

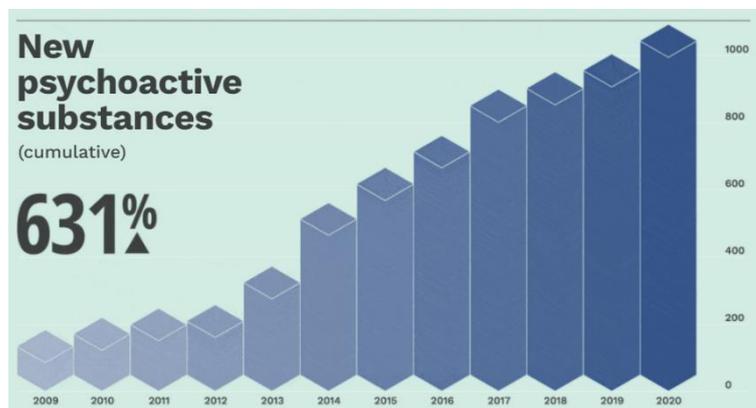


## UNODC Synthetic Drug Strategy



### Introduction

Synthetic drugs present a unique challenge to the international drug control aim to preserve the health of the global community. Unlike the production of plant-derived drugs such as cocaine and heroin, which is geographically constrained, synthetic drug manufacture can occur anywhere depending on human creativity and a few key chemicals. This versatility makes the manufacture of synthetic drugs extremely mobile and any country can be a potential source. Yet this is not a totally new phenomenon. For over a century, international drug control has had to contend with waves of emergence of synthetic drugs: derivatives of morphine in the 1920s, fentanyl analogues in the 1980s and amphetamine-type stimulants in the 1990s. The 2010s marked a defining period for synthetic drugs with the unprecedented emergence of hundreds of substances which mimic the effects of drugs hazardous to human health and therefore under international control. Known as ‘new psychoactive substances’ (NPS), by December 2020 over 1,000 of these had been reported in 120 countries and territories worldwide. For unprepared societies, the effects of these cyclical surges in synthetic drugs have had severe consequences, but none has been as distressing as the ongoing synthetic opioids crisis affecting mainly North America with fentanyl and its analogues, and parts of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East with tramadol.

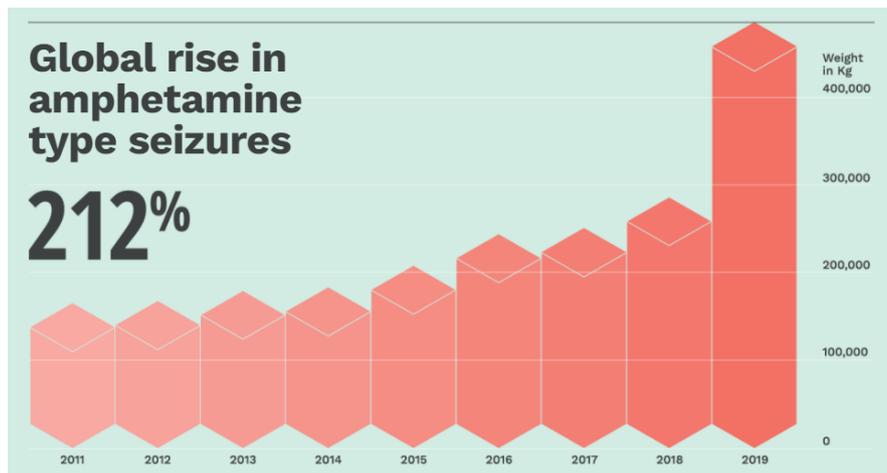




The dynamic nature of synthetic drug markets has by necessity required equally adaptable solutions and continuous refinements of strategies. The establishment of the Global SMART Programme in 2009 as a strategic response to the amphetamine-type stimulants problem identified in the 2009 Political Declaration and Plan of Action; the development of the first global forensic Early Warning Advisory

on New Psychoactive Substances to operationalize the 2016 UN General Assembly Special Session ideal of prioritizing the most harmful, persistent and prevalent substances for international action; and the establishment of the UNODC Opioid Strategy in 2018 to support countries in addressing the synthetic opioids crisis are all clear examples of the nimbleness with which UNODC has responded to the ever-changing and complex synthetic drugs market.

