

Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Drug Abuse Among Inmates in Kosovo Prisons

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Abstract

Background: The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an increase in drug use among inmates in prisons worldwide, including Kosovo, due to restrictions on visitation and addiction recovery programs. This study analyzed drug use among 33,144 inmates in Kosovo prisons over nine years and aimed to identify potential solutions, foster collaboration between relevant institutions, and develop better programs and treatments.

Methods and Results: The study is based on data from the medical files of inmates examined over nine years (2014-2022) in 10 Kosovo prison health units. From the total number of inmates, 8.22% were identified as drug users, and the percentage of drug use among inmates steadily increased from 5.8% in 2014 to 15.48% in 2019. In 2020, the first year of the pandemic, there was a decrease of 1.16% (from 15.48% to 14.28%), which was the first decrease in six years. The study also found a disproportional decrease in the number of inmates admitted during the same period. The Medico Psycho Therapeutic Center “Labyrinth” showed a similar trend. Suicide attempts, death under custody, and tobacco use increased linearly, with alcohol use remaining stable.

Conclusion: The study highlights the need for effective prevention, treatment, and management strategies for drug use among inmates and the general population in Kosovo. Continuous collaboration between relevant institutions and stakeholders is essential to improve the health and well-being of those affected by drug use and create a brighter future for Kosovo. (**International Journal of Biomedicine. 2023;13(2):321-325.**)

Keywords: inmate • drug abuse • COVID-19 • prevention • management strategies • Kosovo

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the world, and its effects have been felt in Kosovo.⁽¹⁾ Among the areas that have been particularly affected is drug use among prison inmates.⁽²⁾ Assessing the impact of the pandemic on

drug use among inmates is a complex issue that requires a comprehensive approach.⁽³⁾ The restrictions on visitation and other programs designed to help inmates with addiction have contributed to increased drug use, as inmates have turned to drugs to cope with their isolation and anxiety.⁽⁴⁾ The disruptions in the drug supply chain have also made it harder for inmates to access the usual drugs, leading to an increase in the use of more potent and dangerous drugs like fentanyl. Therefore, it is critical to take a comprehensive approach to address this issue and ensure that inmates receive the necessary support and treatment to overcome their addiction during these challenging times.

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Moreover, the issue of drug use in Kosovo is not limited to prisons. According to recent studies, there are over 30,000 confirmed drug users in Kosovo, with approximately 6,000 requiring addiction treatment.⁽⁵⁾ Additionally, drug, alcohol, and tobacco use among secondary school students in Kosovo is a cause for concern, with 43.5% of young people having smoked cigarettes, 37.8% having consumed alcohol, and 3.8% having tried marihuana. Heroin use is reported to be at 0.1% in the general population, with cannabis use at 2.1% and cocaine use at 0.3%.⁽⁶⁾ Other drugs, such as ecstasy, amphetamines, and illegally obtained prescription drugs like Tramadol and Methadone/Heptanone are also prevalent in the country, with 2.6% of respondents reporting the use of illegally obtained prescription drugs at an average age of 17.⁽⁵⁾

The national strategy against drugs in Kosovo has two components:

1) reducing the supply of drugs, a component that the Kosovo Police manage;

2) decreasing demand for drugs, a component managed by other sectors, like education, youth, health, and social sectors.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has created additional challenges, making it crucial to reevaluate the existing strategies and develop new approaches to address the increasing rates of drug use in Kosovo.

The purpose:

- To conduct an up-to-date analysis of drug abuse among inmates in Kosovo prisons and compare it with drug abuse in other institutions, such as the Medico Psychotherapeutic Center “Labyrinth.”
- To identify potential solutions for the prevention, treatment, and management of drug abuse among inmates, particularly within the prison system, by exploring various indicators related to drug abuse in prisons and other health organizations.
- To foster greater collaboration between relevant institutions, resulting in improved and high-quality services for drug abusers based on follow-up results.
- To persuade stakeholders to develop better programs and treatments that are aligned with the current indicators and number of drug abusers in Kosovo, both inside and outside the prison system.

Materials and Methods

The methodology of this survey

Data were taken from the medical files of 33,144 inmates examined for 9 years (2014-2022). The data were obtained from the medical protocol of all 10 Kosovo prison health units with coverage of 100% of all inmates admitted into the prisons during the above-mentioned period.

