

Chapter 10: An Exploratory Study on the Transnational Illicit Drug Trade and its Dangers to BRICS Countries – A Scoping Review

Sandhya Maharaj

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-2670-2547>

Abstract

Drug addiction is a global scourge and is a threat to human survival. The United Nations in its World Drug Report (UNODC 2024a) states that almost 292 million people used drugs in 2022 – a 20% increase from 2012. This study examines the prevalence and impact of transnational illicit drug trafficking in BRICS countries. Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa are the original members of BRICS-a formidable political and economic alliance. A study examining the growth and prevalence of illicit drugs in these regions is therefore necessary. Rapid modernisation, urbanisation and migration has reshaped drug trafficking patterns and addiction. This scoping review seeks to investigate the trade effects on public health, economic stability and social cohesion within BRICS jurisdictions.

It is imperative that the inflow of illicit drugs is stopped. This necessitates the formation of a cohesive partnership of BRICS nations. A strong and strategic alliance with a co-ordinated anti-drug strategy is the only viable solution to combat transnational drug trafficking.

The scoping review further indicates that transnational illicit drug trafficking in BRICS countries is widespread and presents serious challenges across public health, security, and governance. The prevalence of drugs like cocaine, heroin, methamphetamines, and synthetic opioids significantly impacts these countries, with the consequences spilling over into regional and global security. Despite the implementation of anti-drug trafficking policy responses, difficulties associated with corruption, resource constraints, and complex international trafficking networks constitute a major hurdle in the fight against drug trafficking. The dangers to public health caused by illicit drug use, such as

the spread of HIV, should sound the alarm bells amongst BRICS. A unified BRICS response, spanning the four strategically located regions is vital in combatting the rising drug threat.

Keywords: illicit drugs; drug trafficking; transnational; users who inject; HIV; BRICS, heroin, cocaine, fentanyl, precursor chemicals

Introduction

The BRICS countries—Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—represents a variety of emerging economies with substantial geopolitical influence. In 2022, the combined GDP of BRICS nations amassed to 25.85 trillion US dollars representing 35% of the global GDP while G7 countries account for 30% (*The Globalist* 2024). The countries forming part of the BRICS nations are key players politically and economically. Each of the countries exert a strong influence in their respective regions.

However, these nations must be wary of an emerging threat from transnational illicit drug trafficking. This desktop review discusses the prevalence of transnational illicit drug trafficking in BRICS countries, its impact, and policy responses. This scoping review highlights the serious challenges the illicit trade poses to BRICS nations, emphasizing the need for international cooperation and a focus on harm-reduction strategies.

The global drug trade has evolved to become pervasive and complex and must be considered a clear and present danger to all BRICS nations. Internal security and economic well-being will undoubtedly be affected by sprouting organized crime in the form of the drug trade.

Drug Addiction: A Global Scourge

Drug addiction is a threat to human survival (Saah 2005), the United Nations in its World Drug Report states that almost 292 million people used drugs in 2022; this is a 20% increase from 2012. Difficulties in eradicating drug use centre around the sheer variety of drugs available with differing modes of intake. Globally the number of drug users is expected to rise by 40% by the year 2030 (UNODC 2023). Rapid modernisation, urbanisation and migration, have changed patterns of drug trafficking and addiction.

In May 2024, the BRICS anti-drug working group held a summit in Moscow where heads of State representing the various BRICS nations discussed the global rise in drug trafficking. The need for increased international cooperation was emphasised (Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs 2024).

This scoping review will explore:

- The prevalence of transnational drug trafficking in BRICS countries.
- The types of drugs trafficked across borders within and outside these nations.
- Impact of Drug Trafficking on Public Health and Social Security.
- Policy responses.

Prevalence of Transnational Drug Trafficking in BRICS Countries

BRICS nations are deeply intertwined in the global illicit drug trade due to their strategic geographical positions and economic participation. Geographical factors greatly influence the vulnerability of BRICS nations to drug trafficking, especially in coastal areas. Countries like South Africa, India, and China with extensive coastlines are prime targets for drug cartels, as these regions facilitate maritime smuggling.

