

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime



Combatting Synthetic Drug Trafficking and Strengthening Early-Warning Systems

-Committee Guide-

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. INTRODUCTION TO THE COMMITTEE

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime was founded in 1997 and is headquartered in Vienna. As part of the United Nations, the UNODC plays an essential role in combating transnational threats such as illegal drug trafficking, organized crime, corruption, and terrorism. The organization support member states by strengthening border security, promoting international cooperation, improving law enforcement capacities, and developing preventive measures against criminal activities.

To achieve these goals, the UNODC works closely with governments, police forces, customs authorities, and other international organizations worldwide. Due to the increasing globalization of crime and rapid technological developments, the work of the UNODC has become more important than ever. Modern criminal networks increasingly make use of cybercrime, the darknet, artificial intelligence, and digital smuggling methods to evade authorities and expand illegal operations.

This development is especially relevant in the context of criminal non-state actors, which are increasingly using AI-driven technologies for smuggling, border evasion, and other illicit activities. In response, the UNODC is developing international strategies to address these emerging threats and strengthen global security. Therefore, international cooperation, information sharing, and coordinated action between states remain essential in effectively combating modern transnational crime.

2. INTRODUCTION TO THE TOPIC

In recent years, synthetic drug trafficking has caused problems in our society and has become an important issue. Synthetic drugs, such as fentanyl, methamphetamine or amphetamine, are artificially produced in the laboratory and contain chemical substances. They are often much easier and cheaper to manufacture, unlike natural drugs and therefore highly profitable for criminal organizations. The growing trafficking of synthetic drugs poses serious threats to public health, social stability and international security. In addition, many of these substances are extremely dangerous and consequently lead to death and overdose. Therefore, governments and

international organizations have improved Early Warning Systems and emphasized the importance. Early Warning networks integrate a wide variety of data to stay ahead of illicit drug markets, which frequently shift to evade laws.

II. FACTS AND CURRENT SITUATION

1. Facts

- Synthetic drugs are produced in artificial laboratories.
- Among the most well-known synthetic drugs are Fentanyl, Methamphetamine and MDMA.
- Synthetic drugs are often cheaper and easier to produce than plant-based drugs.
- Early-warning systems are helpful to recognize new drugs, to share information with other states and to assess health risks more quickly.
- Since 2010, the trade in synthetic drugs has increased enormously.
- Seized quantities of MDMA increased last year by 115.4%, methamphetamine by 13.3% and amphetamine by 8.2%
- 41.1 tons of new psychoactive substances were imported or confiscated in 2024
- In 2024, 47 new substances were registered for the first time

2. CURRENT SITUATION

The global situation on synthetic drugs is increasingly deteriorating. Particularly problematic are the drugs like Fentanyl and, generally, any other **related** new psychoactive substance. The illegal trade is growing rapidly as synthetic drugs are easier to transport and more profitable than many herbal drugs. Criminal networks use modern technologies, darknet platforms, social media and international supply chains. The increasing spread of highly potent synthetic opioids is particularly dangerous. Since 2019, nitazenes, a group of highly dangerous synthetic opioids, have spread strongly, some of which have an even stronger effect than fentanyl or heroin. The quantities of confiscated synthetic drugs have increased. In 2024, 41.4 tons of new psychoactive substances were seized or imported into Europe or imported into Europe. Furthermore, the high number of overdoses remains a central problem. In North America in particular, synthetic opioids have caused hundreds of thousands of deaths in recent years. At the same time, synthetic drug markets are increasingly spreading

to Africa, Asia and Europe. Early warning systems are becoming more important worldwide to counteract and tackle this development. Organizations like the United Nation Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) or the European Union Drugs Agency are working to detect new substances more quickly, exchange information internationally and help states fight synthetic drug

III. DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Synthetic drugs: Artificially produced drugs which were made in laboratories and not derived from natural plants.

Drug trafficking: The illegal transport, sale and distribution of drugs within a country or across international borders.

Synthetic Opioids: Artificially produced opioid containing substances such as fentanyl or nitazenes, which have an extremely strong effect and pose a high risk of overdose.

Darknet: A hidden part of the internet that is often used for illegal activities such as drug trafficking.

Forensic Laboratories: Specialized laboratories that analyze drugs and study their chemical compositions.

