

NARCOTICS TRAFFICKING: HUMANS AS DRUG MULES

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of human drug mules in narcotics trafficking is examined in this research paper with references to the socio-legal and the criminological aspects of their role. Drug mules that are usually chosen within the economically poor or marginalized groups, are used to smuggle illegal drugs across the borders by hiding the narcotics in their bodies or their luggage. The research examines how there has been a growing rate of drug mules at Indian airports, some of the biggest trafficking routes to India and the exploitative nature of the traffickers, the paper analyses the Narcotics Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act, which is punitive, has no policies based on victims, and the difficulty of drug mules to obtain rehabilitation and legal protection. Based on the analysis of international case studies and legal frameworks, the study highlights the necessity of the reforms aimed at acknowledging drug mules as the possible victims of the trafficking process and providing a humane treatment and medical safety, as well as an adequate sentences. There is also the examination of the medical hazards, prison environments and the effect of organized networks on the vulnerable groups. Combining the standpoints of public health, human right, and law enforcement, the paper suggests a comprehensive measure to the problem of drug mules, which proposes policies that would respond to the origins of the situation as well as its outcomes, which is the participation in narcotics trafficking.

INTRODUCTION

Human drug mules are a major problem in the criminal justice systems of the world as a whole. Drug mules refer to the people who carry illegal drugs into and out of the country usually hiding drugs in their bodies or luggage¹. They are usually recruited into the enterprise out the

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¹ Fleetwood, J. (2014). *Drug mules: Women in the international cocaine trade*. Palgrave Macmillan

economically disadvantaged or marginalized groups, and face extreme health risks and prosecution. The socio-legal side assists in the interpretation of the complicated relationship between social factors of vulnerability and legal frameworks that precondition the experience of drug mule.

Definition of Drug Mules

Drug Mules refer to persons who carry drugs across the borders usually by hiding drugs in their luggage. The word mule is used to describe the mode of transport, in most cases, carrying drugs inside the body that raises the chances of severe health complications and prosecution. Drug mules are usually picked up in the economically disadvantaged or marginalized groups and might be forced, tricked or bribed to join in drug trafficking.

Humans are the drug mules of choice because traffickers feel that they can get away with it, their flexibility, and that they are not as hard to control as machines. Mules are usually recruited by economic need, force and fraud. Human trafficking gives traffickers an opportunity to evade law enforcement and smuggle drugs across the borders with reduced chance of detection². It is a tribute to the flexibility and viability of trafficking networks that human mules are used strategically. Cases of Indian Airports are increasing, according to the latest trends, there is an increase in drug mules in the Indian airports³. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) indicates that the rate of drug mule arrest at major airports has increased significantly, which is consistent with the tendencies across the world and also that India is considered a transit and destination point of narcotics. It has been observed that the increase in cases is linked to the increased international travelling, adoption of digital recruitment process, and targeting of vulnerable population.

Key trafficking routes to India

India is a primary point of passage and destination of narcotics and the major trafficking routes are the Golden Crescent (Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan) and the Golden Triangle (Myanmar, Laos, Thailand)⁴. Finding its way into India are the corridors through which drugs like heroin, cocaine and methamphetamine find their way into the country. The strategic positioning of

² Carballo, M., & Efran, S. (2012). *Globalization, migration, and drug trafficking: A public health perspective. Bulletin on Narcotics*, 54(1), 45-68.

³ UNODC (2002). *Drug mules and trafficking victims: A legal analysis*. Vienna: UNODC.

⁴ *ibid*

India renders it an ideal target by traffickers who want to use the porous borders and poor law enforcement.

This paper is limited to discussing the socio-legal and criminological aspects of human drug mules. The socio-legal approach is concerned with the interaction between social forces (poverty, education, and social marginalization) and legal frameworks (laws, policies and judicial practices) in determining drug mules experiences. Criminological perspective analyses the impetuses, actions and outcomes of drug mule activities therefore giving the whole picture of the problem.

The major research questions are:

- a. Which socio-economic factors predispose people to the recruitment as drug mules?
- b. What do the laws of various countries do to drug mules and how do such actions affect their rights and rehabilitation?
- c. What are the difficulties of the law enforcement and court system to strike a balance between punishments and social security of drug mules?
- d. What are the current policies in regard to underlying socio-legal weakness of drug mules and what should reform?