Brazil, positioned close to the leading cocaine-producing nations of Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia, plays a crucial role in the global cocaine trade, making it the second-largest producer after Colombia. Brazil's porous borders with Argentina and Paraguay further complicate law enforcement efforts to curb drug trafficking. Brazil's location near the Amazon and Colombia's drug-producing regions positions it as a major transit hub and an essential transit point for narcotics destined for markets in Europe, Africa, and Asia. Maritime routes are significant in this commerce, with around 90% of cocaine departing South America through Brazilian ports (Proinde 2023). Despite rigorous law enforcement efforts and heightened oversight, drug trafficking activities in Brazil are on the rise, fuelled by the nation's vast coastline and the growing number of ports that aid the operations of organized crime groups (Geldenhuys 2024).

Russia, a similar increase can be observed in Russia where the heroin trade is largely influenced by trafficking networks originating from Afghanistan,

passing through Central Asia. In 2020, authorities in Russia intercepted 2.4 tons of heroin (UNODC 2024b). Russia has one of the highest rates of heroin consumption worldwide, with an estimated 2.5 million users (Hellman 2022).

Alarming, there has been a marked pivot towards synthetic drug use in Russia, especially cathinones, which are manufactured domestically and are often more easily accessible and economically viable compared to traditional narcotics. Russia has witnessed a new method of drug trafficking, the rise of the 'dead drop' distribution method. The 'dead drop' system is facilitated by the dark web and utilising the anonymity of cryptocurrency payments benefiting both the distributor and the consumer. This innovation has significantly contributed to the proliferation of drug trafficking through digital platforms, complicating enforcement efforts (Daly & Shortis 2024)

India, plays a significant role as both a producer and transit corridor in the drug trade, especially for heroin from Afghanistan and methamphetamines from Southeast Asia. In 2020, Indian authorities confiscated over 3.5 tons of heroin (UNODC 2024b). This highlights proactive efforts against an escalating opioid crisis that affects around 2.1% of the population due to proximity to the Golden Crescent (Athawale 2021).

China, is a major source for synthetic drugs like methamphetamines and fentanyl seizing approximately 18 tons of methamphetamine in 2020 (UNODC 2024) emphasizing the need for international collaboration in drug control. The U.S. has identified both India and China as key hubs in the transnational drug trade for fiscal years 2024 and 2025 (White House Memorandum 2025).

South Africa acts as a key trafficking hub for cocaine, methamphetamines, and heroin, with over 2.5 tons of cocaine seized in 2020 (UNODC 2024b). The 2023 - 2024 South Africa Police Service statistics highlight severe impacts from drug influxes, with 3,747 arrests for drug dealing and millions of rands seized in cocaine (SAPS Crime Statistics 2023/2024). It is estimated 15% of the population suffers from addiction, surpassing the global average. While strategically positioned for narcotics trafficking between South America, Asia, and European markets, South Africa faces challenges due to its porous borders and maritime smuggling necessitates improved law enforcement strategies (Eligh 2021).

Furthermore, rising methamphetamine use, especially among the youth is contributing to violence and health risks. The trafficking of diverse illicit drugs is increasing, targeting various socio-economic backgrounds and making

eradication efforts challenging (Eligh 2021). Post-apartheid South Africa has attracted drug cartels, using the region as a link to global markets (Shereda 1997 - 1998).

Classes of Drugs Trafficked across Borders Within and Outside BRICS Nations

The demand for illicit drugs trafficked in BRICS countries reflects the dynamics of local and international markets. One of the key findings of the United Nations World Drug Report (2024a) indicates that the types of illicit drugs available on the global market have diversified and this has complicated anti-drug initiatives. Commonly trafficked drugs across these nations include:

Heroin produced in the ‘Golden Triangle’ and ‘Golden Crescent’, which traverses the borders of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran, account for a significant percentage of the world’s heroin supply (Gerry & Sherwill 2016). Most of the opium cultivated in the Golden Crescent is smuggled into the United States (Barnett 1985). Over 80% of the world’s heroin is supplied by Afghanistan and smuggled throughout the world using routes through BRICS jurisdictions (Chin & Zhang 2015).

Cocaine cultivated in South America and smuggled through Brazil and South Africa to Europe. Brazil is experiencing a rampant public health crisis in the form of crack cocaine use. In 2020, Brazil seized over 25 tons of cocaine. Addiction to crack-cocaine drug is the cause of various forms of psychiatric and psychosocial issues. A disruptive or chaotic family environment is one of the risk factors contributing to the rise of crack cocaine (Perrenoud *et al.* 2021). High rates of HIV, hepatitis B and C are prevalent among users of crack cocaine. Furthermore, studies indicate that homicide is the leading cause of death among users of crack cocaine in Brazil (Perrenoud *et al.* 2021).

