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ILLICIT DRUG FLOWS AND SECURITY CONCERNS ACROSS THE BANGLADESH-MYANMAR BORDER

Abstract

This study argues that illicit drugs should not be understood only as material commodities; rather, they are socially and geopolitically constructed phenomena, especially in the Bangladesh–Myanmar borderlands. Drug trafficking in these border areas poses serious challenges to human security, public health, law and order, and the national economy of Bangladesh. The country's porous borders with Myanmar and India, along with its long coastline along the Bay of Bengal, have created extensive smuggling networks. Bangladesh's geographic proximity to the Golden Triangle, Golden Crescent, and Golden Wedge has further increased its role as a transit route and market for illegal drugs. Based on secondary data, this paper examines the dynamics of drug trafficking along the Bangladesh–Myanmar border and explores policy responses to address the problem. It also proposes a theoretical framework linking illicit drug trade to porous borders, illicit flows, and broader geopolitical factors.

Keywords: Drugs, Illicit Flows, Border Security, Trafficking.

1. Introduction

Cross-border drug smuggling has emerged as one of the fastest-growing forms of international crime, creating serious transnational security challenges. In Bangladesh, the rapid expansion of this illicit activity has become a significant unconventional threat to national security. This smuggling has led to a significant rise in domestic drug addiction, with the total number of addicts surpassing ten million. The issue is a major concern for citizens, researchers, civil society, policymakers, and law enforcement agencies alike. Increasing drug trafficking through the vulnerable borders with Myanmar and northeastern India has made Bangladesh more susceptible. In recent years, trafficking narratives along these borders have gained renewed attention due to their growing scale and impact. Considering the close connections between drug offences and social, economic, and political upheaval,¹ Bangladesh requires urgent and thorough policy changes, institutional reforms, and enhanced

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¹ Vladimir Fenopetov, "The Drug Crime Threat to Countries Located on the 'Silk Road'," *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (2006): 5–13.

community unity to confront this issue effectively. Geographically, Bangladesh is sandwiched in between three main drug-manufacturing locations. Lying next to southwest China, the Golden Triangle encompasses eastern Myanmar's Shan State as well as parts of northern Thailand and Laos. The Golden Crescent is formed by the northeastern and southern regions of Afghanistan, along with the northwest part of Pakistan and Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan. Lastly, the Golden Wedge comprises northern India, including regions such as Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and Arunachal Pradesh, along with certain areas of Nepal and Bhutan. These regions are widely recognized as sources of illicit drugs supply. As a result, countries in the region are, to some extent, exposed to drug inflows from producing areas. In this context, Bangladesh has increasingly emerged as both a consumer market and a transit hub. And it is happening because of its geographic proximity to drug-producing countries, with trafficking routes involving flows from Myanmar and India, as well as additional connections from Thailand, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Cross-border drug trafficking organizations function throughout these regions. These syndicates include growers, producers, couriers, dealers, and protectors. Their operations severely disrupt public safety and order. As noted by Truong et al.² the patterns of drug usage and regulation are frequently influenced by societal and political dynamics rather than empirical evidence. In Myanmar, continuous conflicts and poor government in border regions have facilitated drug manufacturing and trafficking. This is the most evident in northern Shan State.³ Mitra⁴ indicates that in several regions of South and Southeast Asia, borders tend to be quite permeable. There is frequently a lack of rigorous enforcement. Rather, various informal control mechanisms are implemented by non-governmental entities. These entities include civil society groups, smuggling networks, and armed factions opposed to the state. Therefore, the border is far more complex than a simple line separating sovereign powers. It entails a mix of unequal power dynamics, unbalanced responsibilities, and overlapping authorities whose demarcations do not coincide. States view many transnational movements as unlawful. Still, local societies view them as legitimate. This situation creates a grey area between licit and illicit exchanges, particularly in the absence of robust international governance.⁵ The arrival of over one million Rohingya refugees has further challenged border security. It has also caused tensions between Bangladesh

² Dung Tuan Truong et al., "Social norms and political constructions of drug use: A narrative story of Vietnam," *Cogent Social Sciences* 6, no. 1 (2020): 1838707, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2020.1838707>.

³ Francesco Buscemi, "The art of arms (not) being governed: means of violence and shifting territories in the borderworlds of Myanmar," *Geopolitics* 28, no. 1 (2023): 282–309, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2021.1924510>.

⁴ Sanghamitra Mitra, "The Indo-Myanmar Borderlands: Border Trade, Urbanisation and Ethnic Politics in Mizoram, India," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 46, no. 2 (2023): 445–463, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2023.2180592>.

⁵ Willem van Schendel and Itty Abraham, "Introduction," in *Illicit Flows and Criminal Things: States, Borders, and the Other Side of Globalization*, ed. Willem van Schendel and Itty Abraham (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 1–37.

and Myanmar and led to more yaba trafficking from Myanmar.⁶ Furthermore, the local production of synthetic drugs has broadened domestic distribution networks. About one million people in Bangladesh are either directly or indirectly involved in drug trafficking. This comprises approximately 100,000 women and children.⁷ The COVID-19 pandemic has also altered trafficking routes. During periods of restricted movement, drugs were increasingly moved via emergency and humanitarian aid vehicles.⁸

Against the backdrop, the aim of the article is to address a central question: What are the key determinants of drug trafficking along the border areas of Bangladesh and Myanmar? The question remains under-explored, thereby offering a unique opportunity to generate valuable insights for policymakers. This study would assist in launching integrated strategies for the enforcement agencies in their future and current measures by highlighting the latest trafficking trends. It would trace drug trafficking routes; mode of operation and the criminal networks engaged through intelligence gatherings to help equip police and other law enforcers to tackle drug trafficking efficiently. To address this issue, the paper pursues two objectives:

- (i) Assessing drug trafficking problem along the Cox's Bazar border with Myanmar; and
- (ii) identifying the key drug trafficking issues and propose some recommendations.

Methodologically, this study adopts a documentary research approach (DRA), combining qualitative analysis of secondary sources to ensure a more comprehensive and triangulated understanding of the issue. The sources of the DRA include institutional memoranda and reports, census publications, government pronouncements and proceedings, diaries and innumerable other written, visual and pictorial sources in different forms, government publications and official statistics. Additionally, outcome reports and evaluation documents related to drug control programmes were systematically collected. Secondary data sources were also used.

