

Research Article

Education as a tool for preventing illicit drug trafficking: Theoretical and legal, administrative and criminal aspects

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Abstract

Aim: The article presents a comprehensive study of education as a tool for preventing illicit drug trafficking through the prism of theoretical and legal, administrative and legal, and criminal law approaches.

Methods: Using the systemic method, education was considered as a component of a comprehensive mechanism of state policy in the field of preventing illicit drug trafficking. The formal-legal method was used to study the regulatory and legal regulation of educational activities, drug prevention and legal liability for illicit drug trafficking. The comparative-legal method was used to determine the possibilities of using foreign experience in educational prevention. Using the structural-functional method, the functions of the main subjects of preventive activities were determined. The criminological approach allowed us to consider education as a means of influencing the determinants of drug crime.

Results: It is substantiated that modern counteraction to illicit drug trafficking cannot be limited to the application of criminal law prohibitions, the activities of law enforcement agencies and bringing guilty persons to legal responsibility. An important place in the relevant mechanism should be occupied by preventive activities of the state, the central element of which is the formation of a legal culture, awareness of the risks of using psychoactive substances and the development of safe behavior skills.

Conclusion: It is proven that education simultaneously performs legal, social, preventive, informational and educational functions in the field of combating illicit drug trafficking. From an administrative and legal point of view, educational prevention is implemented through the system of public administration, the normatively defined powers of state authorities and local governments, educational institutions, law enforcement agencies and other entities. In the criminal and legal aspect, education is considered as a means of preventing the criminalization of behavior and reducing the determinants of crime associated with illicit drug trafficking.

The need to transition from fragmentary information campaigns to a systemic model of educational prevention based on interagency cooperation, evidence-based prevention programs, digital tools, early detection of risky behavior and respect for human rights is substantiated.

Keywords: Education, Narcotics, Illicit drug trafficking, Prevention, Crime prevention, Administrative and legal regulation, Criminal law, Public administration, Legal culture, Prevention

Introduction

Drug trafficking remains one of the most complex transnational problems of our time, which goes far beyond the sphere of health care and is directly related to ensuring public safety, combating organized crime, protecting human rights, social stability and the effectiveness of state policy. The modern world drug market is characterized by constant transformation, expanding the range of drugs, the emergence of new psychoactive substances, the development of synthetic production and the active use of digital technologies for their advertising, distribution and sale [1,2].

The scale of the problem is confirmed by international statistics. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), in 2023, approximately 316 million people aged 15-64 used drugs, which is about 6% of the population of the corresponding age group. The number of people using drugs has increased significantly compared to the previous decade, indicating that the global trend towards increasing drug use continues [1]. Cannabis remains the most widely used illicit drug in the world,

while opioids, cocaine, amphetamine-type stimulants and other psychoactive substances pose a significant threat [1].

The health and social consequences of drug use are equally serious. According to UNODC estimates, in 2023, about 64 million people worldwide had drug use disorders, while access to necessary treatment remains inadequate [1]. Previous global estimates by UNODC indicated that in 2022, about 494,000 deaths were related to drug use [1]. Thus, illicit drug trafficking generates a complex of negative consequences that cover the criminal, medical, social, economic and demographic spheres.

The European drug market is also characterized by high dynamics. According to the European Union Drugs Agency (EUDA), cannabis remains the most common illicit drug in the European Union: About 24 million adults used it in the last year, and about 8.5 million in the last month [2]. At the same time, the European market is characterized by the increasing availability of synthetic drugs, the spread of new psychoactive substances and the use of digital technologies to organize illicit trafficking [2].

The problem of drug distribution among young people is of particular importance. Adolescence and young age are a period of intensive formation of personality, legal awareness, social attitudes and behavioral patterns. That is why early prevention is of fundamental importance for state anti-drug policy. The World Health Organization (WHO) and UNODC emphasize the need to develop evidence-based prevention measures aimed not only at informing about the harm of drugs, but also at the formation of social, emotional and behavioral skills that can reduce the risk of using psychoactive substances [3].

