

SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND ADDICTION

in Northern Syria

Second Edition



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1- Introduction

Before the Syrian Revolution (2011), Syria primarily acted as a transit route for narcotics coming from Afghanistan, Iran, and Lebanon, destined for Gulf countries. However, with the conflict's onset, Captagon, a stimulant, became widely used, particularly among fighters who relied on it to endure the hardships of the battlefield. Since then, the Syrian regime and its affiliated militias have increasingly engaged in the production and trafficking of narcotics, particularly Captagon. These substances are largely produced in regime-controlled areas and exported via state-controlled ports, becoming an essential revenue stream for financing military operations and sustaining militias.

The narcotics trade has expanded beyond Syria's borders, creating growing regional security concerns. Iran-backed militias and Hezbollah have become involved in the trade, further complicating efforts to combat its spread. The revenues from narcotics trafficking, estimated to be worth billions, have increased the regime's reliance on this illicit trade.

The Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU) conducted the first edition of this study in March 2022. The report served as a key reference for the WHO PSS Working Group, which leveraged the findings to discern the impacts of drug abuse and addiction. This facilitated the mobilization and acceleration of intervention efforts.

In October 2024, the ACU conducted the second edition on narcotic substance abuse in NS. The report highlights the prevalence of drug use and explores the socioeconomic factors contributing to it, such as poverty and trauma. Additionally, it examines the mechanisms of narcotics trafficking in the region. The findings are essential for understanding the scope of the drug crisis and its implications for the region's security and stability.

2- Executive Summary

The ACU conducted a comprehensive study in October 2024 to assess the prevalence and impacts of narcotic substance abuse in NS. Data was collected from 3,150 participants across 326 communities and 304 camps, revealing the growing severity of drug use and its socioeconomic consequences. Furthermore, a lack of awareness campaigns, ineffective accountability mechanisms, and economic hardships exacerbate the crisis. Major findings are listed here:

- 62% of respondents identified drug abuse as an increasing problem, demanding a coordinated strategy involving authorities, humanitarian organizations, and local leaders.
- 77% reported no addiction treatment centers in their areas, with only 1% stating that such centers are available and effective.
- 54% confirmed the absence of awareness campaigns, while 37% deemed existing campaigns insufficient, necessitating widespread educational initiatives targeting youth and vulnerable groups.
- 40% described accountability mechanisms as ineffective and lacking transparency, with only 38% viewing them as effective.
- 84% admitted they are unfamiliar with accountability and punishment mechanisms for drug-related crimes.
- Synthetic drugs were cited by 57% as the most common, with 38% identifying regime-controlled areas as their primary source and 25% pointing to regions under Iranian militia influence.
- 65% reported that chemical substance abuse, such as gasoline or glue, is not prevalent in their areas, while 10% noted it as common.
- 19% attributed drug use to escaping harsh realities, while 16% cited deteriorating economic conditions and lack of job opportunities as major drivers.
- 16% reported family disintegration as a key social impact, alongside increased domestic violence (13%) and rising suicide rates (12%).
- 26% highlighted high unemployment and homelessness as significant economic impacts of drug abuse.
- 40% ranked secret drug sales through acquaintances as the most common mechanism for obtaining narcotics, followed by 19% who cited social media platforms.
- 89% of respondents stated they had never tried drugs, but 8% admitted to having tried them once.

The recommendations focus on launching awareness campaigns, expanding rehabilitation centers, and strengthening accountability mechanisms. They emphasize addressing root causes like poverty, creating job opportunities, enhancing coordination to combat trafficking, and providing specialized training. Sports programs and strict regulation of pharmacies are also key to reducing drug abuse.

3- Methodology

This study was conducted using a representative population sample, addressing the lack of reliable data from centers on substance abuse and its prevalence in Syria. The focus was on assessing community awareness of substance abuse and attitudes toward abusers. The study encompassed 326 communities, including cities and towns, as well as 304 camps. Criteria were established to target five communities per sub-district, including sub-district centers and four additional communities where narcotic substance use was expected to be widespread. Additionally, seven camps from each cluster were included.

Surveys were conducted with males and females aged 15 and above, incorporating respondents from diverse educational, professional, displacement, and marital backgrounds. The survey was collaboratively designed by Hope Revival Organization and WHO PSS Working Group experts to comprehensively address the spread of narcotic substances in Syria. To ensure the accuracy of data collection, The ACU provided one-day online training for enumerators via the Zoom platform. This training equipped them with the necessary skills to conduct the study effectively.

4- General Information

The study covered 630 communities and camps, including 3,150 participants. 79% live outside camps, while 21% reside within camps. Participants included 70% males and 29% females. Marital status showed 73% married, 22% single, 4% widowed, and 2% divorced. Additionally, 93% reported no disabilities, while 7% stated having disabilities affecting daily activities.

Region		# Town/city	# Camp	# interviews	# Female	# Male
Eastern Syria	Al-Hasakeh	4	0	468	154	313
	Ar-Raqqa	2	0	150	52	98
	Deir ez-Zor	3	0	153	52	101
	The Eastern countryside of Aleppo	2	0	179	49	113
Western Syria	Idleb	218	213	1369	359	1008
	Ras Al ain and Tell Abiad	2	0	152	44	108
	The Northern countryside of Aleppo	69	66	430	126	304
	Afrin	26	25	249	74	169
	Total	326	304	3150	910	2214

The survey shows that 63% (1,998 individuals) are employed, and 37% (1,152 individuals) are unemployed, with jobs ranging from agriculture and handicrafts to industry, students, fighters, and police.

The education levels in the sample, with a significant portion having university (35%) or high school (24%), suggest that the survey includes a well-educated population likely to have a deeper understanding of drug use, health, and societal issues.