⁶ Md. Mahmudul Hasan, "Bangladeshi 'Boat People': Context, Drivers And Policy Implications," *South Asia Research* 39, no. 1 (2019): 78–94, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0262728018814632>; M. Rezaul Islam, "An assessment on surging crime, gender violence, and justice mechanisms in the Rohingya camps in Bangladesh," *Women's Studies International Forum* 111 (2025): 103122, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2025.103122>; M. R. Rezvi, M. H. Rumman, and M. Faisal, "Emergence of Rohingya militant groups in the Rohingya camps of Cox's Bazar: A security crisis for host communities," *Global Change, Peace & Security* 36, no. 1 (2025): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14781158.2025.2465357>.

⁷ Hasan, "Bangladeshi 'Boat People'".

⁸ Masturah Bte Mohd Abdul Rashid, "Artificial intelligence effecting a paradigm shift in drug development," *SLAS TECHNOLOGY: Translating Life Sciences Innovation* 26, no. 1 (2021): 3–15, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.slast.2020.07.009>.

They include relevant academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and credible newspaper reports.

After introduction, the paper has six sections. Section Two examines the relevant literature. Section three presents the theoretical framework. Section Four describes the research methodology and approach. Section five presents the key challenges. Section six proposes some policy recommendations to address those challenges. Finally, the paper ends with concluding remarks.

2. Literature Review and Research Gap

Ferris & Donato⁹ define “smuggling” as the act of facilitating an individual’s illegal entry into a country where the person holds no legal residency, specifically for the purpose of gaining a financial or material advantage. Informal trade along the border is a common phenomenon. A cursory look at the literature on informal trade practices could explain why there is a reason to focus particularly on the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. Informal practices are widespread in the borderlands under conditions of anonymity regarding state and regulatory bodies.¹⁰ The informal sector has a pivotal place in world economy, and it certainly contributes greatly to national economic growth. Academic literature labels the informal sector in many ways, which includes black market, illegal economy, shadow economy, not registered economy, informal economy, underground economy and corruption.¹¹ The UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), formed in 1997 from a merger between the UN’s Drug Control Program and Centre for International Crime Prevention, now operates across five areas: organized crime and trafficking; corruption; crime prevention and criminal justice reform; drug abuse prevention and health; and terrorism prevention.

These illicit markets are usually supported by different interested parties and structured crime syndicates. According to Van Uhm and Wong,¹² criminal organizations from China participate in the illegal trade of wildlife in the border areas of the Golden Triangle. Their research reveals that extremely sophisticated smuggling networks sometimes run throughout several illicit marketplaces. These

⁹ Elizabeth G. Ferris and Katharine M. Donato, *Refugees, Migration and Global Governance: Negotiating the Global Compacts* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

¹⁰ Michael J. Pisani, Chad Richardson, and John M. Patrick, “Economic informality on the U.S.-Mexican border: A (re)view from South Texas,” *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 23, no. 2 (2008): 19–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2008.9695696>.

¹¹ Juan Brida Macias and Giorgio Cazzavillan, “Modeling the Informal Economy in Mexico,” *The Journal of Developing Areas* 44, no. 1 (2010): 345–365.

¹² Daan P. van Uhm and Rebecca W. Y. Wong, “Chinese organized crime and the illegal wildlife trade: diversification and outsourcing in the Golden Triangle,” *Trends in Organized Crime* 24, no. 4 (2021): 486–505, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12117-021-09408-z>.

comprise narcotics as well as wildlife. Corruption often facilitates such actions. Border officers accept bribes to guarantee flawless trade. The increasing presence of illegal narcotics undermines the capacity of law enforcement. It also destabilizes societal structures. Consequently, several researchers label drug consumption as a widespread crisis.¹³

Cox's Bazar is the location of the largest refugee population globally. Approximately one million Rohingya individuals reside there. The illicit movement of drugs across the Bangladesh-Myanmar frontier is increasingly recognised as part of a wider set of non-traditional security challenges. In this framework, transnational crime, forced migration, and regional instability intersect. While studies seldom focus exclusively on this particular border, there is a significant amount of research tackling the subject through related topics. These include the Rohingya crisis, transnational trafficking networks, and illicit economies in Southeast Asia. The book authored by Lintner¹⁴ highlights Myanmar's role—particularly within the Golden Triangle—as a major hub of amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS) and opiate production. Previous studies in top-tier journals emphasize that political instability and weak governance structures in Myanmar facilitate the expansion of illicit drug economies. Ashraf¹⁵ mentioned the evidence of Rohingya refugees' involvement in the trafficking of Yaba drugs. Crime data for the period August 2017 to March 2019 indicates that drug trafficking accounts for 34.5 per cent (103 out of 298) criminal cases and 35.7 per cent (156 out of 437) of Rohingyas accused in criminal offences. Human trafficking, murder, kidnapping, and possession of illegal small arms constitute the other four major organised criminal activities involving the Rohingyas.¹⁶ According to police records, 3223 complaints were filed against the Rohingyas for 14 criminal offences, including rape, abduction, death, and smuggling of drugs and weapons, between 25 August 2017, and 31 July 2023. Human trafficking is a major issue in the Rohingya camp. The primary cause of the rising number of trafficking cases may be attributed to the inadequate capacity of law enforcement to protect the camps and stop organised crime.¹⁷

¹³ Kanna Hayashi et al., "Increasing availability of illicit drugs among people who inject drugs in Bangkok, Thailand," *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* 132, no. 1–2 (2013): 251–256, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2013.02.011>.

¹⁴ Bertil Lintner, *Great Game East: India, China, and the Struggle for Asia's Most Volatile Frontier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

¹⁵ A.S.M. Ali Ashraf, "Humanitarianism, National Security, and the Rohingya Refugee Policy of Bangladesh," *Strategic Analysis* 45, no. 3 (2021): 184–206, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2021.1918953>.

¹⁶ Ashraf, "Humanitarianism, National Security".

¹⁷ AKM Ahsan Ullah and S. Khatun, "Security Challenges and Societal Implications of Cross-Border Migration in the Context of the Rohingya Crisis in Bangladesh: A Systematic Review," in *Handbook of Migration, International Relations and Security in Asia*, ed. AKM Ahsan Ullah (Singapore: Springer, 2025), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-8001-7_89-1.