IV. MAJOR PARTIES INVOLVED

UNITED STATES:

The United States are heavily affected by the fentanyl and opioid crisis. The opioid crisis has led to hundreds of thousands of deaths from overdoses in recent years. That is why the United States is investing heavily in Border controls, digital surveillance, early warning systems, such as international police cooperations.

The United States are also investing heavily in technologies for the rapid identifications of new substances.

CHINA:

China has one of the largest chemical and pharmaceutical industries in the world and, subsequently, is a central player in precursor chemicals. Many of these substances are legally manufactured and exported but can be misused to produce synthetic drugs.

In recent years, the Chinese government has tightened the control of certain chemicals and is working more closely with international authorities. Nevertheless, control remains difficult, as new chemical variants are constantly being developed.

China also participates in international programs to control chemical supply chains, combat illegal online sales and improve global information systems.

MEXICO:

Mexico is one of the most important centers for the production and smuggling of synthetic drugs worldwide. Cartels control large parts of the illegal trade and operate numerous secret laboratories.

Particularly important is the production of fentanyl and methamphetamine. Moreover, the smuggling to the USA and the international money laundering networks are playing a major role.

The government is trying to take action against cartels with the military and the police, but violence and corruption complicate the situation. Many regions are under strong influence of organized crime.

Mexico works with international partners to control smuggling routes, to destroy illegal laboratories and to restrict trade in precursor chemicals.

GERMANY:

Germany plays an important role in the fight against synthetic drugs within Europe. The country especially focuses on Cybercrime, Online drug trafficking, Prevention, Youth protection and research.

Germany has modern forensic laboratories and is actively involved in the European early warning system. German authorities regularly exchange information with Europol and international security services.

It is particularly important for Germany to strictly control the darknet, to monitor international parcel deliveries and the early detection of new psychoactive substances.

NETHERLANDS:

The Netherlands are considered one of the largest synthetic drug production centers in Europe. Especially the production of ecstasy and MDMA plays a major role there.

The country is fighting against illegal drug laboratories, international smuggling networks, money laundering and organized crime.

The Dutch authorities work closely with Belgium, Germany and Europol. At the same time, the Netherlands are investing in modern technologies for the analysis of new substances and monitoring drug trafficking.

BELGIUM:

Belgium plays an important role in the fight against illegal drug trafficking in Europe. Due to its central location and the port of Antwerp, one of the largest ports in Europe, the country is often used as a transit point for smuggling drugs, especially cocaine from South America.

The illegal drug trade promotes organised crime, money laundering and violence and poses a challenge to public safety. Therefore, Belgium has strengthened and intensified security controls in its ports and works closely with the European Union, Europol and other international partners.

Belgium believes that drug trafficking can only be combatted in the long term through international cooperation, effective prosecution and preventive measures.

V. EVALUATION OF PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS

Earlier measures to combat trafficking in synthetic drugs and to strengthen early warning systems have achieved significant successes in some cases but have not been able to solve the problem completely.

Above all, the stronger international cooperation between states, police, customs authorities, laboratories and health organizations was positive. Early warning systems such as the Early Warning Advisory of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) or the European Early Warning System of the European Union Drugs Agency significantly improved the international exchange of information. New psychoactive substances can be detected faster today, and health warnings can be published earlier.

Overall, earlier measures have improved international cooperation and early detection, but so far this is not enough to effectively stop the rapid spread of synthetic drugs. Therefore, stronger global cooperations, more modern technologies and long-term prevention strategies are still needed.

VI. POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

In order to effectively combat trade in synthetic drugs and to strengthen early warning systems, closer international cooperation is necessary. States should exchange information about new psychoactive substances, smuggling routes and criminal networks more quickly and expand cooperation between police, customs authorities, health organizations and international institutions. At the same time, early warning systems must be modernized so that new hazardous substances can be detected earlier, and health warnings can be published more quickly. This requires modern forensic laboratories, digital data systems and specially trained personnel.

In addition, governments should tighten control of precursor chemicals used to make synthetic drugs. Stricter export controls, international databases and better monitoring of chemical supply chains could make it difficult for criminal groups to access these substances. As trading is increasingly taking place on darknet platforms, social media, and encrypted messengers, states must also

expand their cybercrime units and work more closely with technology companies to identify and close illegal online markets more quickly.

