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## **THE SURGE IN THE PROLIFERATION OF SYNTHETIC DRUGS IS RESHAPING ILLICIT MARKETS AND DISPLACING SOME PLANT-BASED DRUGS SAYS THE INTERNATIONAL NARCOTICS CONTROL BOARD**

The rapid expansion of synthetic drug manufacture and consumption in recent years is posing considerable challenges to public health and the international drug control system says the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) in its 2024 Annual Report. INCB, which has been at the forefront of efforts to address the spread of new synthetic substances, says more action is needed.

Synthetic drugs can be much more potent than plant-based drugs and have quickly become a deadly problem with hundreds of thousands of overdose fatalities every year. With demand rising, synthetic drugs are being manufactured and trafficked with ease and criminal actors are making greater quantities of drugs and financial returns.

The INCB Annual Report offers an analysis of the current situation, identifying critical trends and patterns within the illicit synthetic drug industry. The Report also reveals the policy gaps in regulation and interdiction that traffickers seek to exploit and makes a series of recommendations to address both supply and demand.

### **Trends in synthetic drug manufacturing and trafficking**

Designed to mimic the effects of plant-based drugs but many times stronger in terms of potency and duration of action, synthetic substances can be easily manufactured, with little technical or scientific expertise required and with reduced labour and operational costs.

The proliferation of these psychoactive substances, including non-medical synthetic opioids, provides illicit actors with virtually limitless ways to fundamentally reshape drug markets.

For criminal actors, manufacturing synthetic drugs has some advantages over plant-based drug cultivation and trafficking with the possibility of using different precursor materials, often faster than regulatory and enforcement agencies can keep up with.

Plant-based drugs require extensive acreage and human resources for planting, harvesting and processing and are vulnerable to weather conditions, satellite detection and forced eradication. Coca bush, for instance, requires producers to establish farms at high altitude in remote, concealed areas to lower the risk of interdiction and eradication.

For the manufacture of synthetic drugs, there is a reduced need for labour or land for cultivation. The illicit production of synthetic drugs can be done in small makeshift facilities that are difficult for law enforcement authorities to detect or industrial-grade facilities for large-scale manufacture.

The manufacturing can be located anywhere and is often placed closer to transit and destination markets. The same equipment can be used for different synthetic outputs, using chemicals in different combinations to manufacture various drugs with different potencies.



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The inclusion of fentanyl, carfentanil or nitazenes in synthetic drug manufacture has increased drug potency – often to fatal levels. With the more potent synthetic opioids having an increased potency-to-weight ratio, smaller volumes are trafficked which are harder to detect. While the global illicit demand for plant-based drugs still exceeds the current supply of synthetic substances, seizures have begun to outpace some of those of plant-based drugs.

### Trends in precursor and pre-precursor use

Restrictions on controlled precursors give an incentive to manufacturers to create new compounds by shifting the molecular structure or to use non-scheduled designer or “masked” chemical additives outside national or international control systems.

To conceal precursor supply chains, synthetic drug manufacturers obtain small batches of different precursors from multiple sources, rather than on an industrial scale, to avoid drawing the attention of regulators or law enforcement authorities. Many of these chemical precursors, such as pseudoephedrine, present in common cold medicines, are dual use, since they also have a licit medical purpose which is a challenge to regulate without affecting licit markets.

### Changing patterns in movement, marketing and demand

Traffickers shift manufacture, movement and marketing tactics to keep operating costs down and profit margins up as well as to reduce risks of interdiction. This can be in response to more effective law and regulatory enforcement.

Smaller consignments of lighter weight synthetic drugs are possible, which are easier to conceal, and different smuggling methods are being used, such as drones, couriers and postal services.

Traffickers have also combined shipments of counterfeit or illicitly manufactured drugs and non-scheduled substances, such as cannabis, cocaine, ketamine and methamphetamine. This allows the use of established trafficking routes for traditional drug markets while diversifying the range of products available to consumers.

### Health and social consequences

In addition to skyrocketing overdose deaths in some places, laboratory analysis and research shows that some of these synthetic substances pose a risk to cardiovascular health and can lead to psychological and physical dependence and substance use disorders.

Synthetic opioids present the greatest risk of overdose but other synthetic drugs also pose severe health risks to people who use them. MDMA, commonly known as “ecstasy”, amphetamines, ketamine and substances such as “K2” and “spice” all have acute and long-term health implications. For drugs such as amphetamine and methamphetamine, which are particularly addictive, the tolerance of consumers increases over time, meaning that they require ever-larger doses that could pose a greater risk of overdose and death.



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Synthetic drugs may pose additional increased safety risks and threats to public health because of dangerous manufacturing and trafficking processes. Toxic fumes, fires and explosions can jeopardize the safety of manufacturers, first responders, law enforcement personnel and other people. Dumping of chemical waste by illicit manufacturers can cause environmental damage and harm to local communities.

The transportation of synthetic materials by sea, air and ground also poses toxicologic risks to nearby passengers, postal workers, customs and law enforcement personnel and even police dogs due to the risk of leakage and airborne exposure.

