

Understanding Police Challenges in Drug Law Enforcement: A Documentary Analysis from Punjab, India

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ABSTRACT:

Punjab occupies a strategically sensitive position on India's north-western frontier and has experienced sustained exposure to illicit drug trafficking, domestic drug markets and cross-border supply networks. The effectiveness of drug law enforcement therefore depends not only on the severity of the legal framework but also on investigative capacity, evidentiary reliability, inter-agency coordination, technological adaptation and institutional legitimacy. This article undertakes a documentary analysis of the challenges confronting drug law enforcement in Punjab. It draws on statutory materials, government and law enforcement publications, audit findings, official crime data, judicial decisions and selected academic and policy literature. The analysis identifies six interrelated domains: procedural and evidentiary demands under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985, cross-border and technology-enabled trafficking; forensic and prosecutorial capacity; institutional integrity and accountability, organizational and technological capacity; and the relationship between enforcement, public health and community cooperation. According to this article, the degree of enforcement intensity as determined by arrests and seizures is insufficient to forecast effectiveness. Prosecution-ready investigations, quick forensic procedures, financial investigations into trafficking networks, intelligence-led policing, enhanced interagency cooperation, and reliable accountability systems are all necessary for sustainable law enforcement.

Keywords: Drug Abuse, Punjab Police, NDPS Act, 1985, narcotics, cross-border trafficking, forensic capacity, policing, criminal justice, public health, India.

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1. Introduction

Drug trafficking presents a multidimensional criminal-justice problem in Punjab. The State's location along the India–Pakistan border places it close to trafficking routes associated with the wider Golden Crescent, while domestic demand creates a local market in addition to the State's role as a transit and distribution environment. Contemporary policing must therefore address

organised networks, cross-border coordination, encrypted communications, financial flows and drone-enabled delivery mechanisms.

The legal response is centred on the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985 (NDPS Act), which creates a stringent framework covering possession, production, trafficking, financing of illicit traffic, search and seizure, confiscation and specialised adjudication.

The statutory framework also incorporates procedural safeguards. Sections 35 and 54 provide presumptions in specified circumstances; section 37 imposes stringent conditions for bail; sections 42, 43 and 50 regulate search and seizure; section 52A addresses disposal of seized narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances; and section 64A provides immunity from prosecution to addicts who voluntarily undergo treatment.

The central policy problem is that enforcement activity and enforcement effectiveness are not synonymous. Arrests, FIR registration and seizures measure activity, but they do not by themselves demonstrate disruption of trafficking organisations, successful prosecution, financial dismantling of networks or sustainable reduction in drug availability. A Comptroller and Auditor General audit of Punjab found significant weaknesses in NDPS case handling, including delays in forwarding seized samples to laboratories and acquittals associated with inconsistencies in police testimony. The audit recorded delays of up to 476 days and found that 532 of 756 acquittals in the examined cases were attributed to differences in witness statements.

The threat environment has also changed. The Ministry of Home Affairs reported that the Border Security Force seized 294 drones along the Punjab border during 2024. In March 2026, the Ministry reported 292 drones seized or recovered along the India–Pakistan border during 2025 and referred to foreign-based elements involved in facilitating narco-terrorism affecting Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir. These figures demonstrate the need for specialised surveillance, interdiction and investigative capabilities.

Against this background, the article asks: what are the principal challenges confronting drug-law enforcement in Punjab, and how do legal, institutional, technological and socio-political factors interact to shape enforcement capacity? The article is documentary rather than survey-based. It does not claim to represent the lived experiences or perceptions of serving police personnel. Instead, it synthesises publicly documented evidence to develop an analytical

framework that can subsequently be tested through primary research.

The article contributes by connecting the enforcement chain—from interdiction and investigation to forensic processing and prosecution—with the emerging drone and technology-enabled threat environment. It argues that additional enforcement volume without corresponding improvements in investigative quality, accountability and rehabilitation capacity may have diminishing returns.