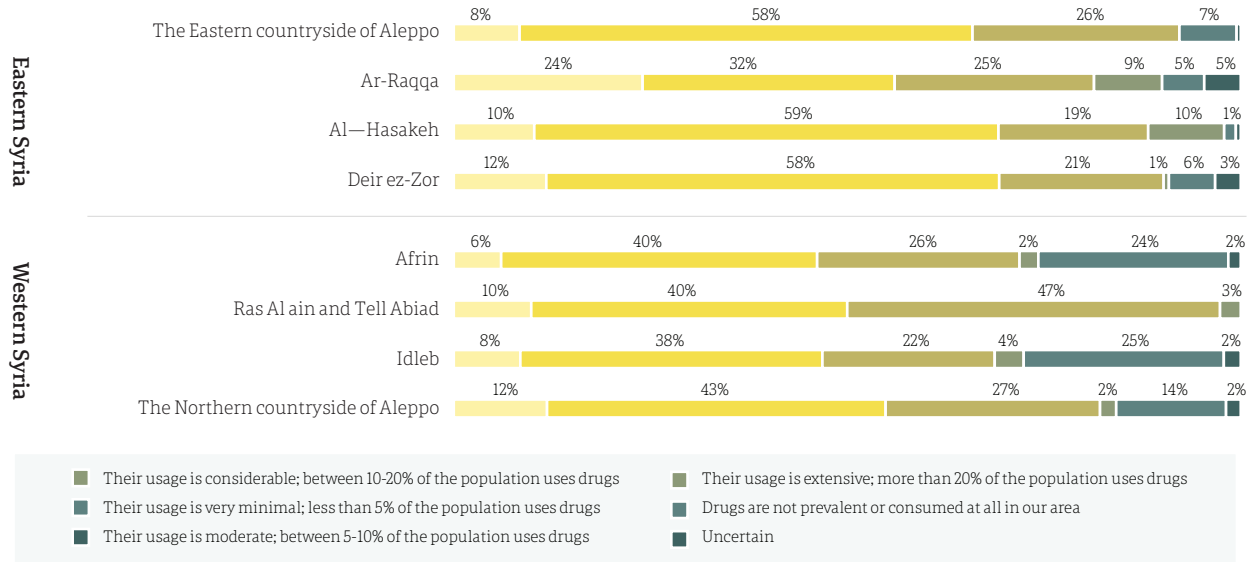
5- Spread of Narcotic Substances

1. The Degree of Spread of Narcotic Substances

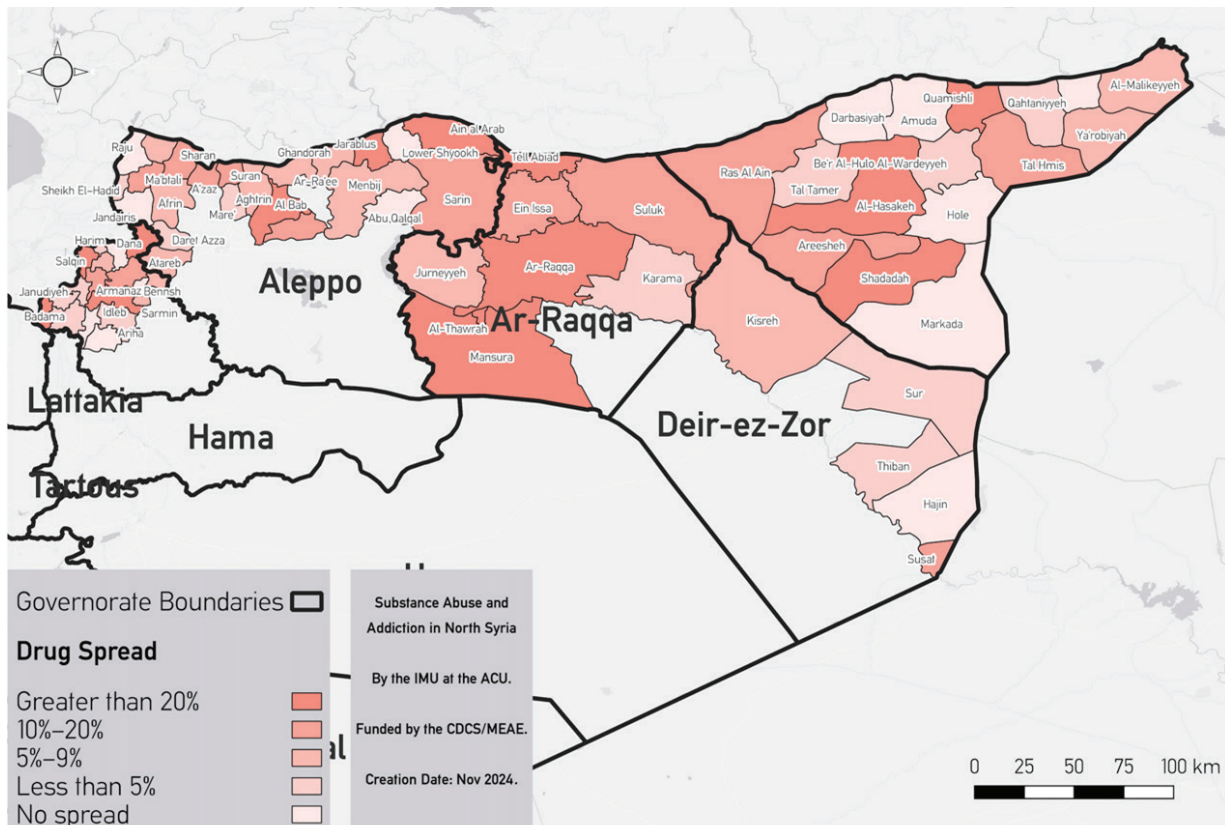
Prevalence and Narcotic Substances in Participant Area

The survey reveals that 44% of respondents see drug use as minimal (under 5% of the population), 24% as moderate (5-10%), and 16% report none. Additionally, 10% view it as considerable (10-20%), 4% as extensive (over 20%), and 2% as uncertain.

Figure 01: Prevalence and Narcotic Substances



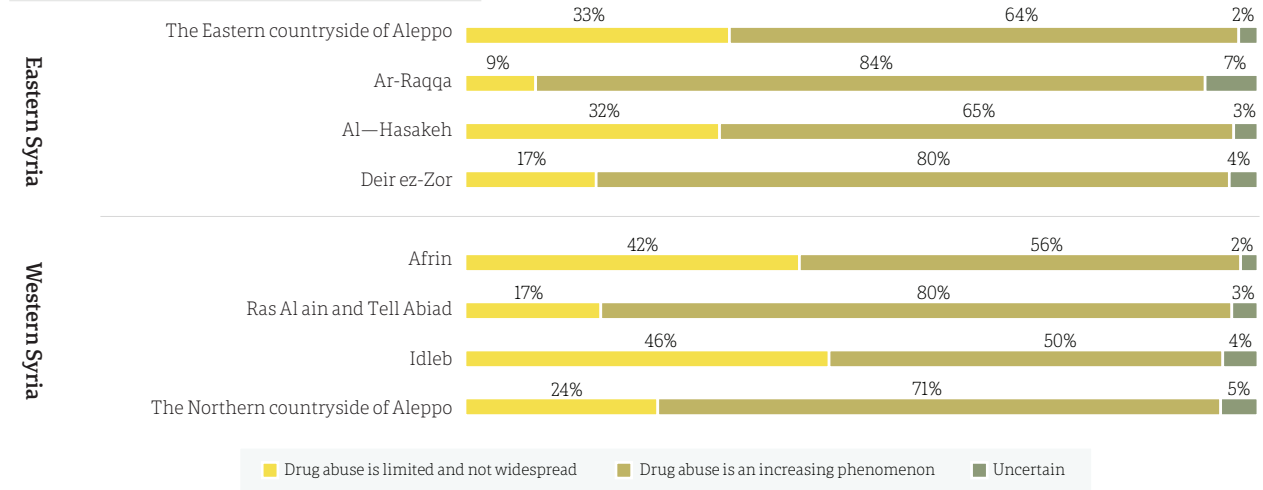
Map 01: Percentages of drug spread at subdistrict level



The Growing Trend of Drug Abuse in the Area

The survey reveals that 62% of respondents perceive drug abuse as an increasing phenomenon, while 34% believe it is limited and not yet widespread. A small portion, 4%, are uncertain about the situation. The highest prevalence of drug abuse is reported in Ar-Raqqa, Deir-ez-Zor, and Northern Aleppo. This edition highlights a significant increase in the spread of drug abuse compared to the first edition in March 2022, where only 26% of respondents reported it as increasing and widespread.

Figure 02: The Growing Trend of Drug Abuse in the Area

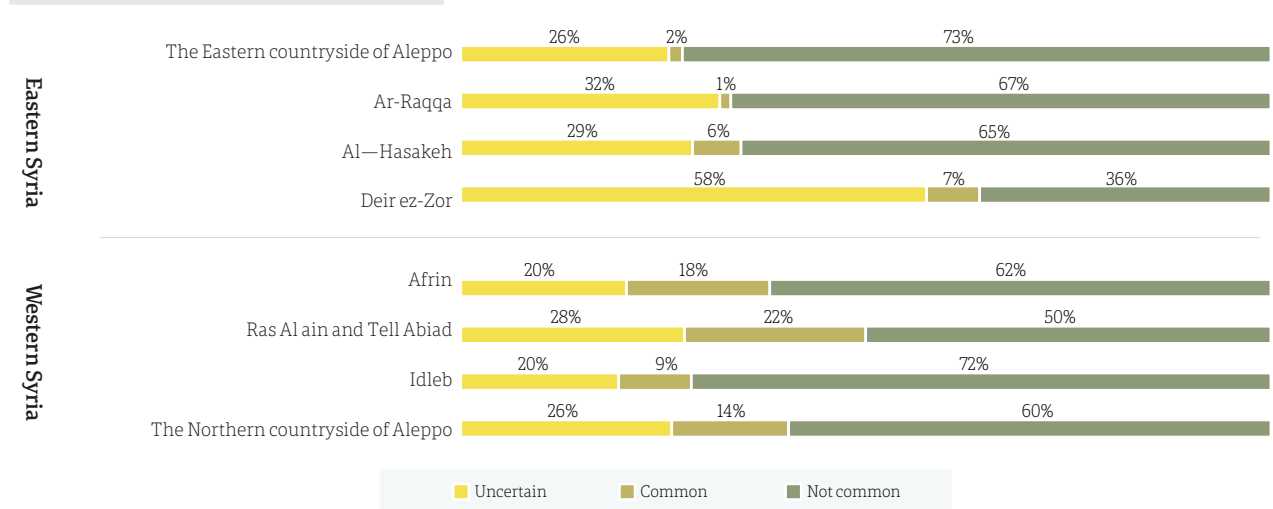


2. Types of the most spread narcotic substances

Prevalence of Chemical Substance Abuse, Such as Gasoline or Glue, in the Participant Area

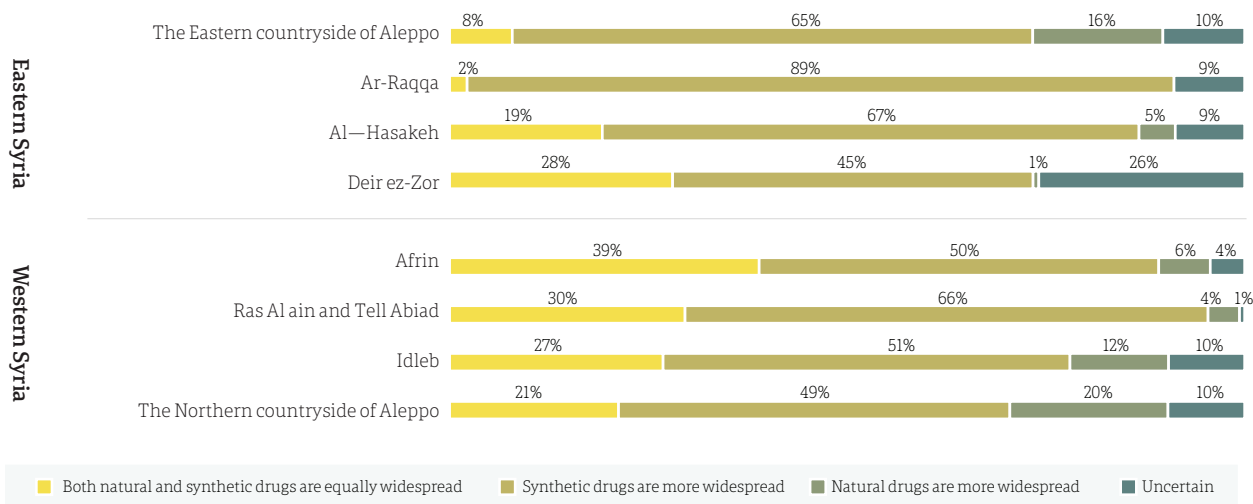
The survey shows that 65% of respondents believe that using chemicals like gasoline for drug abuse is uncommon in their area, while 10% think it is common. In March 2022, 24% of respondents confirmed the widespread use of chemical substances. This shift may suggest a growing preference for narcotics due to their greater accessibility. Additionally, 25% of respondents remain uncertain.

Figure 03: Prevalence of Chemical Substance Abuse



The survey reveals that 57% of respondents find synthetic drugs more widespread, 23% see equal prevalence of natural and synthetic drugs, 9% view natural drugs as more common, and 10% are uncertain. These figures are pretty close to the figures reported in the March 2022 edition.