Data obtained were compared to some of the data from MPTC “Labyrinth” which is the private medical center dealing with the most drug abusers in the country.

Our aim was to process and present all those data and draw conclusions and recommendations for promoting the prevention of drug abuse in prisons, as well as to give proposals and facts for initiating the adoption of the existing

national drug strategy as a sustainable national strategy and protocols for all, based on findings and recommendations.

Results

Over the course of nine years, from 2014 to 2022, a total of 33,144 inmates were admitted to Kosovo prisons. Among them, 2,726 individuals (8.22%) were identified as drug abusers. The percentage of drug abuse among inmates steadily increased from 5.8% in 2014 to 15.48% in 2019. However, in 2020, for the first time in six years, there was a decrease of 1.16% in the percentage of drug abusers among inmates, from 15.44% to 14.28%. It is worth noting that this change occurred during the pandemic period. The decrease started immediately in the year 2020 to continue slightly in the year 2022 as well. It is notable that, despite a decrease in the number of prisoners during the analyzed period (from 2014 to 2022), the percentage of drug abusers has increased (Fig.1).

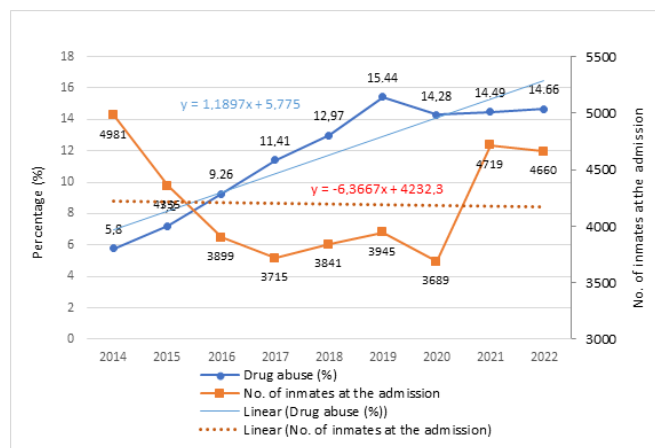


Fig. 1. The trend of drug abuse in the Kosovo Prisons (%) and number of inmates admitted in Kosovo prisons for the period 2014 -2022.

The same trend is presented at Medico Psycho Therapeutic Center “Labyrinth,” there is a decrease in new cases from the year 2019 to 2020 and 2021, touching the bottom of the trend curve, like the year 2015, and starting rapidly increasing at the year 2022.

Suicide attempts have linearly increased. Based on the linear trend equation ($y=0.39x+4.09$) the average incidence rate of suicide attempts for the period 2014-2022 was 4 cases/1000 inmates, with an increase of 0.39 per thousand for each year. There were some variations in the incidence rate, with some decrease during 2019, but an increase again in 2020, mostly caused by pandemic measures and limitations of the routine daily process, like family visits and fear of the virus (Fig.2).

Alcohol use remains almost at the same levels during the years, but tobacco use is increasing permanently at the admission by newcomers, which is a big issue in the country in general and in the prisons specifically (Fig.3).

There were variations in the HCV and HBV infection rates, with some decreases from 2014 to 2022 (Fig.4).

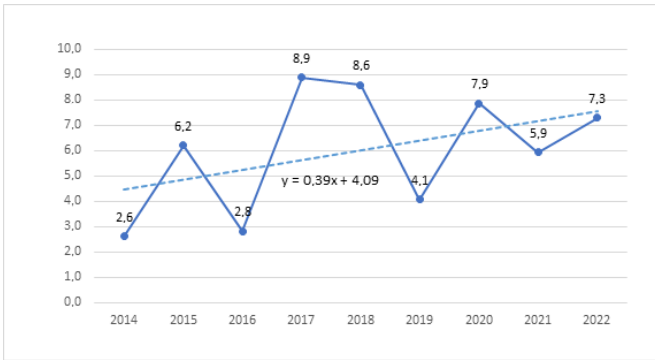


Fig. 2. The incidence rate of suicide attempts (per 1000 inmates) in Kosovo prisons for the period 2014-2022.