In this context, education takes on special importance, since it is the educational environment that provides systematic and long-term contact with children and youth and creates opportunities for the early formation of legal and safe behavior. Effective educational prevention should include not only informing about the medical consequences of drug use, but also the formation of a legal culture, critical thinking, the ability to resist negative social influence, decision-making skills and safe behavior in the digital environment [3,4].

For Ukraine, the problem of illicit drug trafficking has additional dimensions related to the consequences of a

full-scale war, social instability, forced displacement of the population, deterioration of the psychosocial state of certain categories of the population and the transformation of the criminal environment. At the same time, the digitalization of the illegal drug market creates new mechanisms for involving young people in illegal activities. The use of messengers, social networks, anonymous platforms and other digital channels has significantly changed the mechanisms for finding clients and perpetrators of illegal drug trafficking [2,5].

The urgency of the problem is also confirmed by Ukrainian criminal statistics. According to the office of the prosecutor general of Ukraine, criminal offenses in the field of illegal drug trafficking annually constitute a significant amount of registered crime. A special place among them is occupied by criminal offenses provided for in Articles 307 and 309 of the criminal code of Ukraine, which cover the illegal production, manufacture, acquisition, storage, transportation or shipment of narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances or their analogues, as well as their illegal sale [6,7].

At the same time, statistics on registered criminal offenses cannot be considered as a complete indicator of the real scale of the drug problem. Drug-related crime is characterized by a significant level of latency, and official data reflect only those cases that have become known to law enforcement agencies and have been properly registered. Therefore, assessing the effectiveness of anti-drug policy should be carried out taking into account not only the number of registered criminal offenses, but also the prevalence of drug use, the level of drug addiction, mortality, availability of treatment and social risk factors [1,3].

Another significant problem is the transformation of the role of youth in the functioning of the modern illegal drug market. Digital technologies allow the use of minors and young people to perform certain grassroots functions in the system of illegal drug sales, in particular as couriers or persons who carry out the so-called “bookmarks”. In this regard, traditional educational prevention, which is limited to reporting on the harm of drugs, no longer fully meets modern criminogenic challenges. It should include an explanation of the mechanisms of recruitment to illegal activities, the legal consequences of participation in the illegal circulation of narcotic drugs and methods of safe

behavior in the digital environment [2,5].

Thus, the modern drug problem should be considered as a complex socio-legal phenomenon, the counteraction to which requires a combination of criminal law, administrative law, medical, social and educational instruments. Criminal law prohibition and the activities of law enforcement agencies are necessary components of the state anti-drug policy, but they are mainly aimed at responding to already formed socially dangerous behavior. In contrast, education creates the opportunity to exercise a preventive influence at an earlier stage-before the emergence of persistent drug or criminogenic behavior [3,8].

In this context, education should be considered not only as a sphere of knowledge transfer, but also as a tool of public administration and legal prevention. Its potential lies in the formation of legal awareness, social responsibility, critical thinking, resistance to negative social influence and safe behavior skills. It is important that this approach corresponds to the modern concept of evidence-based prevention, according to which the most effective are long-term programs integrated into the educational environment and aimed at a complex of risk factors, and not only at disseminating information about the harmfulness of narcotic substances [3,4].

At the same time, there is a problem of insufficient theoretical and legal development of education as an independent tool for preventing illicit drug trafficking. In the scientific literature, issues of drug crime are mainly studied through the prism of criminal law, criminology, health care and the activities of law enforcement agencies. Much less attention is paid to a comprehensive study of the educational mechanism, its administrative and legal support, implementation subjects, forms and methods of prevention and the relationship with criminal and legal means.

Therefore, the scientific problem is the need to determine the place and role of education in the system of preventing illicit drug trafficking, establish administrative and legal mechanisms for its implementation, and determine the relationship between educational prevention and criminal and legal means of combating drug crime.

Solving this problem involves a transition from fragmentary information campaigns to a comprehensive model of “education-early prevention-social support-

administrative response-criminal and legal counteraction”, in which education performs the function of primary prevention, administrative and legal mechanisms ensure the organization and coordination of relevant activities, and criminal and legal means are used to counteract the most socially dangerous forms of illicit drug trafficking.