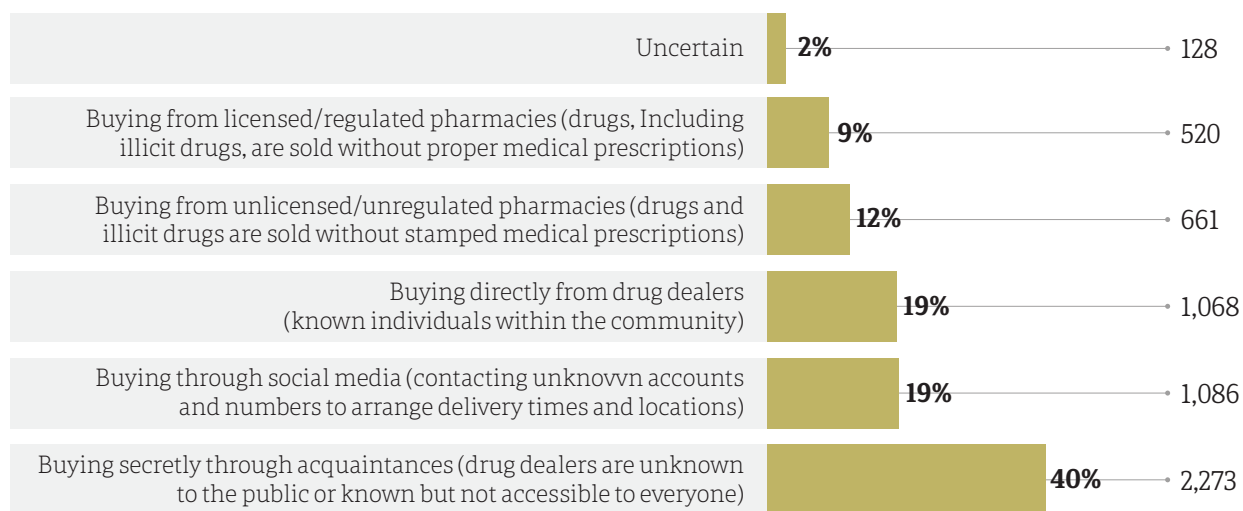
Figure 04: Prevalence of Natural vs. Synthetic Drugs



3. Mechanisms for the Spread of Narcotic Substances

The survey indicates that the most common method for obtaining drugs is secretly through acquaintances, accounting for 40% of responses. Meanwhile, direct purchases from drug dealers and through social media each make up 19%, highlighting diverse and primarily informal drug acquisition channels within the community. Notably, secret drug purchases have decreased by 6% compared to March 2022, while direct purchases from drug dealers have increased by 6%. This shift highlights the growing prevalence of drug trade and underscores the ineffectiveness or absence of prevention mechanisms.

Figure 05: Methods of Obtaining Drug

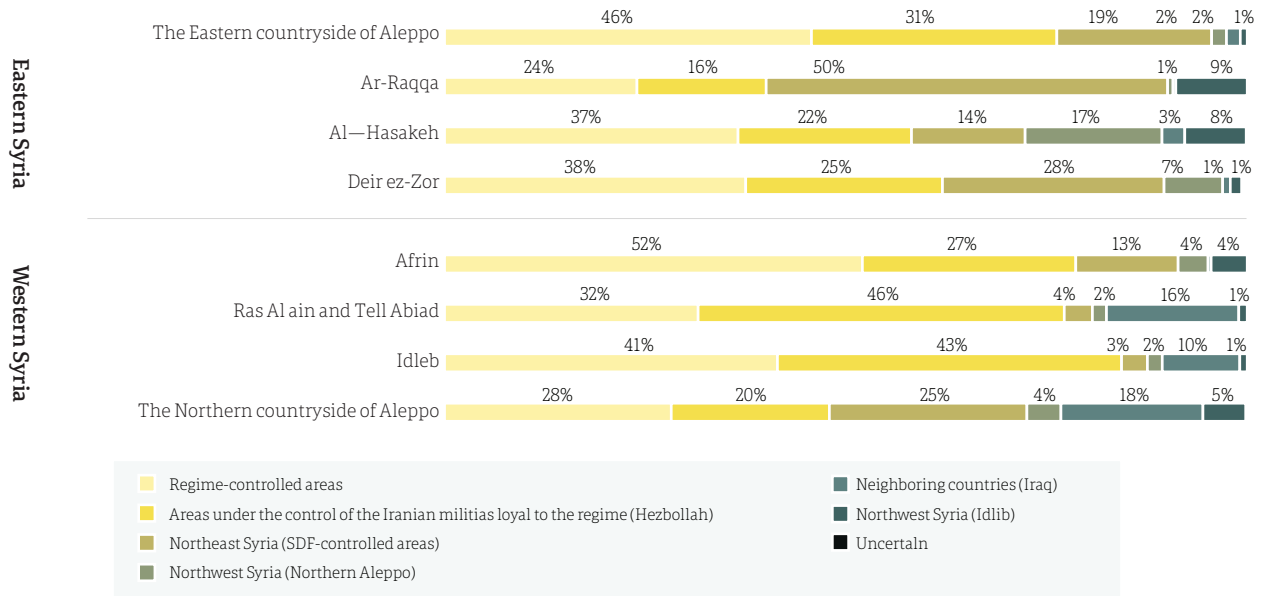


6- Sources of Narcotic Substances

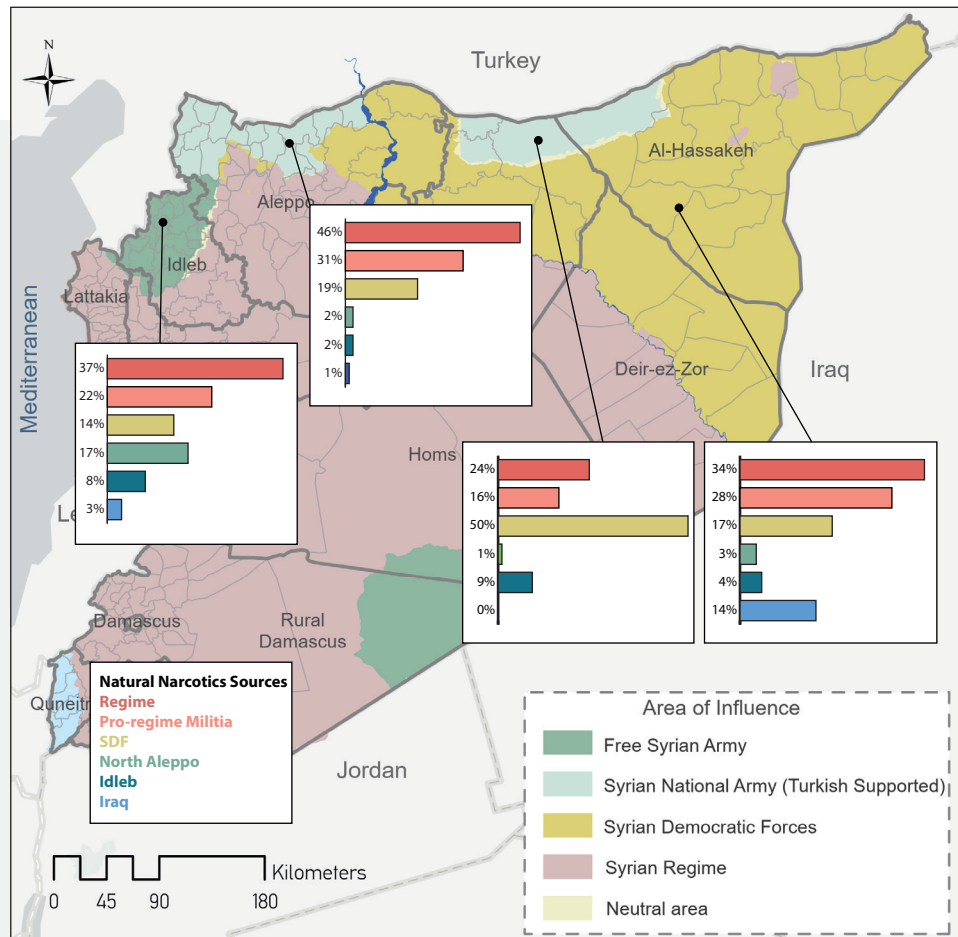
1. Natural Narcotic Substances (Plants)

Regime-controlled areas were reported as the primary source by 36% (1,924), followed by areas under Iranian militia control (Hezbollah) at 25% (1,313). Northeast Syria (SDF-controlled areas) accounted for 19% (994), while Northwest Syria (Northern Aleppo) represented 9% (469). Neighboring countries like Iraq contributed 6% (322), and Northwest Syria (Idlib) made up 5% (270). Notably, sources from regime-controlled and pro-militia areas reported a significant increase from 48% in March 2022 to 61% in this edition, while sources from SDF-controlled areas, Northern Aleppo, and Greater Idlib saw a decrease of 3-5% compared to the previous edition. Also, there was a significant decrease in drugs coming from SDF areas to Ras Al Ain and Tall Abiad (RAATA) (-20%) and the eastern countryside of Aleppo (-77%), replaced by sources from the regime and their affiliated militias.

