

Drug trafficking is one of the [EMPACT](#) priorities, Europol's priority crime areas, under the 2018–2021 EU Policy Cycle.

New psychoactive substances are a growth industry and a cat-and-mouse game gone mad, as producers work to stay one step ahead of, or to skirt, regulations.

The growth in the market for new psychoactive substances (NPSs) shows no signs of slowing, whether in the terms of their number, their type or their availability. Many are sold openly as “legal” replacements for illicit drugs such as cannabis, methamphetamine, cocaine, MDMA, heroin and benzodiazepines.

The [EU Early Warning System](#) currently monitors more than 560 substances, more than twice the number controlled under UN conventions. The market supplies both recreational and, increasingly, chronic and marginalised drug users, and producers are adept at reacting to and even anticipating legal and regulatory controls by rapidly developing and introducing new substances.

PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION

Globalised supply chains and the internet play a major role in making new substances available in Europe. Underpinning this growth is the ability to order bulk quantities of new substances from companies in China and to transport them rapidly to Europe by air or sea. They are then packaged in the EU and marketed openly or illicitly. Given the large profits and the low risks involved, [organised crime groups \(OCGs\)](#) may well become even more active in this field. Indeed, there are signs of an increase in the production of a range of new substances in Europe.

MARKETING AND RETAIL SUPPLY

Entrepreneurs have developed sophisticated and aggressive techniques to market new substances. For instance, they have developed distinct but overlapping markets such as “legal highs”, “research chemicals” and “dietary supplements”. Both online and bricks-and-mortar shops are important sources of supply.

HEIGHTENED DANGERS

As the availability of new substances has increased there has also been an increase in the number of incidents of serious harm, particularly acute poisonings, sometimes resulting in death. There has also been broader public-health and social harm, for instance as chronic and marginalised drug users have switched from injectable heroin to synthetic cathinones. Some new substances can pose an immediate and pronounced danger to public health, for instance by causing mass poisonings. Others may cause outbreaks carried by blood-borne viruses, as well as mass bacterial infections. In the past couple of years, synthetic cannabinoids and synthetic opioids have caused just these kinds of outbreak in the EU.

COUNTERING THE SCOURGE

Working with its national and international partners, Europol has recorded a number of successes that have reduced the local impacts of this scourge. It has supported national operations that have led to the arrest of members of organised crime groups and the seizure of large amounts of NPSs, powders, herbals, crystal substances as well as equipment. In such operations, Europol offers analytical and technical support to the investigating teams, and with its mobile office facilitates the cross-checking and analysis of operational data.

NUMBER OF ITEMS FOUND: 32

SEARCH



TYPE

Article/Story, Event, How-To Guide, Landing Page, Multimedia, News/Press Release, Operation, Page, Publication/Document



TARGET GROUP



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