OIOS
Office of Internal Oversight Services

INTERNAL AUDIT DIVISION

REPORT 2025/011

Audit of research and analysis at the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

There is need to establish a framework for planning, quality assurance and dissemination of research and analysis products and to improve the quality of data in the data portal

10 June 2025
Assignment No. AE2023-360-01

Audit of research and analysis at the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) conducted an audit of research and analysis at the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). The objective of the audit was to assess the adequacy and effectiveness of governance, risk management and control processes over UNODC's operational arrangements to guide, oversee and coordinate its research and analysis workstream. The audit covered the period from 1 January 2022 to 30 June 2024 and included a review of risk areas relating to: (a) governance and strategic planning; (b) standards and quality assurance mechanisms; (c) dissemination and monitoring; (d) data collection management; and (e) capacity building for Member States.

The audit showed that there is need to establish a framework for planning, quality assurance and dissemination of research and analysis products and to improve the quality of data in the data portal.

OIOS made nine recommendations. To address issues identified in the audit, UNODC needed to:

- Operationalize the governance structure for the research and analysis workstream by approving the terms of reference for the Global Research Network and the Regional Research Hubs;

- Finalize its entity-wide research and analysis plan and results framework with appropriate indicators of achievement and reporting mechanisms;

- Finalize and adopt the research quality assurance framework including quality standards, ethical standards, and guidance on use of publication attributes;

- Adopt a quality review framework for research and analysis products that addresses: internal and external review mechanisms; an accountability framework for overseeing compliance with established standards; and guidelines for documenting stakeholders' comments on draft reports;

- Standardize the participation of human rights and gender focal points in the review of research products; and develop a standard protocol for engaging with respondents in collecting information for research and analysis products;

- Develop a centralized repository for all its research and analysis products and ensure that all products are accessible from the main research webpage;

- Establish stakeholder feedback mechanisms for research products, including guidance on using satisfaction surveys, monitoring the use of research products, and performing data analysis on the feedback;

- Establish a plan for improving the quality of data in the portal by: ensuring that metadata sheets and explanatory notes are provided for all areas; activating the data map functions; and standardizing the regional groupings in line with United Nations standards; and

- Develop a roadmap for identifying and addressing gaps in data collection capacity and needs of Member States.

UNODC accepted the recommendations and has initiated action to implement them. Actions required to close the recommendations are indicated in Annex I.

CONTENTS

Audit of research and analysis at the
United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

I.   BACKGROUND

1.   The Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) conducted an audit of research and analysis at the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

2.   The UNODC work stream on research and analysis includes implementation of thematic research programmes, management of global and regional data collections, and support to Member States to strengthen their data collection, research and forensics capacity.

3.   UNODC produces research products based on mandated data collection, such as flagship global reports including the world drug report, the global report on trafficking in persons, global studies on firearms, and the homicide and femicide briefs. This data also feeds into other research publications such as transnational organized crime threat assessment reports and the global cocaine report.

4.   UNODC research and analysis work is mainstreamed in country, regional and global programmes. The core mandate and responsibilities of UNODC's Research and Trend Analysis Branch (RAB) cover three functions: (a) production of knowledge products that are based on consistent quality standards, and timely and user-friendly quantitative and qualitative evidence; (b) support to Member States to strengthen their capacity to collect data and generate impartial knowledge; and (c) production of international standards in the field of data, statistics and analysis.

5.   RAB maintains a data portal in the UNODC website and comprises four sections: (i) the Geospatial Analysis and Programme Delivery Section; (ii) the Data, Analytics and Statistics Section; (iii) the Research and Knowledge Production Section; and (iv) the Research Innovation and Partnership Section.

6.   RAB was led by a Director at the D-1 level supported by 63 staff and non-staff personnel including 29 professional staff, 14 general service staff, 18 consultants and individual contractors, and two United Nations Volunteers. As of February 2025, RAB had five vacancies consisting of four professional posts and one general service post.

7.   RAB used corporate platforms including Umoja, Office 365 and the UNODC website as its information management systems for administrative and programmatic areas.   In addition, RAB used applications developed locally by UNODC and proprietary software to support data collection, data processing and analysis, data visualization and dissemination, and database storage and management.

8.   Comments provided by UNODC are incorporated in italics.

II.   AUDIT OBJECTIVE, SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

9.   The objective of the audit was to assess the adequacy and effectiveness of governance, risk management and control processes over UNODC's operational arrangements to guide, oversee and coordinate its research and analysis workstream.

10.   This audit was included in the 2024 risk-based work plan of OIOS due to the risks associated with the research and analysis workstream as a crosscutting area of work at UNODC.