2. Literature Review

Research on drug-law enforcement in border and transit economies shows that enforcement outcomes depend on more than the formal severity of criminal sanctions. Supply-side interdiction interacts with local markets, organised crime and state capacity. Punjab is particularly relevant because it experiences both cross-border trafficking pressures and domestic demand. The literature therefore supports a shift from viewing drug enforcement solely as a seizure problem towards examining institutional capacity and the criminal-justice pipeline.

A second strand concerns procedural stringency. The NDPS Act combines severe punishment with safeguards governing search, seizure, sampling, custody and adjudication. Supreme Court jurisprudence has repeatedly emphasised that these safeguards are substantive protections rather than administrative formalities. In *State of Punjab v Baldev Singh*, the Court stressed compliance with section 50 in personal searches. In *Karnail Singh v State of Haryana*, the Court clarified the operation of section 42 in circumstances requiring urgent action. The implication is that effective policing requires both operational decisiveness and procedural discipline.

A third strand concerns Police legitimacy and integrity are the subject of a third strand. Since illegal goods are valuable and trafficking networks might appear for influence, drug markets can increase the danger of corruption. Without evidence, claims of institutional responsibility in Punjab should not be extended

into conclusions of systemic corruption. However, from a policing standpoint, credible claims are important since public trust influences willingness to participate with investigations and give intelligence.

A fourth strand concerns technological adaptation. Drone-assisted trafficking, encrypted communications, false identities and digital financial mechanisms have changed the information requirements of narcotics investigations. Effective enforcement therefore requires digital investigation, intelligence fusion, financial investigation and forensic exploitation of seized devices and equipment.

Finally, public-health scholarship challenges an exclusively punitive model. Section 64A of the NDPS Act provides a treatment-oriented mechanism for eligible addicts who voluntarily undergo treatment. Contemporary policy consequently requires differentiation between commercial traffickers and persons whose principal problem is substance dependence.

3. Methodology

The study used a qualitative research design. The unit of analysis is the documented drug-law enforcement system in Punjab rather than individual police officers. Primary legal materials comprise the NDPS Act and judicial decisions. Secondary materials comprise official government and law-enforcement publications, audit reports, crime statistics, parliamentary answers, academic literature and selected policy and investigative reporting.

The evidence was organised around six analytical domains: legal and procedural requirements; cross-border and technology-enabled trafficking; forensic and prosecutorial capacity; institutional integrity and accountability; organisational and technological capacity; and enforcement, rehabilitation and community cooperation. Evidence was compared across source types rather than relying on a single report.

A source hierarchy was applied. Statutes, judicial decisions, official government publications, parliamentary records and CAG reports were treated as high-authority sources. Peer-reviewed

research and established policy institutions were used for contextualisation. News reports were retained selectively where they reported official statements, recent operational developments or public allegations not yet available in equivalent official publications. Allegations are explicitly identified as allegations.

The study has a temporal limitation because trafficking patterns and government responses are evolving rapidly. Recent 2025–2026 figures may be provisional or later reconciled. The article also does not infer individual police attitudes, occupational stress or perceptions from documentary evidence; those questions require primary empirical research.

4. Analysis: Major Challenges in Drug-Law Enforcement

4.1 Procedural and evidentiary demands

The NDPS Act creates an unusually demanding evidentiary environment. Sections 42 and 43 distinguish between searches in specified places and public places, while section 50 safeguards personal searches. Sections 52 and 52A regulate seized material, and sections 55 and 57 impose further obligations concerning custody and reporting. The statutory design means that investigative quality is inseparable from legal compliance. The Punjab CAG audit illustrates the consequences of weak implementation: samples in 8,011 of 10,642 test-checked cases were forwarded to laboratories after delay, in some cases up to 476 days; 532 of 756 acquittals in the reviewed cases were attributed to differences in witness statements. These findings do not establish that the Act itself causes acquittals; rather, they demonstrate the premium placed on professional investigation, documentation and evidence management.