Methods

The methodological basis of the study of education as a tool for preventing illicit drug trafficking is the comprehensive application of general scientific and special legal methods, among which systemic and comparative legal methods are of particular importance. Their use is due to the complex nature of the problem under study, since the prevention of illicit drug trafficking is at the intersection of criminal law policy, administrative and legal regulation, educational policy, health care, social protection and the activities of civil society institutions.

The systemic method is used to consider education not as a set of separate information or educational measures, but as a structural element of a holistic mechanism for preventing illicit drug trafficking. According to this approach, educational prevention is considered in conjunction with the activities of state authorities, local governments, educational institutions, health care institutions, social services, law enforcement agencies, family and public organizations. It is the systemic approach that allows us to establish that none of the above subjects can independently ensure the proper level of drug prevention, since its effectiveness depends on the coherence of legal, organizational, educational, social, medical and law enforcement measures.

Within the framework of the systemic method, education is defined as the primary, which is, the earliest, level of preventive influence. Its purpose is not only to inform students about the negative consequences of drug use, but also to form a legal culture, critical thinking, social responsibility, the ability to resist the negative influence of peers, the skills of making safe decisions and awareness of the legal consequences of participating in the illegal trafficking of drugs. This approach meets international standards of evidence-based prevention, according to which systematic programs aimed at developing social, emotional and behavioral competencies, and not just one-time information about the harm of drugs, are the most effective [9].

The application of the systemic method allowed us to identify the main components of the educational prevention mechanism: Regulatory, institutional, organizational, informational, personnel, socio-psychological, digital, and control and evaluation. The regulatory and legal component covers the provisions of legislation in the field of education, health care, narcotics, criminal liability, crime prevention, and state anti-drug policy. The institutional component defines the system of entities authorized to implement preventive measures. The organizational component is associated with determining the forms of interaction between them, while the information component ensures the dissemination of reliable knowledge about the risks of drugs and mechanisms for counteracting involvement in the illegal drug market.

The digital component of the system acquires particular importance in 2021-2026. The transformation of the illegal drug market, the active use of social networks, messengers, anonymous online platforms, and other digital channels have led to changes in the methods of advertising, finding clients, and recruiting performers. The European Drug Agency EUDA in its reports emphasizes the constant adaptation of the drug market to the digital environment, the development of online sales and the use of new technologies by participants in illegal activities [10]. In this regard, modern educational prevention should include not only traditional legal and medical information, but also digital literacy, the ability to recognize manipulative offers, methods of recruitment to illegal activities and the risks of participating in the functioning of the digital drug market.

The system method also made it possible to study the functional connections between education and other elements of the state anti-drug policy. For example, an educational institution may identify signs of risky behavior of a student, but on its own is not always able to provide the necessary psychological, medical or social assistance. In such a situation, the interaction of pedagogical workers with psychologists, social services, medical institutions and parents is necessary. If signs of a person's involvement in illegal drug trafficking are identified, there is a need to interact with law enforcement agencies. Therefore, the system model can be represented by the sequence: Education-formation of legal and social competence-early identification of risks-social and psychological support-administrative and organizational response-criminal and

legal countermeasures.

The dynamic aspect of the system method allowed us to explore the transformation of the aforementioned model in 2021-2026. An important reference point for European policy was the approval in 2021 of the EU drugs strategy 2021-2025, which consolidated a comprehensive approach to the drug problem and combined prevention, treatment, harm reduction, social support and the fight against the illicit drug market [11]. Thus, at the level of the European Union, the approach was gradually strengthened, according to which criminal law measures should not be considered as the only tool for combating drugs.

In 2022-2023, the issues of the spread of synthetic drugs, new psychoactive substances and the use of digital technologies for their production and distribution became of particular importance. This necessitated the adaptation of preventive mechanisms to new forms of drug threats [12]. In 2024-2025, international practice increasingly focused on the evidence-based nature of prevention programs, early intervention, and interagency cooperation [13]. For Ukraine, the corresponding period is additionally characterized by the impact of a full-scale war, forced population displacement, disruption of the functioning of part of the educational and social infrastructure, increased psychosocial burden on children and youth, and the growing importance of digital communication channels. This necessitates the adaptation of the educational prevention system to the conditions of increased social vulnerability.