11.   OIOS conducted this audit from October 2024 to February 2025. The audit covered the period from 1 January 2022 to 30 June 2024. Based on an activity-level risk assessment, the audit covered risk areas in the planning and implementation of the research and analysis work including: (a) governance and strategic planning; (b) standards and quality assurance mechanisms; (c) dissemination and monitoring; (d) data collection management; and (e) capacity building for Member States.

12.   The audit methodology included: (a) interviews with key personnel; (b) review of relevant documentation; (c) assessment of the client's data management systems, practices, and processes for data management; (d) analytical review of data including statistical datasets published by UNODC; and (e) sample testing of research products.

13.   OIOS assessed the quality of data related to the UNODC research and analysis work stream by: (a) testing the downloading option for three sub-data collections; (b) reviewing existing information and data in the UNODC data portal including data composition by regional grouping, labelling of drug-related data, country and territory data profiles and SDG indicators; and (c) interviewing UNODC personnel knowledgeable about the data.

14.   The audit was conducted in accordance with the Global Internal Audit Standards.

III.   AUDIT RESULTS

A.   Governance and strategic planning

<u>Need for governance mechanisms for the research and analysis workstream</u>

15.   Research and analysis is a cross-cutting area of work conducted across UNODC headquarters, field offices and global programmes. Therefore, coordination mechanisms need to be established to ensure effective and coherent planning, implementation and dissemination of research results. This need was also highlighted by the 2018 independent evaluation and the 2018 professional peer review of RAB, both of which emphasized the importance of clear guidance and oversight.

16.   At the time of the audit, there were no approved guidelines defining research roles or coordination requirements at UNODC. As a result, coordination practices between RAB, field offices, global programmes, and headquarters' thematic branches were inconsistent and inadequate. RAB was not always informed of ongoing or completed research and analysis activities by global programmes and field offices which limited RAB's capacity to coordinate and effectively oversee research and analysis work. Regional Representatives and staff in thematic branches also noted instances where they were not informed in a timely manner of research and analysis activities performed in their regions or areas of work.

17.   RAB had made efforts to enhance governance and coordination, but the governance structure it initiated had not been fully operationalized. In 2018, RAB established the Global Research Network to facilitate annual exchange of good practices and knowledge with research focal points from field offices. Over the years, more field offices joined the Global Research Network and in 2024, its membership was expanded to include research focal points from headquarters branches and global programmes, as well as the UNODC Gender Team. However, the terms of reference for the Global Research Network were not yet approved.

18.   Additionally, in April 2024, RAB proposed to the UNODC Executive Committee (ExCom) the establishment of two new coordination mechanisms: (i) a Research Review Committee; and (ii) Regional Research Hubs. The Research Review Committee met for the first time in December 2024 and its terms of

reference were approved by ExCom in 2025. It will have responsibilities for planning and oversight while the Regional Research Hubs will coordinate regional research efforts. However, the terms of reference for the Regional Research Hubs were yet to be approved. For coordination mechanisms to work effectively, it is essential that the terms of reference are approved, and the governance structure is fully operationalized.

> **(1) UNODC should operationalize the governance structure for the research and analysis workstream by approving the terms of reference for the Global Research Network and the Regional Research Hubs.**
>
> *UNODC accepted recommendation 1 and stated that it will operationalize in 2025 the governance structure for its research workstream. It will finalize the terms of reference of the Global Research Network and of the Regional Research Hubs, already presented at ExCom in 2024. They will both be approved by the Research Review Committee (RRC) by the end of 2025. RRC will meet at least twice a year to review research priorities and plans from Global Programmes and relevant field offices (based on a standard template). It will review and approve accountability and review mechanisms of each research product. It will meet additionally when needed.*

Need to strengthen planning and reporting of research and analysis work

19.   UNODC had not established a results framework for planning, monitoring and reporting on research and analysis work. RAB developed work plans with targets and indicators of achievement for reporting on the impact of research results such as the number of instances in which research results were discussed by legislative bodies. However, the indicators were not mainstreamed to other research and analysis work done by global programmes, thematic branches and field offices. There was also no established mechanism to consolidate the plans and results of the research and analysis workstream.

20.   Establishing an overall results framework for the research and analysis work stream would facilitate the consolidation of plans and ensure alignment of research products with strategic goals. It would also enable UNODC to effectively monitor and report the overall impact of its research and analysis work stream. For instance, the 2023 UNODC annual report compiled the research resources used by RAB and reported that research accounted for 2.4 per cent of total UNODC expenditure (around $10 million). As there was no reference to research engagements of global and field programmes in the report, this figure appeared to be understated.

