



European Monitoring Centre
for Drugs and Drug Addiction



Highlights from the EU Drug Markets Report for policy and practice 2019



Key issues

The illicit drug market represents a growing cross-border threat to the health, safety and security of European citizens. Not only are drugs big business, representing a major source of income for organised crime groups (OCGs), the drug market is also rapidly evolving in ways that challenge existing policies and response models.

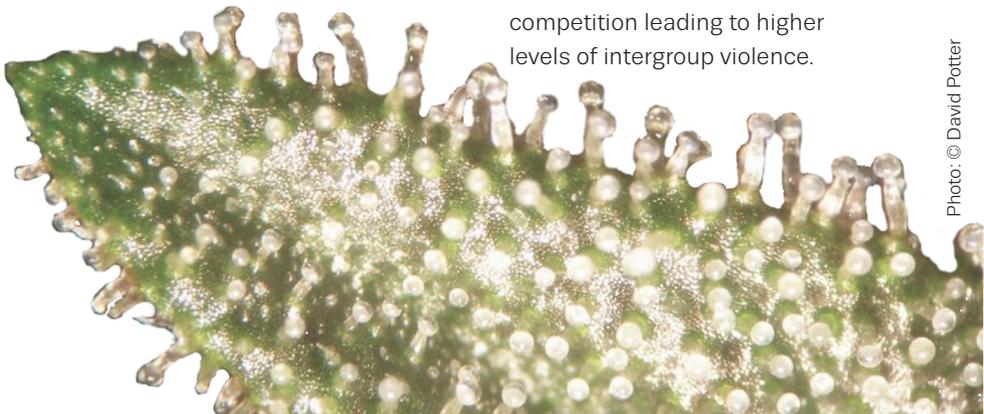
The latest data and information available on Europe's drug market show that:

- ▶ **innovation in drug production** and trafficking has resulted in the **higher availability** of both plant-based and synthetic drugs across the EU;
- ▶ consumers now have access to a wider variety of **high-purity and high-potency products** that are both more **accessible** and, in real terms, **cheaper** than they have been in the past;
- ▶ Europe is now a major **producer** of cannabis and synthetic drugs for the EU market and also a global **supplier** of MDMA;
- ▶ the drug market is becoming **ever more globally linked and digitally enabled** with consumers increasingly able to access drugs through the surface web and darknet and social media applications;
- ▶ **production within Europe** and **changing business models** of OCGs are increasing competition and leading to **increased violence and corruption** within Europe.

Cannabis



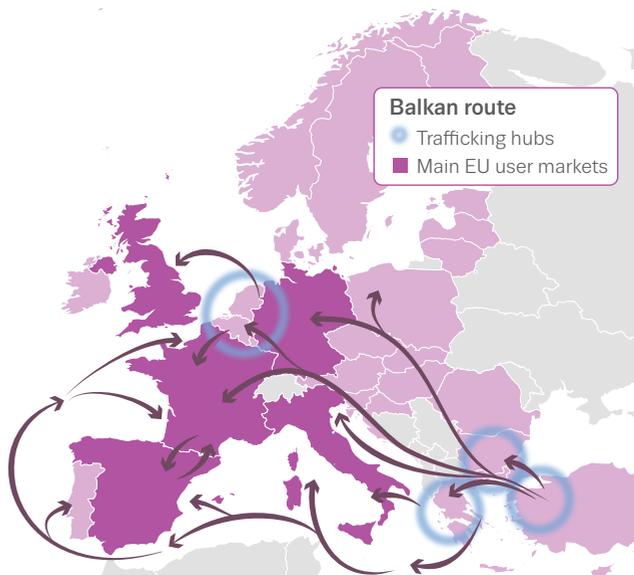
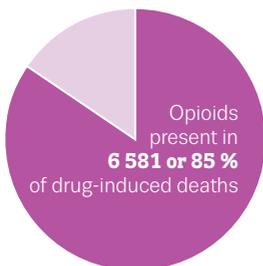
- Cannabis is the largest retail drug market in Europe.
- Herbal cannabis and resin, both now of higher potency, dominate the European cannabis market but other products are appearing, increasing the complexity of the market.
- The Netherlands and Spain remain the major trafficking hubs for intra-EU cannabis trafficking.
- Herbal cannabis is extensively produced within the EU and is a major source of income for the criminal economy.
- Cannabis resin primarily enters the EU from Morocco via Spain. However, Libya has emerged as a major transit hub alongside diffusion of trafficking activities throughout the Mediterranean region.
- There appears to be diversification in OCG involvement in the cannabis market in the EU, with competition leading to higher levels of intergroup violence.



