

Beyond Punishment: Rethinking Liberia's Drug Control Strategy Against Transnational Organized Crime

Ambrues Monboe Nebo

Ph.D. Student -Security Studies with an emphasis on International Security, Hill-City University, Benin Republic.
Adjunct Faculty, Department of Sociology and Criminology, & Political Science, University of Liberia.
Department of Criminal Justice & Forensic Science Program, African Methodist Episcopal University, Liberia.

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***Corresponding Author:** Ambrues Monboe Nebo

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Abstract

Original Research Article

This study examines the effectiveness and limitations of Liberia's Controlled Drugs and Substances Act of 2023 in addressing transnational drug trafficking and organized crime. Although the legislation introduced stricter penalties to enhance deterrence, Liberia continues to experience significant drug-related challenges, including major cocaine seizures and the proliferation of synthetic drugs such as kush and tramadol. Guided by Deterrence Theory, State Capacity Theory, and Routine Activity Theory, the study evaluates whether a punishment-centered legal framework is sufficient to counter increasingly sophisticated trafficking networks. A qualitative case study design was employed, drawing on secondary data from legislative documents, government reports, international agency publications, and peer-reviewed literature. The data were analyzed using thematic content analysis to identify recurring patterns in enforcement effectiveness, institutional capacity, governance constraints, and trafficking dynamics. The findings indicate that while the 2023 Act has strengthened Liberia's legal framework and increased punitive measures, its effectiveness is constrained by limited institutional capacity, porous borders, corruption vulnerabilities, and the adaptive strategies of transnational criminal organizations. The study concludes that sustainable drug control requires a comprehensive strategy combining stronger institutions, intelligence-led policing, regional and international cooperation, and targeted socioeconomic interventions alongside legal deterrence.

Keywords: Controlled Drugs and Substances Act 2023; drug trafficking; Liberia; state capacity; transnational organized crime.

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Introduction/Background

Before Liberia enacted the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act of 2023, the country was already facing a serious drug abuse and trafficking problem. This crisis was fueled by the long-term effects of the civil wars, weak border controls, limited law enforcement capacity, and Liberia's growing role in

West Africa's drug trafficking networks. Reports estimated that about 11% of Liberian adults suffered from substance use disorders, while the use of cannabis remained widespread and the availability of cocaine and heroin increased, especially in Monrovia and nearby communities (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2023; World Health Organization [WHO], 2023).



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Many policymakers and law enforcement officials believed that the previous drug law was too lenient to discourage serious drug crimes. One of the main concerns was that several major drug offenses were bailable, allowing many suspects to secure temporary release while awaiting trial. As a result, the old legal framework was often criticized for having a weak deterrent effect against drug producers, dealers, and traffickers. To address these concerns, the Liberian Legislature enacted the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act of 2023, which introduced much harsher penalties and made several serious drug offenses non-bailable. The new law was intended to send a strong message that Liberia would no longer tolerate drug trafficking and other organized drug-related crimes.

Despite these rigid legal measures, the country's drug problem has continued to evolve. The rapid spread of the highly addictive synthetic drug known as “kush” and “Tramadol” have created a new public health and security challenge that was not fully anticipated when the law was enacted. In addition, the seizure of cocaine valued at approximately US\$19.2 million at Roberts International Airport in June 2026 raised serious concerns about Liberia's continued exposure to international drug trafficking networks. Although the seizure demonstrated improved law enforcement efforts, it also showed that transnational criminal organizations remain active and capable of using Liberia as part of their trafficking routes (Liberia Drug Enforcement Agency, 2026).

These developments suggest that while harsh drug laws are an important part of fighting drug-related crime, punishment alone cannot deter transnational organized crime. Drug trafficking is sustained not only by the existence of illicit markets but also by weak governance institutions, corruption, porous borders, socioeconomic vulnerabilities such as poverty and unemployment, inadequate intelligence and interagency coordination, and the ability of transnational criminal organizations to adapt rapidly to changing law enforcement strategies (GI-TOC, 2023; OECD, 2023; UNODC, 2024; World Bank, 2024). For this reason, many scholars argue that effective drug control requires more than severe penalties. It also requires stronger institutions, intelligence-led policing, regional and international

cooperation, financial investigations, anti-corruption measures, effective border management, and public health interventions (GI-TOC, 2023; UNODC, 2023).

Against this background, this article argues that although Liberia's Drug Law represents an important step toward strengthening deterrence, harsh punishment by itself cannot defeat transnational organized crime. Using Liberia as a case study, the article examines why a broader and more balanced strategy is needed, one that combines effective law enforcement with institutional reform, regional cooperation, public health responses, and sustainable crime prevention measures.

The article's title is organized into four segments or subsections. The first segment includes the introduction and background, addressing the statement of the problem, research objectives, research questions, significance of the study, delimitations, limitations, methodology, and a brief overview of drug trafficking and substance abuse following the enactment of the 2023 drug law, along with the mandate of the Liberia Drug Enforcement Agency (LDEA).

The second segment presents a comprehensive literature review of the social phenomenon, followed by a theoretical framework that emphasizes deterrence theory, supported by state capacity theory and routine activity theory. This integrated framework shifts the focus from questioning whether the law is sufficiently punitive to examining whether the state possesses the institutional capacity to implement it effectively against sophisticated transnational criminal networks.

The third segment offers a thorough analysis, integrating findings and discussions that address the research questions, all guided by the theoretical framework. Finally, the fourth segment concludes the paper or article.

Statement of the Problem

The enactment of Liberia's Controlled Drugs and Substances Act of 2023 marked a significant shift in the country's response to illicit drugs and transnational drug trafficking. The law introduced

harsher penalties, including non-bailable offenses for serious drug-related crimes, intending to strengthen deterrence and disrupt organized criminal networks. The policy assumption was that increased punishment severity would reduce drug trafficking and related offenses.

However, evidence suggests that drug trafficking in Liberia has persisted despite these reforms. Before the 2023 legislation, authorities intercepted a cocaine shipment valued at approximately US\$100 million in 2022, one of the largest seizures in the country's history, underscoring Liberia's established role as a transit hub for international narcotics trafficking (U.S. Embassy in Liberia, 2022). This indicates that sophisticated trafficking networks were already embedded within the country before the legal reforms.

In the post-reform period, the drug situation has further evolved. The emergence and rapid spread of the synthetic drugs “kush” and “Tramadol” have created a growing public health and security crisis, particularly among young people. In addition, the seizure of approximately 237.6 kilograms of cocaine valued at US\$19.2 million at Roberts International Airport in June 2026, one of the largest in the country's history, demonstrates the continued exploitation of Liberia by transnational trafficking networks (Thompson, 2026).

Arguably, these developments highlight a policy paradox. Although Liberia has strengthened its legal framework and ratified international drug control conventions, drug trafficking and organized criminal activities continue to expand. This raises critical questions about whether punitive legislation alone is sufficient to address transnational organized crime. Contemporary research shows that drug trafficking is driven not only by legal penalties but also by weak institutions, corruption, porous borders, limited intelligence-sharing, socioeconomic vulnerability, and adaptive criminal networks (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2023; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2024).

Despite extensive scholarship on drug trafficking in West Africa, limited attention has been given to assessing whether Liberia's post-2023 punitive

approach adequately addresses the structural and institutional conditions sustaining illicit drug markets. This study addresses this gap by arguing that while the 2023 Drug Law strengthens deterrence, punishment alone is insufficient to dismantle transnational drug trafficking networks. It therefore examines the broader governance and institutional reforms required for a more comprehensive and effective drug control strategy.

Research Objectives

The general objective of this study is to examine the effectiveness of Liberia's Controlled Drugs and Substances Act of 2023 in addressing transnational drug trafficking and to assess whether punitive legal measures alone are sufficient to combat organized drug crime in Liberia.

Specific Objectives

1. Assess the extent to which the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act of 2023 has strengthened deterrence against drug trafficking and related organized criminal activities in Liberia.
2. Examine the continuing patterns and dynamics of drug trafficking in Liberia following the enactment of the 2023 Drug Law, including major seizures and the emergence of synthetic drugs such as kush.
3. Identify the key institutional, governance, and socioeconomic factors that continue to facilitate drug trafficking in Liberia despite stricter legal sanctions.
4. Analyze the limitations of a punishment-centered (deterrence-based) drug control strategy in addressing transnational organized crime in the Liberian context.
5. Propose policy and institutional reforms required to strengthen Liberia's capacity to prevent, detect, and respond effectively to transnational drug trafficking.