21.   There was a perception among stakeholders that several areas of research and analysis were not being adequately covered by UNODC. In February 2024, RAB reported to the intergovernmental working group on governance and finance that important research and analysis gaps existed in the areas of organized crime, global research on cybercrime, corruption, and regional threat assessment. However, there was no assessment of research and analysis needs and gaps to inform planning and prioritization. There was a risk that in the absence of clear priorities, research work could be donor-driven to less relevant areas as also indicated in the 2018 peer review of the UNODC research function.

22.   In December 2024, RAB circulated a template for collecting planned research activities which could facilitate the assessment of gaps and the development of a plan, budget and results framework for the research and analysis work stream.

> **(2) UNODC should finalize its entity-wide research and analysis plan and results framework with appropriate indicators of achievement and reporting mechanisms.**
>
> *UNODC accepted recommendation 2 and stated that each Division will develop their own research plan by September 2025, which will be compiled for review and approval by RRC at its last meeting of*

2025. Based on the RAB results framework (included in the global project on research and RAB's work plan), UNODC will develop a unified result framework to be integrated into logframes across all UNODC projects that include research activities.

B.   Standards and quality assurance mechanisms

<u>Need to finalize the UNODC research quality assurance framework</u>

23.   The relevance and quality of research and data collection products were generally appreciated by internal and external stakeholders. This was confirmed by the 2021 OIOS evaluation of UNODC (E/AC.51/2021/6) as well as in interviews with key internal and external stakeholders. To ensure consistent quality of research products, in 2022, UNODC recognized the need for the development of a framework of quality standards, including methodology and verification.

24.   In 2023, RAB developed a draft UNODC research quality assurance framework (Research Quality Standards) which was shared with the Global Research Network and submitted to ExCom in November 2024 for review. At the time of the audit, the Research Quality Standards were applied by some research focal points, but their use was limited and not mandatory except within RAB. RAB explained that the draft Research Quality Standards will be reviewed by the newly established RRC before they are adopted, and training requirements on the application of the standards will be determined after adoption.

25.   RAB also considered innovation as key to the relevance and quality of research results and was fostering several innovation initiatives. For instance, RAB was exploring new methods of data collection involving big data analysis, social media, satellite imagery and remote sensing – a tool for monitoring and collecting data on illicit crop cultivation using satellite imagery, drones and aerial data. Research focal points also noted the importance of integrating artificial intelligence tools to provide updated analysis, including developing predictive analytics models for data collection and nowcasting.

26.   While the draft Research Quality Standards emphasized the importance of ethics, integrity, impartiality and inclusion considerations in research activities, the ethical standards to guide the safe and responsible use of the various innovative solutions had not been developed. For instance, guidance needs to be provided to ensure that the use of artificial intelligence models and tools is in line with the principles for the ethical use of artificial intelligence in the United Nations system (CEB/2022/2/Add.1). A first meeting to discuss ethical standards was held in December 2024, but there were no formal timelines for finalizing their development. Such standards are also needed when external consultants are engaged to work on research products, which is a common practice in UNODC.

27.   In 2025, RAB developed guidance for the use of publication attributes such as logos, disclaimer notes, reproduction methods (permission to reproduce the report or part of it), and citation notes (how to refer to the report. However, the guidelines were only applied for RAB research products, leading to fragmented practices. OIOS' review of a sample of 18 research products indicated inconsistencies and gaps in compliance with the guidelines. For instance: (a) all 18 research publications reviewed used disclaimer notes but had no standard text on disclosure; (b) 6 publications did not disclose whether the report was formally edited; (c) 6 reports did not include reproduction methods; and (d) 11 reports did not include citation notes.

28.   Further, 3 of the 18 research publications reviewed included the donor's logo on the front page – a practice that was discouraged by the Office of Legal Affairs. UNODC had not issued guidance to stop this practice. Although RAB had developed a separate "UNODC Research" logo, its use was not consistent. The "UNODC Research" logo was used only for research products produced by RAB or jointly by RAB

with field offices and for which there was a final clearance by the Chief of RAB. UNODC needs to define the purpose of the "UNODC Research" logo and the implications for research products that did not use it.

> **(3)** **UNODC should finalize and adopt the research quality assurance framework including quality standards, ethical standards, and guidance on use of publication attributes.**
>
> *UNODC accepted recommendation 3 and stated that it will finalize and adopt in 2025 its research quality framework. Such framework will comprise: Research Quality Standards, Research Ethical Standards, Guidance to authors and reviewers to ensure application of research standards, and Guidance on the publication of research products, including publication attributes. RRC will approve and adopt each of the above elements of the UNODC research quality framework by end 2025.*

<u>Need to establish a quality review process for research and analysis products</u>

29.   In November 2024, the first RRC meeting approved the definition of research to distinguish it from other types of publications. However, when drafting the Research Quality Standards, there was still no specific guidance for overseeing the quality of research products. OIOS noted the following:

(a)   UNODC research and analysis products were routinely approved and issued by field office representatives and programme managers. There were no checklists or guidance to facilitate their review and due diligence responsibilities.