Heroin and other opioids

Photo: © David Mansfield

- Heroin is responsible for a large share of the harms related to drug use in the EU, in particular, large numbers of drug-related deaths.
- The opioid market is becoming more diverse and complex, with high-potency synthetic opioids, in particular, posing considerable challenges.
- Large consignments of heroin continue to be seized in the EU, and the potential threat from increased availability globally needs to be monitored.
- The Balkan route remains important for both trafficking heroin into the EU and the supply of the precursor, acetic anhydride, diverted from the EU to heroin-producing areas.
- There appears to be an increase of heroin trafficking on the Southern route, particularly through the Suez Canal using multimodal transport networks for onward transport into Europe.
- OCGs are changing their practices, and overlaps are being identified between OCGs involved in heroin supply and those involved in the trafficking of other illicit commodities.
- There are signs of diffusion in opioid production to new countries, including some in the EU.



Cocaine

- The cocaine market is the largest stimulant drug market in the EU. Use remains concentrated in the west and south of Europe but appears to be increasing elsewhere.
- Cocaine production in the three main producing countries was at record levels in 2017, while manufacturing processes also appear to be becoming more efficient.
- A record quantity of cocaine was seized in Europe in 2017. The use of containers for smuggling means large seizures of cocaine at ports are now common and — the cocaine is of high purity.

- Colombian and Italian OCGs still play a prominent role in the cocaine trade, but others are becoming more significant. European OCGs are establishing a presence in Latin America, which may be driving competition and conflict between groups and increasing violence and corruption within the EU.
- The main entry points and distribution hubs for cocaine in the EU remain Belgium, the Netherlands and Spain.
- Digital technologies — including darknet and surface web, social media and mobile phone apps — are increasingly used to market cocaine to consumers.
- The global market for cocaine also appears to be growing, and the EU appears to be increasingly used as a transit area for cocaine destined elsewhere.

Quantity seized (tonnes)

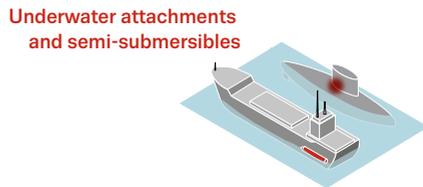
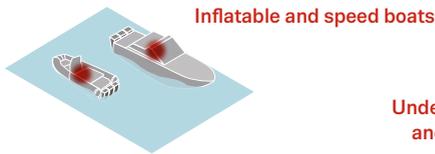
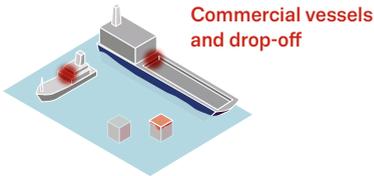
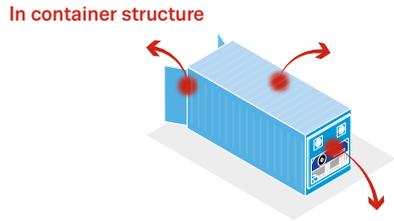
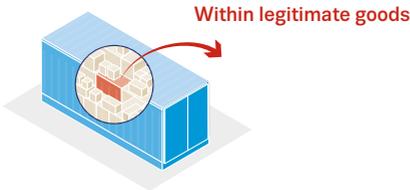
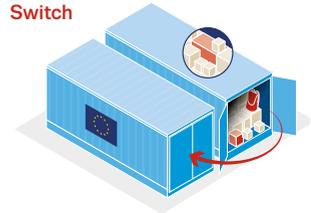
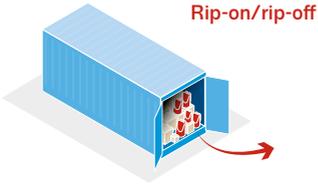


EU+2: EU Member States, Norway and Turkey.