Launched on World Drug Day in June 2018, the five-pillar UNODC Opioid Strategy integrates through strong inter-agency cooperation the unique expertise housed within the Office with complementary specialized knowledge across the United Nations system. Its operational theme of *Predict, Protect and Prevent* leverages a



robust scientific culture to generate the evidence-base for multilateral decision-making, such as the international scheduling of substances, through use of the best available scientific data and timely early warning analyses<sup>1</sup>. Several science-driven multilateral actions over the past few years related to some of the most harmful substances ever known to humankind, including several fentanyl-analogues, illustrate some of the many successes of the Strategy. Within the framework of the Opioid Strategy, UNODC continues to deploy its vast law-enforcement programming assets to offer a coordinated response to air, land and sea container and parcel trafficking in priority regions and countries as well as the online sale of these harmful substances<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Global SMART Programme, the Global Forensic and Scientific Programme

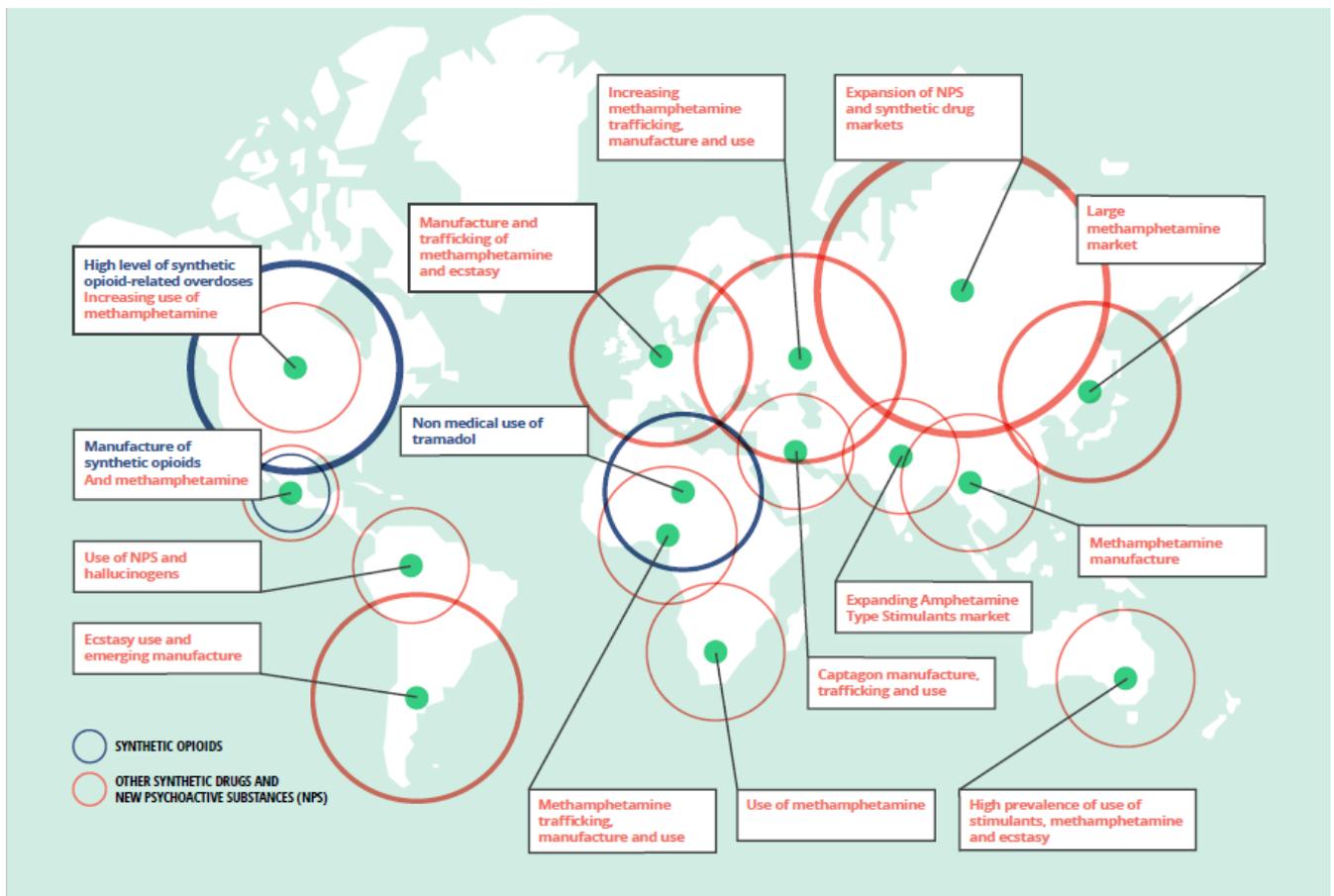
<sup>2</sup> UNODC/WCO Container Control Program, AirCop, the Regional Office for Southeast Asia and the Pacific-Precursors Programme, the Global Programme on Cybercrime, Global Programme on Anti-Money-Laundering, CrimJust programme



In addition, comprehensive support for evidence-based drug demand reduction, prevention, treatment and care continues to be provided. A lasting legacy beyond the ongoing crisis will be the worldwide use and accessibility of the [United Nations Toolkit on Synthetic Drugs](#) – a one-stop shop of cross-cutting resources from the UN family for addressing both the supply and demand elements of the synthetic drug problem.