(b)   The use of peers, scientific advisory committees, or expert group meetings in the review of research products is a generally recognized good practice adopted by RAB and some UNODC research focal points. However, its use was not consistent. Out of 18 research products reviewed by OIOS, two indicated that no external review mechanisms were used.

(c)   In 2015, RAB developed guidance for sharing research products with Member States in advance for validation and information, but the guidance was not promulgated outside RAB. Therefore, for research conducted by field offices, global programmes, and thematic branches, it was left to their discretion whether to share the research reports with Member States.

(d)   There was no mechanism for formally recording stakeholders' comments on draft reports and on data shared at the draft stage for their comments. Such a recording mechanism is essential for tracking Member States' input and to ensure the integrity and independence of the research process.

30.   The lack of a standardized quality review mechanism exposes UNODC research products to inconsistent quality review processes. This could compromise the integrity and credibility of UNODC's research products.

> **(4)** **UNODC should adopt a quality review framework for research and analysis products that addresses: (a) internal and external review mechanisms; (b) an accountability framework for overseeing compliance with established standards; and (c) guidelines for documenting stakeholders' comments on draft reports.**
>
> *UNODC accepted recommendation 4 and stated that it will develop and adopt a standard research quality review process by end 2025. For different types of research products, UNODC will define the internal and external review and accountability mechanisms that ensure compliance with UNODC's research quality framework. It will also include guidelines for documenting reviewers' comments on draft outputs ensuring transparency and documented accountability in adhering to the UNODC research quality framework throughout the publication production and finalization. RRC will approve*

and adopt the UNODC standard research quality review process by end 2025. The feasibility of developing a PowerApp to support and document the review process of research products will be investigated and if technically feasible it will be developed and implemented, upon availability of funding.

<u>Need to establish standards for mainstreaming gender and human rights in the research work stream</u>

31.   The RAB results-based management report indicated that by 2023, it had incorporated gender analysis into seven major knowledge products, including the 2023 World Drug Report and the 2023 Global Study on Homicide, and had made 30 data series available with sex disaggregation. Field offices, global programmes and RAB also indicated that gender and human rights aspects were considered in their research methodology.

32.   OIOS' review showed some gaps and inconsistencies in the practices for mainstreaming gender and human rights in research and analysis work. In 2024, the UNODC Gender Team was integrated into key research coordination mechanisms, including the Global Research Network and RRC, but this was not the case for the human rights focal point. Further, global reports were reviewed by the Gender Team at UNODC headquarters, but this was not the practice for regional and country-related research reports because there was no such requirement.

33.   As research and analysis products often include qualitative analysis, UNODC frequently engaged with respondents, including victims and survivors, to collect testimonies that would help in addressing the research objectives. RAB had established protocols for engaging with respondents in various areas such as drug use, trafficking in people, smuggling of migrants, corruption, and victimization surveys. However, there was no protocol or ethical framework for this process. As a result, one regional programme had developed its own protocol to engage with respondents, while one global programme was developing its own protocol to standardize the approach and minimize recurring mistakes in engaging with respondents.

34.   UNODC needs to establish a protocol or ethical framework to ensure that engagements with respondents are done in a consistent and ethical manner to ensure that the rights of individuals are not undermined. RAB explained that this matter will be addressed by the ethical standards it plans to develop as part of the Research Quality Standards.

> **(5)   UNODC should: (a) standardize the participation of human rights and gender focal points in the review of research products; and (b) develop a standard protocol for engaging with respondents in collecting information for research and analysis products.**
>
> *UNODC accepted recommendation 5 and stated that it will extend participation in RRC to the UNODC Human Rights focal point and to the head of the UNODC Gender Team. The Research Ethical Standards, to be developed and approved by end 2025, will include guidance for engaging with respondents, including interviewees, in collecting data for research purposes.*

C.   Dissemination and monitoring

<u>Need to standardize the system for dissemination of UNODC research products</u>

35.   All research focal points and managers interviewed recognized the importance of effectively communicating and disseminating research results. However, research products were stored on the websites of the field offices and thematic programmes that produced them, with no centralized repository. This resulted in a fragmented picture of the UNODC research portfolio. The UNODC headquarters website

had a publication page that included 70 research reports as of January 2025, but it was incomplete because it did not include all research products from field offices and global programmes. RAB also maintained a separate publication list on the website which had 58 reports as of January 2025 and could be browsed by thematic areas. However, the list only included research products developed by RAB or jointly by RAB with other offices. Out of 18 research products reviewed by OIOS, 6 produced by global programmes and field offices were not included in either of the two webpages (the publications page or the RAB publication list). A centralized repository is required to provide a complete picture of the research portfolio and ensure that all research products are effectively disseminated and easily accessible.