Indexed trend: purity



Maritime trafficking: diversification of modi operandi



EU drug markets —

Drivers and facilitators →



INITIATIVES

STRUCTURES

ACTIONS



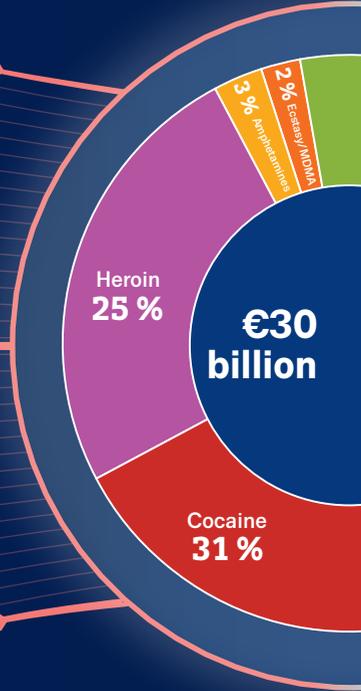
STRATEGIES

LEGISLATION

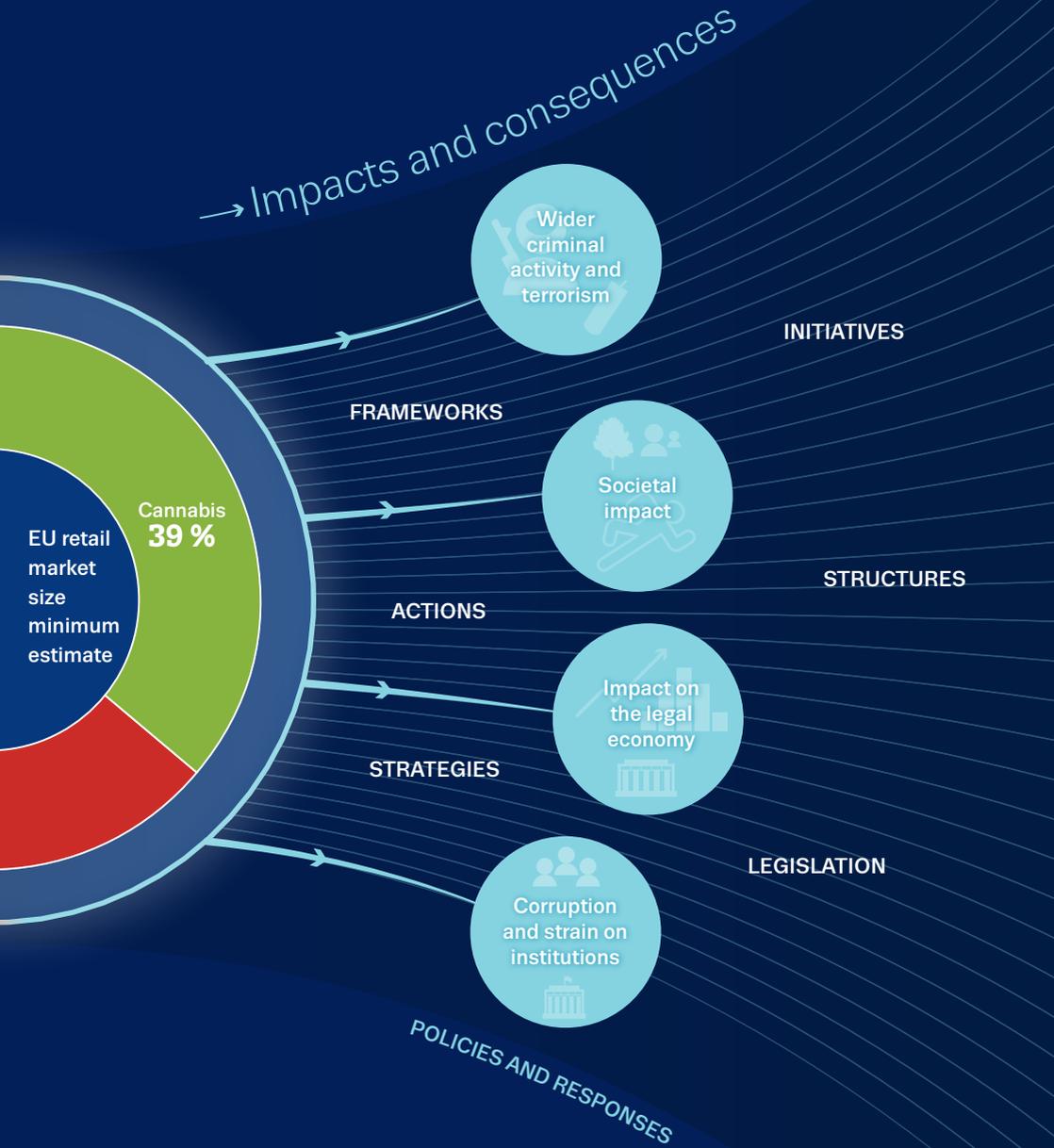


FRAMEWORKS

POLICIES AND RESPONSES



- a systems perspective



Synthetic drugs



- It is estimated that in 2017 between 51 and 81 tonnes of amphetamines and 50 and 70 million ecstasy tablets were produced in Europe.
- The EU also plays a key role in the global production and supply of MDMA, and to a lesser extent, amphetamine and methamphetamine.
- Synthetic drugs are manufactured in the EU from precursors mainly produced locally from alternative chemicals sourced outside the EU. This has lowered costs and increased profits for OCGs and exacerbated the harms associated with the dumping of production waste.
