

[WHAT ARE HUMAN RIGHTS?](#)[DONATE](#)[HOME](#)[ABOUT US](#)[ISSUES](#)[HUMAN RIGHTS
BY COUNTRY](#)[WHERE WE
WORK](#)[HUMAN RIGHTS
BODIES](#)[NEWS AND
EVENTS](#)[PUBLICATIONS AND
RESOURCES](#)[English > News and Events > DisplayNews](#)

Fight against world drug problem must address unjust impact on people of African descent, say UN rights experts

GENEVA (14 March 2019) – States fighting the world drug problem must acknowledge the devastating impact of their methods on people of African descent, and amend them as necessary, says a group of UN human rights experts*.

They must address the racial discrimination in enforcement of drug laws, systemic and race-based denial of human rights, and ongoing acceptance of stark racial disparities in prosecution and incarceration that are not commensurate with actual rates of trafficking or use of narcotics or other legitimate criminal justice priorities.

The comments by the UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent come ahead of a high-level meeting in Vienna of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, which will review the Political Declaration and Plan of Action agreed in 2009 to combat the illegal trade in drugs.

“The global war on drugs has disproportionately targeted people of African descent and disregarded the massive costs to the dignity, humanity and freedom of individuals,” the experts said.

“The pretext of fighting the world’s drug problem has been used to justify excessive surveillance, criminalisation and the targeting of people of African descent worldwide. People of African descent are disproportionately penalised and denied access to treatment or alternatives to being locked up. This is despite the fact that people of African descent use, sell and traffic narcotics at rates similar to other racial groups, particularly in the West.

“It has also not decreased trafficking or the use of narcotics worldwide, despite the enormous investment of resources over several decades. Important recent analyses demonstrate that the war on drugs has operated more effectively as a system of racial control than as a mechanism for combating the use and trafficking of narcotics.”

Globally, people of African descent experience discrimination at every stage of the criminal justice system and are more likely to be stopped, searched, arrested, convicted, and harshly sentenced including the use of the death penalty, for drug crimes. Higher arrest and incarceration rates are not reflective of increased prevalence of drug use, but rather law enforcement’s focus on urban areas, lower income communities and communities of colour.

In addition, public health risks associated with unregulated use of narcotics are largely ignored where they principally impact people of African descent, including in detention settings which are high-risk environments for HIV, hepatitis C and tuberculosis transmission.

“There is lack of recognition that enduring racial disparities and race-based outcomes are related to policy priorities that are grounded in discrimination and negative racial stereotypes, including the targeting of minority communities of African origin rather than criminality,” the experts said.

“The measurable impact and devastation of narcotics policy targeted at people of African descent stands in stark contrast to the lack of measurable success in curtailing the use, sale and/or trafficking via these same policies, and despite the enormous allocation of resources and energy in counter-

"Laudable concern for the effect of narcotics on communities cannot excuse racism in the development of policy or the deployment of resources.

"Enduring and entrenched racial disparities in the criminal justice system – as well as ongoing tolerance of race-based outcomes in policing, entrenched racial disparities, and ongoing selective enforcement of the law – reflect harmful stereotypes grounded in the historical legacies of the global trafficking in enslaved Africans, colonisation, and the ways in which modern social narratives evolved from rhetoric designed to justify these institutions and the exploitation of people of African descent," the Working Group said.

The experts said this implicated the entire human rights framework, as perceptions about people of African descent drove adolescents into the justice system and left many permanently barred from a wide range of employment, educational, social security and other benefits and opportunities.

These conditions may be even more extreme in intersectional populations, including women, LGBTI community members, migrants and refugees, and young people of African descent.

"Member States should prioritise public health and harm reduction measures, combat racial discrimination and adopt gender-sensitive approaches in national drug strategies. In addition, in many States, the measuring of apparent and systemic impacts on people of African descent is complicated by policies and practices preventing the collection of relevant data broken down by race," the experts said.

"Member States should collect adequate data to measure these disparities and their potential improvement over time and also to ensure the availability of treatment services that are evidence-based and respectful of individual rights."

ENDS

The **Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent** was established on 25 April 2002 by the then Commission on Human Rights, following the World Conference against Racism held in Durban in 2001. It is composed of five independent experts: **Mr. Michal Balcerzak** (Poland), current Chair-Rapporteur; **Mr. Ahmed Reid** (Jamaica); **Ms Dominique Day** (United States of America); **Mr. Sabelo Gumedze** (South Africa), and **Mr. Ricardo A. Sunga III** (The Philippines).

The Special Rapporteurs are part of what is known as the **Special Procedures** of the Human Rights Council. Special Procedures, the largest body of independent experts in the UN Human Rights system, is the general name of the Council's independent fact-finding and monitoring mechanisms that address either specific country situations or thematic issues in all parts of the world. Special Procedures experts work on a voluntary basis; they are not UN staff and do not receive a salary for their work. They are independent from any government or organization and serve in their individual capacity.

For inquiries and **media requests** Ms Christina Saunders (+41 79 444 6129 / csaunders@ohchr.org) or write to africandescent@ohchr.org For the media conference, please register by sending an email to: benelux@unric.org / +32 2 788 8461

For media inquiries related to other UN independent experts:

Mr. Jeremy Laurence, UN Human Rights – Media Unit (+ 41 22 917 9383 / jlaurence@ohchr.org)

Follow news related to the UN's independent human rights experts on Twitter [@UN_SPExperts](https://twitter.com/UN_SPExperts).

Concerned about the world we live in? Then **STAND UP for someone's rights today**. #Standup4humanrights and visit the web page at <http://www.standup4humanrights.org>