The main law that regulates the drug trade in India is the Narcotics Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act, 1985. Nevertheless, it has been argued that the act is punitive, has no policies that are victim-oriented and protect the mule rights insufficiently⁵. The Act tends to confer the Drug Mules with the status of Criminals, and not victims and thus are subjected to sever punishment and fewer rehabilitation facilities. The paper discusses the issues of the NDPS Act and suggests the change to improve the rights of drug mules and respond to the underlying reason of their participation.

Types of drug mules

There are a number of different types of dug mules, depending on the modes of transportation and awareness:

- Body Packers/ suffers: People who swallow or stuff drugs into their bodies⁶.

⁵ Schloenhardt, A. (2019). *Sentencing and the drug courier: Victims or villains?* International Criminal Law Review, 19(2), 240-265.

⁶ ibid

- Unwitting mules: These people do not know about the drugs that they are carrying.
- Coerced Mules: These are people who have been forced or threatened to deliver drugs.

Both types have their own risks and challenges, and it is important to know these differences in order to come up with effective policies and interventions.

THE REASONING BEHIND TRAFFICKERS CHOOSING HUMANKIND IS ECONOMICAL

Humans are more efficient and flexible as drug mules because traffickers choose them. Human mules are cheaper to hire and control as compared to alternative ways of conveying goods including vehicles or drones. Having humans would enable the traffickers to deliver their drugs across the borders at a reduced risk of detection, thus making them the best candidates when it comes to eluding the law⁷.

Global routes & methods

The major drug trafficking routes in the world are the Golden Crescent (Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan) and the Golden Triangle (Myanmar, Laos, Thailand)⁸. The drugs that are trafficked in these corridors include heroin, cocaine, and methamphetamine. Drug trafficking carries out by traffickers through different means such as body packing, smuggling of the luggage and even digital recruitment.

Dark Web Recruitment

The dark web emerged as one of the major platforms to meet drug mules⁹. The vulnerable people are targeted via encrypted messaging apps and forums where traffickers deceive and, in most cases, offer financial rewards to get mules. Dark web has been popular amongst the traffickers due to the anonymity and accessibility that it offers them to avoid detection by the law enforcers.

⁷ ibid

⁸ ibid

⁹ ibid

SOCIO-ECONOMICAL DRIVERS THAT ARE INDIA-ORIENTED¹⁰

Poverty and Unemployment

In India, poverty and unemployment are some of the key contributors of drug mules. The poor struggle to make both ends meet and thus they are on the easy side of risk, they are easiest target to traffic networks. These weaknesses are made worse by the insufficient education and available job openings; thus, more drug mules are recruited among the economically disadvantaged groups.

Women being targeted

India targets women disproportionately as drug mules. Taking advantage of the economic and social vulnerability of women, traffickers tend to get them recruited through deception and financial encouragement. The exploiting of women as drug mules to emphasize the gendered aspects of drug trafficking, the importance of gender sensitive policies.

Migrant workers (Kerala, Punjab, UP)

The state migrant workers like Kerala, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh are most often used as the drug mules. These individuals are usually economically challenged and have little job prospects hence they are an easy target in terms of recruitment. Traffickers are able to capitalize on the vulnerability of migrant workers exploiting them through false promises and monetary rewards to obtain mules in these areas.

Courtship, Love-Trap, Deception

Grooming, love-trap and deception are some of the recruitment methods that are employed by traffickers to get drug mules. People are targeted by social media, dating apps, and other Internet media. Traffickers lure mules through deceit and money to take advantage of their weaknesses and play into their trust. This is emphasized by the psychological and emotional manipulation that is underlined by the use of grooming and love-trap approaches in drug mule recruiting.

¹⁰ ibid

Online recruitment

Online recruiting using applications like Telegram and WhatsApp is now another important way of recruiting drug mules in India. Traffickers find individuals who can be exploited by employing encrypted messaging applications, based on tricks and bribing mules with money. Due to the anonymity and accessibility of the digital medium, digital platforms are a desirable resource to traffickers who want to escape the law.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK GOVERNING NARCOTICS & DRUG MULES

The Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985¹¹, better known as the NDPS Act, is an internationally governed statutory legal framework the United Nations Narcotics Convention, 1961, the United Nations Narcotics Convention (Protocol Amending), 1972, the United Nations Convention on Psychotropic Substances, 1971, and several others-which applies to narcotics trafficking in India, along with the usage of humans as drug mules¹². As far as India's position in response is concerned, India has a penal and restrictive action against it, rather than rehabilitation or a victim-centered one; therefore, it is very difficult to separate the human traffickers from being forced or exploited in carrying narcotics. Hence, there is a legal framework regarding the cases of various Indians imprisoned abroad.