Moreover, modern technologies such as artificial intelligence and digital analysis programs could be used to detect new drug trends more quickly and evaluate international data more efficiently. Since many developing countries do not have sufficient technical and financial resources, international organizations should support these countries more strongly, through financial assistance, technical equipment and training programs.

VII. USEFUL LINKS AND STATISTICS

<https://www.unodc.org/>

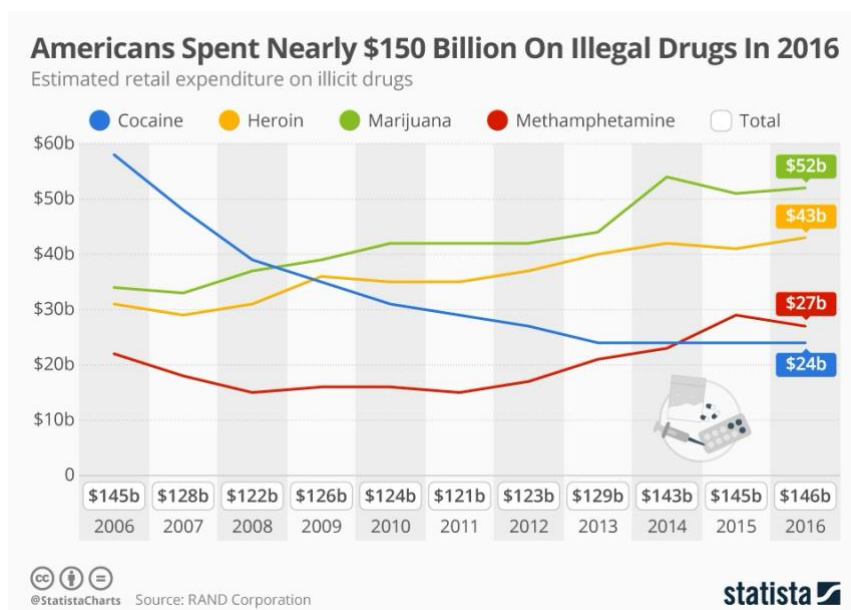
<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/speeches/2023/cnd-synthetic-drug-side-event-140323.html>

<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/drug-trafficking/index.html>

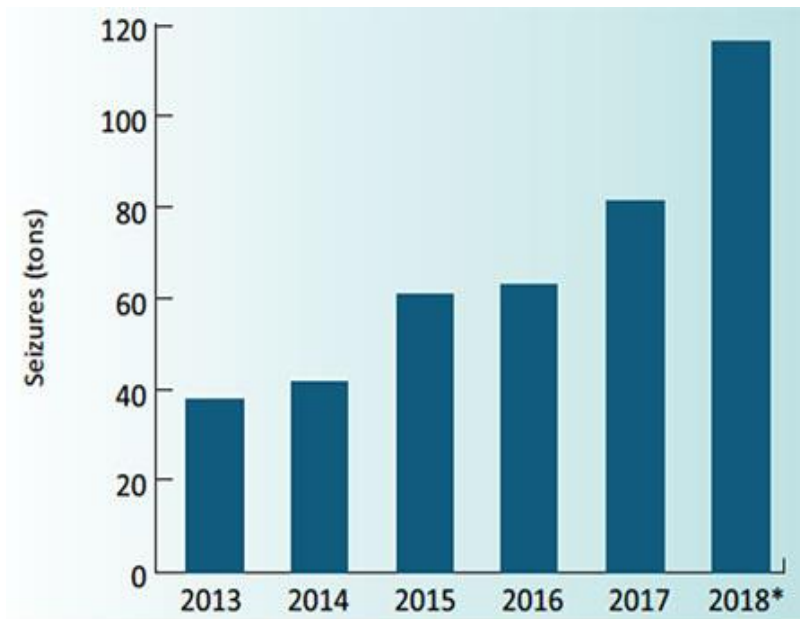
https://www.bka.de/DE/Presse/Listenseite_Pressemitteilungen/2025/Presse2025/251024_BLB_RG_Pressemitteilung.html

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/opioids-drugs-heroin/>

Expenses of Americans



<https://www.statista.com/chart/amp/19163/estimated-retail-expenditure-on-illicit-drugs/>



Seizures of methamphetamine in East and Southeast Asia
Note: *Data for 2018 include only those confirmed by countries in the region.

<https://www.unodc.org/roseap/en/2019/03/synthetic-drugs-report-launch/story.html>