Research Questions

In order to achieve the general objective of this study, which seeks to examine the effectiveness of Liberia's Controlled Drugs and Substances Act of 2023 in addressing transnational drug trafficking and to assess whether punitive legal measures alone are sufficient to combat organized drug crime in Liberia, the following research questions are posed:

Specific Research Questions

1. To what extent has the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act of 2023 strengthened deterrence against drug trafficking and related organized criminal activities in Liberia?
2. What do recent drug trafficking trends and major seizures (including the 2022 and 2026 cocaine incidents and the emergence of kush and Tramadol) reveal about the effectiveness of Liberia's drug control strategy?
3. What institutional, governance, and socioeconomic factors continue to enable drug trafficking in Liberia despite the enactment of stricter drug laws?
4. What are the limitations of a punishment-centered approach to drug control in addressing transnational organized crime in Liberia?
5. What policy and institutional reforms are necessary to strengthen Liberia's capacity to effectively prevent and respond to transnational drug trafficking?

Significance of the study/Contribution to Knowledge

This study holds significant academic and policy relevance as it offers a critical evaluation of Liberia's post-2023 drug control strategy within the larger framework of transnational organized crime. While much of the existing policy discourse focuses on punitive enforcement and severe legislation, this study redirects attention to the structural and institutional conditions that influence the

effectiveness of drug control measures.

From an academic standpoint, the study enriches the growing literature on drug trafficking and organized crime in West Africa by integrating deterrence theory, state capacity theory, and routine activity theory to elucidate the limitations of punishment-centric approaches. It provides an analytical framework that helps explain why harsher laws alone may not lead to the anticipated reductions in drug trafficking, especially in contexts marked by weak institutions, corruption, and porous borders.

Practically, the study delivers valuable insights for policymakers, security agencies, and international partners by pinpointing gaps in Liberia's current drug control strategy. It underscores the necessity for a more comprehensive approach that extends beyond punitive measures to encompass institutional strengthening, intelligence-led policing, interagency coordination, regional cooperation, and public health initiatives.

Overall, this study contributes to the discourse by reframing the drug control debate in Liberia from a narrow emphasis on punishment and deterrence to a broader understanding of state capacity and the resilience of transnational crime. This perspective is crucial for formulating more effective and sustainable responses to drug trafficking in Liberia and similar contexts.

Delimitations of the Study

This study is conceptually and geographically focused on Liberia, with particular attention to the country's response to transnational drug trafficking following the enactment of the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act of 2023. The analysis concentrates on assessing the effectiveness of punitive drug control measures and examining whether such measures alone are sufficient to address organized drug crime.

The study is temporally framed around developments before and after the 2023 Drug Law, with emphasis on key illustrative cases, including the 2022 cocaine seizure, the emergence of the synthetic drug "kush," "tramadol", and the 2026 cocaine interception at Roberts International Airport. These

cases are used to examine patterns of drug trafficking and enforcement responses in the post-reform period.

Theoretically, the study is guided by deterrence theory, State capacity theory, and routine activity theory, which serve as analytical lenses for explaining the limitations of punishment-centered approaches and the persistence of opportunities for drug trafficking. The study does not seek to empirically test these theories but apply them to interpret policy and institutional dynamics.

Methodologically, the study relies on qualitative documentary analysis of secondary sources, including government reports, publications from international organizations, and credible media reports. It does not involve primary data collection such as interviews, surveys, or field-based observation.

In scope, the study is limited to a policy-oriented examination of Liberia's drug control strategy and does not include a comparative cross-national analysis, except where external cases are referenced for contextual understanding.

Limitations of the Study

This study is based on qualitative documentary analysis and relies primarily on secondary sources, including government reports, publications from international organizations, and credible media accounts. As a result, the findings are shaped by the availability, accuracy, and completeness of existing documents, which may not fully capture all operational realities of drug trafficking and enforcement in Liberia.

Another limitation relates to the absence of primary data collection. The study does not include interviews with law enforcement officials, policymakers, prosecutors, or individuals involved in drug trafficking networks. This limits the ability to incorporate firsthand experiential insights and may constrain the depth of understanding of internal institutional challenges.

In addition, the study focuses specifically on Liberia and does not conduct a comparative cross-national analysis. While reference is made to broader regional

and international trends for contextual clarity, the findings are not designed for direct generalization to other West African countries or global contexts with different institutional and security environments.

A further limitation is that some of the cases referenced, including major drug seizures and emerging synthetic drug trends, are based on publicly reported information, which may be subject to reporting inconsistencies or limited official disclosure. This may affect the precision of certain empirical details used in the analysis.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a focused and policy-relevant examination of Liberia's post-2023 drug control framework and contributes to ongoing debates on the effectiveness of punitive approaches to transnational organized crime.

Methodology of the Study

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine Liberia's drug control strategy in the context of transnational organized crime, with particular emphasis on the effectiveness and limitations of punitive legal measures introduced under the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act of 2023. In line with the delimitations of the study, the research is geographically confined to Liberia and analytically focused on the country's institutional capacity response to drug trafficking networks.

The study employs a case study approach to enable an in-depth examination of Liberia's post-2023 drug enforcement environment, including key developments such as major cocaine seizures, the emergence of synthetic drugs such as kush, and evolving enforcement practices by relevant state institutions. This design allows for a comprehensive exploration of how legal reforms interact with institutional capacity, governance conditions, and transnational criminal dynamics.

Data for the study were collected primarily from secondary sources, including government policy documents, legislative instruments, official statements, reports from international organizations such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, as well as credible

media reports and peer-reviewed scholarly literature on drug trafficking and organized crime in Liberia and comparable West African contexts.

The data were analyzed using thematic content analysis, with a focus on identifying recurring patterns related to deterrence, institutional capacity, enforcement effectiveness, corruption risks, border control challenges, and the adaptability of transnational criminal networks. This analytical approach enabled the systematic interpretation of policy developments and operational realities within Liberia's drug control framework.

Given the sensitivity of national security and drug enforcement operations, as well as limitations in accessing primary institutional data from the LDEA, the study relied exclusively on publicly available and documented sources. This methodological choice aligns with the delimitations of the study and ensures that the analysis remains grounded in verifiable evidence while maintaining analytical focus on observable institutional practices and policy outcomes.

Ethical Considerations

Although this study relies exclusively on secondary data and does not involve human participants, it adheres to established principles of research ethics, including integrity, objectivity, transparency, and academic honesty. All information was obtained from publicly accessible and credible sources, including official government publications, legislative documents, and reports of international organizations, peer-reviewed scholarly literature, and reputable media outlets. These sources were critically evaluated to ensure the accuracy, reliability, and credibility of the evidence used in the analysis.

The study also observes the ethical principle of respect for institutional confidentiality by avoiding the disclosure of sensitive operational information that could compromise ongoing law enforcement activities or national security interests. Only information already available in the public domain was utilized, and no attempt was made to access restricted or classified materials from institutions

such as the LDEA or other security agencies.

Furthermore, the analysis was conducted with scholarly impartiality, ensuring that interpretations and conclusions were based on verifiable evidence rather than political, institutional, or personal biases. Proper acknowledgment and citation of all sources were maintained in accordance with the APA 7th edition referencing guidelines to avoid plagiarism and uphold academic integrity.

Finally, given the study's focus on transnational organized crime and drug control policy, care was taken to present findings responsibly, avoiding sensationalism or unsupported allegations against individuals or institutions? The study seeks to contribute constructively to evidence-based policy discourse by promoting balanced, objective, and ethically responsible scholarship on Liberia's evolving drug control strategy.

Brief Overview of Drug Trafficking and Substance Abuse in Liberia

Drug trafficking and substance abuse in Liberia have remained persistent challenges, shaped by a combination of post-conflict fragility, weak border governance, and the country's strategic location within West Africa's broader narcotics trafficking routes. Prior to and following the enactment of the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act of 2023, Liberia has continued to experience both the inflow of hard drugs and the rise of domestic substance abuse, particularly among youth populations.

Before the 2023 legal reforms, Liberia had already begun to emerge as a transit point for large-scale cocaine trafficking. In 2022, authorities reportedly intercepted a shipment valued at approximately US\$100 million in cocaine, underscoring the scale and sophistication of transnational trafficking networks operating through the country (U.S. Department of State, 2024). This incident highlighted structural vulnerabilities in border and airport security systems, even prior to the tightening of drug laws.

