

Summary

In 2019, the year set as the target date in the Political Declaration and Plan of Action on International Cooperation towards an Integrated and Balanced Strategy to Counter the World Drug Problem of 2009, the international community took stock of the achievements and remaining challenges in addressing the world drug problem, including in the area of precursor control. With the accession of Palau as the 190th State party to the United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988, adherence to that Convention is now nearly universal. A total of 164 countries and territories are using the International Narcotics Control Board's online pre-export notification system to cooperate in the monitoring of international trade in controlled precursors, and a number of countries have strengthened their legislation or introduced other practical measures to monitor the movement of chemicals both in international trade and domestic distribution.

However, trafficking attempts continue to be identified in all regions of the world, involving chemicals under international control, such as acetic anhydride, as well as chemicals not controlled internationally. Trafficking trends observed in the period 2018–2019 provided further evidence of the illicit manufacture of amphetamine-type stimulants in regions and countries not previously associated with such manufacture. This included evidence of the large-scale illicit synthesis of amphetamine, the active ingredient in “captagon” tablets, from non-scheduled pre-precursors in the Middle East; the illicit manufacture of methamphetamine in Afghanistan from ephedra growing wild in the mountainous regions of that country; and illicit methamphetamine manufacture in Europe, using the same manufacturing methods as for amphetamine, as well as ephedrines-based methods. Information available to the Board also suggests that organized criminal groups in Mexico have turned to another, new method to synthesize methamphetamine from non-scheduled chemicals.

For chemicals used in the illicit manufacture of heroin, namely acetic anhydride, not many new cases of diversion were identified in 2018, although the amount seized globally remained relatively high. The Board actively facilitated a number of ongoing investigations into suspicious transactions and seizures involving acetic anhydride that have been identified since 2016. As a result, links between what appeared to be isolated cases were identified, suggesting a much larger network of criminal activities than previously thought. The main source of potassium permanganate, the key chemical used in the illicit manufacture of cocaine, continued to be domestic diversion, i.e., diversion within the country of final use, or within the region, with subsequent smuggling into the country of final use. Colombia also continued to report the illicit manufacture of potassium permanganate. Other chemicals used for illicit cocaine processing were typically diverted from domestic sources.

Since 2018, and just over a year after NPP and ANPP were placed under international control under the 1988 Convention, traffickers have started to seek alternatives to the two precursors of fentanyl and a few of its analogues. This has included the use of alternative manufacturing methods that do not require the two precursor chemicals and the use of non-scheduled pre-precursors. Trafficking trends are difficult to discern because of the potency of the end products and the correspondingly small size of precursor consignments. In response to these developments, which follow the pattern observed among other controlled precursors, some countries have strengthened national controls on fentanyl precursors. Several of these controls have been generic in nature, a development that the Board acknowledges, given the rapid evolution of precursors, including the increased availability of designer precursors with no known, or very limited, legitimate uses. To facilitate the work of competent regulatory and enforcement authorities, the Board has amended its limited international special surveillance list of non-scheduled chemicals to include additional fentanyl precursors and has highlighted those for which it is not aware of any legitimate uses.

The proliferation of non-scheduled chemicals, including designer precursors and other series of closely related chemicals, remains an issue of concern to the Board and requires a wider policy discussion about the options available to ensure that there is a common global framework within

which authorities can cooperate effectively to prevent such chemicals from reaching illicit laboratories. This policy discussion must continue, in particular in the light of recent developments related to fentanyl precursors.

At the same time, the Board's observations related to diversion attempts and cases of diversion and seizures of precursors under international control suggest that the existing legal framework may need to be enforced more rigorously at the national level and/or that Governments should explore practical ways of addressing evidentiary challenges associated with proving instances of precursor-related crime. Observations made during the reporting period have also shown that voluntary cooperation between Governments and different sectors of industry beyond the manufacturing industries is a valuable complement to any regulatory framework.

From the Board's perspective, the least satisfactory elements in its cooperation with Governments on precursor-related matters in the period 2018–2019 were the level of reporting through form D, in particular the timeliness of the reports received and their quality and comprehensiveness, especially in relation to the suspected origin or point of diversion of seized chemicals. This has limited the ability of the Board and Governments alike to analyse and address weaknesses in existing control measures in a timely manner, although improved information-sharing through PICS and improved case cooperation, in particular in relation to acetic anhydride, have partly offset the reporting limitations.

A new area of engagement for the Board is essential equipment used in illicit drug manufacture. Specifically, and in the light of the increased sophistication of the illicit manufacture of drugs, new psychoactive substances and pre-precursors, activities in this area are aimed at developing effective cooperation mechanisms to prevent and investigate the diversion of equipment in the context of article 13 of the 1988 Convention.