The NDPS Act, 1985¹³, is the general legislation related to drug offences in India. It criminalises possession, transportation, financing, harbouring, attempts, and abetment of narcotic offences under **Sections 8¹⁴, 21–23, 25, 27A¹⁵, and 29¹⁶**. Drug mules are usually booked under Section 21¹⁷ for manufactured drugs, **Section 23** for illicit import or export, and **Section 29¹⁸** for conspiracy or abetment.

¹¹ Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985, No. 61, Acts of Parliament, 1985 (India).

¹² Pragnesh Parmar & Gunvati Rathod, *Understanding the Narcotics Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act in India: A Comprehensive Analysis*, 9 *Advances in Clinical Toxicology* 1 (2024), <https://medwinpublishers.com/ACT/understanding-the-narcotic-drugs-and-psychotropic-substances--act-in-india-a-comprehensive-analysis.pdf>

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ Narcotic Drugs & Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985, § 8 (India).

¹⁵ Narcotic Drugs & Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985, § 27A (India).

¹⁶ Narcotic Drugs & Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985, § 29 (India).

¹⁷ Narcotic Drugs & Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985, § 21 (India).

¹⁸ Narcotic Drugs & Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985, § 29 (India).

The major fault in the NDPS Act, repeatedly pointed out, is the complete lack of any sensible classification of offenders. The law does not differentiate between couriers, drug mules, or victims of trafficking. Consequently, almost similar punishments are awarded to all offenders, irrespective of the level of involvement. This means that low-level carriers, usually vulnerable individuals, are treated on par with powerful traffickers who control the network of drugs. **The Amendment of 2001** introduced the categories of “small quantity” and “commercial quantity” with a view to rationalizing the punishment. It was intended to ensure that hard-core traffickers received strict punishment while addicted users caught with small quantities received less punishment for the purpose of rehabilitation. However, it is common for drug traffickers to purposely burden mules with commercial quantities so that the latter gets the mandatory minimum sentence of 10 years' imprisonment, besides heavy fines. By a government notification in **2009**, an explanatory note was issued to clarify that the aggregate weight of the mixture or solution containing any narcotic drug or psychotropic substance, including any neutral substance, was to be taken into account for the purpose of sentencing. More often than not, the presence of such legal presumptions in the NDPS Act has led to confusion, especially in cases involving mixtures or substances combined with non-drug materials. The drug legal framework also has certain presumptions that the existence of a guilty state of mind and possession of illegal drugs, unless the accused can prove the opposite. **Section 35¹⁹** makes it difficult for the accused to prove non-involvement in drug trafficking. Even if a drug mule is coerced, deceived, or trafficked, the law places an impossible burden on him/her. The process of proving one's innocence becomes extremely hard due to the covert nature of their work and the lack of legal aid. This is one of the factors leading to the NDPS cases, if not the highest, then certainly one of the highest conviction rates of about 90%. These presumptions are further exemplified by the "airport-style detection model," where a person or his/her luggage is found to have drugs. In such situations, even innocent travellers whose luggage has been tampered with during transit may face prosecution unless they can demonstrate very special circumstances. This affects foreign nationals, women, migrants, and people who are economically vulnerable since most of them cannot afford legal assistance or support networks.

The effect of **section 37²⁰ of the NDPS Act** makes it near impossible to grant bail in cases involving commercial quantities. The courts can grant bail only if they are satisfied that the accused is not guilty or will not commit another offence, a standard that is nearly impossible

¹⁹ Narcotic Drugs & Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985, § 35 (India).

²⁰ Narcotic Drugs & Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985, § 37 (India).

to meet at an early stage. Although the Supreme Court, in **State of Rajasthan v. Balchand**, **made it** clear that the basic rule is bail, with jail being the exception, and in *Sharifbai v. Abdul Razak* held that unlawful detention occurs if the accused is not produced before a magistrate on time, these principles hardly ever protect drug mules. Foreigners and poor people are in jail for long years because they have no contacts, no legal aid, and no means of furnishing bail bonds.

