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ECOSOC 4 – Commission of Narcotic Drugs

Research Report

Topic 2: The use of highly harmful, affordable substitutes to prominent illegal substances



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Introduction

This committee will be discussing the use of highly harmful, affordable substitutes to prominent illegal substances. This is an issue that the world is currently struggling with, as many known drugs are currently being produced, using synthetic alternatives, as they are cheaper and can be easily made. There has not been done enough research on many of these synthetic drugs that are being sold, and therefore it has not been determined, what sort of effects these have when consumed. Whereas, most illegal substances have been scrutinized extensively and the dangers of them are well known.

Definition of key terms

Synthetic-

noting or pertaining to compounds formed through a chemical process by human agency, as opposed to those of natural origin:¹

controlled substances- A **controlled substance** is generally a drug or chemical whose manufacture, possession, or use is regulated by a government.²

Precursor Drugs- Drug precursors are chemicals that are primarily used for the legitimate production of a wide range of products, like pharmaceuticals, perfumes, plastics, cosmetics etc. However, they can also be misused for the illicit manufacture of drugs such as methamphetamines, heroin or cocaine.³

illicit drugs- The non-medical use of a variety of drugs that are prohibited by law. These drugs can include: amphetamine- type stimulants, marijuana/cannabis, cocaine, heroin and other opioids, synthetic drugs, and MDMA (ecstasy).⁴

Background Information

The UK has experienced an increase in drug-overdoses, especially from the synthetic opioid Fentanyl. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) said 3,744 people – 2,572 men and 1,172 women – were fatally poisoned by both legal and illegal drugs in England and Wales in 2016, 70 more than the previous year and the highest number since comparable statistics began in 1993.⁵ The ONS warned of a sharp increase in people dying after taking new psychoactive substances (NPS), which were formerly known as “legal highs” before being banned.⁶ Products that remain available, including synthetic cannabis such as spice and mephedrone, which emulates speed, were the cause of 123 deaths in 2016.⁷ The ONS said 39 people killed had taken NPS drugs that were not banned at the time of their deaths and cautioned it would

¹ <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/synthetic>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Controlled_substance

³ https://ec.europa.eu/taxation_customs/business/customs-controls/drug-precursors-control/what-are-drug-precursors_en

⁴ <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/opioids/terms.html>

⁵ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsrelatedtodrugpoisoninginenglandandwales/2016registrations>

⁶ IBID

⁷ IBID

be several years before statistics show whether the UK Government's blanket ban will have any effect on deaths.⁸

The Misuse of Drugs Act implemented in 1971 has banned a list of substances, ranking them from A to C. "Entrepreneurs are combing through the scientific and patent literature and picking the substances that aren't controlled by this act. They're having them manufactured in countries such as China or India, and then ship them to the EU or the USA, where they're processed and packaged into a legal high"⁹, Michael Evans-Brown, a scientific analyst on the Action on New Drugs Team for the EMCDDA.

The most recent national statistics on synthetic cannabinoid use among young people in the USA, published in December 2012, by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, found that 11.6% of teens had used the drug within the past year.¹⁰ Synthetic cannabinoids were also responsible for 11 406 visits to hospital accident and emergency wards, and three-quarters of these visits were by young people aged 12–29 years. Aside from regular marijuana, synthetic cannabinoids were the most common drug used in this group. More detailed analysis revealed that males were twice as likely to use these drugs as females. Reported rates of bath salt use among young people are much lower—at about 1.3%.

Although formal epidemiological studies have not been published on the use of synthetic drugs in the EU and UK, anecdotal evidence suggests that synthetic cathinones are more popular there than synthetic cannabinoids—the opposite of the USA. An informal survey of club-goers in the UK found that 61% had used synthetic cathinones in the past month.¹¹ The sudden rise in the popularity of such synthetic drugs is matched with data from poison control centres and toxicologists about health risks from overdose and chronic use. The American Association of Poison Control Centers reported a 20-fold increase in calls about bath salts between 2010 and 2011. In 2012, the AAPCC reported 2656 calls about bath salts and 5205 calls about synthetic cannabinoids.¹²

Other countries, including New Zealand, Australia, and Japan, have also banned the drugs. They remain controlled substances in the UK. Besides banning the drugs outright, Simon Gibbons, a medicinal phytochemist at University College London, UK, notes several other tactics that can be used to help stem the tide of synthetic drug misuse.¹³ He advocates the education of young people as well as stricter advertising standards that will control how synthetic drugs are marketed. "Because these drugs are generally legal, we don't have a basis to stop their import or sale"¹⁴, he says.