Since the Rohingya refugee camps are located near the Bangladesh–Myanmar border, and the region includes many hilly tracks and coastal areas, it is relatively easy for drug dealers to import drugs from Myanmar through these channels and sell them in Bangladesh, often using Rohingya as intermediaries.¹⁸ The illicit drug can be a major source of nontraditional security threat.¹⁹ The literature has convincingly shown how several insurgent groups in Myanmar have used the drug business to finance and sustain their violent movements. Funds generated from drug production and circulation help the insurgent groups to procure arms and are widely believed to be supporting the protracted nature of these movements.²⁰ The study conducted by Meehan and Dan²¹ shows that rising opium cultivation and drug use have been defining features of extractive frontiers in Myanmar’s eastern Kachin State. Moreover, the significant and robust association between HIV-positive status and border-crossing suggests an increased level of risk among clients and drug networks involved in cross-border drug use.²² Myanmar’s border has increasingly been re-imagined and contested amid state-led securitization measures.²³

Thus, there is a clear paucity of research on illicit drug flows along the Bangladesh–Myanmar border, and this study addresses that gap by assessing the drug trafficking problem along the Cox’s Bazar border with Myanmar and identifying key drug trafficking issues while proposing appropriate recommendations.

3. Theoretical Framework

In contemporary border studies, there is widespread critique of the linear border model. First, the linear model often tends to present borders as static, arbitrary divisions of sovereignty and territory, while failing to capture or explain how social, cultural, and political formations on both sides have diverged over

¹⁸ Mohammad Main Uddin Yunus, “Exploring insecurity, crime, and violence in Rohingya camps in Bangladesh: types, factors, existing measures, and challenges,” *SN Social Sciences* 6, no. 5 (2026): 130, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-026-01411-x>.

¹⁹ Xiaobo Su, “Nontraditional security and China’s transnational narcotics control in northern Laos and Myanmar,” *Political Geography* 48 (2015): 72–82, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2015.06.005>.

²⁰ Anshuman Behera, “Insurgency, drugs and small arms in Myanmar,” *Strategic Analysis* 41, no. 1 (2017): 34–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2016.1249176>.

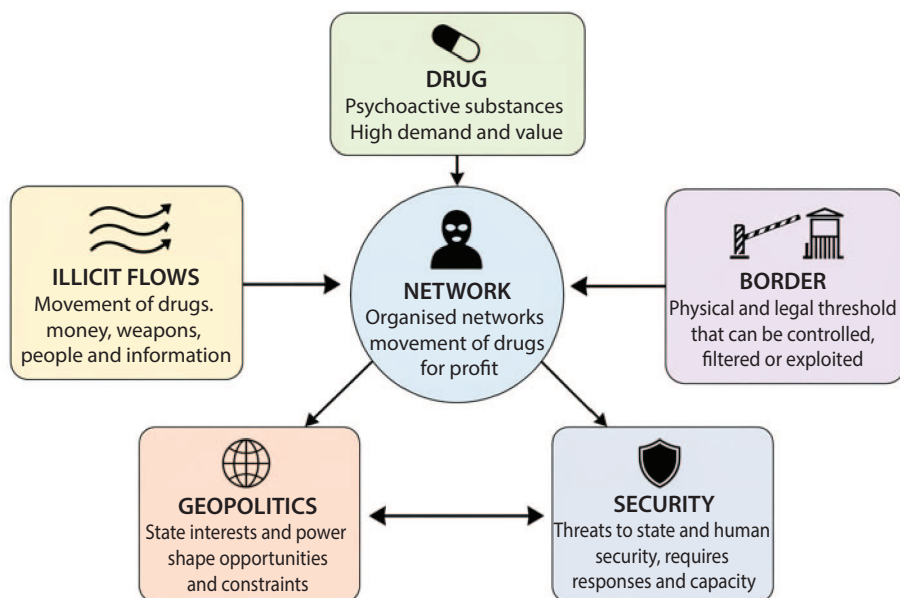
²¹ Patrick Meehan and Seng Lawn Dan, “Drugs and extractivism: opium cultivation and drug use in the Myanmar–China borderlands,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 51, no. 4 (2024): 922–959, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2023.2271403>.

²² Cladia T. Williams, Wei Liu, and Judith A. Levy, “Crossing Over: Drug Network Characteristics and Injection Risk Along the China–Myanmar Border,” *AIDS and Behavior* 15, no. 5 (2011): 1011–1016.

²³ J. Ralte and V. Thomas, “Crossing Lines: Kinship, Security, and Identity in Mizoram’s India–Myanmar Border Communities,” *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 41, no. 2 (2026): 555–571, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2025.2599159>.

time through long-term interaction and co-existence.²⁴ Therefore, Paasi²⁵ suggests a multidimensional approach to the analysis of borders in a world of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation. Boundaries are understood as institutions and symbols that are produced and reproduced in social practices and geopolitical discourses. This article proposes a theoretical framework as mentioned in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The Theoretical Framework



Source: Author's own elaboration

This border-geopolitics-security framework shows that drug trafficking sits at the center of a broader system. This system is influenced by a range of interconnected elements. The presence of drugs generates both demand and avenues for profit. These factors subsequently fuel trafficking operations. Such operations depend on illicit movements. These movements encompass the transfer of money, commodities, and information. Borders either facilitate or constrain these activities, depending on how strictly they are controlled. At the same time, geopolitical dynamics influence how states manage their borders. They also shape how states respond to trafficking. This situation results in both possibilities and dangers. The

²⁴ Zhuang Niu, "The Border Turns Very Dry": Shrinking Porosity and Local Responses on the China-Myanmar Border," *Journal of Borderlands Studies* (2026): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2026.2655463>.

²⁵ Anssi Paasi, *Territories, Boundaries and Consciousness: The Changing Geographies of the Finnish-Russian Border* (Chichester: John Wiley, 1996); Anssi Paasi, "Boundaries as Social Practice and Discourse: The Finnish-Russian Border," *Regional Studies* 33, no. 7 (1999): 669–680, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343409950078701>.

results of these relationships are evident in the security landscape. Trafficking can lead to heightened instability, increased criminal activity, and threats to both state sovereignty and individual safety.

In summary, as illustrated in Figure 1, the conceptual framework reveals a reciprocal connection. Every component has impacts and is also impacted by others. This work assumes that drug trafficking is enabled by illicit flows and porous borders. It is also shaped by geopolitical dynamics. Ultimately, illicit flows of drugs and human trafficking present considerable challenges to security.

4. Assessment of the Drug Trafficking Problem along the Cox's Bazar Border with Myanmar: Findings and Discussion

Drug trafficking has increasingly become both a socioeconomic challenge and a security concern in Bangladesh. Until the 1990s, there were no major changes in the government's drug policies, except for a few limited technical adjustments. Weak legislative measures and the steady inflow of illicit drugs from neighbouring countries gradually contributed to this situation over the past few decades. From the early 1980s, Bangladesh began to emerge as an external market for illicit drugs due to the increasing entry of Burmese heroin (commonly known as white sugar), Indian brown sugar (a lower-grade heroin), Phensedyl, and other contraband substances. Specially, among all the available drugs.

