United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

The increasing production of synthetic drugs in East and South East Asia

Research Report

Leiden Model United Nations 2023

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Forum: UNODC

Issue: The increasing production of synthetic drugs in East and South East Asia

Position: Chairs

Introduction

In east and south east Asia there has been a growing problem in recent years with regard to the production of synthetic drugs. People there are making more and more synthetic drugs, which are man-made substances that copy the effects of illegal drugs like ecstasy and amphetamines. This is causing trouble for many reasons, for example, safety, health, and how countries work together.

Synthetic drugs are tricky because they keep changing their chemical makeup, making them hard to detect and control. This has helped them become a big business in places like East and South East Asia. These areas have some conditions that make it easier for people to make these drugs. There are weak rules, not very strict borders, corruption, and not enough police to stop the drug makers. They can also get the materials they need to make the drugs from nearby places.

This problem is causing a lot of serious issues. More people are getting addicted to these drugs, which is bad for their health. In addition, there are more cases of people getting really sick or even dying from these drugs, because it's hard to know how strong they are and whether they are safe. The drug business has also helped criminal groups grow and make trouble, making the region less safe.

Definition of Key Terms

Synthetic drugs

Synthetic drugs are man-made substances that are created to mimic the effects of illegal drugs. They are designed in labs using chemicals and formulas to produce similar feelings and experiences as drugs like ecstasy or amphetamines. Because they're made in a controlled environment, their chemical composition can change quickly, making them hard to regulate and predict.

Precursor chemicals

Precursor chemicals are the raw materials or chemical substances used in the manufacturing of synthetic drugs. Often, precursor chemicals are regulated to control drug production. In the context of this issue, the availability and trafficking of precursor chemicals play a critical role in the expansion of synthetic drug production.

Transnational criminal networks

Transnational criminal networks are organized criminal groups that operate across national borders. In the context of synthetic drug production, transnational criminal networks are often responsible for the production, distribution, and trafficking of these drugs. They pose significant challenges to law enforcement and regional security.

General Overview

What are synthetic drugs?

Synthetic drugs are also known as designer drugs or new psychoactive substances. These drugs are chemically engineered substances that mimic the effects of illegal drugs such as MDMA, LSD or methamphetamine. The body does not distinguish between herbal and synthetic drugs. What is important is only what the effect is on the body. The body cannot tell whether it is natural or synthetic. Both categories contain healthy substances and substances that are deadly. The synthetic drugs are often created to bypass legal restrictions and detection. One of the challenges in tackling this issue is the constantly evolving nature of synthetic drugs. Manufacturers always tweak the chemical composition to stay one step ahead of law enforcement. This makes it difficult to regulate and control these substances effectively.

Consequences

The production of synthetic drugs is often carried out in clandestine laboratories, which is the reason why it is harder to track and shut down this production. The consequences of the increasing production of synthetic drugs are far-reaching and alarming. They pose significant risks to the public health as well as safety. This is because synthetic drugs can have severe and unpredictable effects on its users, unlike traditional drugs (because those effects are well-known).

Health

The chemical composition of synthetic drugs is constantly changing, which makes it difficult for users to know what they are actually consuming. The dangers of synthetic drugs lie in their potency and the lack of quality control. Users may experience adverse reactions such as extreme agitation, paranoia, hallucinations, seizures, or even cardiac arrest. The potency of these substances can lead to overdose, which can have fatal consequences. Moreover, since synthetic drugs are often sold in unregulated markets, users may consume substances that are contaminated or adulterated with other harmful chemicals without even knowing it.

Crime networks

There is another reason why synthetic drugs are a big problem. Because the risks associated with synthetic drugs are extending beyond individual users. The production and distribution of these drugs contribute to the proliferation of organized crime networks. These criminal organizations exploit the demand for synthetic drugs, leading to increased violence, corruption, and social instability in affected regions. The profits generated from the illicit drug trade can also fund other criminal activities, further exacerbating the problem.

In conclusion, synthetic drugs are a major problem, and a tough approach is required. Synthetic drugs are worrying because they have a negative impact on health, they are made in untrustworthy laboratories and criminal networks may be supported with the consumption of synthetic drugs.

Major Parties Involved

China

China is a significant player primarily due to its role as a major supplier of precursor chemicals. The country's chemical industry, one of the world's largest, provides the raw materials necessary for synthetic drug production. Some illicit laboratories also operate within China's borders. The availability of these precursor chemicals and the involvement of certain individuals and criminal networks within China contribute to the proliferation of synthetic drug production in the region. Consequently, China's involvement is pivotal in addressing this transnational challenge effectively.

Myanmar (Burma)

Myanmar is a major producer of synthetic drugs, especially methamphetamine, and has been a hot spot for its production. The country's rugged terrain, weak governance in border regions, and proximity to precursor chemical sources create an ideal environment for illicit drug manufacturing.

Thailand

Thailand has faced challenges in synthetic drug production, especially in the northern regions. It also serves as a transit route for the trafficking of these drugs to neighboring countries. The country's northern regions, bordering Myanmar and Laos, have become hotspots for synthetic drug manufacturing. Criminal groups take advantage of Thailand's proximity to precursor chemical sources and its extensive transportation networks to produce and traffic synthetic drugs.

Cambodia

Cambodia has experienced an increase in synthetic drug production and trafficking, often linked to criminal networks operating in the region.

Laos

Laos has faced problems related to synthetic drug production and acts as a transit point for the illicit drug trade.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

The UNODC plays a vital role in facilitating international cooperation and providing support to countries in the region to combat synthetic drug production and trafficking.

INTERPOL

INTERPOL, as an international law enforcement agency, helps coordinate the efforts of multiple countries to address the transnational issue of synthetic drug production and trafficking.

Timeline of Events

2019	A decrease in the price of methamphetamine has been observed in Australia, New Zealand and South Korea.
2021	UNODC launched the Synthetic Drug Strategy as a framework to support countries in developing evidence and science-based responses to this ongoing challenge. The strategy includes four spheres of action, namely, multilateralism and international cooperation, early warning on emerging synthetic drug threats, promoting science-informed health responses, and strengthening counter narcotic interventions.

Possible Solutions

Cross-Border law enforcement cooperation, focusing on Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos would be a good step in the right direction. Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos should enhance cooperation in law enforcement to target drug production and trafficking networks operating in their shared border regions. Joint operations and intelligence sharing can disrupt the drug trade and apprehend key individuals involved.

To create public awareness we should introduce public awareness campaigns about the issue. Comprehensive public awareness campaigns are crucial in reducing the demand for synthetic drugs and curbing their use. Governments and relevant organizations should invest in educational initiatives that inform communities about the dangers associated with synthetic drugs. These campaigns should emphasize the health risks, including addiction and severe health consequences, and highlight the legal consequences of involvement in the drug trade. By targeting both urban and rural populations, these campaigns can change attitudes and behaviors, ultimately reducing the demand for synthetic drugs and the profitability of the illicit market.

Governments in the region must implement and enforce strict controls on the precursor chemicals and ingredients used in the production of synthetic drugs. This includes monitoring and regulating the sale, import and distribution of chemicals commonly used in the production of medicines. By monitoring and limiting the availability of these important substances, authorities can disrupt the supply chain of synthetic drug manufacturers. Cooperation between countries in the region and international organizations can increase the effectiveness of such regulations, making it more difficult for illegal manufacturers to access the necessary materials for the production of medicines. This approach not only tackles the problem at source, but also complements other strategies aimed at reducing the production and trafficking of synthetic drugs in the region.

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