The systemic method also made it possible to determine the criteria for the effectiveness of educational prevention. These include the coverage of target groups by systemic programs, the evidence-based nature of the methods used, the regularity of preventive work, the professional training of teachers, the effectiveness of interagency cooperation, the availability of mechanisms for early detection of risky behavior, the availability of psychological, social, and medical care, the ability to counteract digital forms of recruitment, compliance with the rights of the child, and the availability of mechanisms for evaluating the effectiveness of programs. Thus, the system method allowed substantiating the position that education is the primary link of a multi-level mechanism for preventing illicit drug trafficking, and its effectiveness depends on interaction with administrative-legal, social, medical and criminal-legal means.

The comparative legal method was used to establish the features of regulatory regulation and organizational models of educational drug prevention in different countries and to determine the possibilities of using relevant experience in Ukraine. The comparison was carried out according to the following main criteria: The place of education in the state anti-drug policy, regulatory consolidation of prevention programs, the system of prevention subjects, the interaction of educational institutions with health and social protection systems, family participation, the use of evidence-based methods, early intervention, digital prevention, protection of children's rights and assessment of the effectiveness of prevention measures.

Results and Discussion

In modern conditions, combating illicit drug trafficking requires moving away from a narrow understanding of prevention as exclusively the activities of law enforcement agencies and the application of criminal sanctions. Illegal drug trafficking is a complex socio-legal phenomenon, the formation of which is determined by a set of economic, social, psychological, cultural, informational and legal factors. Accordingly, effective state policy should be aimed not only at stopping already committed criminal offenses, but also at eliminating or minimizing factors that contribute to the formation of drug-dependent and criminogenic behavior. It is in this context that education acquires the significance of a special preventive tool [14].

The theoretical and legal understanding of education as a means of preventing illicit drug trafficking is based on expanding the traditional understanding of the functions of education. Education is not limited to transferring a system of knowledge to a person and the formation of professional competencies. It simultaneously performs socialization, educational, cultural, ideological, legal and preventive functions. Through the educational process, the state creates conditions for the formation of a system of values, legal attitudes, social skills and behavioral models in a person that can reduce the likelihood of his involvement in the illicit trafficking of narcotic drugs [15].

In this aspect, education should be defined as a systematic process of forming and developing knowledge, competencies, values, legal awareness and socially responsible behavior of a person, which, along with the fulfillment of general educational functions, creates

conditions for the prevention of behavioral and social factors that contribute to the use of narcotic drugs and involvement in their illicit trafficking.

This definition allows us to distinguish education as a tool of prevention from individual information campaigns. A one-time message about the dangers of drugs in itself is not a full-fledged educational mechanism. Educational prevention involves a systematic and long-term impact integrated into the overall process of personality development. Its result should be not only an increase in the amount of information possessed by a person, but also the formation of the ability to apply the acquired knowledge in specific life situations.

The theoretical and legal nature of education as a preventive tool can be revealed through its correlation with the main directions of crime prevention. In criminological theory, it is customary to distinguish between general and individual prevention. Education primarily realizes the potential of general prevention, since it is aimed at broad social groups regardless of whether there are signs of illegal behavior in a particular person. At the same time, if risk factors are identified, the educational environment can be an important element of individual prevention through mechanisms of psychological support, social accompaniment, interaction with parents and specialized services [16].

The peculiarity of education is that it affects risk factors before the onset of criminally significant behavior. Criminal legal means mainly come into effect after the commission of a socially dangerous act or at the stage of its direct preparation or termination. Educational prevention, on the contrary, is aimed at forming such a social and legal environment in which the risk of the occurrence of the corresponding behavior is reduced.

This allows us to consider education as a tool of primary prevention. Its main goal is to influence the general determinants of drug behavior: Insufficient level of legal culture, lack of critical thinking skills, low ability to resist group pressure, social isolation, information vulnerability, insufficient awareness of the legal consequences of illicit drug trafficking, and inability to assess behavioral risks.