- Large-scale production of MDMA and amphetamine is concentrated in the Netherlands, and to a lesser extent Belgium.

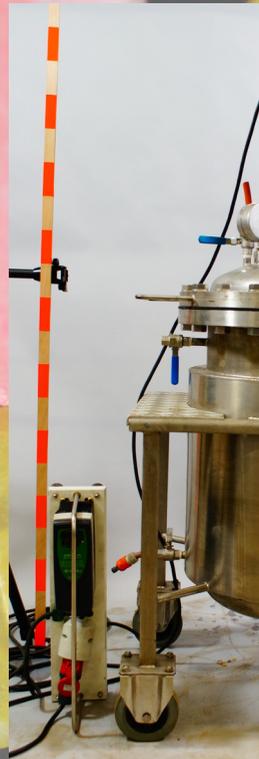
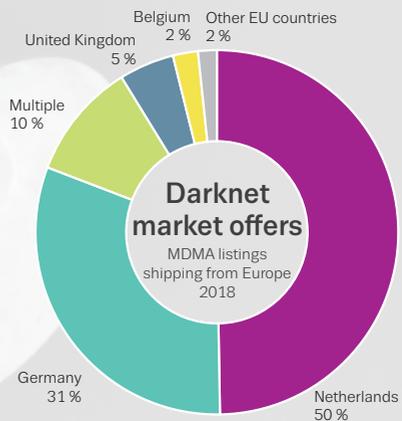




Photo: © Belgian Federal Police

- Methamphetamine production, mostly small-scale, occurs mainly in and around Czechia, but production sites dismantled in the Netherlands and Belgium raise concerns that Europe may emerge as a global supplier.
- Dutch OCGs working with criminals of Turkish origin are involved in the supply of synthetic drugs to Turkey while heroin flows in the opposite direction.
- Darknet markets facilitate access to synthetic drugs, such as MDMA, in batches of thousands of tablets that can be repackaged and sold on.
- The MDMA content of ecstasy tablets in the EU has risen dramatically in recent years.