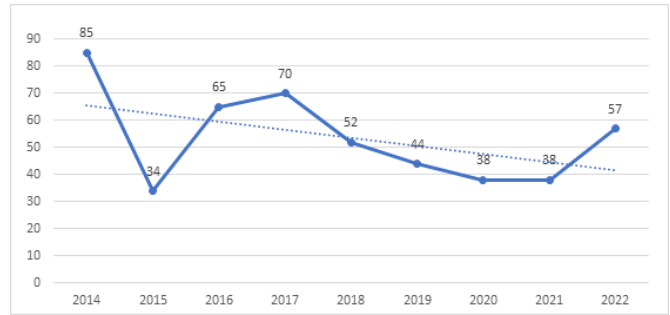


Fig. 5. The number of new cases being treated for drug addiction in MPTC "Labyrinth" (2014-2022).

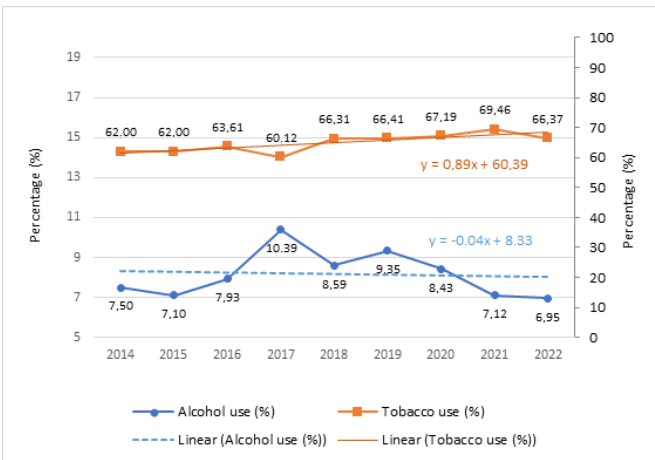


Fig. 3. The trend of alcohol and tobacco use in Kosovo prisons (2014-2022).

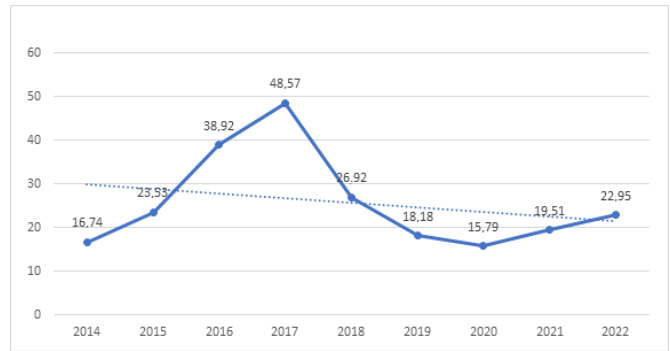


Fig. 6. The annual report and internal database of MPTC "Labyrinth" (2014-2022): percentage of marihuana users.

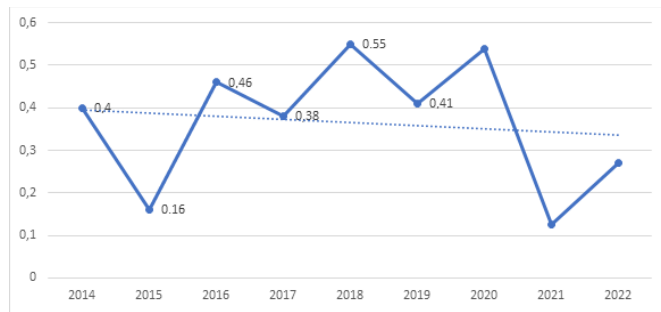


Fig. 4. The trend of HCV and HBV infection rates in Kosovo prisons (2014-2022).

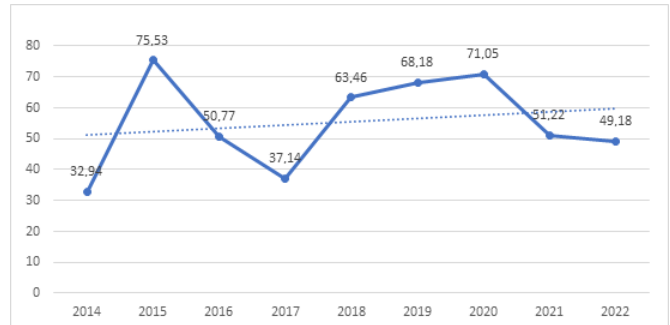


Fig. 7. The annual report and internal database of MPTC "Labyrinth" (2014-2022): percentage of heroin users.

