

The market for synthetic drugs—amphetamines, methamphetamine and ecstasy (MDMA), as well as synthetic versions of cannabis and of opioids such as heroin—runs into the billions of euros each year, and the sophistication of producers and traffickers continues to rise.

MOVING TARGETS

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

The production of synthetic drugs is getting more sophisticated; distribution networks, nimbler and smarter; and the drugs themselves, more harmful. Markets are continually diversifying, with prescription medicines and new synthetic opioids increasingly being misused.

A large number of new psychoactive substances (NPSs) are being sold openly as "legal" replacements for illicit drugs: hundreds of new substances have been reported in the last few years alone, and the [EU Early Warning System](#) now has over 500 on its radar.

PRODUCTION, MARKETING AND DISTRIBUTION

The production of synthetic drugs is becoming more sophisticated and diverse—and there are greater opportunities for drugs to be produced nearer to consumer markets in the EU. Aggressive marketing is becoming more apparent in the ecstasy market, as competition among suppliers heats up.

THE MARKETS

The market for opioid drugs is becoming more dynamic and more complex. Consumption patterns are influenced by availability. Although heroin still predominates, the market is also shifting to other opioids or stimulants, including NPSs. Sometimes new substances are used as temporary replacements for illicit drugs—and they can even displace them altogether, either for some time or permanently.

The market for synthetic stimulants is particularly dynamic, as consumers switch to different substances. And there are considerable differences in terms of use between countries and cultures. Synthetic stimulants are used by well-integrated young people, but they also contribute to the chronic drug problems found in such regions as northern, central and eastern Europe.

INNOVATION AND DESTRUCTION

As a general matter, suppliers of synthetic drugs care less about a specific substance and more about mimicking the pharmacological effects of the original: for instance, each synthetic cannabinoid that is produced is disposable: once it has been banned—or is about to be—a "legal" replacement appears.

THE DAMAGE DONE

The products of all this creativity cause a wide range of harmful outcomes, such as serious, sometimes fatal, poisonings. And changes in how users inject themselves as they switch to new substances have also caused mass poisonings and outbreaks of infections such as HIV, hepatitis C and bacterial illnesses: in the past few years the EMCDDA has put out tens of alerts on outbreaks of this kind.

The use of stimulants leads not only to problems related to fatigue, but to short-term psychotic episodes. In general, it is associated with high rates of psychiatric problems.

The availability of high-dose MDMA (“ecstasy”) products also constitutes an emerging threat. Following recent shortages, the drug is once more widely available. And consumer interest in this drug is once again on the rise.

The dumping of toxic waste from the production of stimulants also poses health risks and causes environmental damage.

THE RESPONSE

The EU Drugs Strategy (2013–20) and its associated action plans provide a framework for addressing illicit drugs in the EU, thus complementing Member States’ national strategies and supporting joint actions. The overarching objective of the Strategy is to cut the availability of illicit drugs by:

- › disruption trafficking
- › dismantling organised crime groups (OCGs) involved in production and trafficking
- › using the criminal justice system
- › deploying intelligence-led law enforcement effectively
- › increasing the sharing of intelligence sharing
- › specifically targeting large-scale, cross-border and organised drug-related crime

The Strategy and its action plans are producing results: every year there are tens of thousands seizures of new substances such as synthetic cannabinoids and cathinones, tranquilisers and fentanyl (which may be sold as heroin)—many vastly more potent than their controlled counterparts.

NUMBER OF ITEMS FOUND: 40

SEARCH



TYPE

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



TARGET GROUP



SEARCH

CLEAR ALL

11
Dec
2019

ILLICIT DRUGS IN THE EU: THE SITUATION IS EXPANDING IN SCALE AND COMPLEXITY

NEWS/PRESS RELEASE

26
Nov
2019



European Monitoring Centre
for Drugs and Drug Addiction

EUROPOL

2019 EU DRUG MARKETS REPORT FROM THE EMCDDA AND EUROPOL

NEWS/PRESS RELEASE

22
Nov
2019

COMING SOON: 2019 EU DRUG MARKETS REPORT FROM EUROPOL AND THE EMCDDA

NEWS/PRESS RELEASE

25
Oct
2019

ADDRESSING ACCESS TO CROSS-BORDER ELECTRONIC EVIDENCE IN THE EU AT THE THIRD ANNUAL SIRIUS CONFERENCE

NEWS/PRESS RELEASE

18
Oct
2019

476 POTENTIAL VICTIMS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING IDENTIFIED DURING THE LARGE-SCALE JOINT ACTION DAYS 2019

NEWS/PRESS RELEASE

11
Oct
2019

BOAT RAIDED FROM BRAZIL TO EUROPE HIDING OVER HALF A TONNE OF COCAINE AND NARCOTIC

SUBSTANCES

NEWS/PRESS RELEASE

23
Sep
2019

LAW ENFORCEMENT EXPLAINED IN 120 SECONDS

NEWS/PRESS RELEASE

20
May
2019

JOINT EUROPOL-CEPOL ADVANCED TRAINING COURSE ON DISMANTLING ILLICIT SYNTHETIC DRUG LABORATORIES.

NEWS/PRESS RELEASE

04
Mar
2019

BIG HIT AGAINST COSA NOSTRA IN SICILY

NEWS/PRESS RELEASE

01
Feb
2019

INTERNATIONAL DRUG TRAFFICKING NETWORK DISRUPTED

NEWS/PRESS RELEASE

06
Dec
2018



DRUGS IN EUROPE: A BOLD LAW ENFORCEMENT RESPONSE

EVENT

09
Oct
2018

TRAINING TOGETHER IN BELGIUM: HOW DO POLICE OFFICERS DISMANTLE ILLICIT SYNTHETIC DRUGS LABS?

NEWS/PRESS RELEASE

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