NDPS offences rely heavily on strict procedural compliance in search, seizure, and forensic processes. **Sections 42²¹, 43²², 50²³, and 52A²⁴ of the Act** play a critical role in ensuring the legality of investigations. **Section 43²⁵** grants broad powers to conduct searches in public places, such as airports, without a warrant. However, **Section 50²⁶**, which requires informing a person of their right to be searched before a magistrate or gazetted officer, has been declared mandatory by the Supreme Court. In cases of internal concealment or “body packing,” maintaining a proper chain of custody becomes complicated because medical intervention is required. This also raises ethical concerns when procedures like forced excretion or surgery are used, potentially violating **Article 21²⁷**.

The Supreme Court’s judgment in the case of **E. Micheal Raj v. Intelligence Officer²⁸** found that for the purpose of establishing the quantity, only the actual content of the narcotic should be taken into account and not the total weight of the mixture. The cases of drug swallowed parts are directly affected by this, since the carrier fluids contribute to the drug's weight. The ruling of the Constitution Bench in **Tofan Singh v. State of Tamil Nadu²⁹** later eliminated confessions made to NDPS officers under **Section 67³⁰** as evidence, significantly affecting the way prosecutions are handled. Also, human rights issues are involved in the cases of internal hiding of drugs. Drug mules may find themselves in medical detention for a long time, undergoing compulsory bodily examinations, and being under heavy scrutiny without there being any uniform medical or ethical guidelines. It is uncertain how such cases can be handled in a way that is compliant with both law and human rights. The literature is increasingly in

²¹ Narcotic Drugs & Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985, § 42 (India).

²² Narcotic Drugs & Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985, § 43 (India).

²³ Narcotic Drugs & Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985, § 50 (India).

²⁴ Narcotic Drugs & Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985, § 52A (India).

²⁵ Narcotic Drugs & Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985, § 43 (India).

²⁶ Narcotic Drugs & Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985, § 50 (India).

²⁷ INDIA CONST. art. 21

²⁸ *E. Micheal Raj v. Intelligence Officer*, Narcotic Control Bureau (2008) 4 SCR 644

²⁹ *Tofan Singh v. State of Tamil Nadu* (2021) 4 SCC 1

³⁰ Narcotic Drugs & Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985, § 67 (India).

favor of India not continuing with a purely punitive model, but rather switching to a health-oriented approach. The adoption of this approach would imply that there would be rehabilitation measures, faster judicial processes, and community-based strategies to fight the problem of drug abuse. A balanced model would be one where the strong actions against drug lords are accompanied by humane and reformatory policies for the drug carriers who are the innocent victims of the system. Actually, the strict implementation of the drug laws in India has unintentionally driven the drug mules who are the most vulnerable ones to the criminal side. The NDPS Act has a punitive structure characterized by the imposition of mandatory minimum sentences, the reversal of the burden of proof, strict bail conditions, and the lack of classification of offenders.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE STATUS OF DRUG MULES

Drug mules are frequently sourced from socio-economically disadvantaged groups, such as rural impoverished individuals, single mothers, and unemployed young people experiencing significant economic instability. Numerous individuals are lured by deceptive promises of genuine jobs overseas, proposals of quick money to settle debts, or threats aimed at them or their family members. In these situations, the notion of “consent” is severely undermined, as the choice is often made amidst desperation, misinformation, or pressure. From a human rights and trafficking standpoint, this closely matches the definition of trafficking, highlighting exploitation, abuse of vulnerability, and the insignificance of consent in coercive situations. International anti-trafficking instruments and UN human rights standards emphasize that people exploited in criminal actions by organized groups should be recognized as victims instead of being regarded merely as offenders. This principle has evident consequences for drug mules, especially in instances where there is proof of deceit, intimidation, or debt servitude. A framework that honors rights would compel authorities to probe into the upstream participants, who are the recruiters, transporters, financiers, and cartel managers, instead of concentrating enforcement mainly on the most obvious and easily replaceable link in the chain. The discussion surrounding victims and offenders also involves the duty of states to safeguard individuals from exploitation. If states recognize that organized crime groups are consistently targeting individuals in poverty, then simply implementing severe penalties on mules, without simultaneous efforts to tackle recruitment trends and offer safe livelihood options, poses a risk of falling short in preventive protection. Humanitarian and criminological evaluations increasingly contend that drug mules ought to be legally acknowledged as possible trafficking

victims, deserving of screening, legal assistance, and support services, including non-punitive alternatives when coercion is evident.