Cannabis is still the most common drug used in Africa. However, this is slowly changing as the demand for heroin, cocaine, and synthetic drugs such as methamphetamine grows. The drug Methaqualone (Mandrax) was the most common synthetic drug until it was dethroned by methamphetamine. This can be attributed to the drug infiltrating the local market while transiting through Africa on its way to Europe (UNODC 2024c).

Synthetic Opioids: Fentanyl, in recent years, synthetic opioids like fentanyl—known as the synthetic cousin of heroin—have emerged as a major threat, with trafficking channels mainly flowing from China to the United States and Europe. The United States reports that their Customs and Border Protection has prevented the entry of more Fentanyl in the last two years than in the last five years combined (White House Memorandum 2025)

In 2023, US Customs and Border Protection seized 1.2 billion doses of Fentanyl. Fentanyl use and trafficking have the potential to cause a global crisis if not controlled. The United States has entered a global coalition consisting of 150 countries to address synthetic drug use. Illicit drug use and trafficking have increased globally; a trilateral Fentanyl Committee consisting of Canada, Mexico, and the United States has been formed to prevent the flow of precursor chemicals used to manufacture synthetic drugs like Fentanyl, which is 80 times more powerful than morphine and 50 times stronger than heroin (White House Memorandum 2025). A dose of 3 mg of Fentanyl is enough to kill an adult human. Traffickers are mixing Fentanyl with heroin, making the two drugs hard to differentiate. The mixing of dangerous drugs is contributing to high mortality rates among users.

The rise of and popularity of synthetic drugs, which are more widely available, is a serious threat. Controlling the illegal entry of illicit drugs into a jurisdiction is not enough; traffickers smuggle in chemicals necessary for heroin, cocaine and various synthetic drug production. Countries worldwide, led by the United States, have committed to stop the trafficking of precursor chemicals (US Department of State Dispatch: Fact Sheet No 9 1992).

Impact on Public Health and Social Security: The Rise of HIV in Users Who Inject Drugs

There is a notable rise in HIV transmission among individuals who inject drugs. Unsafe drug use methods significantly increase the risk of HIV spread, with around 13 million people injecting illicit drugs globally, mostly from developing nations, and an estimated 10% living with HIV (UNAIDS 2021).

In BRICS

Brazil, the proportion of HIV/AIDS cases among injecting drug users dropped from 17% in 1980-1997 to 2.1% due to harm reduction initiatives like needle exchange programs (Guimarães 2015).

Conversely, **Russia** struggles with high heroin addiction rates, with about 2% of the population affected. This contributes to severe health issues, including a rise in HIV and hepatitis C cases. In 2022, drug overdoses surged by 16% from 2019, with 18,013 reported cases (Hellman 2022). The link between intravenous drug use and HIV transmission needs more attention as the number of HIV positive individuals in Russia is estimated to be close one million (Lunz *et al.* 2017 and Edelman *et al.* 2017).

In **India**, the opioid epidemic is contributing to high rates of heroin addiction and overdose deaths. Injecting drug use is a major factor in HIV transmission, with an estimated 6.23% of approximately 20,000 users infected (Pachauu *et al.* 2022). Initial prevention efforts focused on sex workers after HIV was first detected in 1986, neglecting the risks posed by unsafe needle practices among drug users. Although HIV rates among sex workers have decreased, rates of HIV have risen among injecting drug users, particularly in Northern India near the ‘golden triangle’ (Pachauu *et al.* 2022).

In **China**, over half of HIV-positive individuals are injectable drug users, with high transmission rates linked to needle sharing near opium-rich areas (Levitsky 1992). The popularity of intravenous drug use has surged along southern borders adjacent to countries like Burma and Thailand. China reported its first HIV case in 1985, with cases growing to 850,000 by 2016 (Meng 2016). The government has since implemented various prevention and treatment strategies including harm reduction strategies.

South Africa - despite the implementation of the largest anti-retroviral therapy programs, only 40% of HIV-positive injecting drug users access treatment. Stigmas around HIV and the high rates of alcohol and cannabis use further complicate health outcomes, drug use is linked to higher rates of unprotected sex and increased HIV transmission risks (Browne *et al.* 2010).

The HIV epidemic remains a significant crisis, with South Africa being at the epicentre of the epidemic. The correlation between substance abuse and the spread of HIV and HCV is troubling, particularly as drug users are found to be at a higher risk of engaging in unprotected sex, thus amplifying the ongoing health challenges. Users of injectable drugs are also engaging in dangerous practices such as ‘blue tothing’ (Zanoni *et al.* 2023).