Reports indicate that at least 15 powerful political figures in Rajshahi, Bangladesh, are involved in the drug trade and cross-border smuggling.²⁶ Among them, a former state minister has been identified as a key protector of drug traffickers in the northern district. According to a report, a group of corrupt elite is profiting from this illicit business by frequently exploiting innocent individuals to further their trade. Gallien and Weigand²⁷ posited that "It is an open secret in Cox's Bazar that a local former member of parliament and member of the ruling party and his family are key players in control of yaba smuggling from Myanmar in the area, using their state authority to protect their smuggling business and monopolise it." Yaba has become a profitable business although it is prohibited legally. Findings are consistent with some previous works where it had been portrayed how yaba played a key role in generating illegal incomes. Other notable works such as even with the constant threat of asset seizures, steep fines, bribes, or imprisonment, cross-border trafficking and commerce continue to thrive across various borderlands.²⁸ This activity has frequently transformed local livelihoods and reshaped

²⁶ A. K. M. Azad, "AL MP patronising drug trade!" Prothom Alo, January 15, 2018.

²⁷ Max Gallien and Florian Weigand, "Channeling Contraband: How States Shape International Smuggling Routes," *Security Studies* 30, no. 1 (2021): 79–106, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2021.1885728>.

²⁸ Nedson Pophiwa, "Mobile livelihoods—the players involved in smuggling of commodities across the Zimbabwe-Mozambique border," *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 25, no. 2 (2010): 65–76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2010.9695761>; David Maciel de Mello Neto, "Self-regenerating crime: the resilient network of a sector of Rio de Janeiro's

regional political cultures. In their study, Nuruzzaman and Wohab²⁹ interviewed some refugees. The confessions made by the refugees are significant. Generating illegal incomes and amassing money drive the yaba business. A young refugee (who is in his 20s, living in camp number 5 for more than five years) confessed to the authors: “Yaba business is behind many quarrels and fighting. And this business is controlled by many armed groups. They are in a race to generate money with this illegal business”. Furthermore, Aucoin³⁰ explores the relationship between smuggling and sovereignty, examining how states project authority, how trafficking networks arise to contest state control over movement, and how interactions within these networks can create pockets of “individual sovereignty” that defy established power structures. This study generates some insight into the modern-day intersection of smuggling activities and the enforcement measures used to counter them. Two main administrative sub-districts,³¹ namely, Tenaf and Ukhia under the district of Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh are the principal routes for the smuggling of illicit drugs especially yaba.

Feroze³² observes that yaba’s spread to all layers of society was possible for two reasons: Its small size which allowed easy carrying, and the usage of women as sellers. So there is a need ‘to generate more research-based evidence to inform future policy formulation’ on the use of illegal drugs.³³

Yaba is a nervous system stimulating illicit drug substance that consists of a mixture of methamphetamine and caffeine. Since its initial appearance in Bangladesh in 2002, the use and abuse of Yaba have seen a consistent upward trend. These pills are produced in industrial quantities in illegal labs within Myanmar before being trafficked into Bangladesh through the southeastern border, much of which is defined by the River Naf. Bangladeshi law enforcement confiscated 53 million Yaba tablets nationally in 2018 alone. It is estimated that this illicit trade generates over US\$1 billion in annual revenue.³⁴ The total value of this illicit business is estimated to be worth upwards of US\$1bn a year.³⁵

At present, there are several millions of users of yaba in Bangladesh despite the exact information is difficult to gauge. In Bangladesh, the main hotspots for

drug trafficking in the 1970s,” *Dilemas: Revista de Estudos de Conflito e Controle Social* 14, no. 1 (2021): 107–133.

²⁹ Mohammed Nuruzzaman and Abdul Wohab, “The security impact of the Rohingya refugee crisis on Bangladesh and regional states: a securitization theoretical perspective,” *International Journal of Asian Studies* (2026): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479591426100709>.

³⁰ Mathew Aucoin, “Smuggling and Sovereignty: Individual Agencies within the Structures of Human Smuggling and Enforcement in the Mediterranean,” *Geopolitics* 25, no. 2 (2019): 538–543, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2019.1665780>.

³¹ In Bangladesh, the sub-districts are commonly known as Upazillas.

³² Tariq Feroze, “OP-ED: Dhaka’s evolving drug scenario,” *Dhaka Tribune*, May 31, 2021.

³³ Islam, “The War on Drugs”.

³⁴ Linda Pressly, “Yaba: The cheap synthetic drug convulsing a nation,” *BBC News*, April 25, 2019.

³⁵ Pressly, “Yaba”.

smuggling of yaba are the Upazilla of Ukhiya and Teknaf under the south-eastern border district of Cox's Bazar. Police has reportedly come to know about 250 newcomers in the yaba business after interrogating the 63 listed yaba godfathers and dealers, who surrendered to police in Cox's Bazar.³⁶ Yaba is frequently consumed for its stimulant effects, particularly to increase energy. Users often report enhanced physical vigor and heightened libido following its use. In turn, the elite give the Yaba users some sorts of administrative protection to run the business smoothly. Some officials are found to take bribes to make the yaba business hassle-free and smooth. Yaba is destroying the young people. The rates of dropouts from primary and secondary schools are on the increase. The young people are often used as a consumers or traffickers of yaba. They could make a handsome amount of money by means of their quick involvement in yaba trade. But the big fishes (*Ragob Boal* referring to some influential and powerful persons) are out of control. Some officials are corrupt and very greedy to make money through illegal channels.

Previous research highlights that the rising trend of drug consumption among young people has become a major worry for health officials and legislators across Asia.³⁷ Government is serious about stopping yaba. But it is difficult because some junior officials are found involved in smuggling, taking payments and letting the drugs in. It is very hard to find out who is involved. Some residents observed that the act of smuggling has both beneficial and detrimental effects. Many smugglers are fishermen, poor dwellers, beggars and vendors. They earn their bread and butter by means of yaba smuggling. In contrast, the rich elite are engaged in smuggling for their ill-motive of profit-making. The motivation for these two groups -poor and rich -are quite different. The common people are now conscious about the harmful aspects of smuggling. Yaba trade could be linked to the increasing hostile atmosphere of murder and killing.

