



## PERSPECTIVES ON DRUGS

# Cocaine trafficking to Europe

Cocaine is Europe's most commonly used illicit stimulant drug, with about 3.6 million adults (aged 15–64) estimated to have used it in the last year. It is the second most seized drug in Europe, after cannabis. Cocaine is trafficked to Europe from the producer countries of South America by both air and sea using a range of methods and routes. This analysis provides an insight into the European cocaine market, the trafficking routes used to bring it to Europe, and the different methods criminals employ to move their drugs.

### Production

Cocaine is a natural product extracted from the leaves of *Erythroxylum coca* Lamarck and *Erythroxylum novogranatense* (coca leaves). These tropical shrubs are cultivated widely in the Andean–Amazonian region, and are the only known natural source of cocaine, which is produced almost exclusively in Bolivia, Colombia and Peru. In these countries the leaves play a significant cultural role, having spiritual, therapeutic and social functions. In Bolivia and Peru, some growing of coca is permitted to supply licit domestic consumer markets for coca leaves and to supply de-cocainised flavouring agents to international manufacturers of soft drinks.

The extraction of cocaine alkaloids from the coca leaves also takes place almost exclusively in the three producer countries and they also account for the majority of the global production of cocaine hydrochloride. However, some cocaine processing laboratories have been detected in other South American countries and elsewhere, including Europe, and globally over 9 000 cocaine-type laboratories were dismantled in 2013 (UNODC, 2015).

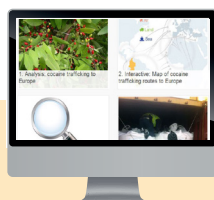
The available data suggest that in 2014, after several years of decline, the surface area under coca cultivation in the Andes increased again slightly, mostly due to a significant increase in the coca acreage in Colombia. While fewer data are available on cocaine manufacture, what there are suggest a similar trend.

### The European cocaine market

In Europe cocaine is available in two forms and is mainly consumed in the south and west of Europe. Cocaine powder is a hydrochloride salt (HCl) and is primarily sniffed

Full edition of this article with interactive features available online at

[emcdda.europa.eu/topics/pods/cocaine-trafficking-europe](http://emcdda.europa.eu/topics/pods/cocaine-trafficking-europe)



or snorted but is also sometimes injected. It is the most common form and is generally used infrequently, but a small proportion of users consume it more frequently and may experience problems. Less commonly available is crack cocaine, a smokeable (free base) form of the drug; there are a few countries with small groups of people who use crack cocaine in a more harmful way, often in conjunction with heroin use. The crack cocaine available in Europe is typically manufactured from cocaine hydrochloride near where it is retailled and used and so there is very little cross-border or long-distance crack trafficking.

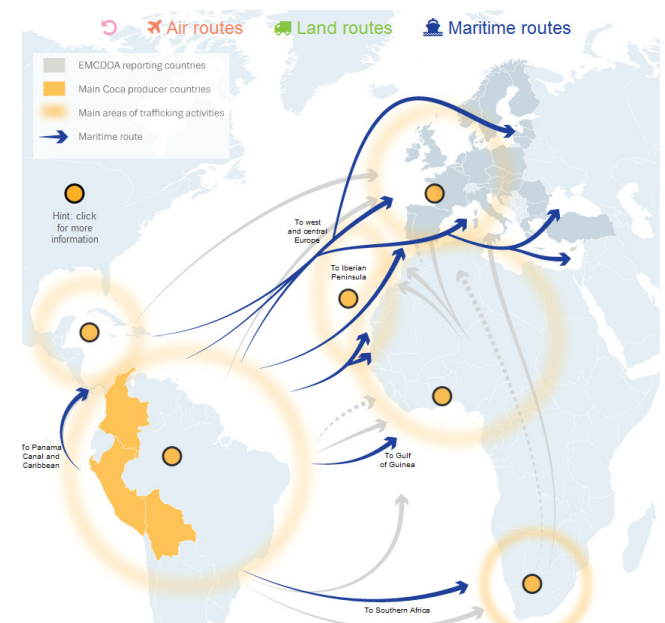
Cocaine is the most consumed stimulant drug in Europe, with a retail market value estimated by the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) to be about EUR 5.7 billion a year. It is also estimated that approximately 91 tonnes of cocaine are consumed in Europe every year. Cocaine is the second most seized drug in Europe, after cannabis. In 2014 about 78 000 seizures of cocaine were reported in the European Union (EU), yielding an estimated 61.6 tonnes of the drug. The situation has been relatively stable since 2010, although both the number of seizures and the volume seized are at levels considerably lower than the peak values reached in the mid to late 2000s. In 2014, 9 % of the drug law offences in the EU (99 000) related to cocaine, 29 000 of which were drug supply offences.