In the UNODC 2005 report, the sharing of needles by drug users was common (Parry *et al.* 2008). Statistics show that the popularity of injectable

drugs such as cocaine and heroin has grown steadily. There is a real danger that different modes of substance abuse, namely injecting drugs and sharing needles, can cause an upsurge in HIV transmission.

The United Nations, in its UNAIDS Report 2021, stated that HIV prevention amongst drug users is an area of priority. Browne *et al.* states that HIV prevention programmes must seriously address the growing intersection of the risk of substance use, violence and HIV risk in South Africa (Browne *et al.* 2010). Investigating the link between drug intake and HIV is important as it determines how programmes designed to cut transmission of HIV should operate.

Economic and Social Impact

Drug addiction has a profound impact on society, affecting individuals in their prime who could otherwise contribute positively to the economy and society at large. This dependency transforms potential contributors into liabilities, placing burdens on families and straining state resources. Countries that serve as transit hubs for illicit drugs are especially vulnerable to corruption, worsening social and economic challenges for citizens. Additionally, poverty is a key factor driving the growth of the illicit drug market, leading to public health crises, particularly in Eastern and Southern Africa, due to ineffective strategies against drug proliferation in the region.

While countries grapple with the impending drug threat, the transnational illicit crime network has grown bigger and stronger, fending off various anti-drug initiatives. Proof of this problem lies in the statistics, which indicate that as many as 250,000 drug-related deaths occur annually throughout the world. Drugs originating in Asia and South America are trafficked all over the world (UNODC 20 24a)

Trafficking networks spawn from the growth of corruption in governmental structures. Corruption spurred by drug trafficking undermines the rule of law and equality in the distribution of wealth within the society and compromises the legitimacy of governmental arms (Ekici 2014 discussing Williams 2007).

Social Instability

The transnational drug trade aids organized crime, violence, and instability, particularly in regions with weakened government structures. The illicit drug

trade undermines governance especially in transit hubs like Eastern and Southern Africa. This leads to the erosion of societies through disharmony and chaos in the form of increased violent and non-violent crime. Substance abuse is a contributing factor in 40%-60% of domestic violence incidents (Martens 2024).

Security Risks

The transnational nature of the drug trade poses significant security challenges. The increase in population size globally, as well as socio-economic factors, are contributors. The trafficking of drugs is an intricate web of organised crime which lacks a definite structure. Drug trafficking can vary in many ways, from the type of product they peddle to how they interact and integrate into society (Eligh 2021)

Due to the versatility of drug trafficking patterns, combatting the drug scourge has been difficult. Drug trafficking is a covert silent killer which ultimately causes the degradation of society. The veiled operations may undermine political instability and territorial vitality and harm economic development. Drug networks are opportunistic and take advantage of weak borders. Despite stringent border controls, traffickers cleverly circumvent these obstacles (Ekici 2014).

Policy Responses

Governments in BRICS countries have adopted varying approaches to combat the illicit drug trade, with varying degrees of success. To prevent drug addiction within a society, many countries have implemented stringent border controls. Geographically vulnerable countries in Eastern and Southern Africa are examples of regions which play a prominent role in the illicit transit of narcotics (Barnett 1985). Infrastructure development in these areas also contributes to the increase in market demand. One of the adverse effects of globalisation is the growing popularity of illicit drugs due to migration, urbanisation and the advancement of technology.

Gardner argues that domestic solutions alone to the international drug trade are inadequate against complex, well-run, organised syndicates that violate international law and international boundaries (Gardner 1993).

Brazil's anti-drug operations are heavily focused on seizing drugs at borders

and intercepting traffickers in ports and airports. However, corruption and lack of infrastructure complicate efforts (Geldenhuys 20 24).

Russia has transformed due to its geopolitical context and relations with Western nations, especially after the war with Ukraine in 2022, this has led to significant sanctions from the European Union and other countries. The political turmoil in the region has resulted in the development of a new model for drug trafficking (Daly & Shortis 2024).

This new model is considerably more efficient and poses greater risks. The dead drop system has surged in Russia due to the country's highly tech-savvy population and offers delivery over long distances. This method of trafficking has led to an increase in the distribution of synthetic drugs compared to previous years. It not only facilitates the distribution of illegal substances but also encourages dealers to create synthetic drugs (Daly & Shortis 2024)

According to Daly and Shortis (2024), cartels can no longer depend on imports because of sanctions, forcing them to produce their own drugs. To achieve this, these cartels rely on precursor chemicals imported from India and China. This emerging method of drug trafficking poses a significant threat not only to Russia but also to the global community. Evidence suggests that this approach is already spreading to Asia and Europe, making it an urgent issue.