> **(6) UNODC should develop a centralized repository for all its research and analysis products and ensure that all products are accessible from the main research webpage.**
>
> *UNODC accepted recommendation 6 and stated that it will expand the current UNODC research website to systematically list all research publications developed across the office starting with the 2025 outputs. RRC will define in its meetings which publications produced outside RAB meet the criteria of research publication and should be included in this site, starting with the 2025 outputs listed in the research plans reviewed in 2025.*

Need to establish comprehensive stakeholder feedback mechanism

36.   Several reviews, including the 2018 peer review of UNODC research and the 2022 RAB retreat, recommended the implementation of feedback mechanisms to assess stakeholders' appreciation of the research portfolio. The reviews emphasized the need for regular consultations with stakeholders to ensure that research products remained relevant and impactful. The Principles Governing International Statistical Activities also advocate for systematic stakeholder engagement to evaluate the usability and relevance of statistical products.

37.   Current practices for obtaining feedback from stakeholders for UNODC research products were not regulated and lacked uniformity. There were inconsistencies in the use of satisfaction surveys, limited quantitative analysis, and no formalized approach for capturing and leveraging stakeholder feedback across research products. This limited UNODC's capacity to assess stakeholders' satisfaction with the research products and to identify lessons learned.

38.   RAB monitored its performance on an annual basis with indicators such as downloads of its publications; usage of the data portal; amount of data points not older than six months; availability of sex-disaggregated data; and citations of UNODC research reports in peer-reviewed journals. RAB also conducted feedback surveys for global reports in 2023 and 2024. However, field offices and global programmes did not integrate such feedback and performance mechanisms in their research cycle. RAB surveys also yielded limited responses (fewer than 50 responses per surveyed publication), and no formal analysis of trends in survey responses was done.

> **(7) UNODC should establish stakeholder feedback mechanisms for research products, including guidance on using satisfaction surveys, monitoring the use of research products, and performing data analysis on the feedback.**
>
> *UNODC accepted recommendation 7 and stated that RAB will carry out a short online survey targeted at stakeholders, both internal and external, following the publication of each global research report, starting with the World Drug Report. In addition, the feasibility of having an online simple rating tool for each research publication will be explored. If technically feasible, it will be implemented, subject to available funding.*

D.   Data collection management

Need to enhance data collection and analysis practices

39.   UNODC collected data on drugs, crime and criminal justice from Member States using five mandatory data collection surveys administered annually through national focal points: (i) Annual Report Questionnaire; (ii) Individual Drug Seizure Survey; (iii) United Nations Survey of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems; (iv) United Nations Illicit Arms Flows Questionnaire; and (v) the Questionnaire for the Global Report on Trafficking in Persons. The data was disseminated through the portal maintained on the UNODC website and presented in 12 thematic areas with more than 50 indicators which included 11 SDG indicators. The portal included 222 country and territory profiles with graphic visualization of data for all surveys.

40.   The website explained the goal of data collection, the methodology used, and the terms of use including disclaimer, liability clause, and alignment with the Principles Governing International Statistical Activities. OIOS noted that the data could be downloaded and analyzed in Excel format, and the presentation was intuitive and easy to navigate. However, OIOS also noted the following:

(a)   The "Principles Governing International Statistical Activities" recommend the use of metadata sheets. These are structured and descriptive information about data that provide context to help users understand the relevance of data, how it was collected, and how to use it. In 2024, RAB updated the metadata sheets for all thematic areas, but it did not update the one for Wildlife Trafficking.

(b)   UNODC's data regional groupings used in the data portal were not aligned with the United Nations' official "Standard Country or Area Codes for Statistical Use (M49)". For instance, the African continent was split into four regions rather than five as required.

(c)   Some indicators lacked explanatory notes on the source of information. For instance, in the topic "Drug Use and Treatment," out of seven indicators, five lacked explanatory notes.

(d)   The "data on map" link was inactive in all six indicators where it was included.

(e)   The 222 country and territory profiles displayed varying levels of data completeness. Sixteen profiles were complete, and 206 displayed either the word "blank" or were left empty with nothing indicated. This was due to missing data or technical errors, but no explanations were provided, leaving uncertainty about the nature of errors. The information on data collection indicated that where "blank" was displayed, it meant that data was not available, but there was no explanation provided for the empty fields.

41.   RAB indicated that the issues arose due to insufficient resources for updating and maintaining the data portal. The January 2025 report to the intergovernmental working group on governance and finance also explained the impact of vacancies, due to the ongoing liquidity crisis, on research work. The gaps noted above need to be addressed as they increase the risk of misinterpretation of data and could reduce their usefulness.