4.2 Cross-border and drone-enabled trafficking

The border environment has introduced a technological dimension to narcotics enforcement. Drone deliveries can reduce traffickers' physical exposure, bypass conventional patrol patterns and complicate attribution. Official parliamentary data recorded

294 drones seized on the Punjab border in 2024 and 292 drones seized or recovered along the India–Pakistan border in 2025. The appropriate response therefore extends beyond interception: investigators must identify recipients, preserve digital evidence, reconstruct communications and financial links, and connect individual deliveries to wider trafficking organisations.

4.3 Forensic and prosecutorial capacity

Forensic delay is a critical link in the enforcement chain. Drug cases require reliable identification and quantification of seized substances, and evidentiary value depends on secure custody and documented movement. The CAG findings show that historical delays were substantial. The policy lesson is that forensic capacity should be measured by caseload, turnaround time and quality assurance, not merely by the existence of laboratories. Digital case tracking can integrate seizure, sampling, dispatch, receipt, examination and report-generation milestones so that supervisors can intervene before delay becomes a litigation problem.

4.4 Institutional integrity and accountability

Drug-law enforcement is sensitive to integrity risks because trafficking networks have strong financial incentives to obtain information, protection or influence. Public allegations of police or political complicity have periodically emerged in Punjab. Such allegations should not be generalised to the entire police organisation; nevertheless, credible allegations can damage legitimacy. Internal vigilance, protected reporting channels, supervisory review of high-risk investigations and transparent inquiry into credible complaints can reduce opportunities for misconduct. Accountability is therefore not merely ethical; it is part of operational capacity because intelligence-led policing depends on public confidence.

4.5 Organisational, training and technological capacity

The contemporary narcotics investigator requires skills in digital evidence, financial investigation, intelligence analysis, drone evidence, pharmaceutical diversion and inter-agency

procedures. Training should be continuous and role-specific. Technology investment should likewise be linked to operational requirements, maintenance, trained operators, standard operating procedures and evidentiary preservation. Anti-drone systems, CCTV and digital case management are useful only when personnel can convert detections into legally sustainable investigations.

4.6 Enforcement, rehabilitation and community cooperation

Drug-law enforcement must distinguish commercial trafficking from drug dependence. Section 64A provides a treatment-oriented route for eligible addicts who voluntarily undergo treatment. The policy challenge is to ensure that treatment capacity keeps pace with diversion and demand. A differentiated approach is preferable: strong investigative and financial action against commercial traffickers, financiers and network organisers, combined with treatment and rehabilitation pathways for eligible persons with dependence. Community cooperation is also essential, particularly in border areas. Such cooperation depends on perceptions of fairness, confidentiality and institutional integrity.

5. Discussion

The evidence indicates that Punjab's drug-law enforcement challenge is best understood as a problem of system capacity rather than simply insufficient enforcement effort. The NDPS Act provides extensive substantive and investigative powers, but their value depends on implementation. Procedural requirements, forensic capacity, prosecutorial coordination and institutional integrity are therefore central determinants of enforcement effectiveness.

Three interactions are particularly significant. First, procedural stringency and forensic capacity are interdependent: where investigators lack timely laboratory access or robust chain-of-custody systems, stringent requirements become difficult to satisfy consistently. Second, technological adaptation and investigative capacity are interdependent: drone detection without digital and intelligence capability may

produce seizures without identifying the network behind them. Third, institutional integrity and community cooperation are interdependent: unresolved allegations of selective or compromised enforcement may weaken the legitimacy needed for intelligence-led policing.

The analysis also suggests that enforcement metrics require recalibration. Arrests and seizures remain necessary indicators, but they should be supplemented by measures of network disruption, financial investigation, forensic turnaround, prosecution readiness, case outcomes and rehabilitation. A policy that produces more arrests while leaving trafficking organisations financially intact may have limited long-term effect.

