

# Sparks fly over drug report

State suggests drug use shooting up; monitors contest police statistics

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FOR THE POST

A debate over trends in drug abuse is raging between the Supreme State Attorney's Office and anti-drug policymakers.

"Without a doubt, the Czech Republic is experiencing a drug boom," reads the Supreme State Attorney's Office Annual Report for 2003.

"That's nonsense!" counters Viktor Mravčík, head of the National Drug Commission, the monitoring group for drugs and drug addiction.

According to officials with the Supreme State Attorney's Office (NSZ), who obtain their statistics from the national police, the number of people charged and prosecuted for selling, producing or possessing illegal drugs increased by one-fifth last year. Statistics provided to *The Prague Post* by Mravčík confirm the numbers: 1,815 offenders were prosecuted in the year 2000; that figure rose to 2,295 offenders in 2003. But it's not the reports on the number of people prosecuted that has Mravčík upset.

"Yes, the number of people prosecuted has gone up slightly," he explained, "but the number of crimes actually went down over the past three years, from 4,458 in 2000 to 3,670 in 2003. This may mean that there are simply more people involved with one crime. The police never explained this difference."

In addition, Mravčík pointed to discrepancies between the number of people the NSZ report as being accused and the number of people prosecuted, showing the number of prosecuted lower.

"How is that possible?" he asked. "When someone is charged with a drug offense, it goes through the police first. Then the police investigate, and then only a portion of those cases get prosecuted by the State Attorney. So how could the number of people prosecuted possibly be lower? These statistics are wrong."

## Delays to blame?

Delays in processing account for the discrepancy between the number of accused and the number prosecuted, according to the NSZ. "You have to bear in mind the time gap



VLADIMÍR WEISS/The Prague Post  
Drug monitoring chief Viktor Mravčík says drug-use statistics are flawed.

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**Viktor Mravčík,**  
National Drug Commission chief

between when the crime was committed and when the criminal charges were filed — that too influences the statistics," said Pavel Macur, spokesman for the NSZ.

Mravčík disagreed. "You could say there is some delay in processing, but even looking at processing times over the long term, the statistics are not compatible," he said. "There's something wrong with these statistics. They may not be reliable."

## Statistical implications

In addition to the disagreement

over the validity of the statistics on drug offenders, the implications the statistics might have relative to the number of drug users in the Czech Republic is a huge part of the heated debate. Although Macur said the NSZ does not have the necessary information to provide details on the exact connection between drug-related crime and drug users, he does conjecture there is a connection. "Our long-term work and experience make it possible for us to say that in general, there is, of course, a link between drug users and drug-related crime," he said.

Mravčík, in turn, said the increase in the number of offenders mirrors only the activities of the police and the NSZ, not the amount of drug use. "Drug use is a very complicated issue, tied to health, social and economic factors. You can't make those kinds of conclusions from one data source," he said.

## DRUGS 2000-03

- ▶ **Police say:** Number of drug offenders up 20 percent
- ▶ **Justice Ministry says:** Number of drug offenders up 25 percent
- ▶ **National Drug Commission says:** Number of intravenous drug users down 5.5 percent

Jiří Richter, director of Sananim, a nonprofit group that monitors drug use and promotes "harm reduction" methods such as needle exchanges, says intravenous drug use has actually decreased over the past several years. "We have very clear data showing a decrease in drug use," Richter said, also asserting his organization's high credibility as the Czech Republic's largest NGO. "The data is derived from statistical methods standardized through the European Commission," Richter said. "Based on these data, I can state without reservation that the number of users of [intravenous] pervertin [methamphetamine] and heroin in the Czech Republic has dropped more than 5 percent over the past three years."

## Strategy needs OK

Mravčík recently presented a new national policy document, Drug Strategy 2005-2009, to a handful of government ministries for discussion. The document needs the backing of a minister for the draft to be submitted for consideration by the government. Mravčík's concern is that inappropriate focus on unreliable drug-use statistics will channel public funding away from the places where it's most needed.

"The main principle of the strategy is a public health approach to minimize consequences to users and society related to drug use," he said. "That means focusing on prevention, treatment and risk minimization, not prosecution."

So while Mravčík is trying to win the support of a minister to back his draft drug strategy, the debate over trends in drug use in the Czech Republic rages on, for some anyway. "There is no debate," Richter states. "The data is clear."