Following the enactment of the 2023 Drug Law, Liberia has continued to confront evolving drug-related threats. One of the most significant

developments has been the rapid spread of the synthetic drug popularly known as “kush” and “Tramadol,” which have become increasingly prevalent among young people and have contributed to rising concerns about addiction, mental health, and public safety. Accordingly, an estimated one in every four young Liberians is addicted to the substance (DW, 2026). This trend reflects a broader shift in West Africa’s drug landscape toward synthetic substances that are cheaper, more accessible, and more difficult to regulate (Emmanuel et al, 2024).

In addition, Liberia has continued to experience major drug trafficking incidents after the 2023 reforms. In June 2026, authorities intercepted approximately 237.6 kilograms of cocaine valued at about US\$19.2 million at Roberts International Airport, one of the largest seizures in the country’s history. The case further demonstrated that transnational criminal networks continue to exploit Liberia as a transit corridor despite stricter legal penalties and enhanced enforcement efforts (Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 2023).

Overall, these developments suggest that while the 2023 Drug Law represents a significant strengthening of Liberia’s legal framework, drug trafficking and substance abuse remain dynamic and resilient. Contemporary scholarship increasingly attributes this persistence not only to legal enforcement gaps but also to deeper structural factors, including weak institutional capacity, corruption risks, porous borders, limited intelligence coordination, and strong transnational criminal networks operating across West Africa (GI-TOC, 2023; UNODC, 2024). These conditions indicate that drug control challenges in Liberia extend beyond legislation and require a more comprehensive and integrated response.

Mandate of the Liberia Drug Enforcement Agency

The LDEA is the principal statutory body responsible for combating illicit drug trafficking, distribution, and abuse in Liberia. Its mandate is derived from national drug control legislation, particularly the Controlled Drugs and Substances

Act of 2023, which empowers the agency to detect, investigate, interdict, and prosecute drug-related offenses in collaboration with other law enforcement and judicial institutions (Government of Liberia, 2023; Ministry of Justice, n.d)

Functionally, the LDEA is tasked with a range of operational and regulatory responsibilities. These include conducting intelligence-led investigations into drug trafficking networks, intercepting and seizing illicit narcotics, arresting and assisting in the prosecution of offenders, and dismantling drug distribution syndicates operating within and across Liberia’s borders. The agency also plays a preventive role through public awareness campaigns aimed at reducing drug demand, particularly among vulnerable youth populations (Liberia Drug Enforcement Agency, n.d).

In addition, the LDEA collaborates with local, regional, and international partners, including the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and neighboring West African law enforcement agencies, to address the transnational nature of drug trafficking (FIA, 2025; Menjor, 2025; U.S. Department of State, 2025). Despite these mandates, the agency continues to face operational challenges, including limited logistical capacity, porous borders, and resource constraints, which affect its enforcement effectiveness (Menjor, 2026; Yaste, 2026).

Literature Review

Drug Trafficking and the West African Security Context

Contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualizes drug trafficking in West Africa as a structural and transnational security challenge rather than a purely criminal justice issue. The region has become an important transit corridor for cocaine shipments originating from Latin America and destined for European markets, driven by weak governance structures, porous borders, and uneven law enforcement capacity (UNODC, 2024). According to the UNODC World Drug Report 2024, cocaine trafficking through Africa, particularly West and North Africa, has expanded considerably, with

traffickers exploiting maritime and air routes linking Brazil, Colombia, Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, Ghana, Nigeria, and other coastal states to European markets. Record cocaine seizures in West and Central Africa since 2019 indicate the growing strategic importance of the region within the global cocaine supply chain. Moreover, the UNODC Global Report on Cocaine 2023 identifies West Africa as a major transshipment hub because its geographical position provides one of the shortest Atlantic crossings between South America and Europe, making countries such as Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, Cabo Verde, and the Gambia attractive staging points for international trafficking networks.

The security implications extend well beyond drug smuggling. In the Sahel, for example, cocaine seizures increased dramatically from an average of 13 kilograms annually between 2013 and 2020 to approximately 1,466 kilograms in 2022 across Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad, illustrating both the rapid expansion of trafficking routes and the growing nexus between organized crime, corruption, and armed extremist groups. These developments have reinforced scholarly arguments that drug trafficking weakens state authority, fuels political instability, finances violent non-state actors, and undermines regional governance, thereby transforming narcotics trafficking into a multidimensional security threat rather than merely a law enforcement concern (Cockayne, 2016; Ellis, 2009; Shaw, 2021). UNODC further emphasizes that organized crime in West Africa is both a cause and consequence of weak state institutions, creating a cycle in which criminal networks exploit governance gaps while simultaneously weakening institutional authority (UNODC, 2024).

Within this broader regional context, Liberia occupies a vulnerable position due to its post-conflict reconstruction challenges, limited surveillance infrastructure, and proximity to major trafficking routes. The Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC, 2023) similarly highlights that criminal markets in West Africa are increasingly adaptive, fluid, and decentralized, relying on informal networks rather than hierarchical cartels. This adaptability complicates state responses that rely primarily on punitive enforcement

mechanisms.

The Rise of Synthetic Drugs and Market Diversification

Recent literature indicates a significant shift in global and regional drug markets toward synthetic and mixed-substance drugs. The International Narcotics Control Board (INCB, 2024) notes that synthetic drugs are increasingly attractive to trafficking networks due to their low production costs, ease of concealment, and reduced reliance on traditional agricultural supply chains. In West Africa, this shift is reflected in the rapid spread of synthetic substances such as “kush”, which has been linked to rising public health concerns and drug-related harm among young populations (UNODC, 2024).

GI-TOC (2023) further argues that synthetic drug markets are more resilient to enforcement interventions because production can be easily relocated and modified, making traditional interdiction strategies less effective. This evolving drug landscape challenges the effectiveness of legal frameworks that are primarily designed to target conventional narcotics such as cocaine and heroin.

Punitive Drug Policies and the Limits of Deterrence

A dominant feature of drug control policy globally has been the reliance on punitive enforcement strategies grounded in deterrence logic. Deterrence Theory assumes that increasing the certainty and severity of punishment will reduce criminal behavior. Many states, including Liberia, have adopted stricter drug laws in line with this assumption.

However, empirical research increasingly questions the effectiveness of punishment-centered approaches in addressing organized drug markets. UNODC (2024) argues that while enforcement actions may disrupt individual trafficking operations, they rarely dismantle the underlying networks due to their transnational structure and capacity for rapid adaptation. Similarly, GI-TOC (2023) highlights that organized criminal groups respond to enforcement

pressure by shifting routes, diversifying drug types, and exploiting institutional weaknesses rather than ceasing operations.

This suggests that deterrence may have limited explanatory power in contexts where criminal actors operate within complex global networks rather than as isolated rational decision-makers.

State Capacity, Institutional Weakness, and Enforcement Gaps

A growing body of literature emphasizes the role of state capacity in shaping drug control outcomes. Weak institutions, corruption, and limited interagency coordination significantly reduce the effectiveness of enforcement strategies, particularly in fragile and post-conflict states. The U.S. Department of State (2024) notes that Liberia's limited law enforcement capacity and inadequate border control systems contribute to the continued flow of illicit drugs through its territory.

Recent governance literature suggests that the effectiveness of drug control and broader public policy depends less on the severity of legal sanctions and more on the credibility and consistency of institutional implementation (Besley & Persson, 2024; Meyer et al., 2024). This perspective emphasizes the distinction between formal legal frameworks and their practical enforcement, arguing that compliance is determined primarily by state capacity and institutional strength rather than legislative harshness alone (Voigt et al., 2023; Hertogh, 2024).

Routine Opportunities and the Persistence of Drug Trafficking

In addition to institutional explanations, criminological perspectives emphasize the importance of opportunity structures in explaining persistent criminal activity. Routine Activity Theory argues that crime occurs when motivated offenders, suitable targets, and the absence of capable guardians converge (Tilley & Sidebottom, 2023; Cohen & Felson, 1979).

Applied to drug trafficking in Liberia, this

framework highlights how porous borders, weak airport screening systems, corruption risks, and limited surveillance create routine opportunities for trafficking networks. Even in the presence of strict drug laws, these structural vulnerabilities enable criminal actors to continue operating with relatively low risk of detection or disruption (UNODC, 2024; World Drug Report, 2024).

