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Beyond the Transit Route: Ghana's Growing Challenge in a Changing Global Drug Trade



Introduction

The Global drug market is expanding and fast changing. There are the emergence of new substances, new trafficking routes, and growing consumer markets creating challenges for governments and public health systems. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) says in 2023, there were a whopping 316 million drug users worldwide. That statistic shows an increase that exceeds global population growth. The supply of drugs is also experiencing significant turns. The World Drug Report for instance records global cocaine cultivation reaching 385,100 hectares in 2024. That is nearly three times the area from 2014, with cocaine manufacturing hitting an estimated 4,100 tonnes (UNODC, 2025 ; UN, 2026). Demand and supply for this substance reflects a marked growth.

Meanwhile, synthetic drugs are becoming predominant in the drug market. Unlike plant based drugs, synthetic drugs can be produced in laboratories using chemical ingredients, thus, can be manufactured closer to consumer markets. In 2024, the UNODC reported a global seizure of amphetamine type stimulants at about 604 tonnes, comprising primarily methamphetamine. Additionally, there is a rise of new synthetic opioids such as nitazenes. This presents significant risks due to their potency and the uncertainty surrounding their composition in user markets (UN, 2026). Drug use is a major public health issue. The World Health Organisation (WHO) attributes about 600,000 deaths yearly to psychoactive drug use, while untreated drug-use disorders can affect people's physical and mental health, employment, education, family relationships and wider social functioning. The WHO has also warned that access to treatment remains inadequate in many parts of the world (WHO, 2024).

The current situation is particularly concerning due to the interconnected nature of supply and demand. Growing supply fosters new markets, while rising demand prompts traffickers to identify new routes and clientele. The UNODC characterises this as a cycle where expanding drug markets both influence and contribute to broader social and economic instability. This affects not only drug producing nations but also those along trafficking routes and emerging consumer markets.

Transit Route to Consumer Market in the West African Region

For many years, West Africa has been known mainly as a transit route for moving drugs between continents. Its location makes it a convenient link between South America, where large quantities of cocaine are produced, and Europe, one of the world's major cocaine markets. Over the past 30 years, the region has seen criminal networks expand (UNODC, 2024).

Cocaine is particularly pivotal, with over 126.4 tonnes seized between January 2019 and June 2024. Seizures mostly occurred in international waters and major coastal countries including the Gulf of Guinea, Cabo Verde, Senegal and Guinea (UNODC, 2024). The region's role is no longer limited to simply moving drugs elsewhere. Drugs passing through West Africa are finding local consumers. Local drug markets across Africa are becoming more diverse, moving beyond the traditional dominance of cannabis to cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine and pharmaceutical opioids among others. In West and Central Africa, cannabis use alone reached nearly 10 percent of the population aged 15 to 64 in 2022. That is equivalent to about 31 million people (Capelle-Sghiouar, 2024 (WHO); UNODC, 2024).

The growth of local consumption creates a different problem for West African countries. When a country is only used as a transit point, the primary concern is usually trafficking and organised crime. But when drugs remain within the region and are sold locally, the problem also becomes one of public health and social welfare.

Aside from cocaine, West Africa has also experienced major problems with pharmaceutical opioids such as tramadol, which are often used outside medical supervision. Africa in 2024 accounted for 90 percent of global tramadol seizures, while non-medical opioid use was estimated at 1.3 percent in 2022 (UNODC, 2024). The region is therefore dealing with a drug market that is becoming more varied, rather than one centred on a single substance.There are also signs that the region's drug markets are becoming more sophisticated. Trafficking networks keep adapting their routes and methods as international enforcement changes. (UNODC, 2024).

This analysis highlights the evolving role of West Africa in the drug trade. The region is transitioning from a mere transit point to a hub for drug storage, distribution, and consumption.

Reliable data remain limited in many countries, making it difficult to measure the true size of local drug markets. However, the change cannot be ignored as it has implications for Ghana, the West African Region and the world at large.

Ghana's Place in the Changing Drug Change

For a long time, Ghana has been known to be a transit point for illicit drugs. This has been possible because of its strategic location that facilitates trafficking networks. The U.S. Department of State has noted Ghana's role in moving drugs like cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine, and also domestic cannabis production (U.S Department of State, 2025). Some of these drugs are now being consumed within Ghana rather than being trafficked through.