India has initiated measures such as the National Drug Control Policy to combat the trafficking of opioids. Cooperation with neighbouring countries, such as Afghanistan and Myanmar, is key. In 1999, the Indian government made a concerted effort to strengthen border controls; however, India still faces a growing drug epidemic. In 1979, pricier drugs such as heroin lacked in popularity because of widespread poverty. The advent of a stronger economy now sees the popularity of more dangerous drugs such as cocaine and heroin. The use of these drugs has contributed to the increase in the spread of HIV (Mitra 2004).

China has ramped up its efforts against synthetic drug production, particularly fentanyl, but enforcement is challenging due to the scale of production and the international nature of trafficking. Nonetheless, China takes a tough stance on drugs, often executing drug mules who are found with large amounts of illegal narcotics. Traffickers and those convicted for manufacturing organised crime also attract the death penalty. Additionally, individuals who are identified as

drug users are sent to mandatory detoxification centres. Thus, China has been criticised for its stringent stance on drug users, with critics arguing that these methods constitute an abuse of human rights while still being ineffective at treating drug use. A successful approach should combine social support and provide for psychosocial treatments (Yang & Giummarra 2021).

China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Malaysia and Singapore are countries that punish drug trafficking with the death penalty (Gerry & Sherwill 2016). China has taken a zero-tolerance policy on drugs and, as a result, enjoyed 30 drug-free years from 1950 till the 1980s. However, there was a downward turn from the 1990s till 2005, when 1 million drug users were registered (Gerry & Sherwill 2016). One of the features of the illicit drug trade is ‘group offending’; this means that trafficking involves a host of different operators, from wholesalers to retailers and runners (Spencer *et al.* 2015). Therefore, tackling the illicit drug trade is particularly difficult. From this period, illicit drug use steadily increased despite strict anti-drug laws. If an individual is found with more than 50g of illicit drugs, they risk being sentenced to death. Notably, drug-related executions have increased in certain regions, including Iran, Indonesia and China (Gerry & Sherwill 2016).

China has made great strides in curbing the spread of HIV by addressing the spread of the virus in high-risk groups such as drug users who inject. A two-prong approach, the first involves the strict policing of drugs and the second focuses on harm reduction in the drug users. The clean needle programme and methadone maintenance form part of the harm reduction initiative. Harm reduction initiatives are necessary and complementary to policing. In China, this strategy has seen success. Meng argues that the sex industry must be decriminalised to ensure that China’s HIV prevention and treatment programmes are more effective (Meng 2016).

South Africa’s Drugs and Drug Trafficking Act 144 of 1992, promulgated in April 1993, was enacted to tackle the booming international trade in drugs. The Act introduced into the South African law measures adopted by the international community designed to suppress the international drug trafficking market (Boister 1995). The United Nations Convention against Illicit Drug Traffic in Narcotics Drugs and Psychotropic Substances influences the Act (UN Document E/CONF.82/15 of 19 December 1988 cited by Milton 1993). In 2020, the South African government launched the National Drug Master Plan (2020) to tackle substance abuse, which has reached alarming proportions.

The emergence of organised crime in the form of drug trafficking was

a relatively new problem in post-apartheid South Africa. Shielded and isolated from the global stage, the reign of democracy exposed the region to the world of organised crime (Shereda 1998). South Africa has since become the regional hub for various types of organised crime, particularly illicit drug trafficking. South Africa serves as a major transit hub and has become a major drug market (Eligh 2021)

South Africa has a comprehensive drug control framework, however drug-linked violence and inadequate resources hamper its success. Eligh asserts that corruption of domestic law enforcement institutions may be the strongest structural enabler of the illicit drug trade in the Eastern and southern regions of Africa. In cases where there is no corruption, law enforcement agencies simply lack the capability and capacity to tackle this issue. These factors, coupled with the geographical location of Eastern and Southern Africa, make the flow of the illicit trafficking of drugs easier (Eligh 2021).