Synthesis and Identified Research Gap

The literature collectively suggests that drug trafficking in West Africa is sustained by a combination of structural, institutional, and operational factors rather than legal leniency alone. While deterrence-based policies remain central to national drug control strategies, recent studies indicate that such approaches are insufficient when implemented in environments characterized by weak governance and transnationally adaptive criminal networks (GI-TOC, 2023; UNODC, 2024; INCB, 2024). However, a key gap remains in the literature. Existing studies tend to either focus broadly on West Africa without isolating country-specific post-reform experiences or examine drug policy at a legal or enforcement level without integrating institutional capacity and opportunity-based explanations into a unified analytical framework.

There is limited scholarly work assessing Liberia's post-2023 punitive drug control regime in relation to evolving trafficking patterns, such as synthetic drug proliferation (kush), (tramadol) and high-value cocaine seizures. This study addresses this gap by integrating deterrence, state capacity, and opportunity-based perspectives to critically assess whether punishment-centered strategies alone can effectively respond to transnational organized crime in Liberia.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in a multi-theoretical framework combining Deterrence Theory, State Capacity Theory, and Routine Activity Theory to explain the persistence of transnational drug trafficking in Liberia despite the enactment of the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act of 2023. These

theories originate from criminology, political economy, and environmental criminology, respectively, and together provide a layered explanation of crime control, institutional weakness, and opportunity structures.

Deterrence Theory

Deterrence Theory has its roots in classical criminology, particularly in the writings of Cesare Beccaria (1764) and Jeremy Bentham (1789), who posited that individuals act as rational agents and can be dissuaded from committing crimes if punishments are certain, swift, and proportionate. Over time, this theory evolved within modern criminology and criminal justice research, becoming a leading framework for shaping punitive legal systems and law enforcement policies.

In the context of this study, deterrence theory elucidates Liberia's adoption of stricter drug laws under the 2023 Drug Control Act, which heightened penalties and introduced non-bailable offenses for serious drug crimes. However, contemporary governance literature indicates that deterrence is effective only when enforcement is credible and consistently applied, which relies significantly on institutional strength rather than solely on the severity of punishment (Besley & Persson, 2024; UNODC, 2024).

State Capacity Theory

State Capacity Theory is firmly grounded in political science and comparative public administration, with foundational insights from scholars like Max Weber (1919), who described the modern state as an entity possessing a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. Contemporary advances in this theory have been shaped by scholars such as Mancur Olson (1993) and Besley and Persson (2011, 2024), who argue that effective governance hinges on the state's capacity to enforce rules, gather information, and implement policies consistently across its territory.

Within this framework, state capacity is defined as the institutional ability to design, implement, and enforce laws effectively. In fragile and post-conflict

contexts, such as Liberia, challenges like inadequate border control, poor coordination in law enforcement, and pervasive corruption can undermine enforcement outcomes, even when robust legal frameworks are in place. Empirical research further illustrates that transnational organized crime flourishes in environments marked by weak institutions and fragmented governance systems (GI-TOC, 2023; UNODC, 2024).

Routine Activity Theory

Routine Activity Theory serves as a fundamental framework in environmental criminology, formulated by Lawrence Cohen and Marcus Felson in 1979. This theory shifts the focus from offender motivation to the situational factors that facilitate crime. It posits that crime occurs when three elements converge in both space and time: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of capable guardianship.

When applied to drug trafficking, this theory underscores how structural and environmental conditions influence criminal opportunities. In Liberia, factors such as porous borders, ineffective airport screening systems, corruption risks, and limited surveillance capacities create regular opportunities for drug trafficking networks to operate with a diminished risk of detection. Contemporary global research reinforces the notion that West Africa's position as a trafficking corridor is closely linked to these opportunity structures, where inadequate guardianship allows illicit markets to thrive (International Narcotics Control Board [INCB], 2024; UNODC, 2024).

Theoretical Synthesis

The three theoretical perspectives together provide a comprehensive framework for understanding drug trafficking in Liberia. Deterrence Theory elucidates the rationale behind punitive drug legislation, while State Capacity Theory underscores the institutional constraints that hinder effective enforcement. Meanwhile, Routine Activity Theory illustrates how everyday opportunity structures allow trafficking networks to persist, despite legal reforms.

Recent empirical evidence indicates that punishment alone is inadequate in contexts where enforcement credibility is weak, and opportunity structures remain accessible (Besley & Persson, 2024; GI-TOC, 2023; UNODC, 2024). Hence, this integrated framework supports the central argument of the study: that effective drug control requires a shift from mere punishment to enhancing institutional capacity and minimizing criminal opportunities.

Integrated Findings and Discussion

This segment of the paper offers a thorough analysis, integrating findings and discussions that address the research questions, all guided by the theoretical framework.

Research Question One: To what extent has the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act of 2023 strengthened deterrence against drug trafficking and related organized criminal activities in Liberia?

The enactment of the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act of 2023 marked one of the most significant reforms of Liberia's drug control regime since the country's post-conflict reconstruction. The legislation introduced substantially harsher penalties for drug-related offenses, including the classification of major trafficking offenses as non-bailable, increased custodial sentences, stricter controls on the manufacture, importation, distribution, and possession of controlled substances, and enhanced investigative powers for law enforcement agencies. The principal objective of these reforms was to strengthen deterrence by increasing the legal consequences associated with drug trafficking and organized criminal activities. The Executive Mansion described the Act as a landmark legal instrument intended to regulate, restrict, and eradicate the proliferation of illicit drugs while strengthening the country's capacity to combat organized narcotics crime (Executive Mansion, 2023).

From the perspective of Deterrence Theory, the 2023 Act reflects the classical criminological assumption advanced by Beccaria (1764) and Bentham (1789)

that individuals make rational decisions by weighing the potential benefits of crime against the costs of punishment. Consequently, increasing the certainty, severity, and swiftness of sanctions should discourage participation in criminal activities. Liberia's decision to impose tougher penalties and eliminate bail for serious drug offenses, therefore, represents a deliberate policy shift toward a deterrence-based strategy designed to raise the perceived risks of trafficking and organized drug crime.

Arguably, to some extent, the legislation has strengthened the country's legal deterrent framework. The law has eliminated several procedural weaknesses that previously enabled suspected traffickers to secure bail and, in some instances, evade prosecution. It has also provided clearer statutory authority for the LDEA and other security institutions to investigate and prosecute drug-related offenses. These reforms signal a stronger governmental commitment to addressing narcotics trafficking and demonstrate increased political willingness to confront organized criminal enterprises.

The period following the enactment of the law also witnessed improvements in operational enforcement. With technical assistance from the UNODC and international partners, the LDEA implemented intelligence-led operations that resulted in several notable interdictions during 2025. These included Liberia's first successful controlled delivery operation, the country's largest seizure of marijuana through a land-border interdiction, major interceptions of illicit pharmaceutical opioids, and enhanced cross-border investigations. These operational successes indicate measurable improvements in investigative capability and interagency cooperation. This claim is evidenced by the LDEA 2025 Annual Report, which records confiscated drugs and chemical precursors valued at approximately \$4.95 million USD (over 949 million LRD) (Thompson, 2025).

Despite some notable gains, the findings suggest that enhanced legal severity has not produced a corresponding reduction in the operational capacity of transnational trafficking networks. Instead, recent developments indicate that organized criminal

groups have continued to adapt to the changing enforcement environment. The emergence and rapid spread of the synthetic drug kush, tramadol, together with continuing large-scale cocaine trafficking, demonstrate that criminal markets remain resilient despite the introduction of harsher legal sanctions (Kane, 2023).

According to the U.S. Department of State's International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, Liberia continues to face significant trafficking risks because of limited law enforcement capacity, inadequate border controls, judicial weaknesses, and its proximity to major regional trafficking routes. The report further notes that the 2022 seizure of cocaine valued at approximately US\$100 million may indicate an attempt by South American cartels to establish an expanded operational presence in Liberia.

The persistence of high-value trafficking incidents following the enactment of the 2023 Act raises important questions regarding the practical limits of deterrence. If increased punishment alone were sufficient to discourage organized criminal activity, one would expect a noticeable decline in major trafficking operations after the law entered into force. Instead, Liberia experienced another significant seizure in June 2026, when authorities intercepted approximately 237.6 kilograms of cocaine valued at about US\$19.2 million at Roberts International Airport. Such incidents suggest that sophisticated trafficking organizations continue to perceive Liberia as an attractive transit corridor despite the heightened legal risks. Rather than abandoning their operations, these networks appear to have adapted their methods by exploiting institutional vulnerabilities and regional trafficking routes.