### Cocaine trafficking routes to Europe

Cocaine is trafficked to Europe from the producer countries of South America by both air and sea, using a range of methods and routes. Cocaine is shipped from Latin America to Europe in vessels departing from Brazil and other countries such as Ecuador and Venezuela. The increasing use of Brazil as a departure point reflects the growing importance of Bolivia and Peru as the source of cocaine shipped to Europe. Venezuela has become more important in recent years as trafficking organisations move Colombian cocaine overland across a porous border and take advantage of the busy maritime traffic between the coast and the islands of the Caribbean, but cocaine is also trafficked from Venezuela to Europe by air, either directly or via the Caribbean and Africa. Although Colombia appeared to have declined in importance as a direct departure point for cocaine heading to Europe over recent years, large seizures continue to be made on the Caribbean coast, including a 7 tonne shipment destined for the Netherlands seized in Cartagena in April 2014. This and the recent upturn in production suggests that Colombia is likely to remain an important departure point for maritime shipments of cocaine. Cocaine is also shipped through the southern cone of Latin America, particularly Argentina.

There are two main areas through which cocaine shipments transit en route to Europe. The first is the Caribbean, where

### Interactive element



Interactive map of cocaine trafficking routes to Europe available on the EMCDDA website: [www.emcdda.europa.eu/topics/pods/cocaine-trafficking-europe](http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/topics/pods/cocaine-trafficking-europe)

the Dominican Republic and Jamaica are considered the main hubs, although operations elsewhere appear to have pushed some trafficking through the eastern Caribbean. Central America and the Caribbean was the only region in which cocaine seizures rose in 2013 (UNODC, 2015). This apparent increase in the use of the Caribbean route may be a reflection of recent crackdowns in Mexico and Central America (Eventon and Bewley-Taylor, 2016). From the Caribbean the cocaine is generally shipped by sea via the Azores or by air, either on direct flights or through a variety of different transfer points. delivered in a shorter timeframe, ranging from 5–30 minutes.

The other major transit area includes the West African mainland and neighbouring islands, Cape Verde, Madeira and the Canary Islands, although there has been some reduction in seizures in this area in recent years following a marked increase in seizures between 2004 and 2007. From West Africa, the cocaine is transported onward to Europe by air, sea or land routes. Transport through North Africa taking advantage of pre-existing cannabis routes is a concern, as occasional large seizures are made, although it is likely that routes through the region are fluid and transient (Algeria recorded a sudden spike in seizures in 2012, for example).

Trafficking of cocaine into Europe appears to mainly take place through western and southern countries, with Spain and Portugal in the south and ports in the Netherlands and Belgium in the north being the most important entry points for South American cocaine reaching the European market. It is estimated that together Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, France and Italy accounted for around four-fifths of the cocaine seized in the EU in 2014.



In the past few years, seizure data have suggested some use of south-eastern Europe as an entry point, spurring talk of an emerging Balkan route, and even a 'Balkan cartel' for cocaine, overlapping the established heroin route. Some seizures in Baltic countries have also led to discussion of another possible passage for cocaine. However, the data suggest, first, that to date the use of these 'routes' appears to be sporadic, and, second, that they remain of minor importance compared with established primary routes but may indicate a spread of the cocaine market eastward, where traditionally other stimulants have predominated, and in particular a growing market in the Russian Federation.

The European countries reporting the greatest number of interceptions of air couriers in 2013 were the Netherlands and Spain, followed by France and Portugal, and then the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany and Belgium<sup>(1)</sup>. However, this may to some extent be a reflection of the resources directed towards such interceptions. Cocaine couriers come from a very wide range of countries, and couriers of over 100 different nationalities were intercepted in Europe in 2012–13. Generally, nationals of the intercepting country predominate, and as a result European nationals make up the majority of intercepted couriers (EMCDDA–Europol, 2016).