## Legal challenges

With traffickers able to rapidly shift to using new precursors and pre-precursors to manufacture synthetic drugs, control and regulatory authorities are constantly trying to catch up. The reactive and multistep international scheduling process is challenged by the rapid emergence of substances that could be used to illicitly manufacture synthetic drugs.

In the future, traffickers will probably find ways to use artificial intelligence to identify new molecular structures for precursors and pre-precursor chemicals to stay a step ahead of control and regulation regimes.

## Specific emerging regional threats

In North America primarily but also in other regions, carfentanil, fentanyl and nitazenes pose some of the greatest, most immediate risks to public health. There are 150 deaths every day related to synthetic opioid overdoses in the United States, with fentanyl accounting for more than two thirds of those fatalities.

In the Middle East and Africa, the manufacture, trafficking and consumption of amphetamine-type stimulants is accelerating. Resources for drug treatment and rehabilitation programmes in the region are already limited, so there could be serious, long-term harm to people and considerable problems for the regions' ill-equipped healthcare sectors.

Trafficking in amphetamine-type stimulants to markets in Southern, East and West Africa has been steadily increasing and demand for methamphetamine has begun to surpass demand for cannabis, cocaine, heroin and methaqualone in some places.

In South-East Asia's Golden Triangle cross-border area, methamphetamine production has increased with organized criminal syndicates based in the region expanding production and adopting industrial-scale manufacturing facilities.

Afghanistan, which was the world's leading illicit opium producer, supplying over 90 per cent of global quantities, has sharply reduced illicit production. The 2022 opium poppy cultivation ban and eradication efforts by the de facto authorities have already led to drug traffickers beginning to identify opportunities for other synthetic drugs.



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The looming deficit in heroin supply in Europe will likely create greater space for the synthetic drug market to expand on the continent. Nitazenes are being marketed as “synthetic heroin” with confirmed overdoses occurring in Estonia and Poland and seizures reported in France and Ireland. European countries remain generally unprepared for the introduction of nitazenes to their markets.

In Africa there has been a drastic increase in the proliferation of falsified pharmaceutical synthetic drugs and their non-medical use. As in North America, dependency on medical prescription pain medication in licit markets in Africa led to broader misuse of synthetic drugs, as people sought out affordable alternatives.

The misuse of tramadol is increasing in West, Central and North Africa because of its psychoactive properties, and represents a key concern for public health and safety.

In East and South-East Asia illicit ketamine manufacture and trafficking has steadily increased. Used as an anaesthetic and in veterinary medicine, the substance has been diverted from licit markets or illicitly manufactured for non-medical use, posing a risk for the drug’s licit accessibility.

## Actions and initiatives being taken to address synthetic drugs

Using the three drug control conventions which underpin international drug control, United Nations agencies and Member States have cooperated on early warning and prevention systems and science-informed health responses, and increased the capacity to disrupt illicit drug and precursor trafficking.

A series of initiatives have been developed by INCB to respond to the increasing manufacture of and trafficking in precursor and pre-precursor materials used in the illicit manufacture of synthetic drugs.

Various INCB online communication platforms and tools allow exporting and importing Governments to determine the legitimacy or illegitimacy of suspicious consignments transporting controlled precursor materials, designer pre-precursors and manufacturing equipment. They also offer Member States actionable intelligence exchange on the trafficking of non-medical synthetic opioids and chemical precursors and associated illegal enterprises.

Many low- and middle-income countries have inadequate drug-testing laboratory capacity and lack the personnel and resources to conduct routine inspections that could lead to seizures and to the dismantling of trafficking networks. There are limited demand reduction and treatment services in many countries and little in the way of awareness campaigns to educate at-risk communities about synthetic drug consumption.

## Policy recommendations for a comprehensive response

While States and institutions have built a patchwork of mechanisms, there needs to be a comprehensive, coordinated strategy to sufficiently prepare for the increasing threat of illicit synthetic drugs.

The INCB Report has a range of recommendations for Governments and relevant authorities on national coordination, early warning and continuous monitoring, law enforcement, public-private partnership, public awareness, prevention, treatment and recovery services.



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The recommendations could lead to more thorough, consistent laboratory testing to better protect people, improved information sharing and a more comprehensive intelligence picture of synthetic drug networks, their methods and the nature of their operations.

Better private-public partnerships could encourage e-commerce sites and platforms to take a more active role in identifying criminal activity and sharing actionable intelligence with relevant authorities. Public awareness campaigns by Governments could help to reduce the demand for synthetic drugs and decrease misuse and risk of overdose from synthetic drugs.

As the illicit synthetic drug industry continues to rapidly evolve, there are new, urgent challenges that need to be addressed. Otherwise, criminal actors will continue to exploit regulatory loopholes and generate new synthetic substances that pose great harm to people. By working together, Member States can take effective measures to counter the highly complex situation of illicit drug manufacture, trafficking and consumption.