Figure 06: Sources of Natural Narcotic Substances



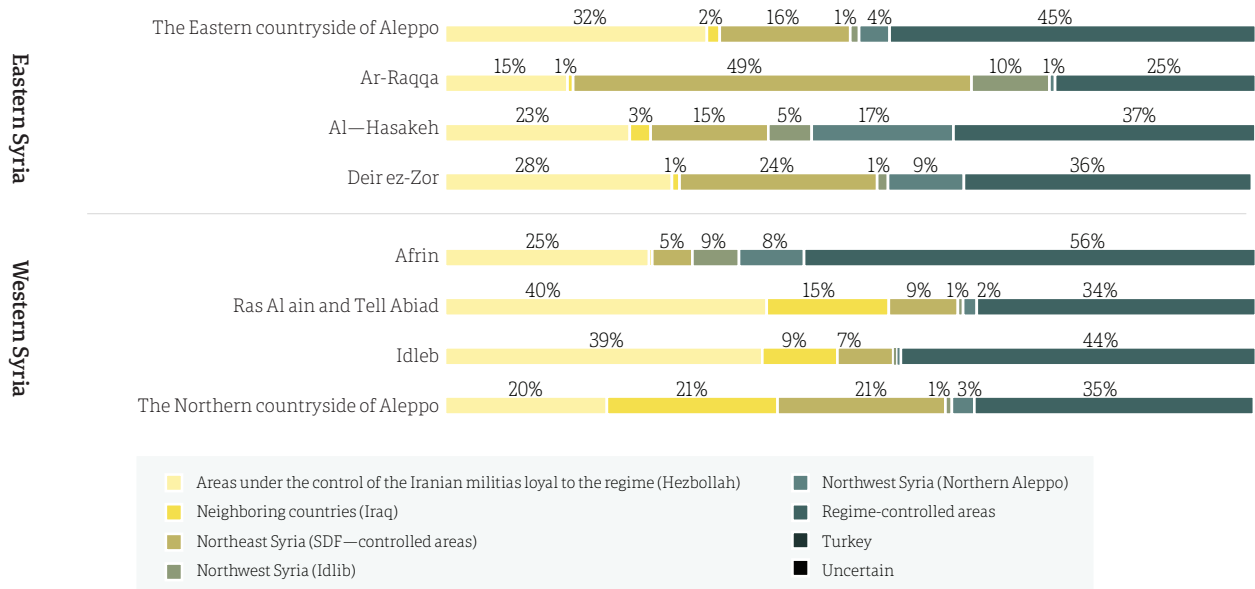
Map 02: Sources of Natural Narcotics Drugs



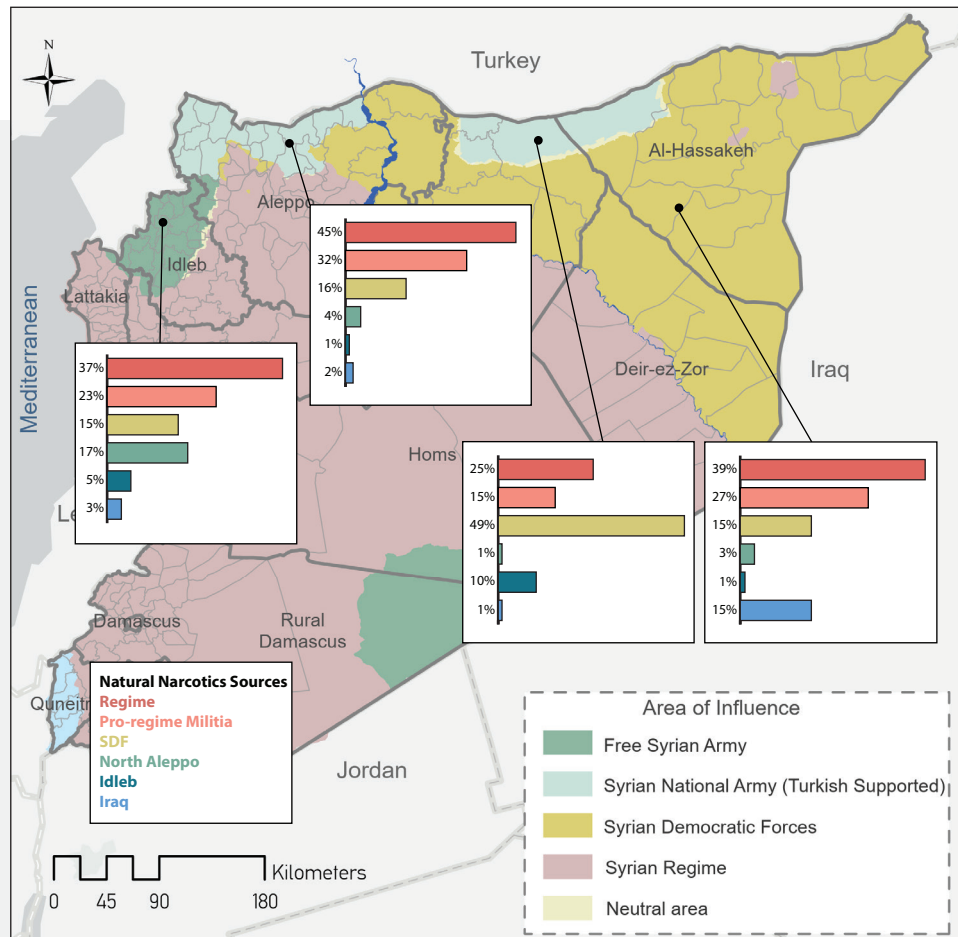
2. Synthetic Narcotic Substances (Chemical)

Regime-controlled areas are reported as the primary source by 38% (2,089), followed by areas under Iranian militia control (Hezbollah) at 25% (1,390). Northeast Syria (SDF-controlled areas) accounts for 17% (955), while Northwest Syria (Northern Aleppo) represents 9% (518). Neighboring countries like Iraq contribute 6% (350), and Northwest Syria (Idleb) makes up 3% (188). Notably, sources from regime-controlled and militia-affiliated areas have increased from 57% to 63%, while sources from SDF-controlled areas, Northern Aleppo, and Greater Idleb have decreased by 3-5%. Additionally, synthetic narcotic drugs maintained the same proportion in RATTA from SDF-controlled areas. However, there was a significant 49% decrease in eastern Aleppo for sources from SDF-controlled areas, shifting in favor of regime-controlled areas and their affiliated militias.

Figure 07: Sources of Synthetic Narcotic Substances



Map 03: Sources of Synthetic Narcotic Drugs

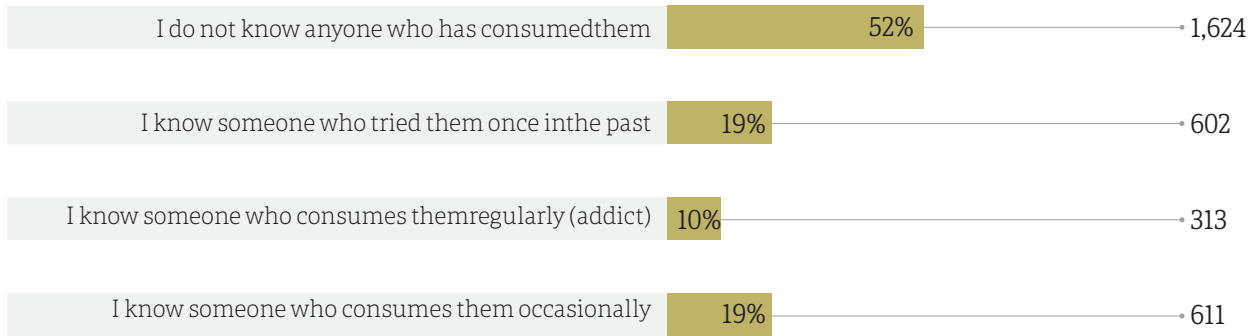


7- Categories of Narcotic Substances Abusers

1. Prevalence of Narcotic Substances Abusers

The survey reveals that 52% of respondents do not know anyone who has used drugs (compared to 44% reported in March 2022), whereas 19% know someone who tried drugs once (compared to 20% reported in March 2022), and another 19% know occasional users (compared to 14% reported in March 2022),. Only 10% are aware of regular drug users (addicts) in their surroundings (compared to 22% reported in March 2022). Notably, there is a marked 12% decrease in awareness of regular abusers and a 5% increase in occasional users.

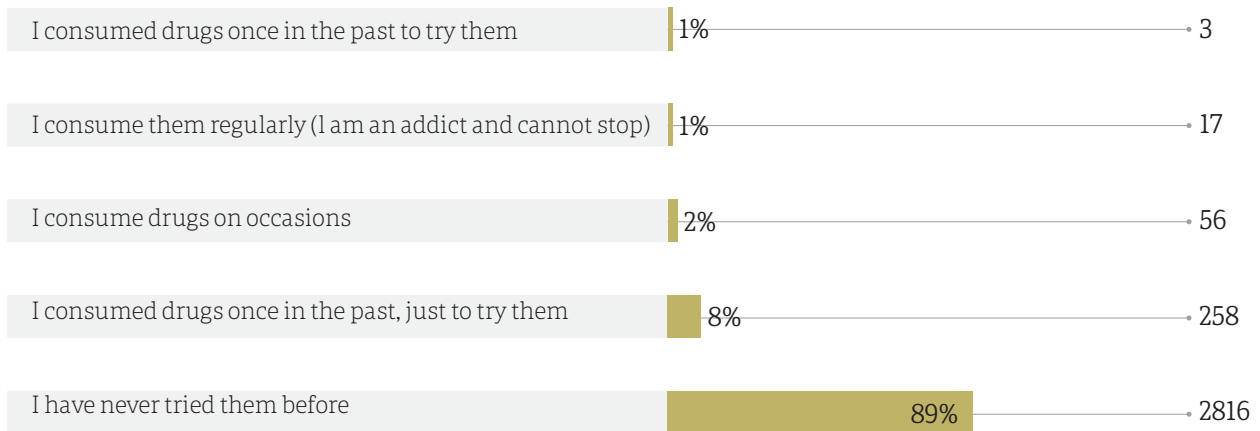
Figure 08: Prevalence of Drug Use Among Participant's Surroundings



2. History of Drug Use Among Participants

The survey shows that 89% of participants have never tried drugs (compared to 80% reported in March 2022), 8% tried them once in the past just to experiment, 2% use drugs occasionally, and 1% are regular users admitting to addiction.