### The Global Synthetic Drug Problem

As illustrated in the World Drug Report, the synthetic drug problem continues to evolve. A few examples of emerging challenges include record amounts of methamphetamine being manufactured in South-East Asia, despite movement restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic; geographical shifts in methamphetamine manufacture, for instance in Afghanistan; and the increasing emergence of opioid, sedative and stimulant-type new psychoactive substances. Such challenges require a recalibration and refinement of current strategies to match a dynamic and fluctuating environment.



Several aspects of the global synthetic drug problem affect women in particular. For instance, the World Drug Report 2020 reports a higher prevalence of the non-medical use of weight loss pills among women compared to men, with pharmaceutical stimulants such as sibutramine hydrochloride monohydrate (sold under the brand names Aderan and Ipomex) and phentermine (sold under the brand names Duromine and Suprenza), along with methylphenidate and amphetamine, being the most commonly misused substances. Similarly, the World Drug Report 2018 identifies the prevalence of the non-medical use of opioids and tranquillizers among women to be at a comparable or higher level to that of men.

Furthermore, women who use drugs, including synthetic drugs, are at a higher risk of infectious diseases than men, making up one third of drug users worldwide and accounting for one fifth of the estimated global number of people who inject drugs (PWID). Women are more vulnerable than men to HIV, hepatitis C and other blood-borne infections and many studies have reported female gender as an independent predictor of HIV and/or hepatitis C among PWID, particularly among young women and those who have recently initiated drug injection. Women who use drugs also face specific challenges including a lack of availability of necessary gender-specific health and drug treatment services, barriers to accessing existing services, social stigma and the fear of possible legal sanctions in relation to drug use and/or losing the custody of children while in treatment.

**Women seem to be particularly affected by the non-medical use of sedatives and tranquillizers, with past-year prevalence in some countries reported as being higher among women than among men, or at least at comparable levels**

While research on issues related to women who use synthetic drugs has improved in recent years, data in this area remains scarce and there is a clear need to improve the quality and availability of gender disaggregated information.

From Latin America to the Middle East, funding for armed violence has in certain instances long been linked to the illicit drug trade. The manufacture of synthetic drugs does not require control over large agricultural areas and the local population to grow drug-related crops. Clandestine laboratories used to manufacture synthetic drugs are comparatively small in size and the chemicals needed can be bought under the guise of licit business. This makes synthetic drugs a particularly attractive source of income for insurgents and non-state armed groups.

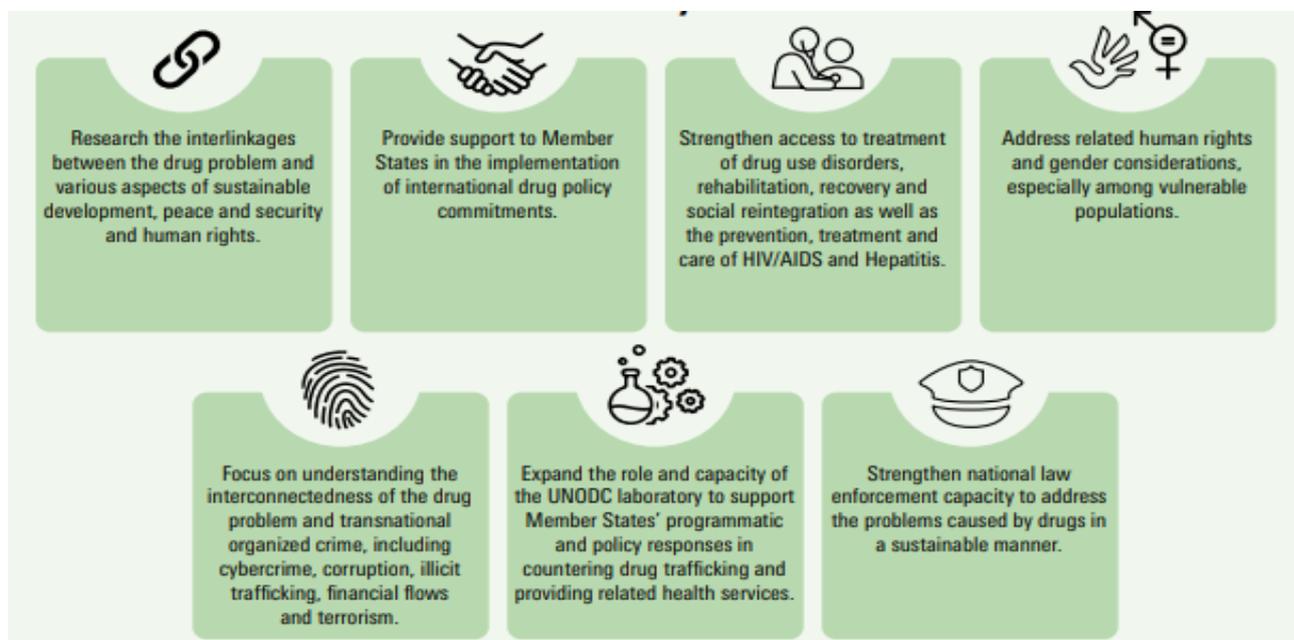
## Learning from the past – what has worked