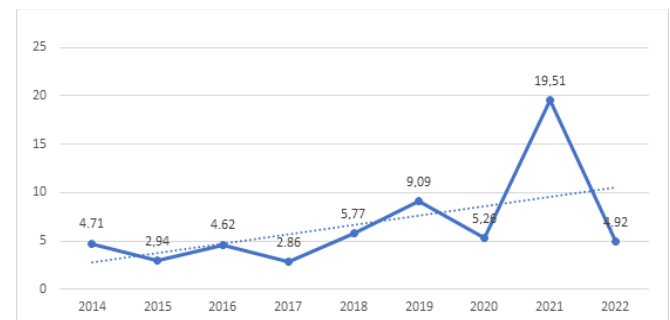


Fig. 8. The annual report and internal database of MPTC "Labyrinth" (2014-2022): percentage of cocaine users.

The annual report and internal database of MPTC "Labyrinth" have shown that during the nine-year period (2014-2022), the number of new cases being treated for drug addiction was linearly decreased from 85 cases (2014) to 38 cases (2020 – 2021), started to rapidly increase at the year 2022 (Fig.5).

During this period (2014-2022), the percentage of marihuana users has decreased but other drugs, like heroin and cocaine, have increased linearly but permanently (Fig.6-8).

Discussion

Based on the available data, the percentage of drug abusers admitted to prisons in 2020 decreased by 1.16%, compared to the previous year. However, this trend was not sustained, as the percentage of drug abusers admitted in 2021 increased again, following a linear upward trend that has been observed since 2014.

Other indicators, such as tobacco, attempting suicide and death under custody, have increased steadily with the same trend.⁽⁷⁾ The highest number of inmates who attempted suicide during the pandemic period were drug abusers.

Death under custody is not directly connected with any of the mentioned indicators but is increasing linearly, mostly caused by chronic diseases and the aging of the inmates. There were 24.40 per 100,000 inmates that committed suicide in Kosovo prisons during the period 1999-2022, in total, twenty-three (23) cases, which is much lower than in European countries,^(8,9) such as England and Wales (at 107 suicides per 100,000 prisoners, 95% CI: 96-118) and Denmark (147; 95% CI: 93-200) had rates higher than some other countries.⁽¹⁰⁾

If we compare suicides in Kosovo prisons with those in prisons in different countries, for the period 2000-2022, then we have the following data:

- In the civilian population, data show that we have 3 to 4 suicides per 100,000 inhabitants, while 18 suicides per 100,000 prisoners.
- The average number of suicides in European prisons is 62 suicides per 100,000 prisoners.
- Suicides in Kosovo prisons have been caused by different factors, different ages, and were committed in different ways.^(7,11-14)
- During the pandemic restriction time, the indicators such as tobacco and suicide attempts rapidly increased because of restriction of movement and visits, and stress caused by the strict pandemic measures.⁽¹⁵⁾
- The number of newly admitted drug users during 2020 slightly decreased because of movement restrictions, difficulties in committing the crime and difficulty finding drugs as a result of closed borders and decreased traffic in drugs.⁽¹⁶⁾ The trend of drug users entering prisons increased again after the obstacles to finding drugs were gone.

Conclusions

The study revealed a decrease in the percentage of drug abusers among inmates in Kosovo prisons during the pandemic period. However, the study also identified other concerning trends, including increases in tobacco use and suicide attempts in custody.

This report has underscored the alarming trend of increasing drug abuse among inmates in Kosovo prisons between 2014 and 2022. While a decrease was observed in 2020, it is imperative to address the underlying causes of drug

abuse and take proactive measures to prevent future spikes. The pandemic had a temporary impact on reducing drug abuse due to the restrictive measures implemented inside and outside of prisons. However, after the measures were lifted, there was a rapid increase in drug abuse.

The authors recommend a review and revision of the national strategy for drug prevention, with a particular focus on prison health services. To ensure comprehensive coverage of all necessary factors and stakeholders, including inmates, the strategy should be separated into two independent components. Additionally, current strategies and plans for preventing and treating drug abuse are inadequate.

There is a pressing need for better policies, implementation documents, and activities to provide more effective and professional drug treatment, especially in challenging situations such as pandemics and movement restrictions.

Addressing the issue of drug abuse in prisons requires a multidisciplinary approach that involves various stakeholders and a commitment to providing inmates with the necessary support and treatment to overcome drug addiction.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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