/transactions, which largely go undetected at legal ports of import/export and subsequently provide the local market with illegal drugs for retail.

Furthermore, location analysis of detected marijuana and cocaine possession suggests that trafficking activities may have returned to less populated, rural and/or forested areas located

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<sup>4</sup> [UNODC World Drug Report 2021: pandemic effects ramp up drug risks, as youth underestimate cannabis danger](#)

<sup>5</sup> A product of the Venezuelan migrant crisis and migrant smuggling

<sup>6</sup> December 2019

<sup>7</sup> [COVID pandemic fuelling major increase in drug use worldwide: UN report | UN News](#)

<sup>8</sup> Wong, Melissa. "As Legal Pot Grows, More Kids Sickened by Edibles at Home." *Loop News*, January 3, 2023. <https://tt.loopnews.com/content/legal-pot-grows-more-kids-sickened-edibles-home-5>.

in the **Eastern, Southern and Tobago** Divisions, to circumvent LE detection. However, seizure data shows that illegal narcotics distribution and consumption is highest along the East-West corridor<sup>9</sup>, within districts synonymous with retail by local criminal gangs, and existing large customer bases. Therefore, traffickers and criminal gangs continue to be motivated to supply drugs to local markets located in the interior (Port of Spain and Northern Divisions, via supply from coastal communities (Western and Eastern Divisions). This reality explains the distribution and typology of narcotics offences across T&T.

Notwithstanding decreases in narcotics seizures and fewer eradication exercises by LE in 2022, the illicit narcotics trade continues to proliferate within the local landscape. Marijuana maintains the largest market share of illicit drugs distributed locally, particularly given its estimated multi-million dollar value<sup>10</sup>. This correlates with the proximity to other marijuana and Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) trafficking countries (e.g., St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Venezuela), local legal provisions for marijuana growth, and the undetected presence of some marijuana fields in rural/forested areas<sup>11</sup>.

### **Firearms and Ammunition Seized with Drugs**

Criminal gangs' demand for, and use of weapons is inextricably linked to thriving criminal enterprises, including the illegal narcotics trade, particularly within the Central, Northern and Southern Divisions. As such, the demand for illegal weapons in 2018 among the estimated 211 gangs with 2484 gang members<sup>12</sup>, partially accounts for the highest number of firearms seized with drugs in that year. Given the nexus between narcotics trafficking and illegal firearms and ammunition trafficking, the decreases from 2019 to 2021 and the increase in 2022 is unsurprising. Intelligence indicates that the concerning trend is the increase in presence of more high-powered assault weapons and its complimentary ammunition<sup>13</sup>, which is not always reflected in the data. Again, the low detection of firearms and ammunition with narcotics may not reflect the current criminal landscape given the uptick in drug-related murders via the use of illegal firearms and ammunition<sup>14</sup>.

The demand for weapons by local criminal groups continues to employ local traffickers along and nearby coastal communities, hence higher levels of firearms and ammunition seized in 2018 in the **North Eastern, Eastern, Southern and South Western** Divisions. Thus, the higher quantities of seizures of drugs and firearms in these suburban and agrarian Divisions may be due to convenience and preference among traffickers to warehouse contraband in these spaces before eventual distribution to 'consumption communities'. These local traffickers utilise go-fast boats and pirogues to transport firearms and other contraband from Venezuela, concealed in hidden compartments of these vessels. Local criminal gangs utilise these weapons against rivals to control, dominate and takeover lucrative retail drug turfs and access State contracts in other Divisions, mainly the Northern, Port of Spain, Western and

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<sup>9</sup> Western Division, Port of Spain Division and Eastern Division

<sup>10</sup> [Ask Our Experts 2/17/20: Legal Cannabis Markets in the Caribbean - New Frontier Data](#)

<sup>11</sup> National Threat Assessment 2023. **Ref : 111646Q APR23**

<sup>12</sup> *Report: 2,484 Gang Members in T&T - Trinidad Guardian*. "Report: 2,484 Gang Members in T&T." July 6, 2019. <https://www.guardian.co.tt/news/report-2484-gang-members-in-tt-6.2.880620.5d4b61be3b>.

<sup>13</sup> AR-15 (automatic firearm), 5.56mm and 7.62mm (ammunition)

<sup>14</sup> Annual Serious Crime Report 2022 and Outlook 2023. **Ref: 170813Q APR23**

Central Divisions. The uptick in weapons seized with narcotics in the Central Division in 2022 reflects the heightened level of gang violence related to rivalry for narcotics trafficking/retailing turfs in communities within the **Chaguanas, Couva** and **Cunupia** Police Station Districts<sup>15</sup>.

