

SO-PREP

Final report on synthetic opioid preparedness

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Executive summary

The opioid epidemic in the United States has resulted in the loss of almost half a million lives since 2000. Unfortunately, it seems that the concerning trend is continuing as more than 100,000 Americans died from drug overdoses in a one-year period ending in April 2021. Moreover, there is a growing concern that similar development might occur in Europe. By the end of 2020 in Europe, the European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) had identified around 830 new psychoactive substances (NPS), of which 46 were reported in 2020. The 67 new synthetic opioids were detected between 2009 and 2020, including ten

reported the first time in 2020. While synthetic opioids are not the largest group of NPS, they are generally associated with the highest risk of an overdose of all NPS.

Many European countries have also witnessed a steady increase in prescription opioids over the past ten years, causing increasing attention and concern about the misuse of prescription opioids.

Most European countries have not been planning on implementing any special or new methods, operation models, or protocols to prepare for possible increases in the use of synthetic opioids. There are shortcomings in the monitoring, data collection, and early warning systems (particularly in rapid communication) and room for improvement in strengthening strategies to prepare for a potential SO crisis.

NPS represent a challenge to current drug policy models. It is assumed that repressive drug policies may increase the emergence of NPS as they are more challenging to identify and control than "traditional" drugs. NPS, including synthetic opioids (SO), synthetic benzodiazepines, stimulants, cannabinoids, and hallucinogens, are associated with severe acute intoxications and deaths in Europe. Despite a range of new measures being introduced, NPS represents a challenge to current drug policy models.

This report draws together the key findings and conclusions of previous reports on European countries' synthetic opioid preparedness.

Findings part I: Good practices of generic health preparedness and SO preparedness in the EU

The report "Good practices of generic health preparedness protocols" demonstrates the need for better strategies for preparing for a potential rise in SO prevalence, use, and incidents. If the use of SOs increases in Europe, rapid communication, early warning systems, and the exchange of information are crucial for preparedness planning. Also, responsible prescribing of opioid medications, prescription drug monitoring programs, and state-run electronic databases are essential to respond to the SO threat.

The increase of NPS on the European drug market has forced the public authorities to respond to the threat rapidly in recent years. In addition, drugs purchased online can be transported across Europe and delivered to consumers by post and parcel services. This creates new challenges for law enforcement.

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We need to prepare our health care system for public health emergencies through information gathering, material preparations, giving out information and communicating with citizens, sharing responsibilities of different organizations and officials, strengthening resources and skills, the flow of information, international cooperation, using smartphone applications and more.

Findings part II: Needs, challenges, and good practices on European SO preparedness

The primary objective of the report “Good practices of synthetic opioid preparedness and needs and challenges in EU Member States” was to explore existing strategies and good practices of preparedness for dealing with a potential synthetic opioid crisis in Europe, identify needs and challenges, and propose recommendations to strengthen European Member States' synthetic opioid preparedness. It was based on a review of available literature, research reports, publications of the EMCDDA, and a survey among the EMCDDA Reitox network of national focal points conducted in 2020.

In Europe, there are different functional monitoring and data collection tools and indicators, including surveys, drug checking services, analysis of wastewater and syringe residues, scientific research, treatment indicators, and supply indicators for detecting the use of synthetic opioids.

There are many different data collection tools, from early warnings and public health alerts on new or potentially dangerous drugs to risk assessments of drug-related infectious disease outbreaks or drug market threats. These innovative methods boost Europe's preparedness and response. For example, data analyses from wastewater studies, syringe residue analysis methods, hospital emergency departments, web surveys, and drug-checking services enhance understanding of drug use and markets in Europe and provide valuable information for local interventions. In addition, the internet has changed the drug markets. Therefore, monitoring the darknet and clear web may also help identify emerging trends and threats, while Trendspotter studies bring together multiple sources for rapid assessments of topics of concern. While these methods have limitations, they can improve awareness of drug use patterns and sub-populations of less well-observed users.

The internet has changed the drug markets, and the darknet provides an ideal environment for distributing all types of illicit commodities, including drugs. In addition to the darknet, there are also other marketplaces where people trade illegal substances, such as the surface web, including social media platforms and instantmessaging tools. Therefore, law enforcement should focus on supply reduction, including disruption of drug trafficking and trade controls, and improving surveillance on fentanils and other SOs. In addition, there is a need to invest more in inter-institutional cooperation and composing multidisciplinary teams for detection, investigation, and prosecution. Furthermore, law enforcement should collaborate with relevant parties, such as post and courier services, mobile service providers, payment providers, and technology companies. Finally, as the drug market changes all the time, law enforcement should pay attention to fentanyl precursor chemicals.

The report demonstrates the need for better strategies for preparedness in preventing a potential opioid crisis. Drug situations – including drug supply, use, public health, social problems, drug policy, and responses – vary significantly from country to country. Also, each country's size, populations, political structures, healthcare, public health systems, and other resources are different. Therefore, the EU Member States need to consider these factors when designing and strengthening their national preparedness to new public health threats.

Findings Part III National synthetic opioid preparedness in five countries

In the report “National synthetic opioid preparedness” an in-depth analysis of SO preparedness of five countries was conducted in the Netherlands, Belgium, Finland, Estonia, and Germany. According to the

report, most countries have not been planning on implementing any special or new methods, operation models, or protocols, to prepare for possible increases in SOs.

Nevertheless, some good practices, such as Red Alert in the Netherlands, can inform and warn all people who use drugs about potentially harmful drugs. Another good practice is the Opioid Task Force, also from the Netherlands, redrafting opioid prescription guidelines and more.

Overall, the results indicate that the increase of NPS on the European drug market and the emergence of online drug markets (with drugs being delivered by postal services) has created new challenges for monitoring systems, health systems, law enforcement, and early warning systems.

Because potent SOs are on the rise in Europe and can cause serious harm, including nonfatal and fatal injuries, preparedness systems for SOs need to be strengthened to prepare for possible changes in the drug market.

Investing in comprehensive and evidence-based treatment options and harm reduction interventions for opioid use disorders is essential. Additionally, there is a growing need for comprehensive plans on monitoring and preventing SO-related overdose deaths.

In conclusion, to date, there is a very limited international exchange of information and good practices on SOs. However, many countries do have good practices at the national level. These practices should be shared, reviewed, and adopted in other European countries.

Conclusions



If the use of synthetic opioids increases in Europe, investing in enhanced monitoring and response capacity is crucial.



Health systems play a fundamental role in preparedness for a potential opioid crisis.



Law enforcement should focus on supply reduction, including disruption of drug trafficking and trade controls, and improving surveillance against drug trafficking. In addition, surveillance of the darknet and clearnet is an important tool in detecting new substances and drug trends.



Enhancing the rapid flow and exchange of information is key to national and international SOpreparedness.



International exchange of information and good practices on SOs needs to be systematically increased. There are many good practices recognized at the national level, and these practices should be shared, reviewed, and adopted actively between European countries.