### Methods of cocaine trafficking to Europe

Cocaine traffickers make use of a wide range of trafficking methods that are used flexibly and evolve over time in response to enforcement effort. Maritime transport allows the transportation of large quantities at one time, and over two-thirds of EU seizures in the period 2011–13 involved this form of transportation. The nature of international commercial maritime traffic means that a vast number of routes can and

will be used. In addition, smaller private boats are able to bring in large quantities of cocaine in single shipments, entering Europe at many points; in September 2014, for example, a private yacht carrying a tonne of cocaine that had been picked up in Venezuela was intercepted off the coast of Ireland (Roche, 2015).

An important development has been an increase in the use of containers on commercial vessels to ship cocaine, making detection more difficult. Since 2006 maritime seizures that involve containers have increased while seizures from vessels have declined (Gandilhon, 2016).

A diverse and continually evolving array of concealment methods is used, and the importation of cocaine in forms such as its incorporation into plastics or other materials that require chemical extraction in Europe continues to be a concern. Concealing the drugs within shipments of perishable goods is another common tactic as there are procedures to allow these to pass through ports more quickly.

The methods used for container trafficking have also evolved. For example, there has been a shift from concealment within the container or cargo to the rip-on/rip-off method (see box on trafficking in containers), which by 2012 accounted for the majority of seizures. Corrupt officials and port employees facilitate this form of trafficking, and staff involved in the aviation industry can also be vulnerable in this regard, as illustrated by two cases of the arrest of Nigerian airline crew members in London for cocaine smuggling (EMCDDA–Europol, 2016).

Cocaine trafficking by air involves individual couriers, air freight aboard commercial flights and the use of private aircraft. However, compared with maritime shipments the quantity transported by air is generally smaller, although the number of seizures of cocaine transported in this way is high, and this mode of transport does have the effect of spreading the risk for traffickers. Couriers transport cocaine on commercial flights, whether internally (swallowed or stuffed), in their baggage, or, less frequently, on their body. Some concealment methods, such as the use of cocaine incorporated into breast implants, involve surgical procedures on cocaine couriers and pose significant risks to the lives of couriers, while ingestion by smugglers of numerous packages can result in death if a package ruptures. Until recently, cocaine smuggled in this way was always in powder form; however, there has been a switch by the smugglers to the use of cocaine in liquid form, presumably in an attempt to avoid the scanning equipment now in place at several airports.

(1) Based on a Europol data collection exercise covering 14 countries: Belgium, Bulgaria, Colombia, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

## Conclusion

Cocaine trafficking to Europe is conducted by organised crime groups that are characterised by diversity and adaptability. These groups are innovative and skilled in switching and modifying both trafficking routes and modus operandi to circumvent law enforcement activities. They are quick to identify and exploit new opportunities for cocaine

trafficking. This includes taking advantage of new technology and methods to facilitate access to maritime containers loaded with cocaine (e.g. rip-on/rip-off) and for concealing cocaine (e.g. incorporating liquid cocaine into materials for later extraction). In addition OCGs also shift transit routes and storage points to capitalise on the presence of ineffective border controls, and areas where instability and poor governance make for weak law enforcement.

### Trafficking in containers

The increase in the use of containers for trafficking cocaine to Europe has been marked in recent years and there has been a shift from concealment within the container or cargo to the rip-on/rip-off method (Gandilhon, 2016). The largest seaports in Europe are in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, and Antwerp, Belgium, and they are key points for this type of trafficking. After around 10 000 kg of cocaine was seized in Rotterdam over the course of 2013 it was reported that Dutch police estimated that 25–50 % of the cocaine reaching Europe now enters via the port, which handles around 11 million containers a year, only 50 000 of which are scanned (DutchNews, 2014, quoted in Eventon and Bewley-Taylor, 2016). However, large container ports in other countries are also used, such as Algeciras and Valencia in Spain, and Hamburg in Germany (EMCDDA–Europol, 2016).