> **(8)   The UNODC Research and Trend Analysis Branch should establish a plan for improving the quality of data in the portal by: (a) ensuring that metadata sheets and explanatory notes are provided for all areas; (b) activating the data map functions; and (c) standardizing the regional groupings in line with United Nations standards.**

UNODC accepted recommendation 8 and stated that subject to the availability of human and financial resources, RAB will develop a plan to modernize and upgrade its data portal in order to ensure at minimum that metadata are available for all data areas, that data map functions are activated and that regional groupings are either in line with United Nations standards or diverge from them for analytical reasons that are made explicit. Such plan will be implemented by mid-2026, subject to available funding (for staff and technical solutions).

E. Capacity building for Member States

<u>Need to establish a roadmap for identifying gaps on Member States data collection capacity</u>

42. The 2024-2025 UNODC budget mandates the sub-programme on Research and Analysis to aid Member States in creating evidence-based policies and enhancing data collection on drugs and crime. Additionally, as the custodian of 16 SDG indicators, UNODC is responsible for developing measurement methodologies for indicators and supporting Member States in data collection and reporting.

43. RAB continuously developed and shared methodological standards and implemented several initiatives to enhance Member States' capacities in data collection. This included data collection webinars to highlight the importance of data; a system for direct data input by Member States' focal points for two of the five mandatory data collection surveys, and a tracking system to monitor data submission progress and trends. RAB also developed a menu of services that UNODC could provide to strengthen Member States' capacity in data collection.

44. Capacity building initiatives on data collection were implemented by RAB and field offices. In 2023, RAB reported that it had undertaken 12 training sessions and 46 workshops on data collection for over 3,256 participants from 100 countries. In-person capacity building initiatives were considered the most effective. For instance, local capacity building in West Africa on data collection resulted in a 200 per cent increase in survey submission. Member States displayed varying levels of capacity and interest in UNODC data collection initiatives, leading to inconsistent data availability. This was evident in the survey response rates which were low (below 50 per cent), as well as gaps in indicators with 8 of the 11 indicators having information on fewer than 20 countries each year.

45. However, capacity building initiatives to enhance Member States' participation in surveys and collection of data were fragmented and limited by the availability of resources. While the UNODC strategy, as well as regional strategies such as the Vision for Africa, included data and analysis as a priority area of action, there was no capacity building roadmap or mid- to long-term measurable indicators to monitor progress. UNODC had not defined the responsibilities of field offices and the Division for Operations in engaging with country data focal points to assess their capacity and needs. As a result, such assessments were not conducted. This gap was also noted in the OIOS audits of the UNODC Regional Office for Eastern Africa (Report 2024/050) and the UNODC Regional Office for Central Asia (Report 2023/013).

(9) The UNODC Research and Trend Analysis Branch should consult with the Division for Operations and field offices to develop a roadmap for identifying and addressing gaps in data collection capacity and needs of Member States.

UNODC accepted recommendation 9 and stated that RAB will discuss with the Division for Operations the feasibility of developing by mid-2026 a roadmap for identifying and addressing gaps in data collection capacity and needs of Member States. Such roadmap will identify the field offices that can commit to have in their portfolio activities related to data gaps and it will include concrete milestones for RAB and field offices to collaborate to support countries in this area.

IV. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

46.   OIOS wishes to express its appreciation to the management and staff of UNODC for the assistance and cooperation extended to the auditors during this assignment.

Internal Audit Division
Office of Internal Oversight Services

STATUS OF AUDIT RECOMMENDATIONS

Audit of research and analysis at the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Rec. no.	Recommendation	Critical[1]/ Important[2]	C/ O[3]	Actions needed to close recommendation	Implementation date[4]
1	UNODC should operationalize the governance structure for the research and analysis workstream by approving the terms of reference for the Global Research Network and the Regional Research Hubs.	Important	O	Receipt of evidence that the research and analysis governance structure has been fully operationalized.	31 December 2025
2	UNODC should finalize its entity-wide research and analysis plan and results framework with appropriate indicators of achievement and reporting mechanisms.	Important	O	Receipt of the UNODC-wide research and analysis plan and results framework.	31 December 2025
3	UNODC should finalize and adopt the research quality assurance framework including quality standards, ethical standards, and guidance on use of publication attributes.	Important	O	Receipt of evidence of the approved research quality assurance framework.	31 December 2025
4	UNODC should adopt a quality review framework for research and analysis products that addresses: (a) internal and external review mechanisms; (b) an accountability framework for overseeing compliance with established standards; and (c) guidelines for documenting stakeholders' comments on draft reports.	Important	O	Receipt of evidence of the approved quality review framework for research and analysis products.	31 December 2025
5	UNODC should: (a) standardize the participation of human rights and gender focal points in the review of research products; and (b) develop a standard protocol for engaging with respondents in collecting information for research and analysis products.	Important	O	Receipt of evidence of participation of Human Rights and Gender Team focal points in the review of research products, and guidance for engaging with respondents in collecting information for research and analysis products.	31 December 2025

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[1] Critical recommendations address those risk issues that require immediate management attention. Failure to take action could have a critical or significant adverse impact on the Organization.