The observation is consistent with a prior study on the lack of employment and study opportunities in China's Qilin borderland. The absence of such opportunities pushed most of its young generation to migrate, leaving behind family and social ties.³⁸ In an interview, the Chief of Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) acknowledges that a major challenge in border management is extreme poverty in border areas³⁹.

³⁶ Mohammad Jamil Khan and Mohammad Ali Jinnat, "Yaba trade in Cox's Bazar: Situation changes, so does strategy," *The Daily Star*, January 28, 2019.

³⁷ Anita Hardon and Thien Duong Hymans, "Ethnographies of youth drug use in Asia," *International Journal of Drug Policy* 25, no. 4 (2014): 749–754, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2014.06.009>.

³⁸ Gioia Zoccatelli, "'It was Fun, It was Dangerous': Heroin, Young Urbanites and Opening Reforms in China's Borderlands," *International Journal of Drug Policy* 25, no. 4 (2014): 762–768, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2014.06.004>.

³⁹ See the interview of Major General Aziz Ahmed, published in the *Daily Star* (A National Daily of Bangladesh), July 28, 2015.

In fact, illiteracy, a lack of education, unemployment and poverty were found to be the most common factors for substance use among refugees.⁴⁰ The data presented in Table 1 point to the general fact that nearly 57.87 per cent unemployed Bangladeshi people got involved in drug abuse. If this is the general picture of Bangladesh, then the unemployment situation in the border region is more alarming. This is because borderlands are marginalised and poverty-stricken.

Table 1: Occupational Status of the Drug Abusers in Bangladesh

Occupational Group	2016(%)	2017(%)	2018(%)	2019(%)	2020(%)
Unemployed	44.22	47.23	53.92	41.3	57.87
Small Business	16.8	12.62	16.9	21.84	7.11
Service (Private/Public)	10.08	9.23	5.84	4.78	8.12
Labourer	7.93	7.85	10.26	11.43	5.08
Vehicle Driver	5.78	5.69	4.02	3.75	5.08
Student	8.6	11.23	5.23	10.24	11.68
Agriculture profession	1.08	0.77	0.6	1.19	0
Others	5.51	5.38	3.22	5.46	5.08

Source: Compiled from the Annual Drug Report (2020, Dhaka).

Table 1 illustrates the occupational distribution of drug users in Bangladesh from 2016 to 2020. It shows that unemployed individuals consistently represent the largest proportion of drug users, with percentages rising overall and peaking at 57.87 per cent in 2020. This discovery indicates a significant connection between joblessness and susceptibility to substance abuse. Within the workforce, a considerable portion is represented by entrepreneurs and students. Nonetheless, their respective shares vary throughout different periods. The rate of students has shown a slight rise in the past few years. It attained 11.68 per cent in the year 2020. This points to increasing engagement among younger, educated demographics. Conversely, people working in service-related jobs represent a considerably smaller segment. These include public and private sector workers. The same applies to those engaged in labor-intensive roles. A noticeable reduction has been recorded in these categories over the years. Occupations such as vehicle driving and agriculture contribute minimally to the overall distribution, with agricultural workers showing almost no representation by 2020. Overall, the data suggest that drug use is more prevalent among economically unstable groups, particularly the unemployed, while also affecting certain active workforce and student populations to a lesser extent.

⁴⁰ Saleh, "Substance use among refugees".

The concentration of poverty usually occurs in border regions. Papers discussing poverty in border regions often explore how factors like environmental degradation, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of employment opportunities contribute to economic inequality in these areas. For instances, the Chinese government is working to mitigate the widespread poverty affecting its border areas.⁴¹ The unemployment rate of US–Mexico border cities was found to be higher than the US average.⁴² Table 2 demonstrates that curiosity and peer influence are the most important causes of drug abuse.

Table 2: Primary Causes of Drug Abuse

Main causes	2016(%)	2017(%)	2018(%)	2019(%)	2020(%)
Curiosity	32.84	24.15	17.13	49.49	40
Influence of friends	64.44	74.92	81.27	49.83	58.5
Desire to get easy pleasure	0.25	0.15	0	0	0.5
Psychological disorder	0.86	0.15	0.2	0.17	0
Adverse atmosphere in the family	0.37	0.31	0	0.17	0.5
Easy access to drugs	0.12	0.15	0	0	0.5
Unemployment	0.12	0	0	0.17	0
Frustration	0.49	0	0.8	0.17	0
Lack of drug awareness	0.12	0.15	0.2	0	0

Source: Compiled from the Annual Drug Report (2020), Dhaka.

Table 2 presents the main causes of drug use in Bangladesh from 2016 to 2020. It clearly shows that peer influence is the most dominant factor across all years, accounting for the highest percentage, with a peak of 81.27 per cent in 2018 and remaining substantial at 58.5 per cent in 2020. This indicates that social networks play a critical role in initiating and sustaining drug use.

Curiosity emerges as the second most significant cause, with notable fluctuations over time. It declines between 2016 and 2018 but rises sharply in 2019 (49.49 per cent) and remains high in 2020 (40 per cent), suggesting that experimentation and interest in drugs continue to be major driving forces.

⁴¹ Lin Hong, Clem Tisdell, and Wen Fei, “Poverty and its reduction in a Chinese border region: is social capital important?” *Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy* 24, no. 1 (2019): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13547860.2019.1591743>.

⁴² André Varella Mollick, “What explains unemployment in US–Mexican border cities?” *The Annals of Regional Science* 42, no. 1 (2008): 169–182, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00168-007-0125-7>.

In contrast, other factors such as psychological disorders, family environment, unemployment, frustration, and lack of awareness contribute only minimally, each accounting for a very small percentage throughout the years. Easy access to drugs and the desire for pleasure also appear as minor but present factors. Overall, the data suggest that drug use in Bangladesh is primarily driven by social influence and individual curiosity, while structural and psychological factors play a comparatively limited role in reported cases.

5. Key Challenges in Countering Drug Trafficking

The forces of globalization and economic liberalisation have expanded the opportunities for cross-border migration alongside illicit activities, particularly drug trafficking and terrorism—frequently resulting in the dangerous convergence of the two: narco-terrorism.⁴³ Bangladesh has emerged as a key transit route for drug trafficking networks aiming to reach international markets. Drugs produced in the supply side countries enters Bangladesh through air, sea and land routes then evade towards international destinations including Europe and North America. The long and porous borders have made the country vulnerable to trans-border smuggling. It poses a real challenge to the enforcement agencies, health department and socio-economic stability of the nation. Customs officials once seized a consignment of 26.2 kilogrammes of powder, preliminarily detected as heroin, at the export cargo village of Shahjalal International Airport.⁴⁴

Officials involved in preventing drug trafficking lack training, equipment and resources to detect and interdict the flow of supplies. Corrupt members within the enforcement agencies become aid to drug trafficking. Financial crime refers to any non-violent crime which results in a financial gain to the perpetrators and loss to others or the state. It includes a range of illegal activities such as corruption, bribery, speed money and kickbacks. In February 2019, a total of 102 listed yaba “godfathers” and dealers ceremoniously surrendered. However, the surrenders have not impacted yaba smuggling as much as was hoped.