This finding is consistent with contemporary international scholarship on organized crime. UNODC (2024) argues that while tougher legislation can increase the immediate risks faced by offenders, transnational criminal organizations rarely cease operations solely because of harsher penalties. Instead, they modify trafficking routes, diversify commodities, corrupt officials, exploit technological innovations, and relocate operational activities to jurisdictions where enforcement remains comparatively weak. Similarly, the Global Initiative

against Transnational Organized Crime (2023) observes that criminal organizations operating in West Africa increasingly function through flexible and decentralized networks capable of rapidly adapting to law enforcement pressure. These findings suggest that deterrence is considerably less effective when confronting highly organized and transnational criminal enterprises than when addressing conventional forms of domestic criminality.

The findings also reinforce the explanatory value of State Capacity Theory. Although Liberia's legal framework has become substantially stronger, the effectiveness of deterrence ultimately depends on the state's ability to enforce the law consistently and credibly. Contemporary governance scholarship emphasizes that compliance is influenced less by the severity of legal sanctions than by the certainty that violations will be detected, investigated, prosecuted, and punished through effective institutions (Besley & Persson, 2024). This distinction is particularly relevant to Liberia, where institutional constraints, including limited investigative resources, porous land and maritime borders, shortages of modern surveillance technology, judicial delays, and corruption risks, continue to reduce the certainty of punishment despite increased statutory penalties. The 2024 INCSR similarly identifies inadequate border controls, limited law enforcement capacity, and weaknesses within the criminal justice system as continuing enablers of trafficking activity.

Routine Activity Theory further complements this analysis by explaining why trafficking opportunities persist despite stronger legislation. Cohen and Felson (1979) argue that crime occurs when motivated offenders encounter suitable targets in the absence of capable guardianship. Applied to Liberia, capable guardianship remains uneven across border crossings, seaports, airports, and remote transit corridors. Consequently, although the legal risks associated with trafficking have increased, opportunities to evade detection continue to exist because surveillance capacity, intelligence coordination, and border management remain insufficient. UNODC's recent support for strengthening intelligence-led policing, border screening, and operational capabilities within the

LDEA implicitly recognizes that reducing criminal opportunities requires more than legislative reform alone.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act of 2023 has strengthened Liberia's legal deterrence framework but has not, by itself, significantly weakened transnational drug trafficking networks. The legislation has improved the country's statutory response, increased the legal risks associated with trafficking, and enhanced the authority of enforcement agencies. However, the continued emergence of kush, repeated high-value cocaine seizures, and the adaptability of organized criminal groups indicate that punitive legislation alone cannot achieve sustainable reductions in transnational drug trafficking. Consistent with the integrated theoretical framework adopted in this study, effective deterrence depends not only on the severity of punishment but also on strong institutional capacity and the systematic reduction of criminal opportunities. These findings therefore support the central thesis of this article: Liberia's long-term success against transnational organized crime requires moving beyond punishment toward a comprehensive strategy that combines robust legal enforcement with institutional strengthening, intelligence-led policing, regional cooperation, and preventive interventions.

Research Question Two: What do recent drug trafficking trends and major seizures reveal about the effectiveness of Liberia's drug control strategy?

The analysis of recent drug trafficking trends and major narcotics seizures reveals a complex and evolving picture of Liberia's drug control strategy. On one hand, the increasing number of high-profile interceptions demonstrates improvements in law enforcement vigilance, intelligence gathering, and interagency collaboration. On the other hand, the scale, frequency, and sophistication of these seizures suggest that Liberia continues to serve as an important transit corridor for transnational organized crime. Consequently, the findings indicate that while the country's operational capacity has improved in certain respects, its overall drug control strategy has

yet to substantially disrupt the structural and transnational dynamics that sustain illicit drug trafficking.

A notable finding is that the enactment of the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act of 2023 has coincided with a more proactive enforcement posture by the LDEA and other security institutions. The introduction of stricter penalties, combined with increased political commitment and technical assistance from international partners, has strengthened investigative operations and enhanced the country's ability to detect and intercept illicit drugs. For example, UNODC (2025) reported that Liberia successfully conducted its first controlled delivery operation, increased intelligence-led investigations, and recorded significant seizures of cannabis and illicit pharmaceutical products through coordinated law enforcement operations (Thompson, 2026). These developments suggest that the country's operational enforcement capacity has improved since the enactment of the new legislation (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2025).

However, the magnitude of recent cocaine seizures simultaneously reveals the continuing attractiveness of Liberia to international trafficking organizations. Before the enactment of the 2023 Drug Law, authorities intercepted approximately US\$100 million worth of cocaine in 2022, demonstrating that Liberia had already become an important node within regional trafficking routes linking Latin America to European and other international markets (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Rather than representing isolated criminal incidents, such large-scale seizures indicate the presence of sophisticated transnational networks with substantial financial resources, logistical capabilities, and regional connections.

More significantly, the continuation of major trafficking operations after the introduction of harsher penalties raises important questions about the effectiveness of a predominantly punitive drug control strategy. In June 2026, authorities intercepted approximately 237.6 kilograms of cocaine valued at about US\$19.2 million at Roberts International Airport. Government officials described the seizure as one of the largest in Liberia's history and confirmed that investigations extended beyond

individual suspects to include broader transnational criminal organizations operating across multiple jurisdictions (Yaste, 2026). The recurrence of such high-value trafficking incidents following the enactment of stricter legislation suggests that organized criminal networks have not been fundamentally deterred by increased legal sanctions.

Another important finding emerging from recent trends is the rapid expansion of synthetic drug consumption, particularly the proliferation of the highly addictive substance known locally as kush. Unlike traditional narcotics such as cocaine and heroin, synthetic drugs present distinct regulatory and enforcement challenges because they are relatively inexpensive to produce, frequently contain multiple chemical components, and can be modified to evade existing legal controls. The widespread emergence of kush therefore demonstrates that Liberia's drug problem is no longer confined to transit trafficking but increasingly encompasses domestic consumption, public health, and community security concerns (Kane, 2023). Similar patterns have been observed across West Africa, where synthetic drugs have become an expanding component of illicit drug markets (International Narcotics Control Board [INCB], 2024; UNODC, 2024).

From an analytical perspective, these developments illustrate the adaptive capacity of transnational organized crime. Rather than abandoning illicit activities in response to stricter legislation, trafficking organizations have diversified their operations, expanded into emerging synthetic drug markets, and adjusted trafficking methods to exploit weaknesses in national enforcement systems. The GI-TOC (2023) observes that contemporary criminal networks increasingly operate through decentralized structures that allow them to rapidly change routes, recruit local facilitators, and exploit governance weaknesses. This organizational flexibility significantly reduces the deterrent effect of punishment-centered policies because enforcement pressure directed at one segment of the network often results in displacement rather than dismantlement.

These findings strongly support the explanatory value of Routine Activity Theory. According to Cohen and Felson (1979), crime persists where

motivated offenders encounter suitable opportunities in the absence of capable guardianship. Liberia's strategic coastal location, extensive land borders with neighboring states, limited technological surveillance, inadequate airport and seaport screening capacity, and corruption risks collectively create opportunity structures that facilitate drug trafficking. Consequently, while the legal risks associated with trafficking have increased following the 2023 reforms, the operational opportunities available to organized criminal groups have not diminished proportionately. The continued occurrence of major seizures paradoxically demonstrates both improved detection by law enforcement and the continuing existence of extensive trafficking opportunities.

The findings equally reinforce the assumptions of State Capacity Theory. Effective drug control requires more than strong legislation; it depends on the state's ability to implement laws consistently through capable institutions. Although Liberia has strengthened its legal framework, institutional limitations, including shortages of specialized investigators, forensic capabilities, intelligence integration, financial crime investigations, border surveillance technology, and judicial resources, continue to constrain enforcement effectiveness. Contemporary governance research consistently demonstrates that criminal organizations exploit such institutional weaknesses by infiltrating legitimate commercial activities, corrupting public officials, and utilizing cross-border logistical networks that exceed the enforcement capacity of individual states (Besley & Persson, 2024; UNODC, 2024).