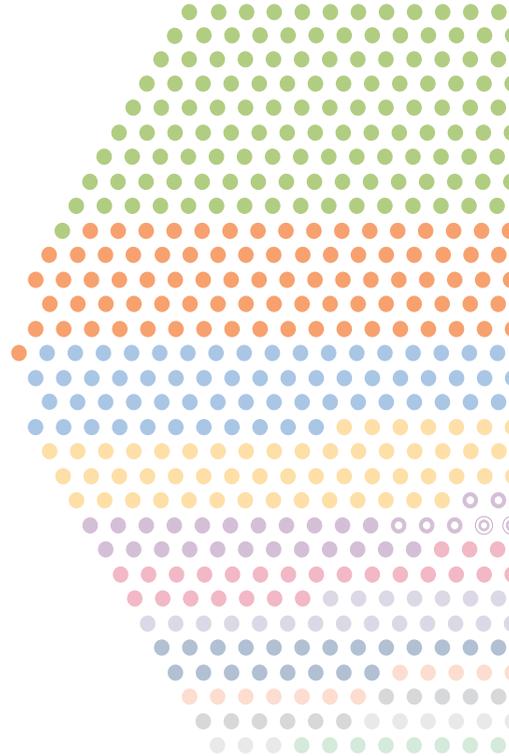


New psychoactive

- Around 50 new substances are reported to the EU Early Warning System annually, giving a total of over 730 being actively monitored.
- The main source countries are China and, to a lesser extent, India. However, a small number of illicit laboratories have been detected in EU countries, such as the Netherlands and Poland.
- Policies relating to NPS appear to be having some impact, especially those aimed at reducing open trade in the EU as well as measures taken in source countries, such as China.
- Interactions between the NPS market and the market in established controlled drugs have grown stronger. Overlaps also exist with the market for fake medicines.

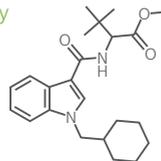
Substances reported to the EU Early Warning

731 NPS



Synthetic cannabinoids — MDMB-CHMICA

First detected: September 2014, Hungary
MDMB-CHMICA is typically sold as a 'legal' replacement for cannabis. Because of its high potency and the way that 'legal high' products are produced, users are at risk of serious poisoning.

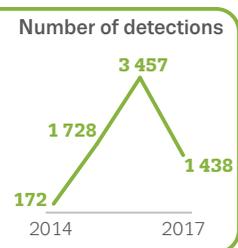
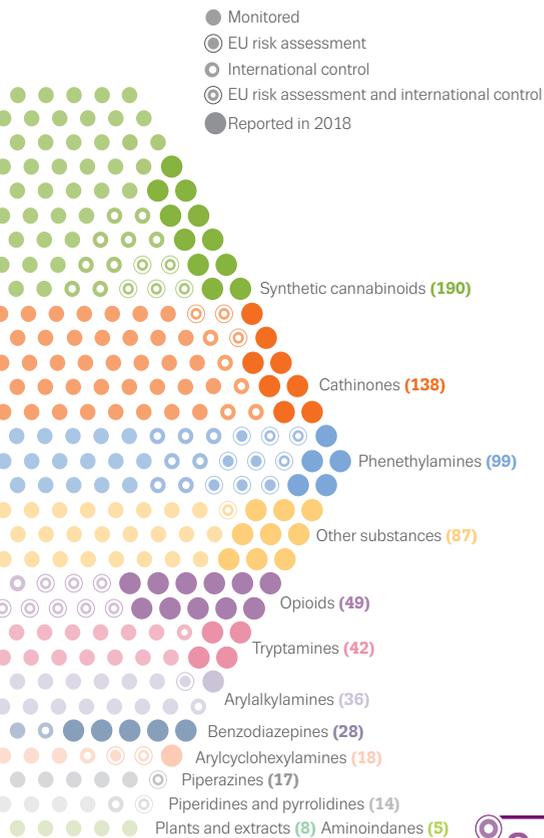


29 deaths in 6 countries

Risk assessment: Jul 2016
European drug control: Feb 2017
International drug control: 2017

substances (NPS)

System since 1997



- Problems attributable to synthetic cannabinoids appear to be growing; their relatively low cost, easy availability and high potency are factors in increased use among marginalised groups, including the homeless and prison populations.
- Non-controlled synthetic opioids are a growing cause for concern, with a rapid increase seen in the number of fentanyl derivatives, substances particularly associated with fatal poisoning.
- NPS benzodiazepines have appeared on illicit drug markets in some countries and have been associated with increases in overdoses.