MEDICAL RISKS: PELLET RUPTURE, OVERDOSE, AND DEATH

From a public health standpoint, body packing, swallowing drug-filled pellets, represents an extraordinarily high-risk practice that turns mules into walking medical time bombs. These pellets typically encase heroin, cocaine, or synthetic narcotics in multiple layers of condoms, latex gloves, or plastic film, often secured with thread and coated in laxatives, oily substances, or local anesthetics to facilitate ingestion and delay digestion; a single mule might swallow 50–150 such packets, carrying a total drug quantity vastly exceeding a lethal dose if unleashed internally. The chief peril is pellet rupture or leakage, triggered by the harsh gastrointestinal milieu: corrosive stomach acids (pH 1–3), proteolytic enzymes, relentless peristaltic contractions, and bloating gas pressures exacerbated during prolonged flights that extend transit time. Rupture unleashes a bolus overdose in minutes: cocaine provokes violent agitation, seizures, hyperthermia (>40°C), ventricular arrhythmias, and abrupt cardiac arrest; heroin or opioids induce profound respiratory depression, pinpoint pupils, coma, and asphyxiation; documented cases span India (e.g., Haryana heroin packer with intestinal perforation) to global flights, where young, otherwise healthy couriers perish mid-air from undetected seepage.³¹

Such incidents recast drug mules as acute medical emergencies, demanding swift triage over custodial measures: plain X-rays reveal radio-opaque packets (cocaine denser than heroin), CT scans confirm multiples, while interventions like whole-bowel irrigation, activated charcoal, or endoscopic/surgical extraction avert catastrophe. Airport and border officials straddle law enforcement and healthcare fronts, where human rights imperatives prioritize stabilizing life via IV fluids, benzodiazepines for seizures, or naloxone for opioids before interrogation, affirming states' duty of care for vulnerable individuals now in custody and underscoring mules' extreme peril as coerced human cargo.³²

³¹BODY PACKING AND BODY STUFFING, MSD MANUALS (PROFESSIONAL EDITION), <https://www.msdmanuals.com/professional/special-subjects/illicit-drugs-and-intoxicants/body-packing-and-body-stuffing> (last visited December 10, 2025).

³² Mesut Bulakci & Ferhat Cengal, *The Role of Radiology in Diagnosis and Management of Drug Mules: An Update With New Challenges and New Diagnostic Tools*, 9 *Br. J. Radiol.* 20150888 (2016), <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4846215/>, (last visited December 11, 2025).

AIRPORT DETECTION AND ENFORCEMENT LIMITS

Despite advanced airport security, detecting internally concealed drugs remains challenging, as standard baggage scanners and metal detectors fail against body-hidden packets. Detection relies on behavioural cues, such as nervousness or inconsistent stories, intelligence profiling of high-risk routes, and the use of selective advanced tools, including full-body scanners or low-dose X-rays, in busy hubs. Massive passenger volumes, numbering in the millions annually, prevent universal screening, forcing a balance between privacy, resources, and interdiction. Invasive methods risk rights abuses, profiling, or judicial hurdles that allow cases to evade capture.³³ Syndicates capitalize by deploying numerous low-profile mules, ensuring profitability despite partial detections. These constraints demand humane policies beyond detection: intercepted mules require prompt medical checks, legal aid, trafficking claims, and network tracing to protect vulnerable individuals rather than criminalize them at borders.³⁴

ORGANIZED NETWORKS AND THE EXPLOITATION OF POVERTY

The decision to become a drug mule rarely occurs in a vacuum. Organized crime groups systematically target individuals and communities where structural poverty, unemployment, indebtedness, or social dislocation prevail. Recruiters may present themselves as agents offering foreign jobs, small business investments, or paid travel. In other instances, they may prey on existing debts, informal loans, medical expenses, or dowries by offering to “clear the account” if the person agrees to a single “trip.” This amounts to debt bondage under a different guise. From a criminological perspective, mules function as expendable components, -low-status actors with minimal knowledge of supply chains, market structures, or high-level organizers.³⁵ They are easy to replace and bear the greatest legal risk. This structural arrangement ensures that law enforcement, acting through traditional arrest-and-incarceration models, captures primarily those with the least decision-making power and the greatest social vulnerability. It also perpetuates a cycle whereby impoverished communities are doubly

³³ Book of Abstracts, CNIE 2025, CNIE2025 Siena (July 31, 2025), https://cnie2025siena.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/310725_Book_Abstract_CNIE2025-ENG-v2.pdf

³⁴ U.S. Dep't of State, Bureau of Int'l Narcotics & L. Enft Affairs, *FY 2010 Program and Budget Guide* (2009), <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/131027.pdf>.