At the same time, a modern understanding of educational prevention must take into account the changing nature of the drug market itself. In 2021-2026, the use of digital technologies for the distribution of drugs, communication between sellers and buyers, as well as the recruitment of

new participants in illegal activities significantly increased [17]. In such conditions, the traditional model of anti-drug education, which mainly focused on the physical harm of drugs, is insufficient. Modern education should also form digital literacy, skills in recognizing manipulations, the ability to detect hidden drug advertising, and understand the mechanisms of attracting young people to illegal activities [18].

The theoretical and legal significance of education is also manifested through the formation of a person's legal awareness. Illegal drug trafficking is not only a medical or social problem, but also a sphere of legal prohibitions. The criminal code of Ukraine establishes responsibility for the illegal production, manufacture, acquisition, storage, transportation, shipment and sale of narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances or their analogues [19]. Accordingly, a person must understand not only the medical consequences of drug use, but also the legal consequences of his or her own behavior.

In this context, legal education should ensure understanding that participation in illegal drug trafficking can have criminal and legal consequences even when a person does not directly use narcotic drugs. This is of particular importance for young people who may be involved in the activities of the illegal drug market as couriers, persons distributing drugs, administrators of digital channels or performers of other auxiliary functions. Therefore, educational prevention should reveal not only medical risks, but also the legal nature of such actions.

At the same time, excessive focus of educational prevention on criminal liability can have a negative effect. Using only intimidation as the main method of prevention does not meet modern standards of evidence-based prevention. UNODC and WHO emphasize the need to use comprehensive programs aimed at developing personal and social skills, building resilience to risky behavior, and strengthening protective factors [20]. Therefore, criminal law information should be only one component of the educational program.

An important theoretical and legal aspect is also the human rights function of education. The state, when forming a system for preventing illicit drug trafficking, must ensure a balance between the public interest in preventing drug addiction and the rights of the individual. This is especially true for children and youth. Preventive measures should not

create the prerequisites for discrimination or stigmatization of students who demonstrate risky behavior or need psychological and medical assistance.

This leads to an important point: Educational prevention should not be focused on punishing a person for being at risk, but on strengthening their protective factors and providing timely assistance. This approach is consistent with the modern concept of human rights and international standards of prevention [20].

Education as a preventive tool also has significant potential in building social resilience. Studies by international organizations show that effective prevention should work not only with information about drugs, but also with factors that influence the behavior of young people. Such factors include the family environment, relationships with peers, the ability to control emotions, conflict resolution skills, self-esteem, social competence, and the ability to resist pressure [21].

That is why modern educational prevention should be considered as a multi-level process that includes informational, legal, social, psychological, and digital components. The informational component involves providing reliable information about drugs and the consequences of their use. The legal component forms an understanding of prohibitions and legal responsibility. The social component is aimed at developing social competencies and positive interaction models. The psychological component involves the formation of resilience to stress, group pressure and risky behavior. The digital component is aimed at countering online recruitment and manipulative information influence.

In 2021-2026, the adaptation of educational prevention to the conditions of war in Ukraine also becomes of particular importance. The full-scale war has caused large-scale social transformations, population displacement, loss of familiar social ties, increased psychological stress and changes in the conditions of the functioning of the education system. Accordingly, prevention programs must take into account the specific vulnerability factors of children and youth who are in conditions of prolonged stress, forced displacement or social instability [22].

In a theoretical and legal aspect, this means that education should be considered not only as a means of transferring knowledge, but as an element of a mechanism for ensuring

public safety and protecting human rights. The state, through educational policy, creates the prerequisites for the formation of lawful behavior, and therefore has a preventive impact on the social factors of crime. At the same time, education cannot be considered as a universal means of overcoming the illicit trafficking of narcotic drugs. Its effectiveness depends on the quality of regulatory regulation, professional training of teachers, the availability of psychological and social support, the availability of medical care, the effectiveness of law enforcement activities and the coherence of the state anti-drug policy. Therefore, education must be integrated into the system of public administration and interagency cooperation.

From an administrative and legal point of view, this means the need to clearly define the powers of state authorities and local governments, educational institutions, children's services, health care authorities, social services and law enforcement agencies. Lack of proper coordination between these actors can lead to fragmentation of preventive activities, duplication of functions or, conversely, gaps in the early response system.