The findings also reveal an important distinction between operational success and strategic success. Operationally, large drug seizures demonstrate that law enforcement agencies are increasingly capable of detecting and intercepting illicit shipments. Strategically, however, repeated high-value seizures indicate that trafficking networks continue to operate on a significant scale. In this regard, the seizure of large quantities of narcotics should not automatically be interpreted as evidence that trafficking has declined. Rather, such seizures may equally signify the increasing volume of drugs moving through the

country or improvements in enforcement against a still-expanding criminal market. International drug policy literature cautions against using seizure statistics as the sole indicator of policy effectiveness because they measure law enforcement outputs rather than reductions in criminal market activity (UNODC, 2024).

Collectively, these findings suggest that Liberia's drug control strategy has achieved important operational gains without yet producing commensurate strategic outcomes. The strengthening of legal sanctions, increased intelligence-led operations, and improved interdiction capabilities demonstrate meaningful progress in enforcement. Nevertheless, the persistence of large-scale cocaine trafficking, the emergence of kush, tramadol, and the continued adaptability of transnational criminal networks indicate that these achievements have not fundamentally altered the underlying political, institutional, and socioeconomic conditions that sustain illicit drug markets.

Therefore, the evidence suggests that the effectiveness of Liberia's drug control strategy should not be assessed solely by the quantity of drugs seized or the number of arrests made. Rather, its long-term effectiveness should be evaluated according to its capacity to dismantle criminal organizations, reduce trafficking opportunities, strengthen institutional resilience, prevent the emergence of new drug markets, and address the governance and socioeconomic conditions that facilitate organized crime. These findings reinforce the central argument of this study that effective drug control extends beyond interdiction and punishment; it requires a comprehensive strategy integrating intelligence-led policing, institutional strengthening, financial investigations, regional cooperation, demand reduction, youth-focused prevention, and sustained governance reforms.

Research Question Three: What institutional, governance, and socioeconomic factors continue to enable drug trafficking despite stricter drug laws?

The findings indicate that the persistence of drug

trafficking in Liberia cannot be explained solely by the adequacy or inadequacy of its legal framework. Although the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act of 2023 significantly strengthened the country's punitive response to drug-related offenses, the continued occurrence of large-scale cocaine seizures and the rapid proliferation of synthetic drugs such as kush and tramadol suggest that transnational trafficking is sustained by a combination of institutional, governance, and socioeconomic factors. These findings support a growing body of scholarship that argues organized crime thrives not because laws are necessarily weak, but because the institutional environment within which those laws are implemented remains vulnerable (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime 2023; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2024).

Institutional Capacity and Enforcement Limitations

One of the most significant findings is that institutional capacity remains a critical determinant of Liberia's ability to combat transnational drug trafficking. Although the LDEA has received expanded statutory powers under the 2023 Act, effective implementation continues to be constrained by limited financial resources, shortages of specialized personnel, inadequate forensic capabilities, insufficient surveillance technology, and logistical challenges. Similar constraints affect other institutions involved in drug control, including the Liberia National Police, the Liberia Immigration Service, the Liberia Revenue Authority (Customs), and the judiciary.

These limitations reduce the certainty of detection, investigation, and successful prosecution, thereby weakening the practical impact of stricter legal sanctions. The U.S. Department of State's International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (2024) identifies inadequate border management, limited investigative capacity, and weaknesses within the criminal justice system as persistent vulnerabilities that continue to facilitate narcotics trafficking through Liberia. Likewise, UNODC (2024) emphasizes that legislative reforms alone

cannot produce sustainable reductions in organized crime without corresponding investments in institutional capacity, intelligence systems, and operational capabilities.

These findings strongly support State Capacity Theory, which argues that effective governance depends not merely on the existence of laws but on the state's ability to implement them consistently across its territory (Besley & Persson, 2024). Liberia's experience demonstrates that stronger legislation without commensurate institutional strengthening produces an enforcement gap that sophisticated criminal organizations can exploit.

Governance Challenges and Corruption

The analysis further indicates that governance challenges, particularly corruption and weak institutional accountability, continue to undermine drug control efforts. Drug trafficking organizations frequently exploit corrupt practices to facilitate the movement of illicit narcotics across borders, evade detection, manipulate customs procedures, and compromise criminal investigations. While Liberia has adopted anti-corruption measures and strengthened its legal framework, governance deficits remain a significant obstacle to effective drug enforcement.

International evidence consistently demonstrates that corruption reduces the certainty of punishment by weakening investigative integrity, compromising prosecutions, and diminishing public confidence in law enforcement institutions (UNODC, 2024). The Global Organized Crime Index similarly identifies corruption as one of the principal enablers of organized criminal markets across West Africa, where criminal networks often capitalize on institutional weaknesses to maintain operational resilience (GI-TOC, 2023).

From the perspective of Deterrence Theory, corruption weakens one of the theory's most important assumptions, the certainty of punishment. Even severe legal sanctions lose much of their deterrent value if offenders believe they can avoid detection or prosecution through bribery, political influence, or institutional inefficiencies.

Consequently, deterrence depends not only on legislative severity but also on transparent, accountable, and impartial law enforcement institutions.

Porous Borders and Regional Trafficking Networks

Another significant finding concerns Liberia's geographical and regional vulnerabilities. Liberia shares extensive land borders with Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Côte d'Ivoire, in addition to possessing a long Atlantic coastline. Monitoring these extensive entry points remains a major operational challenge due to limited personnel, inadequate surveillance technology, and constrained logistical resources.

These geographical realities have enabled transnational criminal organizations to exploit both formal and informal border crossings for the movement of cocaine, heroin, precursor chemicals, and synthetic drugs. According to UNODC (2024), West Africa has become an increasingly important transit corridor linking Latin American cocaine producers with European consumer markets. Rather than functioning independently, trafficking groups operate through highly adaptable regional networks that continuously modify routes in response to enforcement pressure.

These findings are well explained by Routine Activity Theory, which posits that crime occurs when motivated offenders encounter suitable opportunities in the absence of capable guardians (Cohen & Felson, 1979). In Liberia, limited border surveillance, inadequate maritime monitoring, and uneven airport screening reduce capable guardianship, thereby creating opportunities that facilitate transnational trafficking despite stricter legal penalties.

Intelligence Coordination and Interagency Collaboration

The findings also reveal that although cooperation among security institutions has improved since the enactment of the 2023 Drug Law, intelligence coordination remains a continuing challenge.

Effective responses to transnational organized crime require timely intelligence sharing among the LDEA, Liberia National Police, Liberia Immigration Service, Liberia Revenue Authority, Financial Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency, and international partners such as INTERPOL and UNODC.

Recent operational successes, including intelligence-led seizures supported by UNODC, demonstrate the benefits of coordinated investigations. However, fragmented information systems, resource disparities, and inconsistent interagency collaboration continue to limit the state's ability to identify, monitor, and dismantle sophisticated trafficking networks before drugs enter or transit the country (UNODC, 2024).

From a State Capacity perspective, intelligence integration represents a core element of effective governance. Modern transnational criminal organizations operate across multiple jurisdictions using encrypted communications, financial networks, and decentralized organizational structures. Consequently, fragmented institutional responses are often insufficient to counter increasingly sophisticated trafficking operations.

Socioeconomic Vulnerability and Drug Markets

Beyond institutional factors, the findings suggest that socioeconomic conditions continue to create an enabling environment for both drug trafficking and substance abuse. High youth unemployment, persistent poverty, social exclusion, limited educational opportunities, and inadequate rehabilitation services increase vulnerability to recruitment by organized criminal groups while simultaneously expanding domestic demand for illicit substances.

The emergence of kush illustrates the intersection between socioeconomic vulnerability and organized crime. As synthetic drugs become cheaper and more readily available, economically marginalized communities become increasingly susceptible to drug abuse, while traffickers benefit from expanding local consumer markets. UNODC (2024) and the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB, 2024)

report that synthetic drug markets are expanding rapidly across Africa because these substances are inexpensive to manufacture, easy to transport, and highly profitable for criminal organizations.

This finding demonstrates that drug trafficking is sustained not only by supply-side criminal enterprises but also by demand-side socioeconomic conditions. Consequently, strategies that focus exclusively on criminal enforcement fail to address the broader social and economic drivers that facilitate illicit drug markets.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that the persistence of drug trafficking in Liberia reflects a complex interaction between institutional weaknesses, governance deficits, and socioeconomic vulnerabilities rather than shortcomings in legislation alone. The Controlled Drugs and Substances Act of 2023 has substantially strengthened Liberia's legal framework, yet implementation continues to be constrained by limited state capacity, corruption risks, porous borders, fragmented intelligence systems, and socioeconomic conditions that both facilitate trafficking and sustain demand.