Despite the increase in the seizure of drug consignments in various regions, drug cartels are able to stay steps ahead of anti-trafficking initiatives (Eligh 2021). Drugs are also being sold at lower prices, making them more attainable to larger parts of the population, thereby essentially ‘infecting’ society with drug addiction. Eligh states that the current approach to combatting illicit drug trafficking in the Eastern and Southern regions of Africa has been inadequate. Reformation of policy and legislation by itself is falling short of combatting the drug problem because it is not multi-dimensional and cannot dismantle complex drug syndicate structures.

Research Methodology

The methodology for reviewing the literature on transnational drug trafficking in BRICS countries involved scoping review utilising desktop research. A systematic review of existing secondary data from available literature and online databases was conducted. This was useful for mapping complex topics and identifying key themes and research gaps guided by Arksey and O’Malley’s (2005) five-stage framework, with Levac *et al.* (2010) enhancing the study’s rigour to map transnational drug trafficking in BRICS countries.

The stages included:

1. Defining the research question.
2. Identifying relevant studies.
3. Selecting studies.
4. Charting the data.
5. Collating and reporting the results.

Stage 1: Defining the Research Question

The Population, Concept, and Context (PCC) Framework from the Joanna Briggs Institute (2021) was utilized to define the review’s research question and focus, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: PCC Framework

Population	Concept	Context
BRICS Countries	Transnational drug-trafficking	Global
Brazil	Drug-smuggling	International
Russia	Drug-trade	Worldwide
India	Illegal drugs across borders	
China	Illegal drug transportation	
South Africa	Heroin/Opiates	

Stage 2: Identifying Relevant Studies

According to Arksey and O’Malley (2005), a systematic search strategy is essential for gathering relevant literature that addresses research questions. For this study, literature was sourced from academic databases, reference lists, key journals, and government organizations related to drug policy and enforcement. Databases used included Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ScienceDirect. Additionally, reports from the UNODC, INTERPOL, and World Customs Organization were reviewed to investigate transnational drug trafficking in BRICS countries. Sources were evaluated for credibility, relevance and recency. Priority was given to peer-reviewed publication and authorities reports.

The search included various study designs—qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, and grey literature – focusing on studies published in English since 2010, coinciding with the BRICS countries’ formalization and the resulting academic interest in their impact on political and cultural dynamics (DIRCO 2014).

Search Terms and Strategy

To guide this study, search terms were developed to capture the diverse aspects of the topic. The keywords included:

BRICS countries OR Brazil OR Russia OR India OR China OR South Africa
AND Transnational drug-trafficking OR Drug-smuggling OR Trade OR Illegal
drugs across borders OR Illegal drug transportation OR Heroin OR Opiates Or
Heroin and HIV and Injecting drug use AND Global OR International OR
Worldwide.

A pilot search was conducted on Google Scholar to ensure the feasibility of the
selected keywords (refer to Table 2 below).

Table 2. Pilot Search Database Results
Of the 2540 hits obtained, 240 were included after screening.

Date of Search	Keyword Search	Publications Retrieved	Search Engine Utilised
11 December 2024	(BRICS countries OR Brazil OR Russia OR India OR China OR South Africa) AND (Transnational drug-trafficking OR Drug-smuggling OR Drug-trade OR Illegal drugs across borders OR Illegal drug transportation OR Heroin OR Opiates and HIV and Injecting drug use AND (Global OR International OR Worldwide)	2 540	Google Scholar

Stage 3: Study Selection

To ensure a comprehensive scoping review aligned with research objectives, Arksey and O’Malley (2005) emphasize the importance of selecting articles using explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria. This approach minimizes bias and ensures findings are based on systematically reviewed evidence. Table 3 outlines the criteria applied during the title, abstract, and full-text screening stages to identify studies relevant to the research questions.

After the identification of the relevant criterion, the evaluation of the titles and abstracts of the studies identified in the previous stage was conducted.