Figure 09: Drug Use Among Participants



3. Gender and Its Relation to Awareness of Drug Users

The survey shows a gender gap in drug use knowledge, with males more aware of regular or occasional users than females. Also, 64% of respondents are unaware of any substance use, indicating potential underreporting or hidden drug activity.

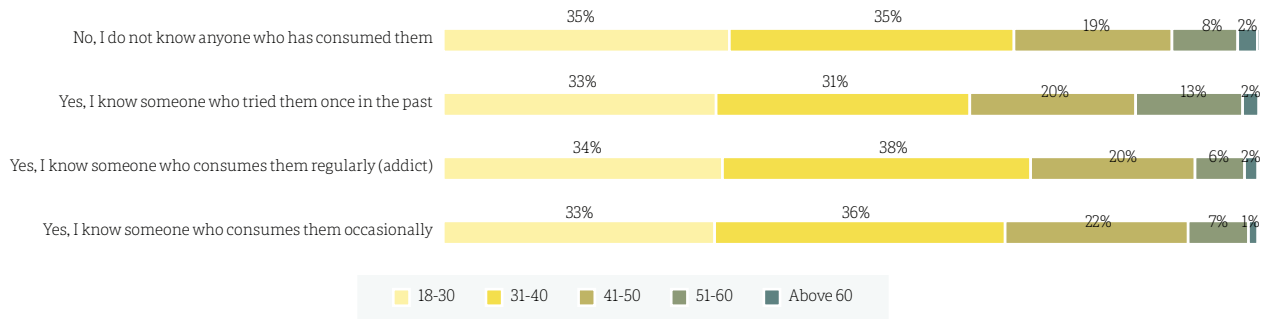
Figure 10: Respondents' Gender and Its Relation to Awareness of Drug



4. Age-Based Differences in Awareness of Narcotic Use Among

The survey reveals that awareness of narcotic use varies by age group, with younger respondents (18-30 and 31-40) being more likely to know regular (34%-38%) and occasional users (33%-36%). Older respondents (51-60 and above 60) are significantly less aware. This suggests higher exposure to drug-related behavior among younger and middle-aged individuals compared to older age groups.

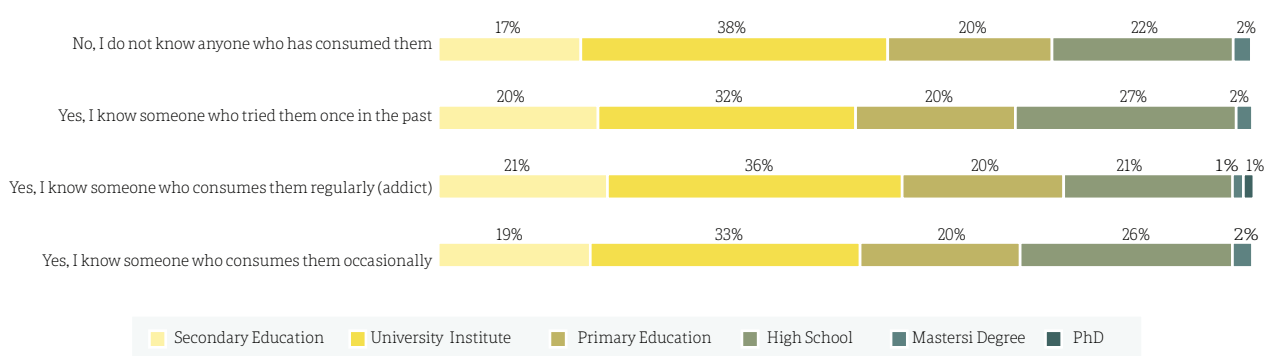
Figure 11: Age-Based Differences in Awareness of Narcotic Use Among Respondents



5. Respondents' Educational Background and Its Relation to Awareness of Drug Use

The survey reveals that high school graduates (27%) and university graduates (32%) are most likely to know individuals who have experimented with drugs at least once. Additionally, university graduates (36%) and those with high school or secondary education (21% each) are more likely to know regular users. Moreover, occasional users are often known by individuals with high school (26%) or university degrees (33%), indicating that drug use extends across both university-aged individuals and younger populations.

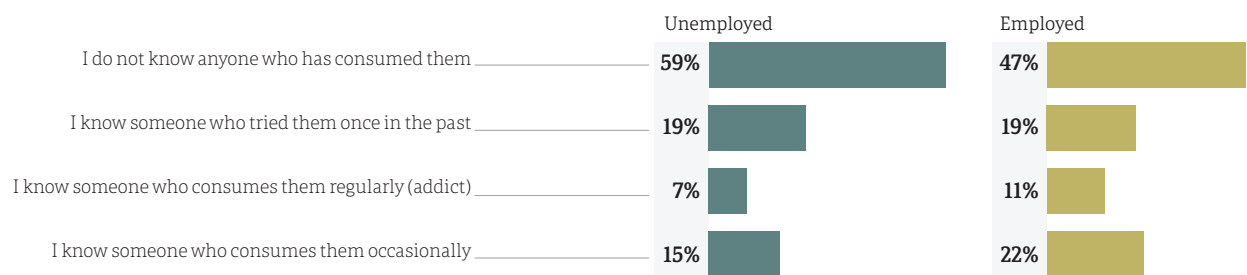
Figure 12: Respondents' Educational Background and Its Relation to Awareness of Drug Use



6. Respondents' Employment Status and Its Relation to Awareness of Drug Use

The survey shows a correlation between employment and awareness of drug use: 59% of unemployed respondents are unaware of any drug use compared to 47% of employed ones. Employed individuals report higher awareness of both occasional and regular drug use, suggesting employment status may influence exposure to drug use environments.

Figure 13: Respondents' Employment Status and Its Relation to Awareness of Drug Use

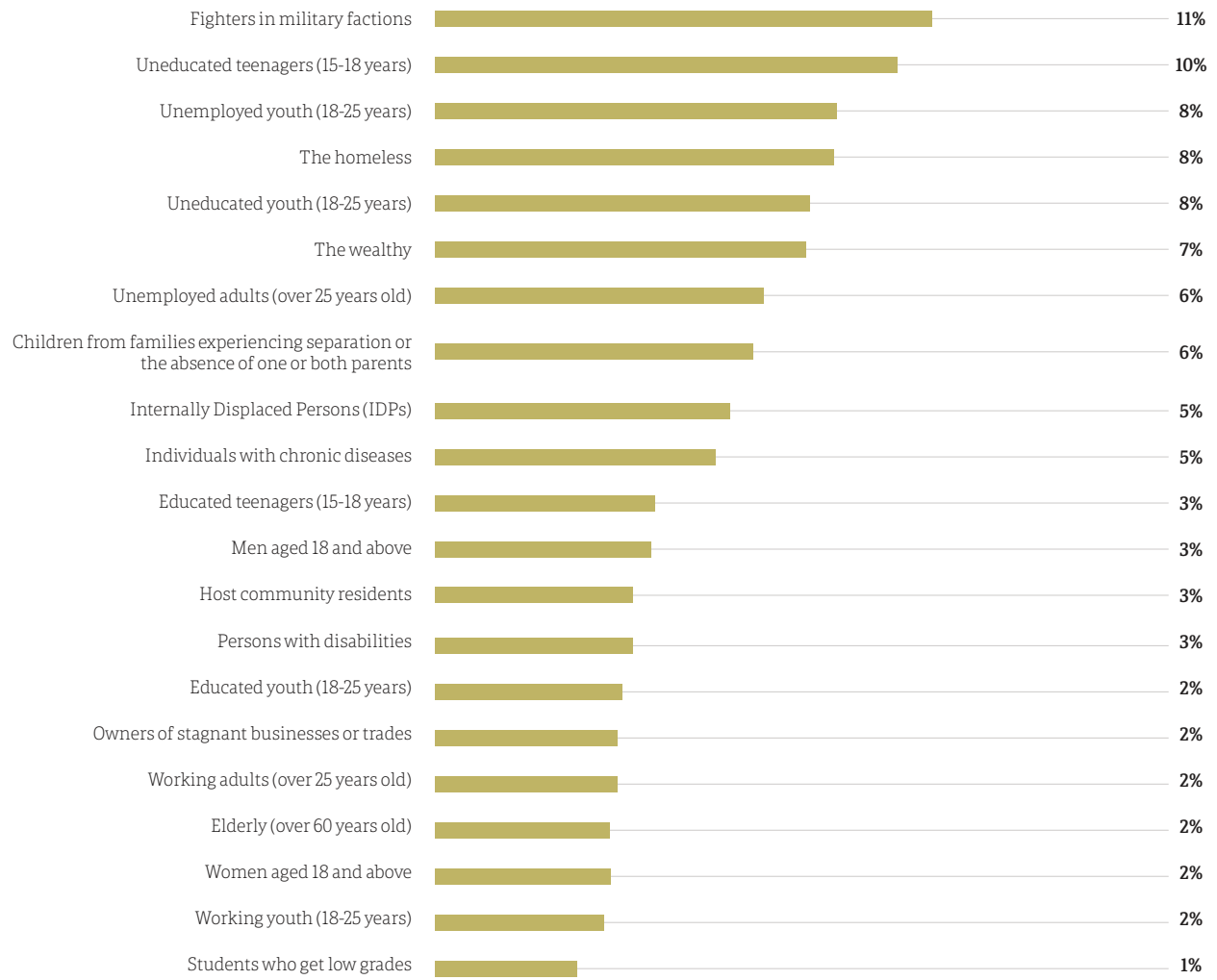


7. Categories of Society That Use Narcotic Substances

The survey identifies fighters in military factions (11%), uneducated teenagers aged 15-18 years (10%), and unemployed youth aged 18-25 years, along with the homeless and uneducated youth aged 18-25 (8% each), as the primary groups reported to use drugs in the community. This highlights a significant correlation between drug use and factors like unemployment and lack of education among young people.