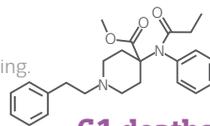
Synthetic opioids — carfentanil

First detected: February 2013, Latvia

One of the most potent opioids known.

In overdose it stops people from breathing.

Used as a veterinary medicine for the immobilisation of large animals.



61 deaths in 8 countries

Number of detections



50 % of cases detected in mixtures with heroin/fentanyl derivatives.

Risk assessment: Nov 2017

International drug control: 2018

Key themes and implications for action

In view of the increasing complexity and dynamism of the EU drug market, EU policies and responses need to be equally agile, adaptive and joined-up if they are to effectively address current and future challenges. This requires actions to be articulated across a broad range of policy domains at both EU and Member State level, and is consistent with Europe's commitment to a balanced and evidence-based approach to responding to challenges in this area. In addition to operational activities, it is important that full use is made of the range of policy tools available. The report highlights key areas for action.

- ▶ **Strengthening efforts to target top-level OCGs active in the global drug market** in order to tackle their changing business models and growing ability to exploit new opportunities requires continuing investment to strengthen financial investigation, information sharing, analysis and cooperative actions at the operational, strategic and policy level.
- ▶ **Reducing vulnerabilities at external borders** requires further investment in risk analysis and profiling, intelligence sharing and the implementation of proven approaches. Effective cooperation within and across borders is critical for success.

- ▶ **Investing in forensic and toxicological capacity** is increasingly important given the innovations in drug production and trafficking methods for all drugs, the growing importance of highly potent synthetic substances, and the introduction of new psychoactive substances and precursor chemicals. However, overall capacity is limited, potentially impeding the development of effective policies and actions. Investment is required at both the European and Member State levels.
- ▶ **Addressing the links with other important health and security threats**, such as trafficking in human beings and terrorism, will require the strengthening of multiagency partnerships in order to step up effective actions in the areas of prevention, protection of victims and prosecution of perpetrators.
- ▶ **Acting at a global level** through engagement with international organisations and third countries is a crucial element in responses to a globalised drug market. Understanding developments in drug production, trafficking and use in non-EU countries is becoming increasingly important in responding more effectively to the drug market in Europe. Working with countries neighbouring the EU or on the main trafficking routes to the EU is essential.



Enhancing preparedness through a future-oriented approach

Taking a future-oriented approach can increase preparedness to respond to potential future challenges, helping to create institutional resilience and fostering more agile policy approaches. Examples of areas identified in the report in which an impact on the drug market can already be seen, but where it can also be predicted that the future implications may be even more profound, include the following.

- ▶ **Globalisation and developments in infrastructure to support trade**, providing new opportunities for OCG activities such as China's Belt and Road initiative; developments in virtual currencies and anonymised payment systems; and developments likely to have an impact on the final stages of drug distribution models, such as the use of drone technology and the expansion of more anonymised 'pick-up and drop-off' networks.
- ▶ **Digitally enabled drug markets and cybercrime** exploiting developments including digitalisation and automation in intermodal transportation

(containerisation) and parcel and post technology; the darknet and surface web and the use of social media applications; the use of encryption, anonymised or semi-anonymised networks, and e-currencies. These present new cybercrime risks but also offer opportunities for regulation and law enforcement, such as the development of artificial intelligence systems.

- ▶ **Impact of conflict, social instability and climate change.** Conflict and social instability is a strong pull factor for drug market involvement, both in the EU and elsewhere. Those affected by conflict and social instability become more vulnerable to recruitment or exploitation by OCGs involved in the drug trade. The income generated by the illicit trade adds further to instability by undermining governance, and alliances develop between OCGs involved in drug trafficking and other groups that pose a threat to security. Climate change will increasingly add to these pressures, while also potentially leading to a shift in the places in which drug production is possible.