Corrupt officials and port employees facilitate this form of trafficking. There are concerns that the organised crime groups involved in cocaine trafficking may be making systematic efforts to corrupt workers in all major ports to facilitate shifting of routes as necessary in response to law enforcement activity.

#### Rip-on/rip-off method of cocaine smuggling

The so-called 'rip-on/rip-off' method involves loading the consignment in the port of departure and recovering it in the port of arrival. The use of one or more corrupt employees at both ends is therefore a key element.

A suitable container must be identified in South America with a legitimate cargo destined for Europe. The drugs are usually loaded in the dock area, so the 'rip-on' team must be able to get the drugs into the container terminal and to locate the container, which must be in an accessible

position. In most cases the security seal needs to be replaced with a duplicate to avoid obvious signs of tampering.

At the port of arrival, the drugs need to be retrieved, which can be achieved in a variety of ways. The drugs can be removed from the container by corrupt port workers or by external teams who gain access to the terminal. After the 'rip-off' is complete, the container is either left open or resealed with another false/duplicate seal. The success of the rip-off depends on knowing the location of the container within what is often a very large container terminal with tens of thousands of containers. However, just knowing the container number is usually not enough. It must also be accessible, which again usually requires a corrupt port or company worker to manipulate the position of the container.










Credit: Spanish National Police

In December 2014 a joint customs–police team in Berlin examined a container transporting coffee. The container had left Santos, Brazil, and had arrived at Bremerhaven port, from where it would have been delivered to a coffee roaster in Berlin. Immediately after the container was opened, a sports bag and an unused container security seal were found. Inside the sports bag, 30 individual packages were found, each containing 1 kg of cocaine marked with a 'horseshoe' logo.



## Facts and figures

### COCAINE IN EUROPE AT A GLANCE

<b>Estimated market size (2013)</b>	Best estimate (low–high)	Value (billion EUR)	Quantity (metric tonnes)	
		5.7 (4.5–7.0)	91 (72–110)	
<b>Consumption (1)</b>	Lifetime	Age group (years)	Estimated number of users (million)	% of EU population (range between countries)
		15–64	17.1	5.1 (0.5–10.3)
	Last year	15–34	8.3	6.7 (1.0–12.8)
		15–64	3.6	1.1 (0.1–2.4)
	Last month	15–34	2.4	1.9 (0.2–4.2)
		15–64	1.4	0.4 (0.0–1.0)
	15–34	0.8	0.7 (0.0–1.7)	
<b>Drug treatment (2) (2014)</b>	All admissions	Number (% of admissions for all drugs)	Trends	
	First admissions	60 000 (13 %)		
<b>Drug law offences (2014)</b>	All offences	Number (% of offences for all drugs)	Trends	
	Offences for drug use/ possession for use	27 000 (16 %)		
	Offences for drug supply	99 000 (9 %)		
<b>Seizures (3) (2014)</b>	EU EU plus Norway and Turkey	Quantity (tonnes)	Trends	
		61.6		
	EU EU plus Norway and Turkey	Number		
		78 000		
<b>Mean retail price (2014)</b>	Range (IQR) (4)	EUR/gram		
		46–91 (52–72)		
<b>Mean purity (2014)</b>	Range (IQR) (4)	% in EU		
		26–64 (36–50)		

#### Notes:

1. EU estimates are computed from national estimates weighted by the population of the relevant age group in each country. They are based on surveys conducted between 2004 and 2014/15 and therefore do not refer to a single year.
2. Drug users entering treatment for cocaine problems. Units coverage may vary across countries.
3. The 2014 figures should be considered as estimates; where not available, most recent data were used in place of 2014, except for the number of seizures for the Netherlands, France and Poland where no recent data is available so they are not included. An additional 4.2 kg of coca paste (26 seizures), 35 kg of coca leaves (33 seizures) and 70 kg of crack (5 600 seizures) were seized in the EU, in 2014.
4. IQR: interquartile range, or range of the middle half of the reported data.

Data presented are for the EU unless stated otherwise. All trend lines shown in this table cover a 5-year period, 2010–14. All trends reflect absolute numbers except for trends on price and on potency which reflect averages of mean values. In the case of treatment, price and purity, trends are based only on data from those EU countries that have consistently submitted data since 2010.

Source: EMCDDA/Reitox national focal points.

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