Notably, there is an 8% decrease in the number of fighter addicts compared to the March 2022 survey.

Figure 14: Categories of Society That Use Narcotic Substances

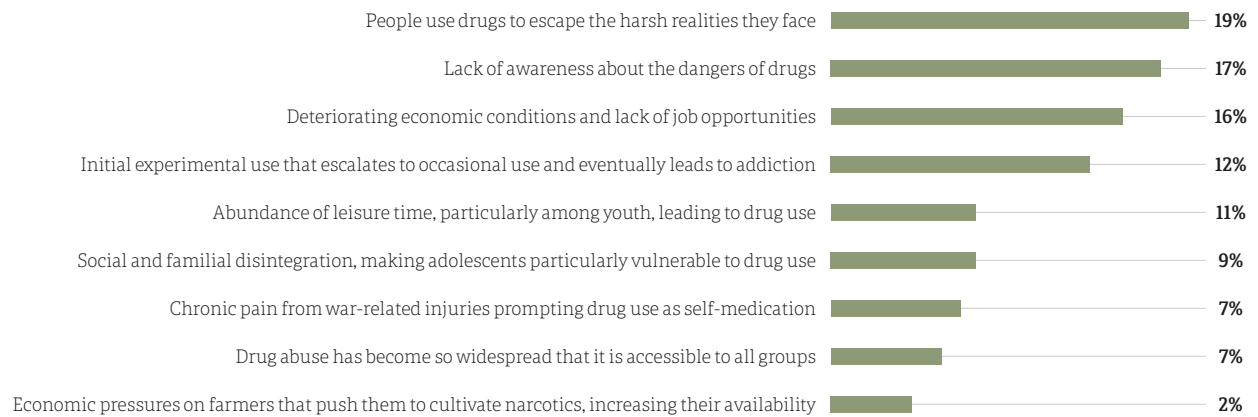


8- Reasons for the Spread of Narcotic Substances and Their Effects

1. Reasons for the Spread of Narcotic Substances

The survey reveals key factors contributing to drug abuse in the region, highlighting that 19% of respondents cite using drugs to escape harsh realities as the top reason. Other significant factors include a lack of awareness about drug dangers (17%) and deteriorating economic conditions (16%). Lesser factors include leisure time abundance (11%) and social disintegration (9%).

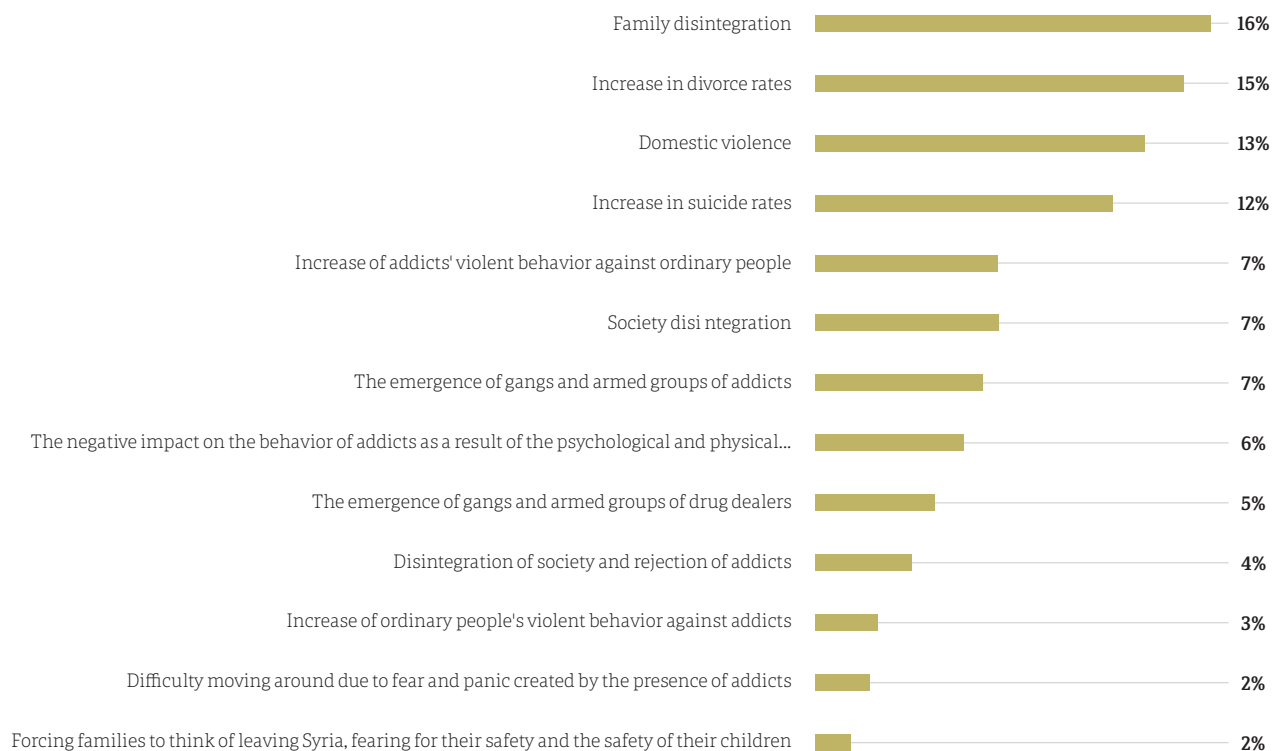
Figure 15: Reasons for the Spread of Narcotic Substances



2. Psychosocial impacts of the spread of narcotic substances

The survey highlights the most significant socio-psychological impacts of drug use, showing family disintegration (16%), increased divorce rates (15%), and domestic violence (13%) as the top consequences. These issues underscore the deep and varied societal challenges posed by drug abuse in the community.

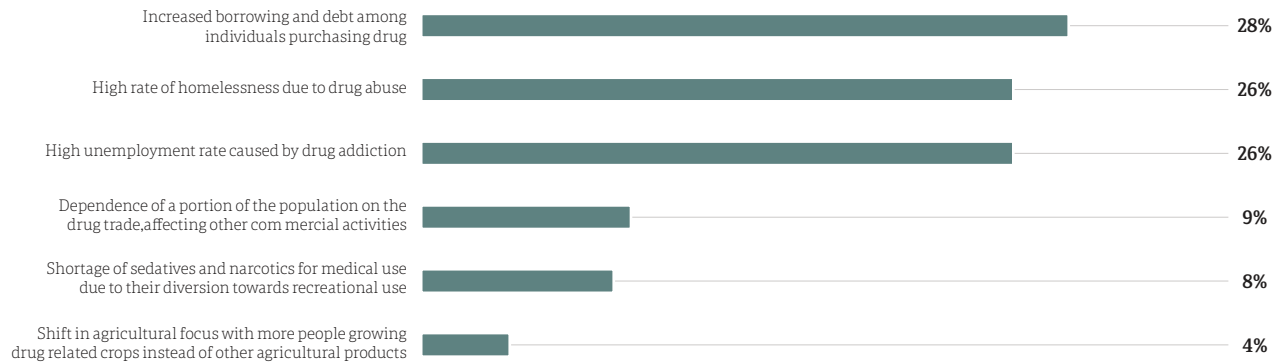
Figure 16: Psychosocial impacts of the spread of narcotic substances



3. The Economic Impacts of the Spread of Narcotic Substances

The survey shows significant economic impacts of drug abuse, noting that increased borrowing and debt (28%), high unemployment rates (26%), and a high rate of homelessness (26%) are the most prominent economic consequences. These factors suggest that drug abuse is closely linked to worsening economic conditions and social instability in the community. Notably, there is a 7% increase this year in the rate of homelessness attributed to drug abuse compared to March 2022.

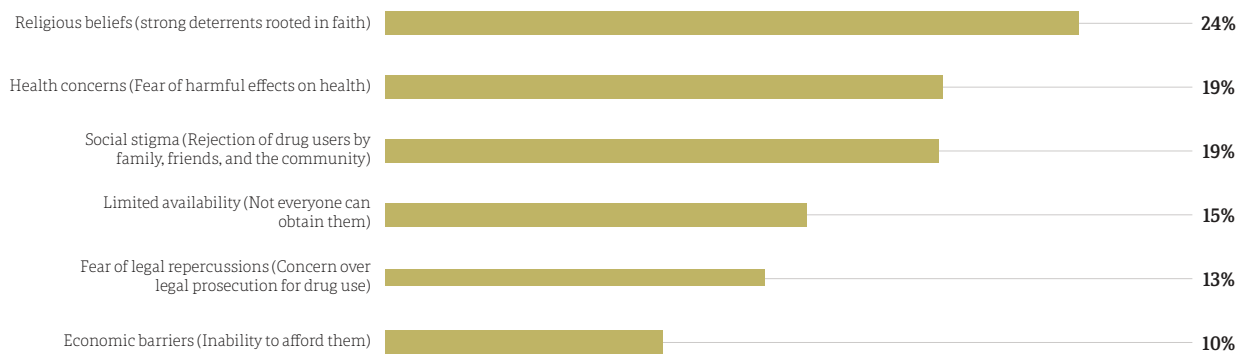
Figure 17: The Economic Impacts of the Spread of Narcotic Substances



4. Reasons preventing people from using narcotic substances

The survey outlines the primary deterrents to drug use in the community, with strong religious beliefs leading as the most significant factor at 24%. Health concerns and social stigma each account for 19%, underscoring societal and health-related barriers, while economic factors and fear of legal repercussions are lesser but notable deterrents.