The BGB found that The Arakan Army is involved in the trade of contraband yaba pills. “Rohingyas are the main traffickers of yaba. They move the drugs very fast, which makes it difficult to catch them. In the interview, it has been revealed that some unscrupulous people in our country, driven by their own interests, are bringing yaba from Myanmar’s Arakan Army into Bangladesh.”⁴⁵

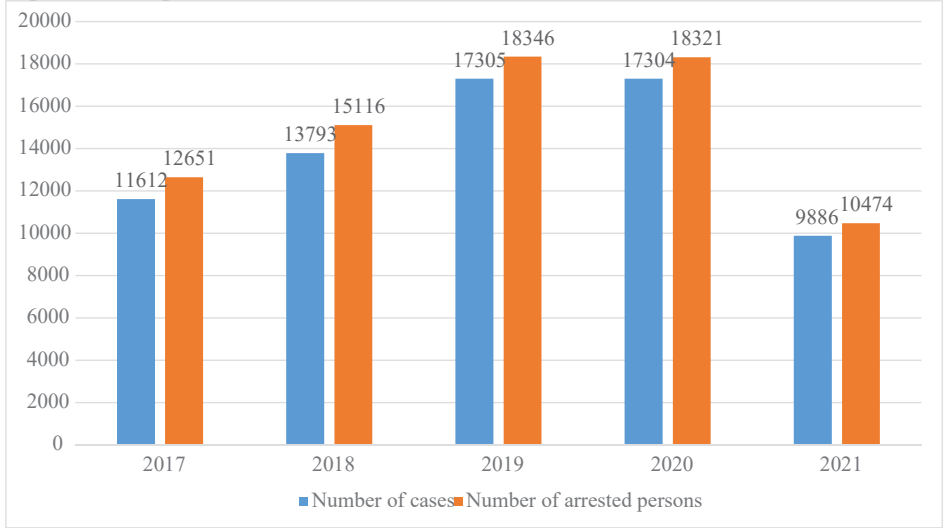
⁴³ Nimmi Kurian Singh and Wendy Nunes, “Drug Trafficking and Narco-terrorism as Security Threats,” *India Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (2013): 65–82, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0974928412472106>.

⁴⁴ Staff Correspondent, “26kg ‘heroin’ seized at Dhaka airport,” *The Daily Star*, September 16, 2012.

⁴⁵ Staff Correspondent, “Arakan Army involved in yaba trade: BGB,” *The Daily Star*, September 16, 2025.

A nexus of power and politics is also seen to facilitate the yaba trade. Members of the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) arrested the leader of a syndicate involved in peddling the highly addictive stimulant drug called crystal methamphetamine, better known as “Ice”. The law enforcers seized “Ice”, yaba pills, foreign liquor, cannabis, instruments used for drug consumption and different chemical reagents and lab equipment⁴⁶. It is to be noted that along with yaba , “Ice” is smuggled into Bangladesh through some 21 points in Cox’s Bazar and several border points in Bandarban⁴⁷. Many cases, as shown in Figure 2, are filed against the dealers of illicit drugs such as yaba tablets, heroin, cocaine, opium, ganja, phensidyl, foreign wine, beer and injecting drugs. Consequently, many people are arrested in Bangladesh in relations to criminal offences.

Figure 2: Drug-Related Cases and Arrested Person



Source: Own elaboration from the Annual Drug Report, 2020–2021, Dhaka.

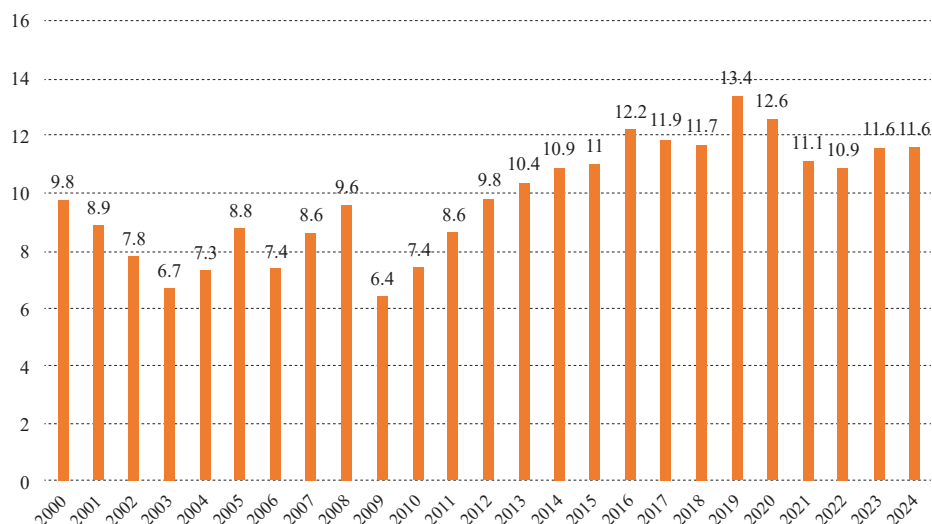
Bangladesh’s youth unemployment rate experienced a pronounced long-term deterioration, nearly doubling from 6.0 per cent in 1991 to 11.6 per cent in 2024. It indicates a structural challenge in job creation for young people over the past three decades. The data exhibits significant volatility with dramatic fluctuations, including sharp drops to 6.4 per cent in 2009 and peaks reaching 13.4 per cent in 2019. The data suggest that youth employment is highly sensitive to economic cycles and external shocks. Data in Figure 3 showd an upward trajectory, with the rate

⁴⁶ Taken from an excerpt in *Dhaka Tribune*, June 18, 2021.

⁴⁷ The Editorial, “Take stern action to stop drug trade,” *Daily Star*, October 30, 2022.

consistently remaining in double digits since 2012. It reflects persistent difficulties in absorbing the country’s growing youth population into productive employment despite Bangladesh’s economic growth during this period.