Thus, the theoretical and legal characteristics of education as a means of preventing illegal drug trafficking allows to define it as an independent preventive tool of the state

anti-drug policy, aimed at forming legal awareness, social stability, critical thinking, digital security and lawful behavior of a person, as well as early identification and minimization of risk factors that can contribute to drug addiction and involvement in illegal drug trafficking.

Its fundamental difference from the criminal-legal response lies in the temporal and functional focus: The criminal law establishes prohibitions and provides a response to socially dangerous behavior, while education creates the prerequisites for such behavior not to form. That is why education should occupy a proper place in the system of general and primary prevention of illegal drug trafficking [23].

Summarizing, we can propose the following structure of preventive influence: Legal education → formation of legal awareness → development of socio-psychological stability → formation of digital security → early identification of risk factors → social and medical support → administrative response → criminal-legal countermeasures. It is this sequence that corresponds to the modern understanding of comprehensive state policy in the field of drug crime prevention and allows ensuring a balance between preventive, social, administrative and criminal law measures (Table 1).

Table 1: Legal characteristics of education as a means of preventing illicit drug trafficking.

Legal characteristic	Content	Preventive value	Main implementing entities
Education as a means of primary prevention	Systematic formation of knowledge, values, competencies and models of lawful behavior before the emergence of drug addiction or criminogenic behavior	Allows influence on risk factors before they transform into illegal behavior	Educational institutions, education management bodies, teachers, psychologists, parents
Legal educational function	Formation of knowledge about legal prohibitions, legal responsibility for illicit drug trafficking and mechanisms for protecting rights	Reduces legal ignorance and the risk of involvement in illegal activities	Educational institutions, education bodies, law enforcement agencies, public organizations
Informational and educational function	Providing reliable information about drugs, psychoactive substances, the consequences of their use and the risks of illicit trafficking	Forms a conscious attitude towards drugs and the ability to assess the consequences of behavior	Educators, medical workers, psychologists, social workers
Socialization function	Formation of socially acceptable models of behavior, responsibility, mutual respect and the ability to interact constructively with others	Reduces the impact of a negative social environment and group pressure	Educational institutions, family, social services, public organizations
Psychological and preventive function	Development of emotional stability, stress management skills, critical thinking and safe decision-making	Increases the individual's resistance to factors that may contribute to drug addiction	Psychologists, teachers, social workers, medical institutions
Formation of critical thinking	Development of the ability to critically evaluate information about drugs and recognize manipulative influence	Reduces the susceptibility of young people to drug propaganda and manipulative advertising	Educational institutions, teachers, psychologists, media education centers

Digital and preventive function	Formation of skills for safe behavior on the Internet, recognition of online recruitment, hidden advertising and digital channels of illicit drug trafficking	Counters modern forms of involving young people in the illegal drug market through social networks and messengers	Educational institutions, education bodies, cyber police, parents, public organizations
Early preventive function	Identification of the first signs of risky behavior and timely involvement of psychological, social or medical assistance	Prevents the transition of experimental or risky behavior into addiction or criminal activity	Educational institutions, psychologists, social services, medical institutions
Legal socialization function	Formation of respect for the law, awareness of the social danger of illicit drug trafficking and responsibility for its implementation	Promotes the formation of sustainable lawful behavior	Educational institutions, family, law enforcement agencies
Anti-criminogenic function	Influence on factors that may contribute to the involvement of a person in the illegal production, purchase, storage, transportation or sale of narcotic drugs	Prevents the formation of criminogenic motivation and the involvement of youth in the drug market	Educational institutions, law enforcement agencies, social services
Interdepartmental function	Interaction of education with health care, social protection, law enforcement agencies and the public sector	Ensures the comprehensiveness of prevention and eliminates the fragmentation of response	State authorities, local governments, education, medicine, police
Human rights protection function	Combining preventive activities with ensuring the rights, freedoms and legitimate interests of education seekers	Prevents the stigmatization and discrimination of children and youth with risky behavior	Educational institutions, children's services, social and medical institutions
Family and preventive function	Involving parents in the formation of a safe environment and timely response to risky behavior	Strengthens protective factors and ensures the continuity of preventive impact	Parents, educational institutions, psychologists, social services
Adaptation function	Adapting preventive programs to new social, digital and security conditions	Ensures the relevance of prevention in conditions of war, digitalization and transformation of the drug market	State authorities, educational institutions, scientific institutions
Evidence function	Using preventive programs whose effectiveness is confirmed by scientific research and practice	Enables the transition from formal implementation of measures to assessing their real impact	Authorities education, scientific institutions, educational institutions
Control and evaluation function	Monitoring the effectiveness of preventive programs and assessing changes in the behavior of target groups	Allows timely changes to ineffective programs and rational use of resources	Educational bodies, scientific institutions, state control bodies