Although long-term data for the addictive potential of these drugs remain scarce, researchers believe that users can readily become addicted to new synthetic drugs. The proliferation of treatment programmes and rehabilitation facilities specifically targeting users of these drugs would indicate this. Prosser also notes that the parent drugs are potentially addictive, which

⁸<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsrelatedtodrugpoisoninginenglandandwales/2016registrations>

⁹ The New Danger of Synthetic Drugs

¹⁰ IBID

¹¹ IBID

¹² IBID

¹³ IBID

¹⁴ IBID

means that these newer synthetic derivatives are as well.¹⁵

To truly combat this problem, lawmakers will have to develop novel types of legislation that can keep up with the pace of new drugs arriving on the market. These pieces of legislation will require scientists and policy makers to rethink their approach so they're not merely responding to the creation of new synthetics. The drugs seem to be here to stay, and new policies are just beginning to catch up.

Major Countries and organizations involved

Synthetic, harmful drugs are being produced and exported around the world today. Although all countries are affected by this issue, it varies from country to country in which substances are being used.

In the United Kingdom, they created a new law known as the Misuse of Drugs Act in 1971. This was to control the distribution of dangerous and harmful drugs, with the aim of preventing drug misuse.¹⁶ Producers of the drugs constantly alter the chemical composition in order to bypass the regulations. These alterations can produce active substances 100 times more powerful than THC. Therefore, the UK still suffers from synthetic substitutes despite new, harsher regulations. One synthetic drug that has had great effect on the population is synthetic marijuana. Studies have shown that around 6 % of students aged 15-18 has tried synthetic marijuana. Not only is it affecting the student, but it is having a devastating impact on British prisons. The synthetic marijuana smuggled into the prisons, has led to a rise in unprecedented psychotic episodes.

In Russia, there has been an increase in illegal manufacturing of desomorphine, or Krokodil, a drug with very high addiction liability when used recreationally. Production is relatively simple synthesis from codeine, but very toxic due to “cooking elements” such as gasoline or paint thinner. The final product can also contain substances such as hydrochloric acid and sodium hydroxide. This makes the drug very toxic, leading to many unpleasant symptoms such as gangrene, thrombosis, pneumonia, meningitis, liver and kidney damage, brain damage and HIV/AIDS. There are about 100,000 krokodil users in Russia.

China also struggles with the issue of synthetic drugs. China produces and exports over 100.000 tons of Acetic Anhydride (A precursor ingredient for the production of heroin and cocaine)¹⁷. It has become a net exporter of synthetic drugs and precursors according to reliable governmental sources in China. Behind Afghanistan and Burma, Chinese intelligence estimates that Europe will be the main target for exportation of synthetic drugs and precursors. China has begun to export precursors to Burma and Afghanistan, and has in return imported refined heroin.

¹⁵ The New Danger of Synthetic Drugs

¹⁶ <http://candidate.hr-manager.net>

¹⁷ China's war on narcotics, Swanström/Yin He, 2006

Relevant UN resolutions

Resolution 60/4

Preventing and responding to the adverse health consequences and risks associated with the use of new psychoactive substances

Resolution 60/5

Increasing international coordination relating to precursors and non-scheduled precursor chemicals used in the illicit manufacture of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances

Resolution 58/9

Promoting the role of drug analysis laboratories worldwide and reaffirming the importance of the quality of the analysis and results of such laboratories

Resolution 57/9

Enhancing international cooperation in the identification and reporting of new psychoactive substances and incidents involving such substances

Resolution 56/4

Enhancing international cooperation in the identification and reporting of new psychoactive substances

Resolution 56/13

Precursors: raising awareness on the diversion in international trade of non-scheduled substances for use as alternatives to scheduled substances in the illicit manufacture of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances

Resolution 53/15

Strengthening international cooperation and regulatory and institutional frameworks for the control of substances frequently used in the manufacture of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances¹⁸

Previous attempts to solve the issue

There have been several attempts to solving these issues related to synthetic substitutes of prominent illegal substances. Countries are now aware of the dangers that these have caused, both to illegal and legal substances, and are taking action to prevent the spread of these drugs. This is being done by the cooperation to identify and report new substances that are being produced and sold illegally. In 1971, there was implemented The Misuse of Drugs Act in England, which banned a list of substances that were involved in providing these illicit drugs. This led to several countries to ban these substances as well. Furthermore, young people are being educated of the risks and unknown effects that these drugs may cause. More data collection is being done to help promote the awareness of this issue. Research is also being done to try to identify and discover the effects these substances have, as well as the ingredients used to produce these different substances.

¹⁸ https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/commissions/CND/Resolutions_Decisions/Resolutions-Decisions_2010-2019.html

Possible solutions

- More research on synthetic substitutes to prominent illegal substances, to further understanding of the side-effects and the production of precursor drugs to halt the exportation of “cooking ingredients” to various illicit substances such as heroin.
- Increased funding to rehabilitation-treatment centres in order to make treatment-programs more widespread and have higher success-rates.
- Tightening regulations surrounding precursor drugs to limit the genetic restructuring of illegal substances in order to by pass the current regulations.

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