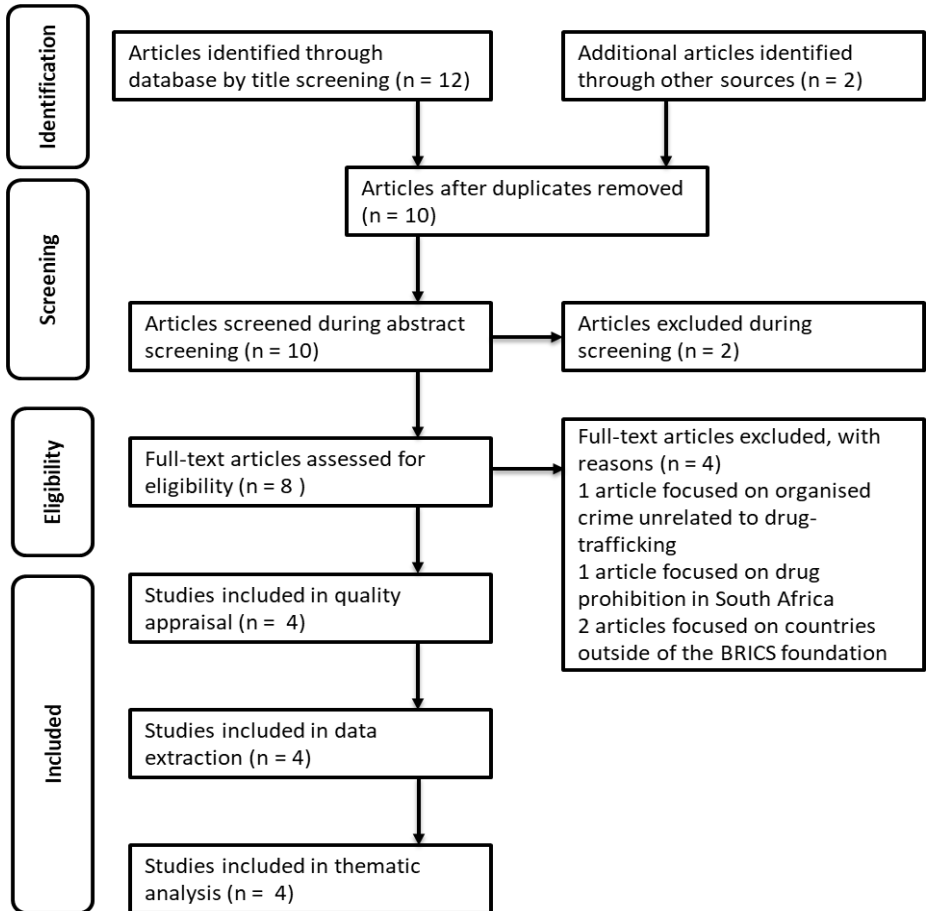
This was followed by a more thorough evaluation involving a review of the full texts of the selected studies to assess their relevance to the criteria, with reasons for exclusion documented as needed. Ultimately, PRISMA guidelines were used to document the selection process to maintain transparency. Figure.1 below presents a PRISMA flowchart illustrating the study selection process. With a clearly defined set of relevant studies, the data collected was more consistent, facilitating the identification of themes and patterns aligned with the research objectives and questions.

Table 3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Population	Studies focusing on BRICS countries	Studies unrelated to BRICS countries
Concept	Studies addressing transnational drug-trafficking	Studies unrelated to drug-trafficking
Context	Studies within a global framework but focused on BRICS countries	Studies outside the scope of BRICS countries or unrelated global contexts
Study design	Qualitative, quantitative, mixed-method studies, and grey literature.	Opinion pieces without empirical data or analysis
Language	English publications	Non-English publications
Period	Articles published from 2010 onwards	Articles published before 2010

Studies focusing on non-BRICS nations were excluded. Themes not related to drug trafficking were excluded. Opinion pieces lacking empirical data were excluded.

Figure 1. PRISMA Flowchart Diagram



Stage 4: Charting the Data

Data extraction follows study selection and is performed using a standardized form to ensure consistency and accuracy (Arksey & O'Malley 2005). This systematic approach is essential for identifying relevant studies and analysing findings, providing a solid foundation for summarizing results. An example of the data extraction form is shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Data Charting Tool

Citation details
Study design
Geographic region
Study population
Aim/Research question
Key findings

Stage 5: Collating, Summarising, and Reporting the Results

Braune and Clarke (2006) championed thematic analysis for synthesizing qualitative data during the study selection process, especially given the large volume of information involved. This method allows researchers to identify recurring themes relevant to their research questions and comprises six phases: familiarization with data, coding, theme organization, theme review, significance establishment, and reporting findings. In this study, thematic analysis effectively examined the complexities of transnational drug trafficking in BRICS countries. The themes were not predetermined to maintain objectivity, with the researcher’s focus aligned with the aims and questions regarding drug trafficking dynamics and implications in these nations.

Quality Appraisal

Quality appraisal, as recommended by Levac *et al.* (2010), involves systematically assessing the validity of articles in a review. For this study on transnational drug trafficking in BRICS countries, the Mixed Method Appraisal Tool (MMAT) was utilized due to its comprehensive framework for evaluating both qualitative and quantitative studies. Appraisal criteria focused on the clarity of research design, alignment of research questions with objectives, and rigor of data collection and analysis. This approach enhanced the overall reliability and validity of the scoping review.