³⁵ U.N. Office on Drugs & Crime, *The Globalization of Crime: A Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment* (2010), https://www.unodc.org/roseap/uploads/archive/documents/2010/06/tocta/TOCTA_Report_2_010_low_res.pdf.

harmed: first by the violence, addiction, and social disruption associated with the drug trade, and then by the loss of breadwinners or young adults to long prison terms.³⁶

PRISON CONDITIONS AND THE IMPACT ON DRUG MULES

Once arrested, drug mules face strained prison systems burdened by strict anti-narcotics laws that mandate long minimum sentences based on drug quantity, ignoring coercion or role, resulting in high drug-offense populations and years-long undertrial delays amid severe overcrowding with poor sanitation, space, and services. Mules suffer physically from cramped conditions, malnutrition, and diseases like TB or HIV; mentally from uncertainty, stigma, and family separation exacerbated for foreign arrestees by language barriers; and lack rehabilitation, hindering reintegration and risking re-trafficking. Women mules endure added sexual abuse risks, poor reproductive care, and child separation, while foreign nationals face consular gaps; human rights demand humane treatment over mere incarceration, which fails to deter replaceable networks³⁷

INTEGRATING PUBLIC HEALTH AND RIGHTS INTO POLICY REFORM

A holistic response to drug mules must align public health, human rights, and law enforcement instead of isolating them. Laws should be reformed to allow clear defenses or reduced liability where trafficking, coercion, or severe economic exploitation can be shown, with proportionate sentencing that distinguishes low-level couriers from organizers and favours non-custodial options for minor or first-time offenders. Enforcement procedures at airports and borders should embed medical safeguards, including prompt triage when internal concealment is suspected, clear rules on when imaging or invasive exams are justified, and observation periods to detect delayed pellet rupture. Officers need training to recognize signs of trafficking, such as coached or fearful testimony, and to route such cases to victim-support and protection systems instead of purely punitive tracks. Public health interventions must include access to overdose-reversal drugs, substitution therapy, and counseling in both custody and community settings to disrupt dependency that traffickers exploit. Parallel community education in high-risk recruitment zones, combined with stronger social protection, employment support, and

³⁶ Andreas Schloenhardt, *Overview: Transnational Crime*, in **International and Transnational Crime and Justice** (Mangai Natarajan ed., 2d ed., Cambridge Univ. Press 2019), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/international-and-transnational-crime-and-justice/overview-transnational-crime/CF05FFDBCEA2CA6DA53E1D92ECD3260D>.

³⁷ U.S. Dep't of State, Bureau of Int'l Narcotics & L. Enf't Affairs, *FY 2010 Program and Budget Guide* (2009), <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/131027.pdf>.

targeted aid for indebted households, can reduce the economic pressure that drives people into acting as mules in the first place.³⁸

CONCLUSION

The problem of human drug mules involved in the narcotics trade is difficult to resolve because it combines socio-economic vulnerability, legal regulations, and social health. Drug mules who are usually selected among the marginalized communities are exposed to extreme health risks, legal jeopardy and psychological torture. The existing legal strategy, especially in the NDPS Act, is more about criminalizing, not treating, since it does not distinguish between low level carriers and high-level traffickers. The pattern of exploitation and prison is particularly exploitative of the most vulnerable and is perpetuated through this punitive model. The international case studies and legal changes demonstrate the necessity to consider drug mules as possible victims of trafficking, to treat them humanely, and to protect them with medical and legal assistance. The combination of the perspectives of public health, human rights, and law enforcement is a key to the creation of effective policies regulating the fundamental causes of drug mules' recruitment as well as the overall support of people affected. The holistic approach ensures that the rights of the drug mules are better safeguarded and that the organized networks are broken down so that the social and the economic burden of the narcotics trafficking is minimized.

³⁸ Cornelius Friesendorf, ed., *Strategies against Human Trafficking: The Role of the Security Sector* (Nat'l Def. Acad. & Austrian Fed. Min. of Def. & Sports & Geneva Ctr. for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces 2009)