The international community's experiences in responding to previous synthetic drug crises as described above, including the most recent opioid crisis which still affects parts of the world, have provided some valuable lessons learned with regard to successful approaches:

- A science-informed multilateral process provides the evidence and knowledge on which to build effective and targeted policy directions and operational activities.
- An agile response needs to be based on a strong culture of monitoring, evaluating and understanding constantly evolving synthetic drugs markets and their complexity.
- Early warning provides a predictive model for emerging threats and increases the preparedness of Member States to formulate effective responses.
- An integrated Office-wide approach, coupled with strong inter-agency cooperation, leveraging the expertise and in-field presence of flagship UNODC programmes and sister agencies from across the UN system, is an efficient and cost-effective way of achieving a critical mass for delivery.
- The availability and accessibility of practical cross-cutting resources and tools from across the UN system through a one-stop shop, e.g. the UN Toolkit on Synthetic Drugs, increases the comprehensiveness of countries' responses<sup>3</sup>.

## UNODC Synthetic Drug Strategy

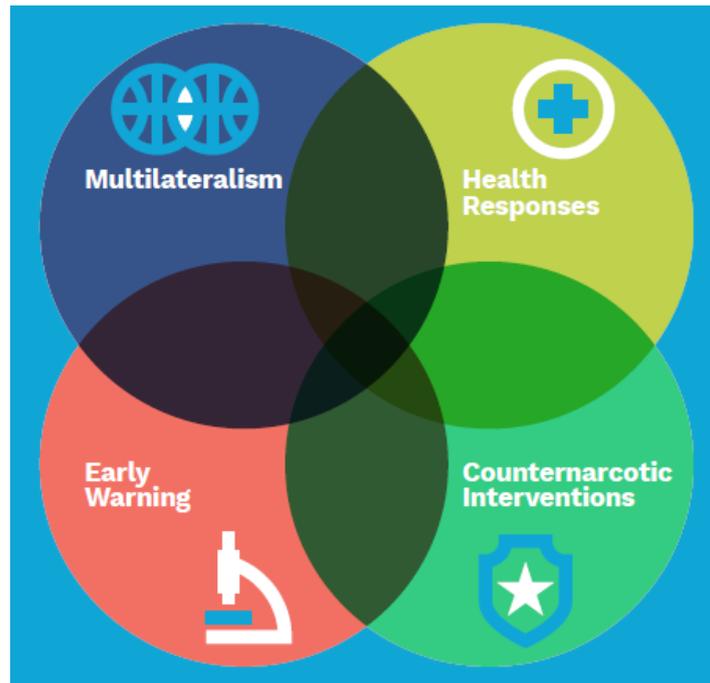
The UNODC Strategy 2021-2025 thematic focus on the world drug problem identifies seven key areas for action:



<sup>3</sup> The UN Toolkit on Synthetic Drugs features resources and tools from a growing number of UN agencies including INCB, UNODC, WHO, UPU, WCO and ICAO and is accessed by experts and agencies in over 170 countries.

Aligned with and to advance the implementation of the UNODC Strategy 2021-2025, the Synthetic Drug Strategy is built on four synergetic and complementary spheres of action. These constitute a framework to guide international, regional and national action to support countries to effectively address the growing synthetic drug problem as it manifests around the world with particular attention to protecting and empowering vulnerable populations, including children, youth, women and people in contact with the criminal justice system and in humanitarian settings.