Findings

This review reveals that transnational illicit drug trafficking is a complex problem and demands urgent attention. BRICS nations have adopted diverse approaches to combat drug trafficking, each facing unique challenges and achieving varying levels of success. The solution to this problem must encompass a co-ordinated strategy by BRICS nations. A multi-pronged strategy wherein BRICS countries partner and collaborate with each other with the sole focus of eradicating transnational drug trafficking from its point of origin to its various destinations.

Brazil has primarily concentrated on seizing drugs at borders and inter-cepting traffickers, targeting ports and airports. However, seizing contraband at the ports and borders is not, on its own an effective long terms solution.

Russia is grappling with a substantial heroin influx, and has therefore stepped-up enforcement against trafficking, however the sheer volume of drugs entering the country, compounded by organised crime, poses persistent obstacles. This review further stresses the importance of a strategy developed to address the use of technology to facilitate drug trafficking. Cyber security and technology must be enhanced to stay abreast with the rapid evolution of drug trafficking both domestically and globally. It is clear, countries such as Russia have fallen prey to the technology driven ‘dead drop’ system which spells a new age of drug trafficking and has the potential to spread to various jurisdictions. This system, facilitated by the dark web and cryptocurrency, underscores the need for governments to embrace technological advancements in their counter-narcotics efforts.

India has taken a multifaceted approach, enacting the National Drug Control Policy and prioritizing collaboration with neighbouring nations like Afghanistan and Myanmar to curb the opioid trade. Despite these measures, India still grapples with a burgeoning drug epidemic, which has evolved from the use of less expensive drugs in the past to more potent, dangerous and expensive substances like cocaine and heroin, contributing to the spread of HIV. This strongly indicates that a stronger economy may not necessarily spell the end of substance abuse but facilitate use of more expensive drugs in countries such as India.

China stands out with its stringent zero-tolerance policy on drugs, enforcing harsh penalties, including the death penalty for drug trafficking and mandatory detoxification for users. While credited with controlling drug use for three decades (1950s - 1980s), this approach has been criticized for its potential human rights violations and limited efficacy in addressing addiction. China's harm reduction initiatives, such as needle exchange programs and methadone maintenance, have proven successful in curbing HIV transmission among injecting drug users.

Urgent attention must be given to the public health crisis created through injecting drug use. BRICS countries must attend to this grave threat. Harm reduction initiative must be implemented where injecting drug use is prevalent. If injecting drug use is not contained, many BRICS nations may experience a new wave in the spread of HIV. Countries such as India and South Africa must be wary of the dangers inherent with increasing injectable drug use amongst the HIV positive population.

South Africa, operating under the Drugs and Drug Trafficking Act of 1992 and the National Drug Master Plan, faces challenges from drug-related violence and resource constraints. The nation's emergence as a regional hub for drug trafficking is attributed to its strategic location and the exploitation of vulnerabilities in its post-apartheid transition. Harm reduction initiatives such as needle exchange programme must be adopted in all regions where there is injectable drug use such as India and South Africa.

Conclusion

The trafficking of drugs into certain regions can have catastrophic effects on society if not contained. A major concern is the link between HIV transmission and injecting drug users, who exhibit higher HIV rates compared to non-users. This issue demands urgent attention as neglecting it could lead to high transmission rates, even in countries that have successfully controlled the spread of HIV1. For instance, countries like India and China, with populations exceeding a billion, face significant risks if HIV transmission rates increase even slightly.

Research has identified injecting illicit drugs as a driving factor in the global HIV epidemic. The introduction of injectable drugs like heroin into regions like South Africa and India, where they were previously uncommon, highlights the emergence of new target markets.

Efforts to curb the influx of illicit drugs must also focus on preventing the entry of precursor chemicals, which enable drug manufacturing anywhere, circumventing border controls. The escalating abuse of synthetic opiates like Fentanyl requires close monitoring. Collaboration among BRICS nations is crucial to protect their respective regions. A unified front among these countries, strategically positioned across four major continents, can effectively disrupt the operations of the transnational drug trade.

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Dr. Sandhya Maharaj
School of Law, College of Law and Management Studies
University of KwaZulu-Natal
(Attorney and Conveyancer of the High Court of South Africa)
Durban
MaharajS2@ukzn.ac.za