Figure 18: Reasons preventing people from using narcotic substances

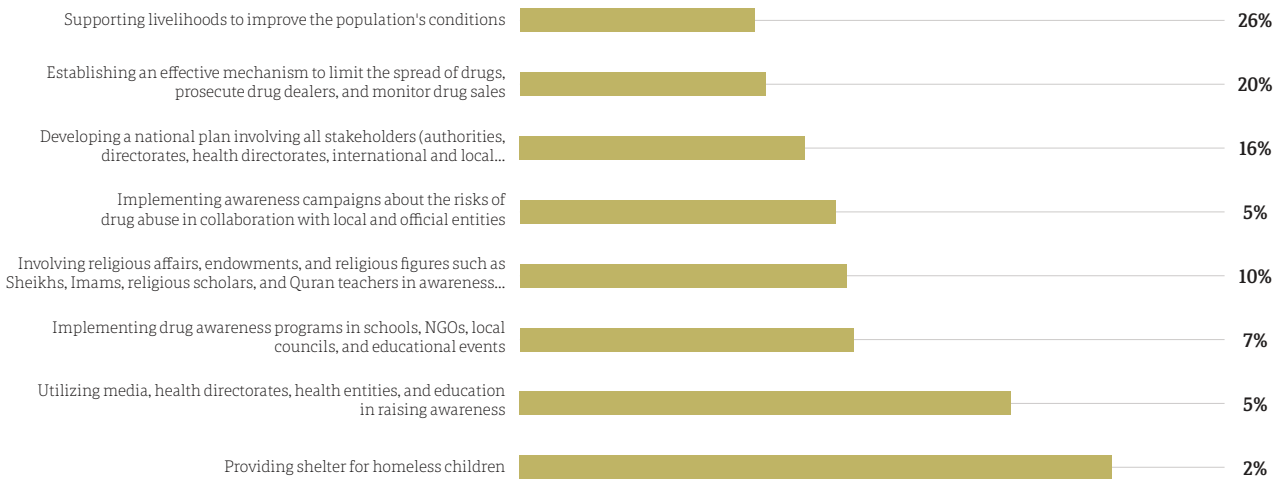


9- Addressing the Spread of Narcotic Substances and the Attitude Toward Abusers

1. Actions to Be Taken to Reduce the Spread of Narcotic Substance Abuse

The survey suggests key strategies to combat drug abuse, with the most supported being livelihood improvement (26%) and establishing effective limitation and prosecution mechanisms (20%). Developing a comprehensive national plan (16%) and engaging religious figures in awareness campaigns (10%) are also significant measures, reflecting a multifaceted approach to tackling drug issues in the community. Notably, support for livelihoods to improve the population's conditions as a measure to curb the drug spread has increased by 7% this year compared to March 2022.

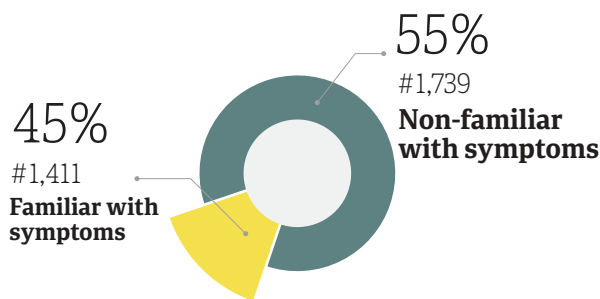
Figure 19: Actions to Be Taken to Reduce the Spread of Narcotic Substance Abuse



2. Recognizing the Symptoms of Substance Abuse

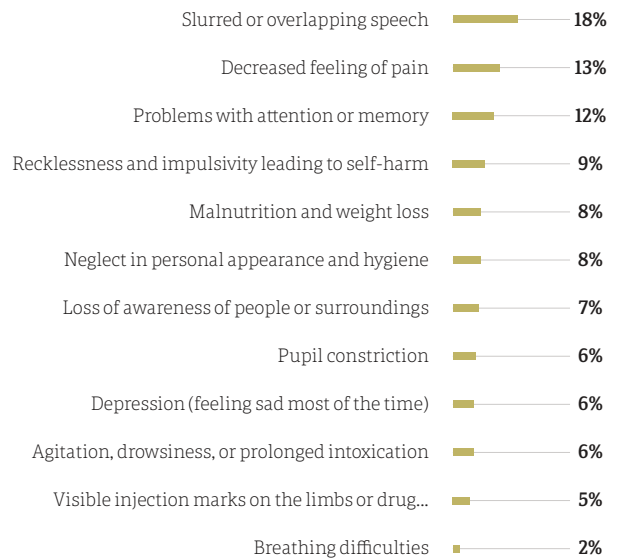
The survey shows that 55% of the community is not familiar with the signs of drug addiction, while 45% recognize them, indicating a significant gap in awareness. Notably, the percentage of people familiar with the symptoms of substance abuse has decreased by 18% compared to March 2022.

Figure 20: Recognizing the Symptoms of Substance Abuse



Out of the people who can recognize the signs of drug addiction, 18% state that drug addicts suffer from slurred or overlapping speech (18%), decreased pain sensation (13%), and problems with attention or memory (12%) as the most frequently observed symptoms.

Figure 21: Recognizing the Symptoms of Substance Abuse



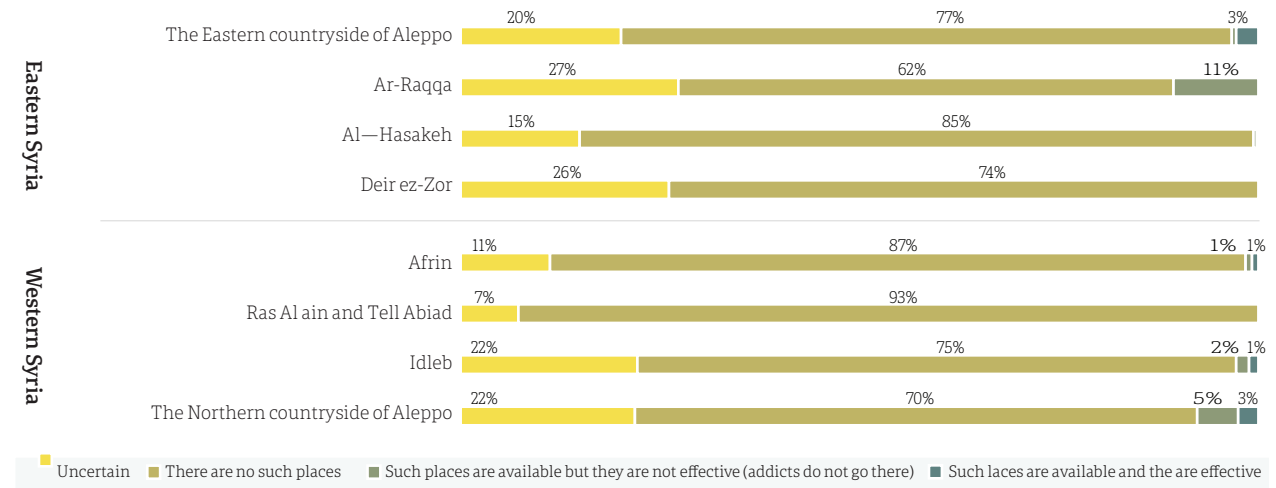
Negligence in personal appearance and hygiene and malnutrition also stand out, highlighting physical indicators of addiction.

3. Availability of Addiction Treatment Centers

The survey reveals that 77% (up from 65% in March 2022) of respondents reported no rehabilitation centers in their area, 20% were uncertain, 2% mentioned ineffective centers, and only 1% indicated effective ones.

Despite the high percentage reporting a lack of centers, the number of facilities has risen significantly to 105 across northern Syria, offering a range of services, including treatment, psychological consultations, rehabilitation, awareness campaigns, medication, and admissions. In contrast, the March 2022 edition reported only 12 centers, with eight in Idleb and three in Northern Aleppo, highlighting a notable expansion in available resources.

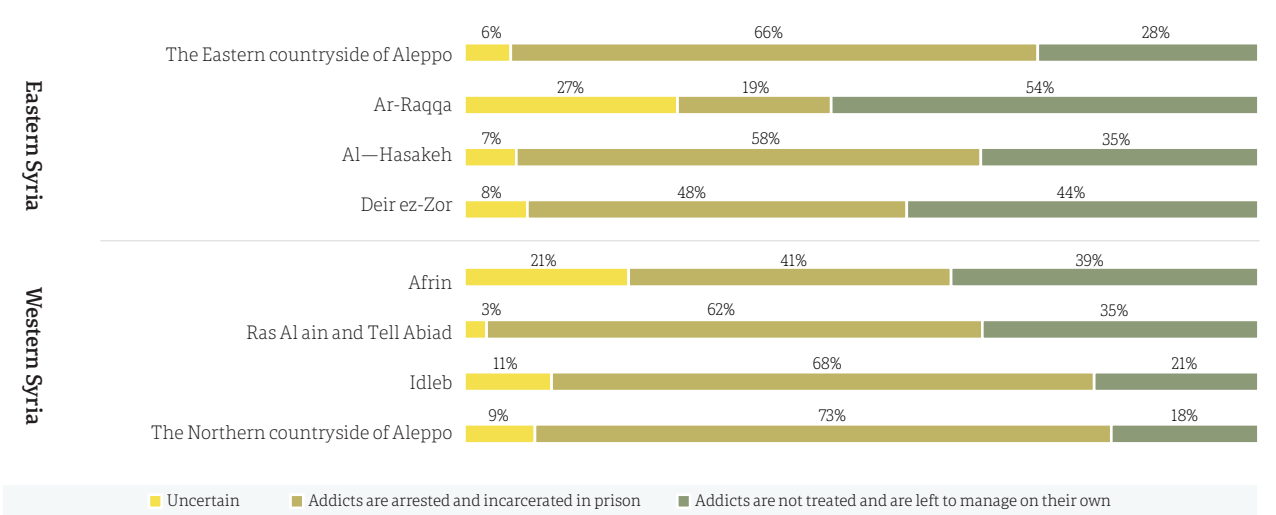
Figure 22: Availability of Addiction Treatment Centers



4. Mechanisms for Dealing with Addicts in Areas Where Treatment Centers Are Not Available

The survey reveals that 62% of respondents (up from 35% in March 2022) report that addicts are jailed, 28% (down from 45% in March 2022) say they remain untreated, and 11% are uncertain about how addicts are handled.