[2] Important recommendations address those risk issues that require timely management attention. Failure to take action could have a high or moderate adverse impact on the Organization.

[3] Please note the value C denotes closed recommendations whereas O refers to open recommendations.

[4] Date provided by UNODC in response to recommendations.

STATUS OF AUDIT RECOMMENDATIONS

Audit of research and analysis at the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

6	UNODC should develop a centralized repository for all its research and analysis products and ensure that all products are accessible from the main research webpage.	Important	O	Receipt of evidence that a centralized repository has been established, and all products are accessible.	31 December 2025
7	UNODC should establish stakeholder feedback mechanisms for research products, including guidance on using satisfaction surveys, monitoring the use of research products, and performing data analysis on the feedback.	Important	O	Receipt of evidence of the practice for obtaining stakeholders feedback on research products and the use of such feedback.	30 September 2025
8	The UNODC Research and Trend Analysis Branch should establish a plan for improving the quality of data in the portal by: (a) ensuring that metadata sheets and explanatory notes are provided for all areas; (b) activating the data map functions; and (c) standardizing the regional groupings in line with United Nations standards.	Important	O	Receipt of evidence of the approved plan to modernize and upgrade the data portal.	30 June 2026
9	The UNODC Research and Trend Analysis Branch should consult with the Division for Operations and field offices to develop a roadmap for identifying and addressing gaps in data collection capacity and needs of Member States.	Important	O	Receipt of evidence of the roadmap for identifying and addressing gaps in data collection capacity and Member States needs.	30 June 2026

APPENDIX I

Management Response

UNODC
United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Interoffice Memorandum

To:	Ms. Fatoumata Ndiaye, Under-Secretary General for Internal Oversight Services	Date: 21 May 2025
Through:	Ms. Ghada Waly *Ghada Waly* Executive Director, UNODC	
From:	Ms. Candice Welsch *[signature]* Director, Division for Policy Analysis and Public Affairs, UNODC	
Subject:	Draft report on OIOS audit of research and analysis at the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (Assignment No. AE2023-360-01) from 15 May 2025	

UNODC confirms the acceptance of the nine Recommendations made by OIOS in its draft report on an audit of research and analysis at UNODC, dated 15 May 2025.

Please find attached an action plan for addressing these nine recommendations with target dates and the titles of the individuals responsible for implementing the recommendations (Appendix I of the OIOS draft report) as per OIOS request from 15 May 2025.

Please note that addressing some recommendations will be pending available resources. Some of the technical tools to implement Recommendations 4 and 7 will depend on sufficient funding being available, while the development of a plan to upgrade the data portal and its implementation as set out in Recommendation 8, which are currently constrained by the liquidity crisis, will both depend on available resources.

Thank you in advance for your support and cooperation.

Cc: Mr. Byung-Kun Min, Director
Internal Audit Division, OIOS

Management Response

Audit of research and analysis at the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Rec. no.	Recommendation	Critical[1]/ Important[2]	Accepted? (Yes/No)	Title of responsible individual	Implementation date	Client comments
1	UNODC should operationalize the governance structure for the research and analysis workstream by approving the terms of reference for the Global Research Network and the Regional Research Hubs.	Important	Yes	Chief of Research and Trend Analysis Branch and Research Review Committee	31.12.2025	UNODC will operationalize in 2025 the governance structure for its research workstream. It will finalize the terms of reference of the Global Research Network and of the Regional Research Hubs, already presented at ExCom in 2024. They will be both approved by the Research Review Committee (RRC) by the end of 2025. The RRC will meet at least twice a year to review research priorities and research plans from Global Programmes and relevant field offices (based on a standard template). It will review and approve accountability and review mechanisms of each research product. It will meet additionally upon needs.
2	UNODC should finalize its entity-wide research and analysis plan and results framework with appropriate indicators of achievement and reporting mechanisms.	Important	Yes	Director of Division for Policy Analysis,	31.12.2025	Each Division will develop their own research plan by Sept. 2025, which will be compiled for review and approval by the RRC at its last meeting of 2025. Based on the UNODC Research and Trend

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[1] Critical recommendations address those risk issues that require immediate management attention. Failure to take action could have a critical or significant adverse impact on the Organization.