#### Four Spheres of Action to Address the Global Synthetic Drug Problem:



#### Sphere 1: Multilateralism and international cooperation

- Support scientifically informed multilateral deliberations through the Commission on Narcotic Drugs and international cooperation activities to identify emerging synthetic drug challenges and mobilize relevant institutions to identify system-wide synergies and options for response.
- Support UNODC's normative work as it relates to the international scheduling framework and strengthen the process of incorporation of decisions into national legislative frameworks to support the implementation of scheduling decisions.
- Support the prioritization of the most harmful, prevalent and persistent substances for international action.
- Ensure system-wide coherence on the science of synthetic drugs through proactive consultations with the treaty bodies (Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND), World Health Organization (WHO), and International Narcotics Control Board (INCB)) and other UN agencies, regional organizations, academia, the scientific community and the chemical and pharmaceutical industries.



## Sphere 2: Early warning on emerging synthetic drug threats - Preventing crises before they happen

- Enable early detection and prompt responses by national institutions to emerging threats related to synthetic drugs and their precursor chemicals.
- Promote and improve the collection and analysis of reliable and comparable data to strengthen evidence-based responses, with particular focus on at-risk populations including women and youth.
- Strengthen the capacity of forensic drug testing and toxicology laboratories worldwide to identify synthetic drugs, including NPS, and increase the use of such knowledge in strategic interventions and policy decisions.
- Build the capacity of national institutions to contribute to and strengthen forensic early warning systems worldwide.
- Support the development of a global campaign aimed at raising awareness of the threats posed by synthetic drugs, including the dissemination of early warning messages via the UNODC Forensic Early Warning Advisory.
- Enter into strategic partnerships with forensic and scientific associations and academic institutions to facilitate access to scientific best practice and knowledge to respond to emerging synthetic drug threats.
- Increase the understanding of toxic adulterants and the use of pharmaceuticals (and counterfeit medicines) with known effects in the production of synthetic drugs.



## Sphere 3: Promote science-informed health responses - “Science for health”

- Promote non-stigmatizing attitudes with a focus on gender and marginalized communities to ensure the availability, access and delivery of health, care and social services for people who use drugs.
- Promote awareness-raising, education and training as part of a comprehensive approach to ensuring the access and availability of internationally controlled substances for medical and scientific purposes and improving their rational use, while preventing their diversion and abuse.
- Promote and facilitate access to comprehensive, scientific evidence-based, affordable quality drug prevention, treatment, care, sustained recovery and related support services, with particular consideration for the needs of women, youth and vulnerable communities, including for people impacted by social marginalization.
- Enhance international scientific collaboration across the UN system to promote effective interventions related to synthetic drugs, including opioid overdoses and the management and treatment of synthetic drug use disorders.
- Enhance the guidance available for the management of infants born with neonatal abstinence syndrome resulting from prenatal exposure to synthetic drugs, in particular synthetic opioids, to ensure the best possible outcomes and that no infant is left behind.
- Promote measures to prevent the transmission of HIV as well as to prevent and treat viral hepatitis C attributable to synthetic drug use.
- Improve the participatory role of civil society in addressing the synthetic drug problem, including the community of people who use drugs.
- Promote the involvement of youth in drug prevention efforts.



#### Sphere 4: Strengthen counternarcotic capacity and support international operations to disrupt trafficking in synthetic drugs

- Leverage innovation and technology to make science accessible to counternarcotic and law enforcement entities to better inform and facilitate counternarcotic operations and interdiction decisions, including drug identification, safe handling and the disposal of synthetic drugs and their precursors.
- Promote private-public partnerships to support counternarcotic capacity to disrupt and interdict trafficking in synthetic drugs, including the disposal of toxic chemicals and precursors used in the manufacture of synthetic drugs.
- Prevent and counter the diversion and trafficking of precursors and pre-precursors used in the illicit manufacture of synthetic drugs.
- Enhance the capacity of online investigative units to identify, intercept, interdict and disrupt online trafficking in synthetic drugs as well as to seize cryptocurrencies used to transact such trafficking.
- Build the capacity of frontline law enforcement and forensic personnel to disrupt the supply chain and expand law enforcement activities targeting both traditional and online trafficking.
- Enhance the access of law enforcement entities and criminal justice systems to quality and reliable in-country forensic science services operated at internationally accepted standards.
- Encourage the adoption of national chemical disposal plans that are informed and guided by the science of safe handling and disposal.