Figure 3: Youth unemployment rate in Bangladesh⁴⁸



Source: Elaboration with the data from O’Neill.

The illicit trade of yaba could be inter-linked to the problems of fragile states, corruption and crime. In this regard, Rosen and Kassab⁴⁹ present their evidence to show that there is a relationship between corruption and the profitability of drug crime. Contemporary research has specifically examined how “mastaans” (local criminals), recruit street children to transport weapons, distribute drugs, manage extortion, engage in political violence, and even carry out contract killings.⁵⁰

India has already completed several thousands of kilometres of fencing to prevent illegal migration from Bangladesh. It implies that population mobility across the border have become relatively difficult after the construction of the India-Bangladesh fences. This insight gathered from the current news media is related to a similar survey conducted at the border between Iran and Afghanistan, two countries with a similar record of disputed border fencing. Prior to the installation of the border wall, the influx of narcotics from the eastern frontier—specifically the Sistan region—was viewed as a critical social threat that put millions of lives at risk. Now, however,

⁴⁸ Aaron O’Neill, “Youth unemployment rate Bangladesh,” Statista, July 22, 2025, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/811657/youth-unemployment-rate-in-bangladesh/>.

⁴⁹ Jonathan D. Rosen and Hanna S. Kassab, *Drugs, Gangs, and Violence* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

⁵⁰ Sally Atkinson-Sheppard, *The Gangs of Bangladesh* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

the construction of this wall and the resulting border closures have significantly mitigated these issues. According to the survey participants, the arrival rate of drugs and weapons before constructing the border wall was on average 3.36 per cent and 2.89 per cent respectively. But after the wall's construction, the figures came down to 1.35 per cent and 1.23 per cent respectively, reflecting a clear decline in illicit traffic.⁵¹

Bangladesh has become a place for illicit flows of drugs especially tobacco, weed and phensedyl. Sahana Ghosh⁵² documented decently how the production, consumption and exports of the agrarian commodities in India's Cooch Behar have transformed the national economic landscape and regional border culture. Illicit drugs are produced and "grown profitably on the Indian side exclusively for Bangladesh".⁵³ Several analysts blame New Delhi for supplying illicit drugs resulting in the deterioration of morality and ethics among the Bangladeshi population, especially the youth and the ultimate declining law-and-order situation. As Sahana Ghosh has observed, "Phensedyl, weed and alcohol from India, and yaba from Myanmar, are reported to be pouring into Bangladesh from all sides.... Indian drugs are not only targeting youth with addiction but also turning them into criminals".⁵⁴

6. Policy Recommendations

Several issues and concerns need to draw some policy attention. First, in the southeastern city of Cox's Bazar, more than one million Rohingya refugees have been languishing in basic, makeshift camps after being forced out of their homes in Rakhine state through ethnic cleansing. The Rakhine state is located just across the border in western Myanmar. The Rohingya refugees are stateless⁵⁵, vulnerable⁵⁶ and victims of the genocide.⁵⁷ The living condition in the Bangladeshi refugee camps is

⁵¹ Sirous Ghanbari, Omid Jamshid Zehi Shahbakhsh, and Mahdi Naderianfar, "The Impact of Concrete Wall Construction Between Iran and Afghanistan Border on Safety of Iran South-Eastern Marginal Regions," *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 37, no. 1 (2022): 1–15.

⁵² Sahana Ghosh, *A Thousand Tiny Cuts: Mobility and Security across the Bangladesh-India Borderlands* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2023).

⁵³ Ghosh, *A Thousand Tiny Cuts*, 138.

⁵⁴ Ghosh, *A Thousand Tiny Cuts*, 168.

⁵⁵ Nasir Uddin, "The State, Vulnerability, and Transborder Movements: The Rohingya People in Myanmar and Bangladesh," in *Deterritorialised Identity and Transborder Movement in South Asia*, ed. Nasir Uddin and Nasrin Chowdhury (Singapore: Springer, 2019), 73–90.

⁵⁶ Jahangir Alam, "The Status and Rights of the Rohingya as Refugees under International Refugee Law: Challenges for a Durable Solution," *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 18, no. 1 (2020): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2020.1746872>.

⁵⁷ Stephen C. Druce, "Myanmar's Unwanted Ethnic Minority: A History and Analysis of the Rohingya Crisis," in *Managing Conflicts in a Globalizing ASEAN*, ed. Mikio Oishi (Singapore: Springer, 2020), 17–46; C. Christine Fair, "Rohingya: Victims of a Great Game East," *The Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (2018): 63–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660x.2018.1519356>; Azeem Ibrahim, *The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar's Hidden Genocide* (London: Hurst & Company, 2016).

woefully inadequate and unhealthy. The Rohingya refugees have limited access to clean water and sanitation.⁵⁸ Cox's Bazar is Bangladesh's prime tourist destination, home to many luxury hotels and resorts, with about 125 km of unbroken sandy beaches. Despite being a relatively new drug, Yaba quickly has become popular across the region. Some fishermen, farmers and traders in Cox's Bazar and Teknaf were consequently drawn into a corrupt network of Yaba smuggling, involving also Rohingyas.⁵⁹ For the sustainable prevention of illegal drug trafficking along the Cox's Bazar border with Myanmar, the government should complement law enforcement measures with targeted socio-economic interventions. Expanding employment opportunities, promoting industrialisation, and implementing poverty reduction programs can help address the underlying economic vulnerabilities that often make local communities susceptible to involvement in illicit activities. By creating alternative livelihoods and improving income-generating prospects, these initiatives can reduce dependence on the drug trade and contribute to long-term social and economic stability in the border region. More importantly, enhancing monitoring systems can hinder drug transportation. Improving cross-border coordination can also help. Combined, these actions can diminish the strength of international trafficking networks.

Second, for the long-term reduction of illicit drug trafficking, a comprehensive approach is required. Expanding access to education and public awareness can help address the social conditions that contribute to drug involvement and discourage participation in illicit activities. At the same time, effective rehabilitation and reintegration programs are essential for individuals affected by drug use, enabling their return to productive social and economic life. Strengthening the capacity of law enforcement agencies through regular motivational training, professional development, and welfare support for police and border security personnel can further enhance their effectiveness in preventing drug trafficking and related crimes. The spread of education is important to root out the illicit drug trade. Rehabilitation is also needed for the affected people, whereas motivational training for the officials would be helpful.

Third, dealing with the societal causes of drug demand inside this structure requires critical educational activities. Collaboration with the Ministry of Education

⁵⁸ M. Nafis Khan, M. Mofizul Islam, and M. Mahbubur Rahman, "Risks of COVID19 outbreaks in Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh," *Public Health in Practice* 1 (2020): 100018, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhip.2020.100018>.