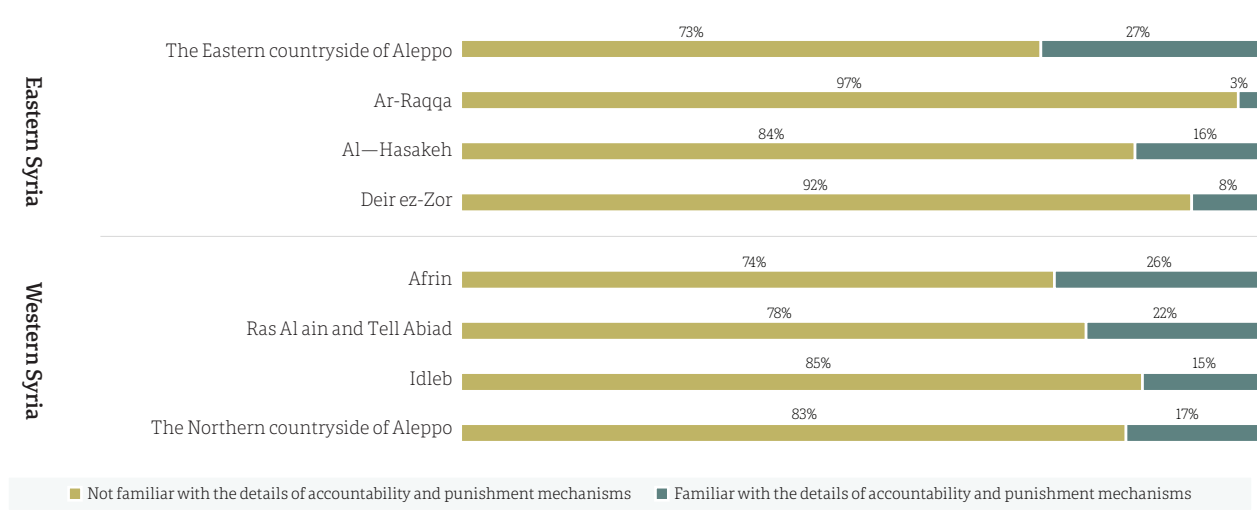
Figure 23: Mechanisms for Dealing with Addicts in Areas Where Treatment Centers Are Not Available



5. Attitude Towards Narcotic Substances

The survey shows that the majority of the participants (84%) view all substances as harmful, while 12% believe harm arises only with addiction or excessive use. Only a small minority differentiate between natural and synthetic drugs' harm.

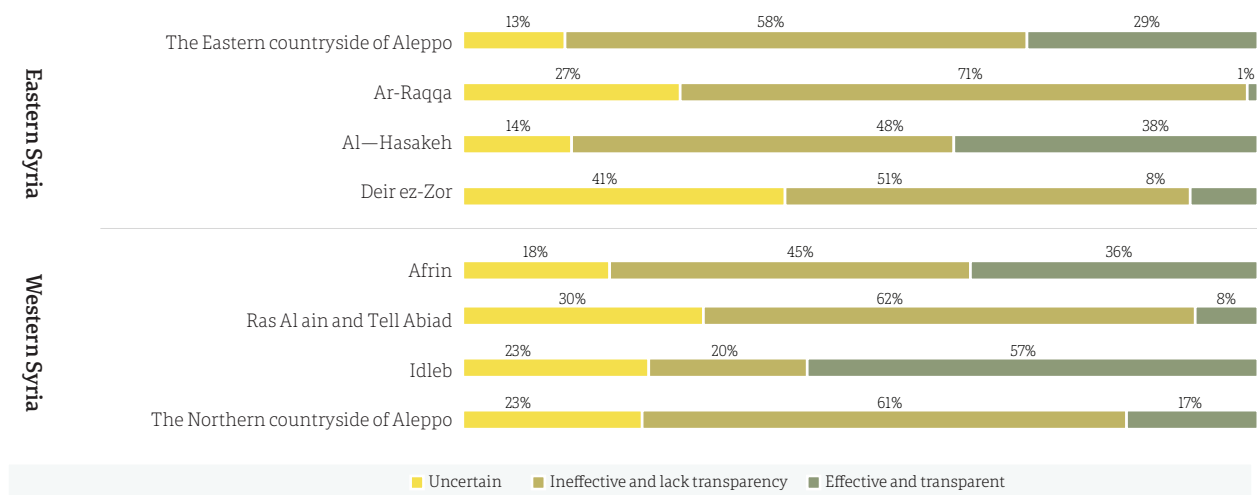
Figure 24: Attitude Towards Narcotic Substances



6. Availability and Effectiveness of Entities for Prosecuting Drug Dealers

The survey reveals that 40% see accountability mechanisms as ineffective, 38% (up from 27% in March 2022) view them as effective, and 22% are uncertain.

Figure 25: Availability and Effectiveness of Entities for Prosecuting Drug Dealers

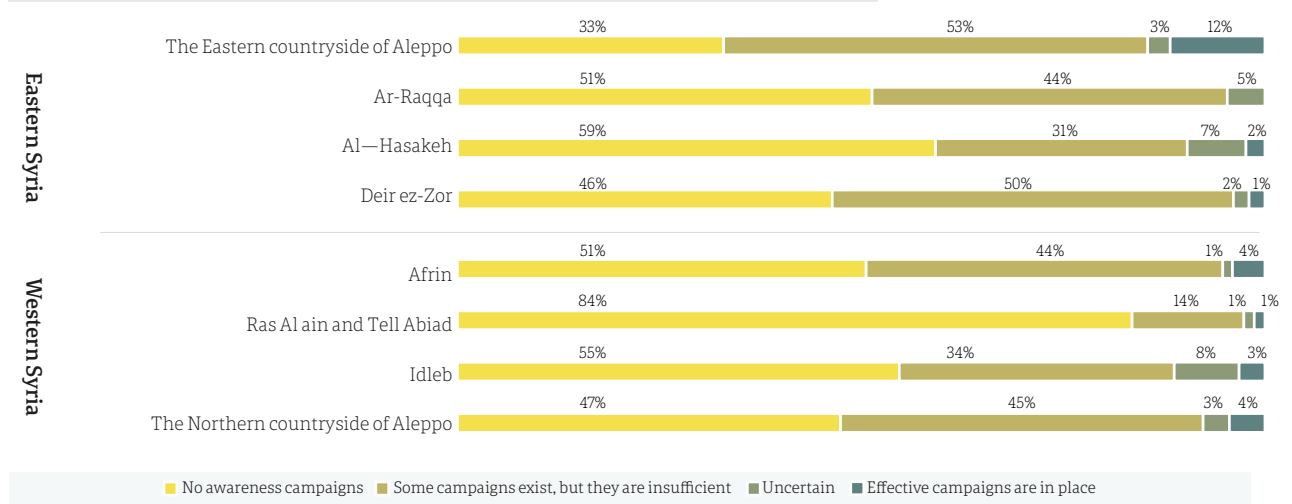


The survey shows that 84% are unfamiliar with accountability mechanisms for drug-related crimes, while 16% are aware.

7. Awareness Raising Campaigns on the Dangers of Narcotic Substances and their Effectiveness

The survey shows 54% (down from 74% in March 2022) report no awareness campaigns, 37% (up from 14% in March 2022) find existing ones insufficient, 6% are uncertain, and only 3% see campaigns as effective.

Figure 26: Awareness Raising Campaigns on the Dangers of Narcotic Substances and their Effectiveness



10- Recommendations

- 1 Launch comprehensive awareness campaigns incorporating education programs in schools, communities, and through media channels to emphasize the dangers of drug abuse and promote prevention.
- 2 Establish and expand accessible rehabilitation centers with adequate resources while upgrading the quality and capacity of existing facilities to ensure effective treatment and support.
- 3 Strengthen accountability mechanisms to ensure transparency, efficiency, and effectiveness in prosecuting drug dealers, traffickers, and those facilitating drug abuse.
- 4 Address the underlying causes of substance abuse by implementing targeted economic, educational, and psychosocial support programs to combat poverty, unemployment, stigma, and trauma.
- 4 Create sustainable employment opportunities, especially for youth and marginalized groups, to reduce vulnerability to drug use and promote social integration.
- 6 Enhance coordination with stakeholders at local, regional, and international levels to combat drug trafficking, improve surveillance systems, and tighten border controls.
- 7 Provide specialized training for key professionals, including healthcare workers, educators, and law enforcement personnel, to identify, address, and respond effectively to drug-related issues in their respective roles.
- 8 Implementing sports and social programs to engage young people and occupy their leisure time, reducing their vulnerability to substance use.
- 9 Establish strict oversight of licensed pharmacies to enforce robust mechanisms for the regulated dispensing of medications. Additionally, take decisive action to shut down unlicensed pharmacies and pursue unlicensed medicine traders to curb the distribution of illicit narcotic substances.



SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND ADDICTION

in Northern Syria

Second Edition

December 2024 **Thematic Report**



A study produced by the Information
Management Unit (IMU) At the
Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU)