Background Guide

UNODC

NVMUN 2025

Director's Letter

Dear Delegates,

My name is Alexander Hsiao and I will be serving as the Director of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime at NVMUN 2026. Along with my chairs, Jolie Ye and Cynthia Ma, we have been working vigorously over the past months to prepare a memorable weekend of debate and diplomacy for all of you.

I am currently a sophomore studying at Vancouver College, and I can confidently say that entering Model UN two years ago was one of the best decisions of my life. Model UN has challenged me to think critically, and given me a new appreciation for current events. Beyond the debates and resolution papers, it has given me a sense of community and I can guarantee that the friendships that you make at Model UN will last a lifetime.

UNODC is a fast-moving and multifaceted committee, tackling global issues related to drugs and crime through rigorous debate and collaboration. If this is your first conference, I encourage you to step outside of your comfort zone, be fearless, and seize the chance to contribute. For returning delegates, I hope that you will use this opportunity to push your limits while fostering an environment for those beginning their Model UN journey.

This year, we will be examining the topic of the *Rise of Synthetic Drugs*. The topic will require thoughtful research, nuanced discussion, passionate speeches, and creative solutions. The background guide is a great starting point, but I highly recommend you make your own preparations to make the most of your time at NVMUN.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us at unodc@nvmun.org. I look forward to meeting all of you this October and seeing the ideas you will bring to this committee.

Warm regards,
Alexander Hsiao
UNODC Director, NVMUN 2025

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Topic: Combatting the Rise of Synthetic Drugs and New Psychoactive Substances

Committee Overview

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) is the primary body within the UN system focused on addressing the interrelated challenges of illicit drugs, organized crime, corruption, and terrorism.[1] It was established in 1997 following the merger of the *United Nations Drug Control Programme* and the *Centre for International Crime Prevention*. Since then, UNODC has become a central actor in shaping global strategies that safeguard societies from threats to stability, security, and governance.[2]

The mandate of the UNODC is extensive/wide-ranging. It serves as the guardian of several international treaties, including the *United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC)* and the *United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC)*. The office also plays a critical role in supporting member states with technical assistance, capacity building, and legislative guidance, ensuring that international legal frameworks are translated into effective national policies.[3]

In addition to treaty-related work, UNODC provides research and analysis that underpin evidence-based policymaking. Its flagship publication, the "World Drug Report,"offers a comprehensive overview of global drug trends, while other reports focus on crime prevention, trafficking patterns, and corruption.[4] These publications not only inform governments but also guide civil society and academic engagement on complex transnational issues.

Operationally, the office maintains a broad field presence, with over 80 offices worldwide.[5] These field offices deliver on-the-ground assistance ranging from training law enforcement officers to strengthening border security and judicial institutions.[6] By working closely with governments, regional institutions, and other UN agencies, UNODC ensures that its programs are tailored to the specific needs and vulnerabilities of each region.

Beyond its technical role, UNODC also provides a forum for international cooperation, facilitating dialogue among member states through review mechanisms, expert groups, and

[1] "About the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)." United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/about-unodc/about-unodc.html
[2] "UNODC Mandate." United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime – Southern Africa, https://www.unodc.org/southernafrica/en/sa/about.html
[3] "Our Mandate." United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime – Environment & Climate, https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/environment-climate/our-mandate.html
[4] "World Drug Report 2024." United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/wdr2024.html
[5] "UNODC around the World: Field Offices." United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/field-offices.html
[6] Ibid.

conferences.[7] In doing so, the office embodies the UN's commitment to collective action, helping states address problems that transcend borders.

Ultimately, UNODC stands as a cornerstone of the international community's efforts to promote the rule of law, protect human rights, and foster safer, more resilient societies.[8]

Topic Overview

The rise of synthetic drugs has been a pressing issue in the field of narcotics control for many years, as its rapid global spread faces minimal resistance.[9] Differing from plant-based narcotics such as heroin or cocaine, laboratory-manufactured narcotics proliferate extremely easily due to their low production cost and quick manufacturing.[10] The early emergence of these drugs started in the mid-20th century, with substances like amphetamines gaining popularity amongst different subcultures.[11] This was followed by the evolution of chemical formulations producing numerous different synthetic opioids and stimulants, which significantly altered drug markets in the late 20th and early 21st century. Noticing a shift in trends, the UNODC has been historically monitoring global drug patterns and launching initiatives to combat the detrimental impacts of synthetic narcotics. Currently, the globe is facing a synthetic opioid crisis, particularly fentanyl and tramadol, causing overdose deaths in North America, Asia, and some parts of Africa.[12] Furthermore, the growing market of new psychoactive substances (NPS) challenges the conventional drug regulations, sparking discourse on how international regulations can effectively control NPSs. All of these factors contribute to exacerbating public health systems and drug safety worldwide.

The expansion of synthetic drugs has caused a variety of consequences, including rising overdose deaths globally.[13] Many nations are also struggling to update legislation to tackle the NPS market, leading to policy gaps that if not fixed will foster the synthetic drug economy in the long term. On top of that, the unresolved legal frameworks could also lead to the potential normalization of synthetic drug use in certain regions, and this is a phenomenon that can already be observed in different nations such as Canada.[14] As a result, humanitarian risk will be increased drastically, and vulnerable demographics will be impacted negatively with drug abuse issues and

[7] "CND – Its mandate and functions." UNODC. https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/commissions/CND/Mandate_Functions/index.html
[8] "UNODC Strategy 2021–2025." UNODC. https://www.unodc.org/unodc/strategy/index.html
[9] "Synthetic Drugs." *Better Health Channel*, Department of Health & Human Services, 20 Feb. 2014, www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/synthetic-drugs.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Rasmussen, Nicolas. "America's First Amphetamine Epidemic 1929-1971." *American Journal of Public Health*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, June 2008, pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC2377281/.
[12] "Opioid Overdose." *World Health Organization*, World Health Organization, 2023, www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/opioid-overdose.
[13] Ibid.
[14] "Government of Canada." *Canada.Ca*, / Gouvernement du Canada, 29 July 2025, www.canada.ca/en/privy-council/services/publications/canada-fentanyl-czar-interim-report-june-2025.html.

more. If not addressed urgently by the UNODC, the broader ramifications of the proliferation of synthetic narcotics could branch out to as far as economic consequences that strain healthcare, and deplete societal productivity.[15]

Since the 21st century, the UNODC has been involved in combating synthetic drug abuse globally, coordinating international response through technical assistance, and professional guidance. From the UN Toolkit on Synthetic Drugs to the SMART programme, this committee's main role is to monitor cross-border narcotics activity, and develop global strategies to mitigate their consequences.[16] This includes assisting member states in establishing regulations, as well as advocating for the implementation of international conventions. As the expansion of synthetic drugs grows into an urgent threat to the UNODC, it is now the responsibility of this committee and its member states to tackle the complexity of this crisis.

Timeline of Events

March 30, 1961 — The Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs is adopted by the UN to enforce its control over synthetic drugs, particularly opioids. This solidifies international drug regulation against manufactured narcotics.[17]

August 16, 1976 — The Convention on Psychotropic Substances enters into force, establishing global control over synthetic psychoactive drugs such as LSD, amphetamines and more.[18]

December 19, 1988 — A UN Conference in Vienna formally adopts The Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotics Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, mitigating synthetic drug trafficking in the prospective future.[19]

[15] Kalligiannakis, Nicole. "The Deadly Proliferation of Synthetic Drugs Is a Major Threat to Public Health and Is Reshaping Illicit Drug Markets, Says the International Narcotics Control Board." *INCB*, Mar. 2025, www.incb.org/incb/en/news/press-releases/2025/the-deadly-proliferation-of-synthetic-drugs-is-a-major-threat-to-public-health-and-is-reshaping-illicit-drugs-markets--says-the-international-narcotics-control-board.html.
[16] "Abuse of Synthetic Drugs Rising in Developing Countries, Says UN Report." *United Nations*, United Nations, 8 Sept. 2008, news.un.org/en/story/2008/09/272182-abuse-synthetic-drugs-rising-developing-countries-says-un-report.
[17] "UN, United Nations, UN Treaties, Treaties." *United Nations*, United Nations, treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=IND&mtdsg_no=VI-15&chapter=6&clang=_en. Accessed 24 Aug. 2025.
[18] "Convention on Psychotropic Substances, 1971." *UNODC*, 1971, www.unodc.org/pdf/convention_1971_en.pdf.
[19] "United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances." *United Nations*, United Nations, digitallibrary.un.org/record/55356?ln=en. Accessed 24 Aug. 2025.

September 23, 2003 — The UNODC releases a novel global survey on synthetic drug abuse, revealing that it has surpassed both heroin and cocaine combined. This study brings forth the spotlight on synthetic narcotics, indicating severity and the urgency of response.[20]

September 8, 2008 — The SMART programme (Synthetics Monitoring: Analyses, Reporting and Trends) launches. This is a system where governments will work alongside the UNODC to strengthen their regulation on manufactured drug trafficking and its corresponding trends.[21]

June 2013 — The UNODC launches its Early Warning Advisory on New Psychoactive Substances in response to the emergence of the new narcotics, enabling real-time monitoring and reporting of synthetic drug threats globally.[22]

May 2014 — The UNODC publishes its Global Synthetic Drugs Assessment, a lengthy article consisting of detailed regional reports, drug market updates, and vital data to tackle the existing narcotics issues.[23]

March 18, 2019 — The UN Toolkit on Synthetic Drugs, an online platform supporting international response to the opioid crisis, launches under a collaboration between the UNODC, WHO and INCB.[24]

March 12, 2021 — The World Customs Organization, along with a few other groups, concludes Operation GOALS, a global mission targeted against synthetic drugs. They seize over 2.3 tonnes of synthetic narcotics, marking an enforcement milestone.[25]

May 3, 2024 — The Global Coalition to Address Synthetic Drug Threats publishes its Final Key Recommendations, proposing non-binding and strategic actions to tackle synthetic drugs on a global scale.[26]

[20] "Synthetic Drug Abuse Exceeds That of Heroin and Cocaine Combined, Says New UN Study." *United Nations*, United Nations, 23 Sept. 2003, press.un.org/en/2003/socnar877.doc.htm.
[21] "Abuse of Synthetic Drugs Rising in Developing Countries, Says UN Report." United Nations.
[22] "What Is the Early Warning Advisory?" *UNODC EWA*, www.unodc.org/LSS/Page/About. Accessed 24 Aug. 2025.
[23] "2014 Global Synthetic Drugs Assessment." *UNODC*, May 2014, www.unodc.org/documents/scientific/2014_Global_Synthetic_Drugs_Assessment_web.pdf.
[24] "UNODC: The 'United Nations Toolkit on Synthetic Drugs' Is Launched." *UNODC*, Mar. 2019, www.unodc.org/LSS/announcement/Details/a79153a5-f581-4c8e-b869-2fc715786d1d.
[25] "More than 2 Tonnes of Synthetic Drugs Seized during Operation GOALS." *World Customs Organization*, 2021, www.wcoomd.org/en/media/newsroom/2021/march/more-than-2-tonnes-of-synthetic-drugs-seized-during-operation-goals.aspx.
[26] "Global Coalition to Address Synthetic Drug Threats Final Key Recommendations." *U.S. Department of State*, U.S. Department of State, 2024, www.state.gov/globalcoalition/.

March 4, 2025 — The INCB issues an urgent warning on the uncontrollable expansion of synthetic drugs, advocating for increased international coordination towards drug enforcement.[27]

Historical Background

Global Overview:
Synthetic drugs, sometimes referred to as new psychoactive substances (NPS) or laboratory-manufactured narcotics, have fundamentally changed the global drug landscape over the past century.[28] Unlike traditional plant-based narcotics such as opium, coca, or cannabis, synthetic drugs are produced in laboratories using chemical compounds that can often be altered to evade detection and regulation.[29] Their emergence reflects the intersection of scientific innovation, global demand, and organized criminal networks.[30] Historically, the rise of synthetics has posed unique challenges to policymakers, law enforcement, and public health authorities, requiring continuous adaptation of international frameworks and cooperative mechanisms.[31]

Early Origins of Synthetic Narcotics (Late 19th–Mid 20th Century):
The story of synthetic drugs begins with the scientific revolution in chemistry and pharmacology during the late 19th century. In 1987, German chemist Felic Hoffmann, working at Bayer, first synthesized heroin (diacetylmorphine), which was marketed as a supposedly safe and non-addictive alternative to morphine.[32] While heroin was technically derived from a natural source, the opium poppy, the laboratory process demonstrated how chemical manipulation could create new, powerful narcotics that far exceeded the potency of their natural counterparts.[33]

In parallel, amphetamines were developed in the early 20th century, with Benzedrine marketed in the 1930s as a treatment of asthma and nasal congestion.[34] It did not take long for its stimulant properties to be recognized outside of medical contexts, and during the Second World War,

[27] "'Rapid Expansion' of Synthetic Drugs Reshaping Illicit Markets, Un Anti-Narcotics Body Warns." *The United Nations Office at Geneva*, 2025, www.ungeneva.org/en/news-media/news/2025/03/103969/rapid-expansion-synthetic-drugs-reshaping-illicit-markets-un-anti.
[28] "Origins of Heroin." Encyclopedia.com, Gale, 2019, https://www.encyclopedia.com/medicine/medical-magazines/origins-heroin
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid
[32] Schirber, Michael. "The Misjudgment of Heroin." ChemistryViews, Wiley-VCH, 29 Mar. 2017, https://www.chemistryviews.org/the-misjudgment-of-heroin/
[33] Ibid.
[34] Courtwright, David T. "A Speedy History of America's Addiction to Amphetamine." Smithsonian Magazine, Smithsonian Institution, 12 Jan. 2017, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/speedy-history-americas-addiction-amphetamine-180966989/

amphetamines were distributed widely to soldiers in both Allied and Axis militaries to increase alertness and reduce fatigue.[35]

The postwar era of the 1950s and 1960s witnessed the widespread commercialization of synthetic pharmaceuticals such as amphetamines and barbiturates.[36] Doctors in the United States and Europe prescribed them liberally for conditions ranging from depression to weight loss, and their non-medical use became increasingly common. By the 1960s, mounting evidence of dependency, overdose, and illicit diversion showed that synthetic pharmaceuticals were fueling recreational drug use and addiction, setting the stage for international regulation and control.[37]

Pharmaceuticals to Illicit Manufactures (1970s - 1980s):
The rise of synthetic drugs as a global problem accelerated in the 1970s and 1980s, coinciding with broader transformations in the international drug trade. In Asia, methamphetamine became the first synthetic drug to reach epidemic proportions. Japan faced a wave of methamphetamine abuse immediately after World War II, when leftover military stockpiles flooded the civilian market. By the 1970s, clandestine laboratories had taken over production, first in Japan and later in Taiwan, South Korea, Thailand and the Philippines, turning meth into a regional crisis.[38]

At the same time, Western societies saw a shift from medical to recreational drug markets. As regulations tightened on pharmaceutical amphetamines, illicit manufacturers filled the void. In the United States, biker gangs in California began producing methamphetamines on a large scale, while Southeast Asia's Golden Triangle, traditionally associated with opium, began to pivot toward synthetic drug manufacturing. [39]

Another defining feature of this era was the emergence of "club drugs" such as MDMA (ecstasy) and LSD. MDMA, originally developed in the early 20th century and explored as a psychotherapeutic aid in the 1970s, became a recreational substance by the 1980s, spreading through the counter culture movements and nightlife scene.[40] Unlike heroin or cocaine, which relied on agricultural supply chains, these drugs could be produced entirely in laboratories, making regulation far more difficult. Governments soon realized that eradication strategies targeting coca or opium crops could not be applied to synthetics, which could be manufactured in labs anywhere in the world. [41]

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[35] Ibid.
[36] "Barbiturates." Encyclopedia.com, Gale, 2019, https://www.encyclopedia.com/medicine/drugs/pharmacology/barbiturates
[37] Ibid.
[38] "Illegal drug trade in Japan." Wikipedia, Wikipedia Foundation, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illegal_drug_trade_in_Japan
[39] U.S. Department of Justice, Drug Enforcement Administration. "Methamphetamine Production in Mexico and Superlabs." DEA Drug Threat Assessment, 2008, https://www.justice.gov/archive/ndic/pubs31/31379/meth.htm
[40] "MDMA (Ecstasy)." Wikipedia, Wikipedia Foundation, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MDMA
[41] Ibid.

Globalization of Synthetic Drug Markets (1990s-2000s):
The globalization of synthetic drugs became increasingly evident in the 1990s and 2000s, as production and consumption spread across continents. Methamphetamine "super-labs" emerged in Mexico, supplying both local demand and the United States market. Mexican traffickers relied heavily on precursor chemicals such as pseudoephedrine, imported in bulk from Asia, to manufacture large quantities of meth.[42] Because meth production was not tied to agricultural cycles, traffickers enjoyed greater flexibility and stability compared to cocaine or heroin networks.[43]

During the same period, MDMA became closely tied to the growing rave and electronic dance music culture in Europe, North America, and Australia. Small-scale laboratories proliferated in countries such as the Netherlands and Belgium, which became global suppliers. Law enforcement agencies struggled to control the spread, as ecstasy tablets could be produced cheaply, distributed widely, and consumed discreetly in nightlife settings.[44]

Meanwhile, pharmaceutical diversion began to blur the line between medical use and illicit trafficking. Fentanyl, invented in the 1960s as a powerful anesthetic, began to be misused in the 1990s. Though initially limited to medical thefts and isolated abuse, it foreshadowed the devastating fentanyl-driven opioid crisis of the 21st century.[45]

This period also marked the emergence of internet-facilitated trafficking. With the rise of the darknet and encrypted communication technologies, synthetic drugs became accessible to consumers across the globe without the need for traditional street networks.[46] For the first time, online marketplaces enabled small producers to sell directly to users, transforming the geography and scale of synthetic drug distribution. These developments revealed the inadequacy of international drug control treaties, which had primarily been designed to regulate plant-based substances rather than laboratory-manufactured narcotics.[47]

New Psychoactive Substances (NPS) and the Fentanyl Crisis (2010s):
The 2010s witnessed two interrelated phenomena: the rapid rise of new psychoactive substances and the escalation of the fentanyl epidemic. NPS, also known as "designer drugs," are chemical analogs of controlled substances that are modified slightly at the molecular level to evade existing drug laws. These substances, ranging from synthetic cannabinoids ("Spice", " K2") to synthetic cathinones ("bath salts"), proliferated rapidly, with over 1000 identified globally by the

[42] U.S. Department of Justice, Drug Enforcement Administration. "Methamphetamine Production – Precursor Chemicals Smuggling." National Drug Threat Assessment, 2009, https://www.justice.gov/archive/ndic/pubs31/31379/meth.htm
[43] Ibid.
[44] "History & Background of MDMA." Recovery.org, 2025, https://recovery.org/ecstasy/history/
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.

UNODC by 2020.[48] The constant innovation of clandestine chemists meant that by the time authorities scheduled one substance for control, new analogs has already emerged, making enforcement reactive rather than preventive.[49]

At the same time, the fentanyl crisis became the most severe drug epidemic in North America. Illicit fentanyl and its analogs, often produced in China and Mexico, flooded U.S. and Canadian markets. Fentanyl's potency, up to 100 times stronger than morphine, caused overdose deaths to skyrocket. By the late 2010s, synthetic opioids, particularly fentanyl, were responsible for the majority of drug-related deaths in North America. The crisis highlighted the devastating potential of synthetics.[50]

Another major development was the globalization of precursor chemical trafficking. Rather than smuggling finished drugs, traffickers increasingly shipped the necessary chemical precursors to local markets, where small-scale labs synthesized the final product.[51] This model decentralized production and made detection far more difficult, creating a new obstacle for international drug control efforts.[52]

Past UN/Committee Involvement

Past International and Regional Responses:
The international community has long sought to address the challenges posed by synthetic drugs, though efforts have often lagged behind the speed of traffickers' global drug control but focused primarily on natural substances like opium, coca, and cannabis. Recognizing the growing prevalence of laboratory drugs, the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances expanded controls to hallucinogens, stimulants, and depressants.[53] The 1988 UN Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances further strengthened the global framework, targeting precursor chemicals, money laundering, and international cooperation.[54]

[48] UNODC SMART Update: Almost 1,050 NPS reported to UNODC from 126 countries and territories. UNODC, January 2021, https://www.unodc.org/LSS/Announcement/Details/c64c59d6-6279-4934-a25d-b3dc2a35247d
[49] Ibid.
[50] Fentanyl Facts. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, April 2 2024, https://www.cdc.gov/stop-overdose/caring/fentanyl-facts.html
[51] Doyle, Kevin. "Methamphetamine trafficking surges from 'Golden Triangle' region." Al Jazeera, 29 May 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/29/methamphetamine-trafficking-surges-from-golden-triangle-region
[52] Ibid.
[53] Convention on Psychotropic Substances. Wikipedia, Wikipedia Foundation, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Convention_on_Psychotropic_Substances
[54] United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances. Wikipedia, Wikipedia Foundation, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Nations_Convention_Against_Illicit_Traffic_in_Narcotic_Drugs_and_Psychotropic_Substances

By the 2000s, more specialized mechanisms were established. The UNODC Early Warning Advisory, launched in 2013, sought to monitor the emergence of new psychoactive substances and provide governments with up-to-date data on emerging threats.[55] In Europe, the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) played a vital role in identifying NPS trends and supporting member states in rapid responses.[56] Similarly, ASEAN states collaborated through regional action plans to combat methamphetamine trafficking, while trilateral cooperation between the U.S., Canada, and Mexico focused on intelligence-sharing and precursor interdiction.[57]

Despite these frameworks, enforcement remained largely reactive. New substances often spread widely before they were recognized and banned, and traffickers quickly shifted to alternative analogs. Moreover, the scale of the fentanyl crisis underscored how international responses had failed to anticipate the catastrophic impact of synthetic opioids.[58]

Current Situation

Industrial-Scale Methamphetamine Production

Methamphetamine has emerged as the most widely consumed synthetic drug worldwide, with production reaching industrial proportions in the 21st century. Unlike the small-scale "kitchen labs" associated with meth in the 1980s and 1990s, today's operations are industrial in size and sophistication. In East and Southeast Asia, particularly in the Golden Triangle region spanning Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand, methamphetamine laboratories now operate on a massive scale.[59] Criminal networks, often aligned with local militias or insurgent groups, manufacture hundreds of tons each year. These groups exploit weak governance and porous borders, enabling laboratories to remain active despite periodic crackdowns. The region's meth trade has grown so profitable that it rivals traditional sources of revenue for armed groups, giving traffickers both financial strength and political protection.[60]

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[55] What is the Early Warning Advisory? UNODC, 2025, https://www.unodc.org/LSS/Page/About
[56] New psychoactive substances (NPS). UNODC World Drug Report 2013, 2013, https://www.unodc.org/wdr2013/en/nps.html
[57] Leaders of US, Canada, Mexico show unity despite friction. AP News, 10 Jan. 2023, https://apnews.com/article/d6f622d986bc07fae93fa4c53bfaaef9
[58] Are China, Canada, and Mexico really to blame for fentanyl? Vox, 31 Mar. 2025, https://www.vox.com/politics/406336/fentanyl-china-canada-mexico-trump
[59] "Golden Triangle Methamphetamine Trafficking Continues to Surge, UN Says." The Diplomat, May 30 2025, https://thediplomat.com/2025/05/golden-triangle-methamphetamine-trafficking-continues-to-surge-un-says/
[60] "Exponential rise in synthetic drug production and trafficking in the Golden…" UN Geneva, May 2025, https://www.ungeneva.org/en/news-media/news/2025/05/106772/exponential-rise-synthetic-drug-production-and-trafficking-g

The finished product is trafficked through Asia and Oceania, with record seizures in Australia, Japan, and South Korea. Law enforcement agencies have reported multi-ton shipments, a scale which would have been unimaginable only two decades ago. Mexico has also become a global hub for methamphetamine, where cartels such as the Sinaloa and Jalisco New Generation Cartel operate "super-labs" capable of producing industrial quantities of crystal meth for export to North America and beyond. Unlike plant-based drugs such as cocaine or heroin, which depend on specific climates and growing seasons, meth can be manufactured year-round in virtually any location equipped with the necessary precursor chemicals. This characteristic makes meth one of the most reliable and stable commodities in the illicit economy. The sheer scale and adaptability of methamphetamine production illustrate how synthetic drugs have overtaken traditional narcotics in profitability, volume, and availability.

The Fentanyl Epidemic:

While methamphetamine dominates in terms of volume, fentanyl has become the deadliest synthetic drug in terms of human cost. Fentanyl is between 50 and 100 times more potent than morphine, and its analogues can be even stronger.[61] This extraordinary potency means that microgram doses can be lethal, and traffickers need only small quantities to generate enormous profits. In North America, fentanyl has transformed the opioid crisis into a full-blown epidemic. The United States and Canada now report tens of thousands of deaths annually linked to fentanyl. Emergency responders frequently describe scenarios in which individuals unknowingly consume fentanyl-last substances in counterfeit prescription pills, cocaine or heroin, only to experience fatal respiratory failure within minutes.[62]

For traffickers, fentanyl's potency is highly appealing: one kilogram can yield hundreds of thousands of doses, far more than heroin could produce, all while being easier to transport and conceal.[63] Its integration into counterfeit prescription opioids has fueled unintentional overdoses among recreational users and patients who believe they are taking legitimate medications. While North America remains the epicenter of the crisis, seizures of fentanyl in Europe, Asia, and Oceania indicate that the epidemic is spreading.[64] Without coordinated intervention, fentanyl and other synthetic opioids could create global public health catastrophe surpassing even the heroin epidemics of the late 20th century.

New Psychoactive Substances (NPS)

Alongside methamphetamine and fentanyl, the proliferation of new psychoactive substances (NPS) has added complexity to the synthetic drug landscape. NPS refers to an ever-changing

[61] "Strongest Opioid: Understanding Potency Levels and Risks." Nirvana Recovery, February 24 2025, https://nirvanarecoveryaz.com/strongest-opioid-potency-and-risks/
[62] "Fentanyl Facts | Stop Overdose | CDC." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023, https://www.cdc.gov/stop-overdose/caring/fentanyl-facts.html
[63] "Fentanyl Deaths Per Year in U.S. | Trend Chart (2025)." ConsumerShield.com, 2025, https://www.consumershield.com/articles/fentanyl-deaths-per-year
[64] Ibid.

array of chemicals designed to mimic the effects of existing drugs while skirting legal restrictions. What makes NPS particularly challenging for governments is their adaptability. Once authorities identify and ban a specific compound, chemists slightly alter its molecular structure to create a new, technically legal version.[65]

This cycle has created what many experts call a "cat-and-mouse game" between regulators and traffickers. Forensic laboratories often struggle to identify and classify these substances quickly enough to keep pace.[66] Meanwhile users are exposed to unknown and dangerous effects ranging from psychosis and seizures to organ failure and death. Unlike more established drugs, the unpredictable composition of NPS means that consumers often have no idea what they are ingesting leading to erratic outcomes.[67] The NPS phenomenon shows how traffickers exploit loopholes in regulatory frameworks, sustaining highly profitable markets.

The Digital Market and Technology

The digital revolution has fundamentally reshaped drug trafficking. Once dependent on face-to-face transactions and local distribution networks, traffickers now leverage the anonymity of the internet. Darknet marketplaces, accessible through encryption software such as Tor, have created virtual bazaars where synthetic drugs can be bought and sold like consumer goods.[68] Transactions are facilitated by cryptocurrencies, reducing the risks of detection and financial trading. Small packages containing synthetic drugs are often concealed within ordinary postal shipments making interception difficult for customs authorities.[69]

The closure of high-profile platforms like Silk Road demonstrated law enforcement's ability to strike back, but replacements quickly emerged, often more sophisticated and decentralized than their predecessors.[70] Beyond the darknet, mainstream social media platforms and encrypted messaging apps have also become tools for marketing and distributing drugs. This digital shift has lowered barriers to entry, enabling smaller independent traffickers to compete alongside major cartels.[71] When combined with the high potency-to-volume ratio of synthetic drugs, the

[65] "Rise in production and trafficking of synthetic drugs from the Golden Triangle, new report shows." UNODC via Philippine Journal, May 2025, https://journal.com.ph/rise-in-production-and-trafficking-of-synthetic-drugs-from-the-golden-triangle-new-report-shows/
[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid.
[68] "The digital drug revolution: How online markets are reshaping global illicit trade." Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2024, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/digital-drug-revolution-online-markets-global-illicit-trade-ocindex/
[69] "Darknet cybercrime is on the rise in South-East Asia with drugs being a prominent illicit product traded." UNODC, 25 Feb 2021, https://www.unodc.org/LSS/announcement/Details/4349a4ee-cac4-440e-9d39-d2c21869e49a
[70] "The Fall of Silk Road and the Rise of Next-Gen Tor Marketplaces." Torry Blog, 2024, https://www.torry.io/blog/the-fall-of-silk-road-and-the-rise-of-Next-Gen-Tor-marketplaces/
[71] Ibid.

internet has facilitated the globalization of drug supply chains to a degree never seen in the illicit economy.

Potential Solutions

Reforming Domestic Legal Frameworks

One of the most urgent stops in countering the synthetic drug crisis is reforming domestic legal frameworks so that they can match the speed of chemical innovation. Traditional approaches where governments ban drugs on a substance-by-substance basis is no longer efficient or sufficient. By the time a single compound is formally scheduled under national law, chemists have already produced and distributed several new variants that are technically legal.[72] This loophole has allowed traffickers to stay one step ahead of regulators. To address this, many experts advocate for "generic scheduling" or "class-based scheduling", which bans entire categories of substances based on chemical structure or psychoactive effects rather than specific molecules.[73]

Legal reforms must also be paired with investment into forensic laboratories and early warning systems. Rapid testing, digital databases of emerging substances, and international networks for sharing chemical intelligence can allow governments to detect new compounds more efficiently. For example, the European Union's Early Warning System has been credited with identifying dozens of psychoactive substances before they spread widely. Helping regulators respond more effectively.[74]

Public Health and Harm Reduction

Policymakers increasingly recognize that the synthetic drug crisis cannot be solved through enforcement alone. Public health must play a central role. Harm reduction strategies have proven essential in directly saving lives, particularly in regions grappling with fentanyl overdoses. Supervised consumption facilities, where trained staff can intervene in cases of overdose have dramatically reduced deaths in Vancouver.[75] Similarly, widespread distribution of naloxone, an opioid antagonist that reverses overdoses, has helped communities respond quickly to overdoses. Opioid substitution therapy, such as providing methadone or buprenorphine, offers individuals a safe alternative to illicit opioids and reduces reliance on traffickers.[76]

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[72] "Generic Scheduling of Controlled Substances." UNODC, 2023, https://www.unodc.org/generic-scheduling
[73] Ibid.
[74] "EU Early Warning System on NPS." European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, 2022, https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/early-warning_en
[75] "Insite: Supervised Injection Site Saves Lives." Wikipedia, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Insite
[76] "Opioid Agonist Therapy and Naloxone Access." FNHA, 2022, https://www.fnha.ca/mental-wellness-and-substance-use/harm-reduction

In addition to immediate harm reduction, education and prevention campaigns are vital. Many young people falsely assume that synthetic drugs are cleaner or less risky than traditional narcotics. Public health initiatives that dispel these myths can reduce demand before it developed into an addiction. Moreover, expanding into the mental health sector and addiction services ensure that individuals struggling with substance use are treated correctly. Portugal's health-centered model, where drug use is decriminalized and treated primarily as a medical issue, offers a strong example of how shifting from punishment to treatment can reduce both consumption and harm.[77]

Strengthening International and Regional Cooperation

Due to the fact that synthetic drugs are manufactured and trafficked across borders, no country is able to tackle the crisis in isolation. Enhanced international and regional cooperation is therefore essential. Institutions such as INTERPOL and the World Customs Organizations could help UNODC provide platforms for intelligence sharing, capacity building, and joint enforcement operations.[78] Regional organizations also play a key role: the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) coordinates responses to meth trafficking in Asia, while the European Union has harmonized drug monitoring and enforcement across its member states.[79]

Equally important is monitoring precursor chemical flows, since synthetic drugs depend on chemical inputs that are traded globally. Strengthening customs checks, imposing tighter licensing for chemical sales, and sharing data between consumer and producer states will make it harder for traffickers to access essential ingredients. Bilateral agreements, particularly between major consumer countries and source countries can help close jurisdiction gaps that traffickers exploit.[80] Without such cooperation, national efforts are easily undermined by weak enforcement in neighbouring states.

Financial Disruption

Synthetic drugs are among the most profitable commodities in the illicit economy, making financial disruption a powerful tool. Rather than focusing exclusively on intercepting physical shipments, governments can target the money that sustains trafficking organizations.[81]

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[77] "Portugal's Decriminalization Model." Drug Policy Alliance, 2015, https://endthewarondrugs.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/DPA_Fact_Sheet_Portugal_Decriminalization_Feb2015.pdf

[78] "ASEAN Methamphetamine Action Plan." ASEAN Secretariat, 2024, https://asean.org/asean-action-plan-methamphetamine

[79] Ibid.

[80] "Precursor Control Agreements: Canada and USA." Health Canada, 2023, https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/health-concerns/controlled-substances-precursor-chemicals/precuursors.html

[81] "Beneficial Ownership Registries." Transparency International, 2021, https://www.transparency.org/en/ownership-registers

Establishing ownership registries expose shell companies often used by cartels to launder profits. Likewise, strengthening anti-laundering regimes and holding financial institutions accountable for compliance will close loopholes.[82]

International initiatives such as the UN's Stolen Asset Recovery (StAR) program highlight the potential of asset confiscation.[83] When recovered assets are reinvested in treatment programs, infrastructure, and community development, states not only weaken traffickers but also help the communities harmed by synthetic drug economies. By striking at the profits, the state can easily reduce the incentive for organized crime to remain with the narcotics trade.

Addressing Root Causes of Demand and Supply

Finally, sustainable solutions require addressing the root causes that drive both the production and consumption of synthetic drugs. On the supply side, many communities engaged in precursor diversion or illicit manufacturing do so out of economic necessity. Providing alternative livelihoods through education, infrastructure investment, and access to legal markets can reduce reliance on criminal economies.[84] On the demand side, synthetic drug use often thrives in contexts of poverty, unemployment, and social isolation. Reducing inequality, strengthening social safety nets, and investing in youth opportunities can weaken the recruitment pipelines exploited by traffickers.[85]

This development-oriented approach ensures that anti-drug strategies are not merely reactive but transformative. By tackling the structural conditions that fuel both production and consumption, states can reduce the long-term sustainability of synthetic drug economies.

Bloc Positions

Delegates can expect all countries to agree that the expansion of synthetic drugs is a significant issue, but will be divided in their stance in terms of responsibility and possible solutions. Delegates should consider alliances carefully as the discussion continues to develop.

Strict Control and Enforcement of Prosecution

In larger nations where the demand for synthetic drugs is consistently rising, these nations will focus on punishment and enforcing international laws before considering another solution. Emphasizing stronger border control to reduce the spread of synthetic drugs or eliminating trafficking routes entirely, these nations are strictly focused on the prosecution of producers and traffickers. Specifically, targeting the precursor chemicals of synthetic drugs will highly appeal to

[82] Ibid.
[83] "StAR Initiative's Asset Recovery Successes." World Bank, 2022, https://star.worldbank.org/
[84] McNeil, Ryan et al. "Drug Checking Reduces Overdose Risk at Insite." PMC Harm Reduction Journal, 2018, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7204455/
[85] Ibid.

these nations, as well as enforcing harsher penalties during the crackdown of traffickers. This bloc is highly likely to frame the spread of synthetic drugs as a national security and organized crime issue due to the high amounts of demand from within. On the other hand, this bloc is highly opposed to loosening prohibitions, specifically the decriminalization or legalization of any synthetic drugs. Similarly, they are also unlikely to align with any policies that do not include forms of strict prosecution. They will also advocate for cross-border law enforcement cooperation, intelligence sharing, and the financial monitoring of trafficking networks. Their solutions will be focused on targeting production and major transit hubs in states where production is large, such as Mexico and Southeast Asia. These are nations such as the United States of America, Canada, Australia, Japan, South Korea, and even countries within the European Union.

Producer and Transit Countries

Historically, these producer and transit-hub nations have struggled enormously with opioid crises and continue to do so in the status quo. In turn, these nations are positioned as victims of the staggering demand and trafficking routes of synthetic drugs. Naturally, during discussion, these nations are extremely vulnerable and in need of international support when combatting the expansion of synthetic opioids. Possible solutions include international development programs to strengthen internal policies. One major part of this bloc's stance is recognition of how enforcement of prosecution alone is insufficient in eliminating the crisis completely, and instead the focus should be on the corruption within weak institutions throughout the states in this bloc. Although these nations are largely responsible for the production and transit of drugs, they will refuse to take full blame for the global synthetic drug crisis and highly oppose purely militarized or punitive solutions. This bloc will focus on development and strengthening internal regulations rather than simply enforcing stricter punishments. This bloc consists of nations such as Mexico, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Nigeria, and additional West-African transit hubs.

Supply-Side and Sovereignty

This bloc consists of countries that, having been through opioid crises in the past, emphasize controlling the chemical precursors of drugs while simultaneously maintaining national sovereignty. These are nations that have already implemented controls on synthetic drugs in the status quo. This bloc will focus on protecting national sovereignty above all else while negotiating policies, through controlling the chemical aspects of synthetic drugs. China, especially, will emphasize its own chemical regulation system while resisting Western pressure. That being said, these nations are likely to reject any Western influence when making decisions, especially international monitoring mechanisms that would heavily restrict their own pharmaceutical exports. Therefore, countries in this bloc would look towards the larger developed countries in terms of domestic responsibility on the demand side. This means that these nations will not admit sole blame for the opioid crisis. These states will, however, support solutions that involve partnerships and collaboration rather than a takeover of control. Although,

this bloc is also likely to resist any legalization, decriminalization, and harm-reduction framing in policies while considering possible solutions. This bloc includes countries such as China, India, Iran, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia.

Public Health and Harm Reduction

Although these nations contribute less to the global production and/or demand of synthetic drugs, they are nonetheless prioritized in public health and reducing the harm of the opioid crisis. They are very likely to frame synthetic drugs as a public health issue instead of solely an issue regarding criminal justice. That being said, this bloc will strongly support rehabilitation, harm reduction, and treatment programs for victims of the crisis, and highly advocate for international research collaboration in terms of eliminating the origins of synthetic drugs. Additionally, this bloc will be interested in data-sharing when new psychoactive substances emerge into the market. However, this bloc will also resist militarized or enforcement-heavy solutions due to focusing on ensuring public health and safety above all else. They are also less concerned with stricter punishments and enforced prosecution of producers that are abroad, due to possessing significantly less within their own state. These nations include Portugal, New Zealand, Spain, the Netherlands, Chile, and Argentina.

Discussion Questions

1. Does your country focus more on prosecution of rehabilitation? Does it have a strong foundation for either? If not, how does your country plan on addressing those weaker foundations?
2. What role does the United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotics Drugs and Psychotropic Substances play into your country's stance? How effective has it been in addressing the expansion of Synthetic Drugs within your own country?
3. Has your country been through previous opioid crises? Have they been addressed or are they still present in the status quo? If they are ongoing, how do you plan on addressing them without making the situation worse?
4. How can states ensure that precursor chemical regulation doesn't stifle legitimate pharmaceutical and industrial production?
5. Should the UN update scheduling and regulation procedures to more rapidly control new psychoactive substances (NPS)?
6. How should the UNODC support transit states struggling with corruption without violating their sovereignty?
7. What role should treatment, education, and rehabilitation play compared to punitive measures in combating synthetic drug expansion?
8. How can consumer states, producer states, and transit states collaborate effectively while respecting sovereignty?

Further Resources

1. “2025 National Drug Threat Assessment.” U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, 15 May 2025, www.dea.gov/press-releases/2025/05/15/dea-releases-2025-national-drug-threat-assessment
2. International Narcotics Control Board. “Annual Report 2024.” United Nations, 2025, www.incb.org/documents/Publications/AnnualReports/AR2024/Press_kits/press_kit_eng.pdf
3. “The Challenge of New Psychoactive Substances.” UNODC, 2013, www.unodc.org/documents/scientific/NPS_Report.pdf

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