### Drug Arrests and Convictions

In relation to drug use, narcotics is used recreationally within the population<sup>16</sup>, as well as it plays a critical role in prostitution, serious crime offending, sexual violence and sex trafficking. Traditionally, drug arrests for possession of cannabis has always been high (as shown in the 2018 and 2019 data), but post the decriminalisation of marijuana in December 2019, arrests for possession of cannabis took a sharp decline for the subsequent years. However, the data does not reflect actual drug consumption levels, which is still determined to be comparatively high within the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region<sup>17</sup>.

The fluctuating but relatively stable number of arrests for possession of cocaine, trafficking of cannabis and trafficking of cocaine over the four year period 2019-2022, is indicative of the established illegal narcotics trade, given that persons were determined to continue their illegal actions despite improved LE detection strategies and the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. The attempts to return to pre-pandemic social events and activities may correlate with increased possession and trafficking of illegal narcotics, particularly in 2021-2022. Intelligence reveals that narcotic retailers utilise social media and other online platforms to distribute to customers, with some social events advertising different drug types (marijuana, synthetic marijuana, MDMA<sup>18</sup>, NPS<sup>19</sup>, vape pens, etc.) to their potential attendees. The analysis indicates a concerning trend of drug trafficking and poly-drug use/consumption amongst young adults.

There is growing normalisation of illegal drug use among the youth population, particularly associated with the 'zesser' subculture and their concomitant social events. Drug treatment data suggests that Males aged 35-44 and 25-34 were most likely to access drug treatment during the reporting period. This aligns closely with age distributions of Males most likely to be convicted for drug offences (25-29, 30-34, 35-39). Information indicates that higher levels of financial stress, mental health disorders and other risk factors are creating a 'silent' epidemic amongst this specific demographic. Further, as T&T continues to experience an aging population<sup>20</sup>, this group of identified drug users may continue to be pivotal to both the demand and supply of drugs within the local landscape, where targeted approaches to deter drug trafficking and treat drug use remain crucial.

The arrest and conviction data illustrates that young males 25-29 years of age continue to be at risk for narcotic-related offences, mainly possession of marijuana. However, young males, women and young offenders who may be unemployed, employed primarily in vocational/low-

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<sup>15</sup> Annual Serious Crime Report 2022 and Outlook 2023. Ref: 170813Q APR23

<sup>16</sup> [Ask Our Experts 2/17/20: Legal Cannabis Markets in the Caribbean - New Frontier Data](#)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> 3,4-Methylenedioxymethamphetamine (ecstasy)

<sup>19</sup> New psychoactive substances

<sup>20</sup> Central Statistical Office. "Population Statistics Trinidad and Tobago," June 24, 2023. <https://cso.gov.tt/subjects/population-and-vital-statistics/population/>.

paid work, self-employed, students or school dropouts, show susceptibility to narcotic-related offending. This reveals a possible relationship between occupation type and likelihood for criminality, including narcotic offending in T&T. Further, hotspot communities act as schools of crime, where young men and women associate with deviant peers, emulate more prolific offenders and become involved in the use (possession) or trafficking of narcotics. Finally, in the current socio-economic climate, characterised by sustained economic hardship, limited success in mainstream environments (work and school) and proximity (socialisation) to gang members may be push and pull factors for these vulnerable groups (young males, young females and juveniles) towards drug experimentation/consumption and trafficking.

### **Money Laundering and the Narcotics Trade**

Money laundering continues to be integral to the fiscal success of drug trafficking enterprise in T&T. Over the reporting period, there was a continuous reduction in the number of Suspicious Transaction Reports/Suspicious Activity Reports from 35% in 2018 (118) to 3.7% in 2022 (35). However, intelligence indicates that increased criminal engagement with guns-for-drugs trade, terrorist financing, bulk-cash smuggling, social media-based cash-intensive businesses, unrestricted cashless/digital payment applications and unregulated real estate markets continue to facilitate undetected money laundering activities locally. As such, the data may be more reflective of the difficulties for authorities to uncover and stem the drug trafficking and money laundering nexus.

### **Looking Forward**

- ✓ As the majority of deportees emanated from the United States of America (USA), it suggests that this group may play an increasingly significant role in drug trafficking due to drug diversification to the evolving consumption patterns of the local market.
- ✓ Need for mandatory testing for drugs of persons at point of arrest or deceased due to gang motivated attacks or reprisals in an attempt to gain a more complete understanding of drug consumption patterns to better inform demand and supply reduction strategies.
- ✓ Develop a strategy to treat with Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) persons and groups, who are more susceptible to drug use and retail.

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