The integrated theoretical framework provides a comprehensive explanation of these findings. Deterrence Theory explains the rationale for imposing harsher legal sanctions but also illustrates why deterrence weakens when the certainty of punishment is undermined by corruption and institutional inefficiency. State Capacity Theory demonstrates that effective drug control depends fundamentally on the ability of state institutions to enforce laws consistently, coordinate operations, and maintain territorial control. Routine Activity Theory further explains how weak guardianship at borders, ports, airports, and other transit points creates opportunities that organized criminal networks exploit regardless of the severity of legal penalties.

Overall, the findings suggest that Liberia's drug trafficking challenge is fundamentally a governance and capacity problem as much as it is a criminal justice problem. While stronger laws remain an essential component of national drug control policy, they cannot, in isolation, dismantle transnational organized crime. Sustainable progress requires

simultaneous investments in institutional capacity, anti-corruption reforms, intelligence-led policing, border security, interagency coordination, regional cooperation, socioeconomic development, and evidence-based drug demand reduction. These findings reinforce the central argument of this study that moving beyond punishment is essential for developing a resilient and effective national strategy against transnational organized crime.

Research Question Four: What are the limitations of a punishment-centered approach to drug control in addressing transnational organized crime in Liberia?

The findings reveal that although the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act of 2023 has significantly strengthened Liberia's punitive legal framework, a punishment-centered approach alone has inherent limitations in addressing the increasingly complex nature of transnational organized crime. While harsher penalties may enhance deterrence against some forms of criminal behavior, the evidence suggests that they are insufficient to dismantle sophisticated trafficking networks that operate across national borders, exploit institutional weaknesses, and rapidly adapt to changing enforcement environments. Consequently, punishment should be viewed as one component of a broader drug control strategy rather than as a comprehensive solution.

From the perspective of Deterrence Theory, the enactment of stricter penalties was intended to increase the perceived costs of engaging in drug trafficking. Classical deterrence assumes that rational offenders will refrain from criminal activity when the risks of detection and punishment outweigh the anticipated benefits (Beccaria, 1764; Bentham, 1789). Liberia's decision to classify major drug trafficking offenses as non-bailable and impose more severe sanctions reflects this logic. However, the findings indicate that the effectiveness of deterrence depends not merely on the severity of punishment but also on the certainty and consistency of its enforcement. Contemporary empirical research consistently demonstrates that increasing sentence severity alone has a limited impact when criminal actors perceive a low probability of detection,

investigation, or successful prosecution (Besley & Persson, 2024; UNODC, 2024).

The continued occurrence of major trafficking incidents following the enactment of the 2023 Drug Law illustrates this limitation. The interception of cocaine valued at approximately US\$100 million in 2022, followed by the seizure of approximately 237.6 kilograms of cocaine worth about US\$19.2 million at Roberts International Airport in 2026, demonstrates that organized criminal networks continue to exploit Liberia as a transit corridor despite the introduction of harsher legal sanctions. Similarly, the rapid emergence and widespread use of the synthetic drug kush indicate that illicit drug markets continue to evolve despite strengthened legislation. Rather than abandoning criminal activities, trafficking organizations appear to have adjusted their operational strategies, diversified drug products, and exploited persistent institutional vulnerabilities.

These findings are consistent with international evidence showing that transnational organized crime is highly adaptive. According to UNODC (2024), organized criminal groups routinely modify trafficking routes, change transportation methods, diversify illicit commodities, and exploit emerging technologies in response to enforcement pressure. Likewise, (GI-TOC, 2023) argues that criminal markets are increasingly decentralized, allowing networks to recover quickly from arrests or seizures by replacing individuals, establishing alternative routes, and redistributing operational responsibilities. Consequently, while punitive enforcement may disrupt individual trafficking operations, it rarely dismantles the broader organizational structures that sustain illicit drug markets.

Another important limitation identified by the findings is that punishment-centered approaches focus primarily on offenders while giving comparatively less attention to the structural conditions that enable organized crime. Drug trafficking does not occur in isolation; it flourishes within environments characterized by weak institutions, corruption, porous borders, limited intelligence-sharing, and socioeconomic vulnerabilities. As discussed under Research

Question Three, these conditions continue to provide opportunities for criminal organizations to operate despite stricter legislation. Therefore, punishment addresses the symptoms of drug trafficking rather than many of its underlying drivers.

This observation is strongly supported by State Capacity Theory, which argues that effective law enforcement depends fundamentally on the ability of state institutions to implement laws consistently and maintain control over their territory. The findings demonstrate that Liberia's legal framework has improved substantially, but implementation continues to be constrained by shortages of trained personnel, limited investigative technology, inadequate forensic capacity, logistical challenges, and fragmented institutional coordination. As Besley and Persson (2024) argue, policy effectiveness depends more on institutional credibility and implementation capacity than on legislative severity alone. In other words, severe penalties cannot compensate for weak enforcement institutions.

The findings also illustrate the relevance of Routine Activity Theory, which explains that crime persists when motivated offenders encounter suitable opportunities in the absence of capable guardians (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Liberia's extensive land borders, maritime domain, and international airport remain vulnerable to exploitation because surveillance capacity, border screening technologies, intelligence systems, and interagency coordination remain uneven. These conditions create opportunities that organized criminal groups continue to exploit, irrespective of the severity of criminal sanctions. The persistence of trafficking activities, therefore, reflects deficiencies in capable guardianship rather than the absence of punitive legislation.

Beyond enforcement challenges, the findings indicate that punishment-centered approaches often pay insufficient attention to the socioeconomic dimensions of drug markets. High levels of youth unemployment, poverty, social exclusion, and inadequate rehabilitation services continue to increase vulnerability to both drug abuse and recruitment into illicit trafficking networks. The spread of kush among young people demonstrates that demand for illicit drugs cannot be reduced solely

through arrests and imprisonment. International evidence increasingly supports a balanced approach that combines criminal justice interventions with prevention, treatment, education, and community-based rehabilitation (INCB, 2024; UNODC, 2024). Without addressing these underlying socioeconomic conditions, punitive measures are unlikely to produce sustainable reductions in either drug consumption or organized trafficking.

The findings further suggest that punishment-centered strategies may unintentionally produce operational displacement rather than long-term crime reduction. When enforcement intensifies in one location or against one trafficking method, organized criminal groups frequently shift operations to alternative routes, utilize different transportation methods, recruit new participants, or introduce new synthetic substances that are more difficult to detect. This adaptive behavior has been widely documented across West Africa, where trafficking organizations continuously respond to enforcement initiatives by modifying their operational models (GI-TOC, 2023). Consequently, the success of individual seizures, while operationally significant, does not necessarily indicate the disruption of the broader criminal economy.

From a policy perspective, the findings demonstrate that measuring success solely by arrests, prosecutions, or drug seizures provides an incomplete assessment of drug control effectiveness. Although such indicators reflect important law enforcement achievements, they reveal relatively little about whether trafficking networks have been dismantled, financial assets confiscated, corruption reduced, drug demand lowered, or institutional resilience strengthened. Contemporary drug policy literature increasingly advocates the use of broader performance indicators that assess governance quality, intelligence effectiveness, financial investigations, cross-border cooperation, public health outcomes, and community resilience alongside traditional enforcement statistics (UNODC, 2024).

Overall, the evidence indicates that Liberia's punishment-centered approach has strengthened the country's legal capacity to prosecute drug offenses but has not fundamentally altered the structural

conditions that sustain transnational organized crime. The integrated theoretical framework provides a coherent explanation for this outcome. Deterrence Theory explains the rationale for imposing harsher penalties but also demonstrates that deterrence is weakened when enforcement certainty remains inconsistent. State Capacity Theory shows that effective implementation depends on capable, well-resourced, and accountable institutions rather than legislation alone. Routine Activity Theory explains how persistent opportunities created by porous borders, weak surveillance, and inadequate guardianship enable criminal organizations to continue operating despite increased legal risks.