⁵⁹ Md. Mahmudul Hasan, "Bangladeshi 'Boat People': Context, Drivers And Policy Implications," *South Asia Research* 39, no. 1 (2019): 78–94, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0262728018814632>; Sharful Islam Khan et al., "Understanding the reasons for using methamphetamine by sexual minority people in Dhaka, Bangladesh," *International Journal of Drug Policy* 73 (2019): 64–71, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2019.07.009>; Hai Thanh Luong, *Transnational Drug Trafficking Across the Vietnam-Laos Border* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Dorothy Kronick, "Profits and Violence in Illegal Markets: Evidence from Venezuela," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 64, no. 7–8 (2020): 1495–1520.

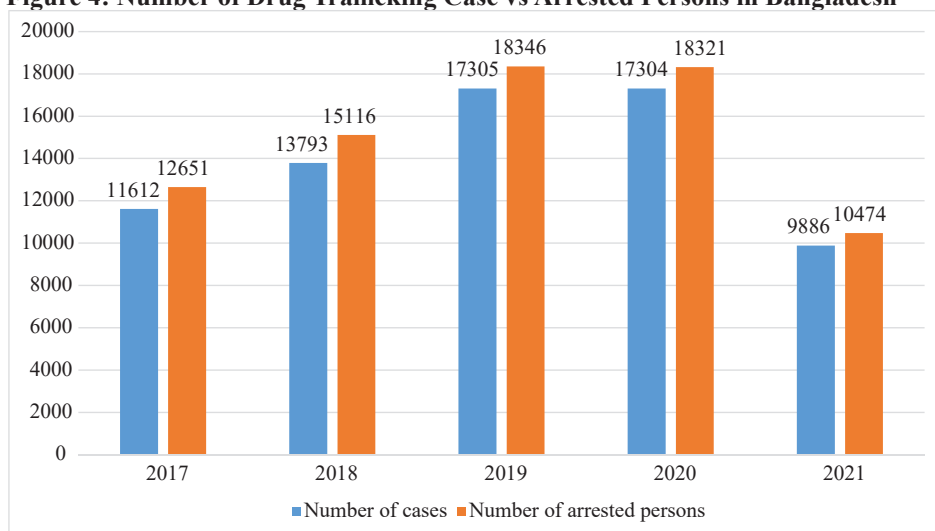
is necessary. The goal is to incorporate the causes, consequences, and security implications of drug use into school curricula. This can reduce vulnerability among youth. Trafficking networks frequently target the youth demographic. Preventive strategies at the community level should focus on school- and community-based activities. These initiatives can help address peer pressure and curiosity. The available data highlight these elements as significant catalysts for drug consumption. Restricting these elements could lower the recruiting pool for drug trafficking networks. Simultaneously, family-level awareness initiatives could enhance informal social controls. This will lower the probability that youngsters will participate in illicit drug trafficking.

Fourth, from the perspective of governance and institutional frameworks, it is crucial to assess and revise national drug policies. These policies must align with evolving trafficking patterns and geopolitical realities. It is also vital to promote accountability within law enforcement organizations. Creating uniform operating protocols (SOPs) for treatment facilities overseen by the Department of Narcotics Control (DNC) can bolster these initiatives. These actions will improve both the reduction of supply and the reduction of demand.

Fifth, enhancing the treatment and rehabilitation sector is vital for advancing human security results. Capacity-building initiatives for private treatment centers can improve service quality and effectiveness. These initiatives might encompass sharing knowledge on an international level. It is also essential to offer financial assistance. Such support should focus on centers that serve vulnerable populations. These include the poor, children, and street-based drug users. Increasing access to care has the potential to diminish prolonged reliance on drug distribution networks.

Finally, regular monitoring, evaluation and feedback mechanisms for treatment centers necessary to ensure policy implementation remain responsive to changing patterns of drug trafficking and use. This will reinforce a comprehensive security approach, where supply control, demand reduction, and institutional capacity collectively will address the multidimensional challenges of drug trafficking and illicit flows.

Figure 4: Number of Drug Trafficking Case vs Arrested Persons in Bangladesh



Source: Author's Compilation.

7. Conclusion

The research argues that illicit drug trafficking are formed socially and geopolitically along the border areas of Bangladesh and Myanmar. Through this argument, it reinforces the theoretical framework advanced by Anssi Paasi (1996, 1999). Building on this framework, the current study reveals that such theoretical insights are not only applicable to well-studied locations, but they can also be meaningfully applied to diverse contexts. Among these are the border regions between Bangladesh and Myanmar. From the standpoint of border, geopolitics, and security within the suggested theoretical framework, managing the drug supply necessitates a distinct focus. This focus should concentrate on regions near the border that presents significant risk. The most critical area is the Myanmar frontier. Trafficking networks and illicit operations are especially common in this area. For effectively combating illicit drug trafficking, this paper recommends strengthening monitoring systems and cross-border coordination to disrupt trafficking networks. It also emphasises integrating drug awareness and security-related education into school curricula, alongside community- and family-based prevention initiatives targeting youth vulnerability. The study further highlights the need to revise national drug policies, enhance accountability within law enforcement agencies, and establish standardized operating procedures for treatment facilities. Expanding rehabilitation services through capacity-building, financial support, and greater access for vulnerable groups, combined with regular monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, is essential for addressing both the supply and demand dimensions of the drug trade.

Overall, this study proposes a synthesized and integrated framework to address Bangladesh's cross-border drug-related challenges, emphasizing stronger border control, the integration of drug education into school curricula, and broader community awareness initiatives. It also highlights the importance of parental engagement, updated drug policies, standardized treatment procedures, enhanced training for service providers, and financial and institutional support for private treatment centers. Finally, it underscores that poverty reduction and employment generation are essential for expanding sustainable livelihood opportunities in the Bangladesh–Myanmar border region.

Like many studies, this paper has several limitations. A key limitation is the absence of statistical analysis of causal mechanisms, particularly how drug flows translate into specific security outcomes. While the study presents quantitative data, it does not employ statistical models to test these relationships. Future research could address this gap by incorporating field-based data collection and applying more rigorous analytical and modeling techniques to better capture causal dynamics.

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Ethical Approval

This study did not involve human participants, interviews, or the collection of personal data. Therefore, institutional ethics approval and informed consent were not required, and the study complies with international guidelines for research integrity.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.