[2] Important recommendations address those risk issues that require timely management attention. Failure to take action could have a high or moderate adverse impact on the Organization.

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						Analysis Branch (RAB) results framework (included in the global project on research and RAB's workplan), UNODC will develop a unified result framework to be integrated into logframes across all UNODC projects that include research activities.
3	UNODC should finalize and adopt the research quality assurance framework including quality standards, ethical standards, and guidance on use of publication attributes.	Important	Yes	Chief of Research and Trend Analysis Branch and Research Review Committee	31.12.2025	UNODC will finalize and adopt in 2025 its research quality framework. Such framework will comprise: Research Quality Standards, Research Ethical Standards, Guidance to authors and reviewers to ensure application of research standards, and Guidance on the publication of research products, including publication attributes. The RRC will approve and adopt each of the above elements of the UNODC research quality framework by end 2025.
4	UNODC should adopt a quality review framework for research and analysis products that addresses: (a) internal and external review mechanisms; (b) an accountability framework for overseeing compliance with established standards; and (c) guidelines for documenting stakeholders' comments on draft reports.	Important	Yes, full implementation subject to funding	Chief of Research and Trend Analysis Branch and Research Review Committee	31.12.2025	UNODC will develop and adopt a standard research quality review process by end 2025. For different types of research products, UNODC will define the internal and external review and accountability mechanisms that ensure compliance with UNODC research quality framework. It will also include

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						guidelines for documenting reviewers' comments on draft outputs ensuring transparency and documented accountability in adhering to the UNODC research quality framework throughout the publication production and finalization. The RRC will approve and adopt the UNODC standard research quality review process by end 2025. The feasibility of developing a PowerApp to support and document the review process of research products will be investigated and if technically feasible it will be developed and implemented, upon availability of funding.
5	UNODC should: (a) standardize the participation of human rights and gender focal points in the review of research products; and (b) develop a standard protocol for engaging with respondents in collecting information for research and analysis products.	Important	Yes	Chief of Research and Trend Analysis Branch and Research Review Committee	31.12.2025	UNODC will extend participation in the RRC to the Human Rights UNODC focal point and to the head of the UNODC Gender Team. The Research Ethical Standards, to be developed and approved by end 2025, will include guidance for engaging with respondents, including interviewees, in collecting data for research purposes.

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6	UNODC should develop a centralized repository for all its research and analysis products and ensure that all products are accessible from the main research webpage.	Important	Yes	Chief of Research and Trend Analysis Branch and Research Review Committee	31.12.2025	UNODC will expand the current UNODC research website to allow to systematically list all research publications developed across the office starting with the 2025 outputs. The RRC will define in its meetings which publications produced outside RAB meet the criteria of research publication and should be included in this site, starting with the 2025 outputs listed in the research plans reviewed in 2025.
7	UNODC should establish stakeholder feedback mechanisms for research products, including guidance on using satisfaction surveys, monitoring the use of research products, and performing data analysis on the feedback.	Important	Yes, full implementation subject to funding	Chief of Research and Trend Analysis Branch	30.09.2025 for World Drug Report 2025 survey	RAB will carry out a short online survey targeted at stakeholders, both internal and external, following the publication of each global research report, starting with the World Drug Report In addition, the feasibility of having an online simple rating tool for each research publication will be explored. If technically feasible, it will be implemented, subject to available funding.
8	The UNODC Research and Trend Analysis Branch should establish a plan for improving the quality of data in the portal by: (a) ensuring that metadata sheets and explanatory notes are provided for all areas; (b) activating the	Important	Yes, subject to available human and financial resources	Chief of Research and Trend Analysis Branch	30.06.2026 subject to available funding	Subject to the availability of human and financial resources, RAB will develop a plan to modernize and upgrade its data portal in order to ensure at minima that metadata are available for all data areas, that data

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	data map functions; and (c) standardizing the regional groupings in line with United Nations standards.					map functions are activated and that regional groupings are either in line with UN standards or diverge from them for analytical reasons that are made explicit. Such plan will be implemented by in 2026, subject to available funding (for staff and technical solutions).
9	The UNODC Research and Trend Analysis Branch should consult with the Division for Operations and field offices to develop a roadmap for identifying and addressing gaps in data collection capacity and needs of Member States.	Important	Yes	Chief of Research and Trend Analysis Branch and Director of Division for Operations	30.06.2026	UNODC RAB will discuss with DO the feasibility of developing by mid-2026 a roadmap for identifying and addressing gaps in data collection capacity and needs of Member States. Such roadmap will identify the field offices that can commit to have in their portfolio activities related to data gaps and it will include concrete milestones for RAB and field offices to collaborate to support countries in this area.