The findings therefore reinforce the central argument of this study that punishment, while necessary, is insufficient as the primary strategy for combating transnational organized crime in Liberia. Sustainable progress requires a comprehensive approach that integrates effective law enforcement with institutional strengthening, intelligence-led policing, financial crime investigations, anti-corruption measures, border security, regional cooperation, demand reduction, rehabilitation, and socioeconomic development. Moving beyond punishment is therefore not an argument against enforcement but an acknowledgment that durable success depends on addressing the broader institutional and structural ecosystem within which transnational organized crime operates. This conclusion is consistent with contemporary international scholarship, which increasingly advocates balanced, evidence-based, and whole-of-government approaches to drug control that combine criminal justice responses with governance reform, public health interventions, and international cooperation (GI-TOC, 2023; INCB, 2024; UNODC, 2024).

Research Question Five: What policy and institutional reforms are necessary to strengthen Liberia's capacity to effectively prevent and respond to transnational drug trafficking?

The findings indicate that addressing transnational drug trafficking in Liberia requires reforms that extend beyond punitive legislation to strengthen the

country's institutional capacity, governance systems, and regional cooperation mechanisms. While the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act of 2023 provides a stronger legal framework, its effectiveness ultimately depends on the ability of state institutions to implement the law consistently and address the structural conditions that enable organized crime.

First, the study finds that strengthening the institutional capacity of the LDEA and other security institutions should be a national priority. This includes increased investment in specialized personnel, forensic laboratories, intelligence analysis, surveillance technologies, and modern border screening equipment. Enhancing interagency coordination among the LDEA, Liberia National Police, Liberia Immigration Service, Liberia Revenue Authority (Customs), Financial Intelligence Agency, and the judiciary is equally important to improve intelligence sharing and coordinated investigations (UNODC, 2024).

Second, the findings underscore the need for intelligence-led policing and financial investigations to complement traditional enforcement. Since transnational drug trafficking is financially motivated, greater emphasis should be placed on identifying criminal networks, tracing illicit financial flows, confiscating criminal assets, and dismantling the economic foundations of organized crime rather than focusing primarily on arrests and imprisonment. International evidence demonstrates that disrupting criminal finances is often more effective than targeting individual offenders alone (GI-TOC, 2023).

Third, strengthening border governance and regional cooperation is essential. Given Liberia's strategic location within West Africa, effective drug control requires closer collaboration with neighboring countries, ECOWAS, INTERPOL, and UNODC through joint intelligence operations, information sharing, harmonized border management, and coordinated cross-border investigations (UNODC, 2024).

Finally, the findings suggest that sustainable drug control must incorporate public health and socioeconomic interventions. Expanding drug

prevention programs, rehabilitation services, youth employment initiatives, and community awareness campaigns would reduce both the demand for illicit drugs and the vulnerability of young people to recruitment by criminal networks. Such interventions address the underlying social conditions that punitive measures alone cannot resolve (INCB, 2024).

These findings reinforce the integrated theoretical framework underpinning this study. State Capacity Theory emphasizes the importance of strengthening institutional effectiveness; Routine Activity Theory highlights the need to reduce criminal opportunities through improved guardianship and border security; and Deterrence Theory suggests that punishment is most effective when supported by credible enforcement institutions. Accordingly, Liberia's long-term success against transnational organized crime depends not on harsher punishment alone but on a comprehensive strategy that integrates legal enforcement with institutional reform, intelligence-led policing, regional cooperation, and evidence-based prevention. Such a balanced approach is more likely to enhance national security and produce sustainable reductions in drug trafficking and organized criminal activities.

Conclusion

This study examined the effectiveness of Liberia's Controlled Drugs and Substances Act of 2023 in addressing transnational drug trafficking and organized criminal activities, with particular emphasis on whether a punishment-centered approach is sufficient to confront the evolving nature of illicit drug markets. Guided by Deterrence Theory, State Capacity Theory, and Routine Activity Theory, the study critically assessed the extent to which the strengthened legal framework has enhanced deterrence, analyzed recent trafficking trends, identified the institutional and socioeconomic factors that continue to facilitate drug trafficking, examined the limitations of punitive drug control strategies, and proposed policy and institutional reforms necessary for a more comprehensive national response.

The findings demonstrate that the enactment of the

Controlled Drugs and Substances Act of 2023 represents a significant milestone in Liberia's drug control policy. By introducing harsher penalties, classifying serious drug offenses as non-bailable, and strengthening the legal authority of enforcement institutions, the legislation has considerably improved the country's statutory framework for combating illicit drug trafficking. The law reflects the government's commitment to addressing what has become one of Liberia's most pressing national security and public health challenges. In this regard, the Act has strengthened the legal foundation for deterrence and has enhanced the operational mandate of institutions responsible for drug enforcement.

However, the study also finds that stronger legislation has not translated into a corresponding reduction in transnational drug trafficking. The persistence of major cocaine seizures, including the approximately US\$100 million seizure in 2022 and the US\$19.2 million seizure at Roberts International Airport in 2026, together with the rapid emergence and widespread abuse of the synthetic drug kush, demonstrates that organized criminal networks remain highly resilient and adaptive. These developments indicate that traffickers continue to exploit Liberia's strategic geographic location, institutional weaknesses, and regional trafficking routes despite the increased legal risks associated with the 2023 reforms.

The analysis further reveals that the effectiveness of drug control is constrained by broader institutional and governance challenges. Weak border management, limited investigative and forensic capacity, inadequate intelligence-sharing, corruption risks, fragmented interagency coordination, and resource constraints continue to undermine enforcement efforts. At the same time, persistent socioeconomic conditions, including youth unemployment, poverty, limited educational opportunities, and inadequate rehabilitation services, create an enabling environment for both drug consumption and recruitment into illicit criminal networks. These findings confirm that drug trafficking in Liberia is not merely a legal problem but also a governance, development, and national security challenge.

The integrated theoretical framework provides

important insights into these findings. Deterrence Theory explains the rationale behind the enactment of harsher penalties but also demonstrates that punishment loses much of its effectiveness when the certainty of detection and prosecution is weakened by institutional deficiencies. State Capacity Theory highlights that successful drug control depends fundamentally on capable, well-resourced, and accountable institutions that can implement laws consistently and coordinate national responses effectively. Routine Activity Theory further explains how porous borders, inadequate surveillance systems, weak guardianship, and routine criminal opportunities continue to facilitate trafficking activities despite stronger legislation. Collectively, these theories demonstrate that legal severity alone cannot effectively counter transnational organized crime without simultaneous improvements in institutional effectiveness and environmental guardianship.

Accordingly, the central contribution of this study is its demonstration that punishment is a necessary but insufficient component of an effective drug control strategy. While the 2023 Act has strengthened Liberia's legal response, sustainable progress requires a broader, integrated strategy that combines robust law enforcement with institutional strengthening, intelligence-led policing, financial investigations, anti-corruption measures, enhanced border security, regional and international cooperation, evidence-based prevention programs, treatment and rehabilitation services, and socioeconomic interventions aimed at reducing vulnerability to organized crime.

The study, therefore, concludes that Liberia's long-term success against transnational drug trafficking will depend not on imposing increasingly severe punishments but on strengthening the state's capacity to detect, prevent, investigate, and disrupt sophisticated criminal networks while simultaneously addressing the structural conditions that sustain illicit drug markets. Moving beyond punishment does not diminish the importance of criminal sanctions; rather, it recognizes that effective responses to transnational organized crime require a balanced, multidimensional, and evidence-based strategy that integrates criminal justice, governance

reform, public health, and socioeconomic development.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the growing body of scholarship that challenges the assumption that harsher penalties alone can defeat organized crime. It argues instead that the future of Liberia's drug control strategy lies in building resilient institutions, strengthening regional cooperation, improving intelligence capabilities, and adopting a holistic approach that addresses both the supply and demand dimensions of illicit drug markets. Such an approach offers a more sustainable pathway toward enhancing national security, protecting public health, and disrupting the transnational criminal networks that continue to threaten Liberia's stability and development.

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About the Author



Dr. Ambrues Monboe Nebo is an interdisciplinary researcher and senior police officer with over 20 years of experience in training, administration, and security intelligence, including international peacekeeping. He holds academic backgrounds in Sociology, Peace and Conflict Studies, Humanitarian and Refugee Studies, Public Administration, Law Enforcement, and Peacekeeping. He is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Security Studies at Hill-City University, Benin. He has taught at several

universities in Liberia, served in academic leadership roles, and reviewed for IJRISS. Dr. Nebo is the author of four books available on Amazon and numerous scholarly articles on Liberia, Africa's socio-political issues, and global politics published in Academia.edu, ResearchGate, and Google Scholar. His academic profile is <https://neboambrues.academia.edu>, where his scholarly work can be assessed.