In 2025, Ghana's Narcotics Control Commission (NACOC) revealed major drug enforcement efforts. This involved the destruction of over 16.8 tonnes of narcotics, including cocaine, heroin, cannabis, methamphetamine and ketamine. A notable seizure involved 3,313 kilograms of cocaine on the Cape Coast Takoradi highway (NACOC, 2025).

Consumption of pharmaceutical and synthetic drugs like tramadol is on the rise. NACOC reported the destruction of more than 5.9 million tramadol capsules along with cannabis and cocaine (NACOC, 2025). The diverse drug types show a change in Ghana's drug market. Also NACOC records a 197 percent rise in drug related arrests, seizing nearly 1,500 kilograms of narcotics, and disrupting trafficking networks during enforcement activities.

Key urban centers such as the Ashanti and Greater Accra regions, reported the highest cases of drug trafficking and abuse in 2024 with 293 trafficking cases (NDPC, 2025). In September 2026, Ghana emphasized the need for enhanced regional cooperation against evolving drug threats, including synthetic drugs and cocaine trafficking (NACOC, 2026). It is thus important to view drug issues as a public health concern and not solely criminal justice matters.

Young people are also an important part of the conversation. WHO's 2025 reporting on adolescent health in Ghana estimated that 5.7% of adolescents were affected by drug use, among other major health and social challenges (WHO Ghana, 2025). It points to a population that requires greater attention to prevention, education and early intervention.

The Cost to the Ghanaian Society

The cost of drug use in Ghana shows up in health, family dynamics, education, employment, the healthcare systems and security.

The health repercussions include substance use disorders and heightened risks like HIV among injectors. Ghana's Mental Health Authority advises treating substance use disorders as health issues rather than criminal ones (WHO Ghana, 2025). Ghana is starting to address treatment access issues for substance use disorders. In 2025, the Minister for the Interior instructed NACOC to implement the Substance Use Disorder Rehabilitation Fund, aimed at supporting addiction research, treatment, rehabilitation centers, and professional training (NACOC, 2025).

Families also bear the burden of substance dependence. This happens by impacting relationships, finances, and employment or prospects of education (WHO,2025). Drug abuse can affect community safety and social stability. Substance use disorders can

affect judgement, health and daily functioning, and in some circumstances may contribute to unsafe behaviour or conflict (Information Services Department, 2026).

Nationally, untreated substance use disorders strain health and mental health services. The bulk of Ghana's population is youthful, thus, substance use and abuse will take a toll on the country's future workforce and human development. According to a 2026 WHO report, Ghana faces challenges such as underfunding, limited mental health personnel, and unequal access to services, hindering adequate treatment support (WHO Ghana, 2026).

Young people facing unemployment or social exclusion are at risk of being recruited by criminal networks, for activities like drug distribution and trafficking (UNODC, 2024). While drug use does not necessarily lead to crime, the rise of drug trafficking in the West African region poses this risk. Additionally, in October 2026, NACOC emphasized the need to connect youth drug prevention with community resilience against violent extremism, especially in vulnerable border areas of Ghana (Information Services Department, 2026). This points to the concern that economic difficulties may allow criminal groups to exploit youth vulnerabilities. Undoubtedly, it warrants further investigation into the link between drug use and violent extremism.

Drug markets can strengthen organised crime. Ghana's drug challenge is becoming more complex as criminal networks move beyond traditional narcotics to pharmaceutical and synthetic substances. The concern is that profits from illicit drug markets can sustain criminal networks, encourage corruption and undermine public confidence in law enforcement (Information Services Department, 2026).

Conclusion

The global drug trade is transforming, impacting West Africa, including Ghana, where trafficking and local consumption are rising. The Narcotics Control Commission reported in September 2026 that over 8.5 tonnes of narcotics and 45.4 million tramadol tablets were intercepted. This shows substantial enforcement actions. However, more than a 1,000 individuals in 2025 sought treatment for substance use disorders in Ghana. The need to shield youth from drug related risks while countering criminal networks is pressing. Ghana's approach must extend beyond enforcement to include regional cooperation, prevention, accessible treatment, and support for the young. As emphasized by NACOC's Director General, focusing solely on seizures is inadequate; strategies must adapt to effectively mitigate drug related harm and ensure the well being and safety of future generations.

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