This documentary analysis should not be mistaken for an empirical assessment of police perceptions. Its value is diagnostic: it maps the institutional environment in which police personnel operate. Primary research can now test these documented challenges against data collected from Punjab Police personnel, including operational burden and occupational stress.

6. Policy Implications and Recommendations

- Adopt prosecution-ready investigation protocols integrating statutory compliance, forensic sampling, chain-of-custody documentation and legal review from the earliest stage of an NDPS investigation.
- Implement digital case-tracking systems for seizure, sample dispatch, laboratory receipt, examination and report completion.
- Expand forensic capacity in proportion to caseload and publish turnaround-time indicators.
- Develop a dedicated drone-trafficking investigation protocol combining counter-drone detection, scene preservation, digital forensics, geospatial analysis and intelligence fusion.
- Strengthen financial investigation alongside physical seizure to identify proceeds, assets and the organisational structure of trafficking networks.

- Use the NCORD framework to institutionalise timely intelligence sharing among Punjab Police, BSF, NCB and other relevant agencies.
- Introduce role-specific continuing professional development in digital investigation, financial intelligence, drone evidence, pharmaceutical diversion and NDPS procedure.
- Strengthen integrity safeguards through vigilance, protected reporting channels and transparent inquiry into credible allegations.
- Adopt differentiated enforcement indicators for commercial traffickers and treatment-oriented responses for eligible persons with substance dependence.

Expand community-policing and confidential information mechanisms in border areas, supported by transparent reporting on enforcement and accountability outcomes.

6.1 Limitations and Future Research

This study is based entirely on secondary and documentary sources — official statistics, audit reports, and journalistic investigation — and does not incorporate primary data from serving police officers, prosecutors, or affected communities. Consequently, it captures the publicly documented challenge landscape rather than officers' lived operational experience, informal coping strategies, or unreported constraints. Official statistics on arrests, seizures, and conviction rates are also subject to potential reporting and measurement bias, and figures cited from ongoing 2026 campaigns should be treated as provisional pending final annual reconciliation.

6.2 Directions for future primary research. A

natural extension of this study would employ a mixed-methods design: (a) a structured survey of Punjab Police personnel across ranks and districts measuring perceived barriers to NDPS enforcement (legal, technological, resource, and institutional); (b) semi-structured interviews with investigating officers, public prosecutors, and forensic officials to triangulate the documentary findings above; and (c) case-file analysis of a

representative sample of NDPS prosecutions to quantify the procedural determinants of acquittal identified qualitatively here. Such a design would allow the seven-domain framework proposed in this article to be empirically validated and weighted.

7. Conclusion

Punjab's drug-law enforcement challenge cannot be reduced to the volume of arrests or seizures. The documentary evidence indicates a system in which stringent legal requirements, evolving cross-border trafficking methods, forensic and prosecutorial constraints, technological demands, integrity risks and public-health considerations interact. The policy question is therefore not simply whether Punjab should enforce drug laws more strongly, but how enforcement can be made more precise, legally sustainable, intelligence-led and institutionally credible.

The NDPS Act provides a powerful statutory framework, but statutory severity cannot

substitute for investigative quality. The practical priority should be to improve the entire enforcement chain—from intelligence and interdiction through forensic examination, financial investigation, prosecution and adjudication—while maintaining constitutional and procedural safeguards. Drone-enabled trafficking further demonstrates the need to integrate border security with modern criminal investigation.

Finally, durable drug-law enforcement requires a differentiated response. Commercial trafficking and organised supply networks warrant focused criminal-justice intervention, including financial disruption and network dismantling. Drug dependence requires accessible treatment and rehabilitation. Community cooperation requires legitimacy and accountability. Bringing these components together offers Punjab a more sustainable enforcement model than relying on enforcement volume alone.

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