

Summary

The United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988 provides the basis for the international control of precursors. With 190 States parties as at 1 November 2021, the same number as in the previous year, the 1988 Convention covers almost the entire world. Of these, 116 – one more than in the previous year (Iceland) – have requested to be pre-notified about shipments to their territories of substances listed in Table I or Table II of the 1988 Convention. The system of monitoring of international trade, which includes the process of advance notifications of intended exports, as provided for in article 12, paragraph 10, of the 1988 Convention, forms the foundation of the international control of precursors. The PEN Online system, the INCB tool that provides an electronic platform for such notifications, is used by 166 countries and territories.

In the reporting period, from 1 November 2020 to 1 November 2021, the level of reporting using form D (“Annual information on substances frequently used in the illicit manufacture of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances”) of information on seizures of precursors, including non-scheduled chemicals, their origin, when known, and methods of diversion and illicit manufacture, as mandated by the 1988 Convention, remained about the same as in previous years, with 123 countries and territories submitting form D for 2020. The timeliness and quality of the information provided, especially with regard to the methods of diversion and the origin of seized substances, have generally not yet met the required standards.

The International Narcotics Control Board undertook several initiatives and activities relating to four themes that have been emphasized in recent years and that are critical to current international precursor control efforts: (a) the emergence of non-scheduled chemicals and designer precursors; (b) control over the domestic manufacture, trade and distribution of controlled precursors; (c) the use of the Internet, specifically the surface web, for trafficking in precursors; and (d) industry cooperation as a means to prevent diversion. Cooperation with regional and international organizations, in addition to Governments, was key to those efforts.

Four expert and consultative meetings were held on the subject of non-scheduled chemicals and designer precursors, resulting in recommendations for action at the global level to address that vexing issue.

As the diversion of precursor chemicals has been largely a domestic phenomenon, the Board conducted a survey on the nature and extent of controls that countries have in place for precursors. Sixty-two Governments and the European Commission responded to the survey. The fact that about a third of the respondents still did not control all of the substances in Table I and Table II of the 1988 Convention and a quarter of them did not have controls over domestic trade in and distribution of those substances reflects potential gaps in the control regime that could be exploited by traffickers.

A targeted, time-bound operation, code-named Operation Acronym, focusing on the trafficking of certain synthetic drug precursors over the Internet, was conducted in February 2021 and brought to the fore the present challenges in investigating such cases. The Board, in cooperation with Governments, will further support initiatives in this area to address the gaps.

Relevant chemical and pharmaceutical industries are critical stakeholders in precursor control efforts, in particular in relation to the use of non-scheduled chemicals and designer precursors for illicit drug manufacture. The Board supported activities in this regard, including the twinning arrangement between the Governments of France and Switzerland and the Government of the United Republic of Tanzania. The Board also conducted a survey with a view to preparing a compilation of global good practices and case scenarios related to industry cooperation on precursors, the results of which will shape the Board’s future activities in this area.

While no new substances were added to Table I or Table II of the 1988 Convention, in October 2021, the Government of the United States of America proposed three fentanyl precursors for international scheduling.

Regarding the substances used in the illicit manufacture of amphetamine-type stimulants, global reported seizures of ephedrines totalled about 10 tons in 2020, confirming the declining trend observed in recent years. Seizures of ephedrines were reported by only 28 countries and territories, representing one of the lowest levels of reporting of such seizures in the last decade. By contrast, reported seizures of MAPA, the latest substance to have been included in Table I of the 1988 Convention, amounted to more than 30 tons in 2020, indicating a shift towards the use of designer precursors. While the bulk of seizures of MAPA remained concentrated in Europe, notable seizures were reported for the first time in Australia, representing the first reported seizures of the substance outside Europe.

Seizures of potassium permanganate, traditionally the principal precursor used for the illicit manufacture of cocaine, amounted to about 84 tons in total and were localized to countries in South America. It is believed that a significant proportion of the global quantity of the substance seized had been illicitly manufactured, or had been diverted from domestic distribution channels and not from international trade.

Seizures of acetic anhydride, the key heroin precursor, exceeded 100 tons in total in 2020, evidently remaining unaffected by the restrictions on movement resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Ironically, the total quantity of the substance seized in Afghanistan, the main heroin-manufacturing country worldwide, amounted to only about 650 litres, representing a further decline since 2019. Although no seizures of the substance were reported in the Central Asian countries neighbouring Afghanistan, seizures continued to be made in other neighbouring countries, such as Iran (Islamic Republic of) and Pakistan, and in the United Arab Emirates. The use of acetyl chloride, an alternative acetylating agent, also remained a distinct possibility in that region. Myanmar, the other major heroin-manufacturing country, seized more than 12,000 litres of acetic anhydride.

The use of non-scheduled chemicals, such as P-2-P methyl glycidic acid derivatives and EAPA (the ethyl ester of MAPA) for the manufacture of amphetamine and methamphetamine, and a newly emerging substance, MAMDPA, for the manufacture of MDMA, was reported. As in the recent past, the use of non-scheduled chemicals for the manufacture of synthetic drugs such as fentanyl and methaqualone continued in the countries concerned. Seizures of 4-AP and its masked derivative, boc-4-AP, were reported in Canada, Mexico and the United States. A seizure of a large quantity of acetantranil, an internationally non-scheduled methaqualone precursor with no known legitimate uses, was reported in South Africa in 2021, the fourth such incident in the country since 2018. Moreover, sporadic seizures of notable amounts of precursors of new psychoactive substances and substances recently scheduled under the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961 as amended by the 1972 Protocol, and the Convention on Psychotropic Substances of 1971, in particular precursors of synthetic cathinones, indicate that illicit manufacture of those end-products may be moving closer to the retail market.

The analysis of the major trends presented in this report highlights the following: (a) the urgent need to accelerate the global momentum in addressing the proliferation of non-scheduled chemicals and designer precursors; (b) comprehensive and timely data and information underpin the capacity to address emerging trends effectively and proactively; (c) the focus on domestic manufacture and distribution channels remains critical to tackling diversion carried out through domestic distribution channels; (d) the need for continued vigilance after diversion attempts through legitimate international trade, and more systematic use of the PEN Online system; and (e) the need to mainstream cooperation with industry, as a key component of the strategy to prevent the diversion of precursors.