The table shows that education as a means of preventing illicit drug trafficking is multifunctional. Its preventive potential is not limited to informing about the harmfulness of drugs. It includes the formation of legal awareness, social and psychological competencies, digital security, mechanisms for early detection of risks and ensuring interaction between educational, medical, social and law enforcement institutions.

It is especially important that in the conditions of 2021-2026, the digital preventive function acquires independent significance. The modern illegal drug market uses digital technologies for communication, advertising, finding customers and recruiting performers, which necessitates the inclusion of digital literacy and skills of safe behavior on the Internet in the anti-drug education system.

In turn, the evidentiary and control and evaluation functions

allow the traditional prevention model to be improved. International standards emphasize that effective prevention should be based on scientific data, be systematic and correspond to the age and social characteristics of target groups [24]. Therefore, the criterion for the effectiveness of educational prevention should not be the number of lectures, conversations or information campaigns conducted, but the ability of such measures to actually reduce risk factors and form sustainable models of lawful and safe behavior.

Therefore, in the theoretical and legal sense, it is advisable to consider education as a comprehensive preventive tool that operates at the pre-criminal stage, forming legal awareness, social stability and safe behavioral models, as well as ensuring the early detection of risk factors. At the same time, its effectiveness directly depends on integration with administrative-legal, social, medical and criminal-legal mechanisms for combating illicit drug trafficking.

Conclusion

The conducted study of education as a tool for preventing illicit drug trafficking gives grounds to assert that modern counteraction to drug crime cannot be limited to criminal law and law enforcement measures. Illegal drug trafficking is a complex socio-legal phenomenon determined by a set of social, economic, psychological, informational, cultural and legal factors. Under such conditions, education acquires an independent preventive value, since it allows influencing risk factors even before the formation of drug addiction, deviant or criminal behavior.

Theoretical and legal analysis allowed defining education as a systematic process of forming knowledge, legal awareness, social, psychological and behavioral competencies of a person, aimed, along with the implementation of general educational tasks, at minimizing risk factors that may lead to the use of drugs and the involvement of a person in their illicit trafficking. This approach allows us to move away from the simplified understanding of anti-drug education exclusively as informing about the harmfulness of drugs.

It has been established that the preventive potential of education is realized through a set of interrelated functions: Informational and educational, legal education, socialization, psychological and preventive, legal socialization, anti-criminogenic, digital and preventive, early prevention, human rights and interdepartmental. Their comprehensive application ensures the formation of a person not only knowledge about drugs, but also the ability to resist group pressure, critically evaluate information, recognize manipulations and risks of the digital environment, realize the legal consequences of illegal behavior and seek timely help.

The use of a systemic method has made it possible to establish that education is the primary link in a multi-level mechanism for preventing illicit drug trafficking. Its effectiveness depends on the interaction of educational institutions with state and local government bodies, health care institutions, social services, law enforcement agencies, families and public organizations. Accordingly, educational prevention should be considered not as an autonomous activity of an educational institution, but as a component of an interagency system of public administration in the field of drug crime prevention.

The digital transformation of the illegal drug market has

gained particular importance in 2021-2026. The use of social networks, messengers, online platforms and other digital channels creates new ways of advertising drugs, recruiting young people and involving them in illegal activities. In this regard, traditional anti-drug education needs to be supplemented with a digital component, which should include skills for safe behavior on the Internet, recognition of hidden drug advertising, manipulative content, online recruitment and other forms of digital influence.

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Conflict of Interest

Authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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