

Summary

The use of non-scheduled chemicals, including designer precursors, as alternatives to controlled precursors in illicit drug manufacture, a practice that has been identified by the Board for several years, continued to be one of the key challenges in international precursor control. In June 2023, the Board took a decisive step towards addressing the issue by notifying the Secretary-General of two groups of closely related substances that in its opinion should be included in the tables of the United Nations Convention against Illicit Trafficking in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988, in line with Commission on Narcotic Drugs resolution 65/3. After concluding the assessment process under article 12, paragraph 4, of the 1988 Convention, the Board recommended P-2-P methyl glycidic acid and eight of its esters, as well as the ethyl ester and six other esters of 3,4-MDP-2-P methyl glycidic acid, for international control. Seizures of the substances, which are precursors of amphetamine-type stimulants, increased sharply from the end of 2022, as evidenced by communications shared through PICS. The ethyl ester of P-2-P methyl glycidic acid, incidents involving which had hitherto not been communicated through PICS, made its appearance in a seizure in August 2023, that is, after the initiation of the scheduling process by the Board. Clearly, the transition of a substance from existing only in theory to existing in reality happens quickly in the dynamic world of illicit drug manufacture today, thereby validating the group approach adopted by the Board. In addition, on the basis of a proposal by the United States of America, the Board also recommended for inclusion in Table I of the 1988 Convention two precursors of fentanyl and fentanyl-related substances, namely, 4-piperidone and 1-boc-4-piperidone. In its assessment, the Board made use of the results of Operation Backup, an international operation targeting these substances that was conducted in October 2023.

The results of a survey conducted by the Board indicate a lack of sufficient controls over domestic manufacture, trade and distribution in a significant number of the countries that responded. The survey also revealed that even though more than three decades have passed since the entry into force of the 1988 Convention, about one quarter of the responding Governments have not yet placed all Table I and Table II substances under national control, pointing to a major regulatory gap.

Nevertheless, during the reporting period, Governments continued to strengthen their legislative provisions related to precursors. In addition to implementing the scheduling decisions of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, some Governments extended the scope of controls over chemicals not under international control, including off-the-shelf chemicals and groups of closely related chemicals, such as derivatives and sometimes even analogues.

The quality and quantity of reporting by Governments under article 12 remained a cause for concern, with just 60 of the 191 States parties to the 1988 Convention having submitted form D by the deadline of 30 June 2023. The number had risen to 113 States parties by 1 November 2023, the cut-off date for the present report. Since timely reporting is critical for the Board to conduct an informed analysis of the global situation, it is imperative for Governments to fulfil their obligation under the 1988 Convention in this regard.

The Board's PEN Online system continued to provide an effective mechanism for monitoring trade in internationally controlled precursors, with the tool now being used by 169 countries. In addition, use of the analogous PEN Online Light system, another of the Board's initiatives to prevent non-scheduled chemicals from being used for illicit activity, expanded after its launch in October 2022.

With regard to trafficking in substances used in the illicit manufacture of amphetamine-type stimulants, global seizures of ephedrine, which at 6.7 tons were about 10 per cent higher than the seizures reported in 2021, have still exhibited a general decline over a 10-year period. Seizures of preparations of pseudoephedrine, which had increased continuously since 2018, declined slightly in 2021, but more countries than before reported such seizures. The year 2022 also saw a significant seizure of preparations containing pseudoephedrine in an FTZ, reflecting vulnerabilities that were also identified during

Operation Insight, conducted jointly by the Board, WCO and the UNODC-WCO Container Control Programme in 2023. The upward trend in seizures of preparations of pseudoephedrine reflects traffickers' attempts to exploit possible regulatory gaps related to such preparations and underscores the need for Governments to control the preparations in the same way as they control the substances they contain.

With respect to potassium permanganate, the key cocaine precursor, the amounts seized were lower than in 2021 but remained relatively high, at 122 tons. Compared with the amounts of potassium permanganate seized, seizures of its precursors remained low, and potassium permanganate typically continues to be diverted more than it is illicitly manufactured. The use of non-scheduled chemicals that improve the efficiency of cocaine manufacture, such as sodium metabisulfite and calcium chloride, continued to be noted. The Kingdom of the Netherlands was the only country outside South America to report notable seizures of sodium metabisulfite and calcium chloride, reflecting the existence of secondary extraction laboratories in Europe.

Seizures of the main heroin precursor, acetic anhydride, declined further to about 25,600 litres in 2022, the smallest quantity reported since 2005. The reasons for that significant decline in global seizures of acetic anhydride are not fully explained by the absence of seizure information from Afghanistan or by significantly smaller amounts being seized in neighbouring and other countries along the trafficking routes. Nor are they explained by the seizures of acetyl chloride, a possible substitute chemical. It therefore continues to be challenging to assess the magnitude of trafficking in acetic anhydride and demand for the substance for use in the illicit manufacture of heroin in Afghanistan.

Seizures of fentanyl precursors totalled some 680 kg (and an unknown quantity in solution) in 2022, an increase of at least 10 per cent compared with 2021. ANPP accounted for the bulk of such seizures, with the United States and Mexico being the predominant reporting countries. In contrast, seizures of 4-piperidone, which is not yet internationally controlled (but that has been recommended by the Board for international control), were predominantly made in Canada. In 2023, North America saw a surge in seizures of fentanyl precursors not under international control communicated through PICS. Precursors of other synthetic drugs, such as GHB, ketamine and new psychoactive substances, also continued to be seized. The available information suggests limited illicit manufacture of cathinones in parts of Europe.

The use of the Internet (the surface web) to facilitate trafficking in precursors continued to be noted in 2023. In response, the Board took steps to support Governments in this area by providing a training workshop on the investigation of suspicious postings on the Internet regarding precursors.

The present report also provides an account of the implications of conflict and unresolved territorial disputes for precursor control.