



European Monitoring Centre
for Drugs and Drug Addiction

European Drug Report

Trends and Developments

16 June 2023

12.00 Lisbon | 13.00 Brussels



European Drug Report 2023



EDR 2023: Europe's drug situation in 2023

Availability of most illicit substances remains high

Greater **diversity** in drug availability and use is creating new health and policy challenges

Evidence-based and joined-up **responses** can work, but they are often not sufficiently available



EDR 2023: Europe's drug problems have become more complex

Today, drug-related issues appear almost **everywhere** in our society



Almost **everything** with psychoactive potential can be a drug



Everyone can be affected, whether directly or indirectly



EDR 2023: Growing support for implementing evidence-based substance use prevention

Substance use prevention: stop or delay drugs use, avoid developing drug use disorders

Not all approaches effective, now more interest in **evidence-based prevention** programmes

European Prevention Curriculum: improve effectiveness of prevention, 25 EU MS and neighbouring countries have national European Prevention Curriculum trainers

Xchange: European online registry of evaluated prevention interventions



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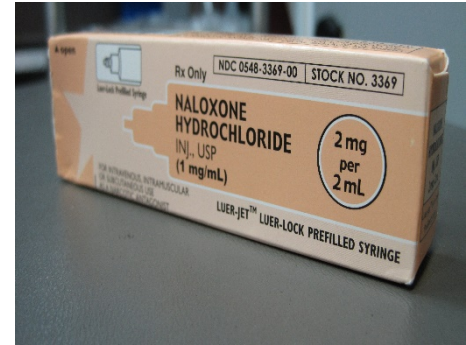
European Prevention Curriculum

A handbook for decision-makers, opinion-makers
and policy-makers in science-based prevention
of substance use

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EDR 2023: Harm reduction services still require scaling up, enhanced evidence base

- **Acute and chronic illicit drug use harms:** harm reduction accepted as key part of healthcare
- **2022:** all EU MS and Norway have needle and syringe exchange and opioid agonist treatment
- **Newer services in European countries:** drug checking (12), take-home naloxone (16), drug consumption rooms (10)
- **Research and evaluation needs:** further develop evidence base for policy makers



EDR 2023: Europe's evolving drugs situation creates new harm reduction and risk communication challenges

- **Harm reduction:** mitigate health risks from complex consumption patterns, new substances and drugs mixtures
- **Identify effective responses:** synthetic opioids, synthetic stimulants, new cannabis types and forms and dissociatives (e.g. ketamine)
- **Growing concern:** inadvertent use of potent substances or drugs mixtures
- **Policy considerations:** what risk behaviours to target, evidence base for responses and quality of care standards
- **Risk communication:** new substances, drug interactions, high-potency products or routes of administration



EDR 2023: Investment needed to achieve targets for reducing the burden of infectious diseases

Injecting risks: HVB and HCV and HIV; pandemic disruption linked delayed diagnosis; city-level local HIV outbreaks; half of new injecting linked HIV cases diagnosed late

WHO targets: only five reporting countries in 2021 distributed 200 syringes per person who injects and had 40 % of the population of high-risk opioid users in opioid agonist treatment

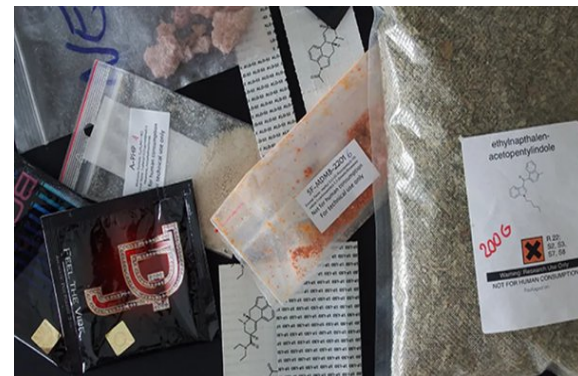
Prevalence of high-risk opioid use: estimated at 0.34 % for the EU adult population, equivalent to around 1 million high-risk opioid users in 2021

Opioid agonist treatment: 511 000 clients in 2021



EDR 2023: Enhanced toxicological and forensic data needed to inform policies and actions

- **Growing importance:** synthetic drugs, novel substances, new illicit drugs production practices, harms from drug consumption exacerbated by interactions between drugs taken together
- Similar concerns regarding continued detection of synthetic cannabinoids alongside natural cannabinoids in herbal material
- **Forensic and toxicological sources:** essential to understand drug market developments and health implications; currently **not sufficiently available**
- **EUDA 2024 launch:** European network of forensic and toxicological laboratories



EDR 2023: War in Ukraine increases uncertainty of Europe's drug situation

- **Russia's invasion:** humanitarian crisis continues over a year later
- **Healthcare, drug treatment:** difficult to deliver
- **Continuity of care:** Ukraine's Ministry of Health and NGOs providing opioid agonist treatment
- **Displaced people who use drugs need:** continuity of treatment, language services and the provision of accommodation and social welfare and childcare supports in EU countries
- **Still difficult to assess impact:** heroin availability declined, synthetic drug production and use less affected, shift to other trafficking routes to Europe away from Ukraine



EDR 2023: Cannabis policies increasingly complex in Europe, baseline data needed to assess changes

Cannabis policies now encompass:

- control of illicit cannabis
- regulation of cannabis for medical uses
- other emerging uses and forms, including as ingredients in some commercial products

Regulatory status: some EU MS Governments changing policy approach to recreational cannabis use, including Malta, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Czechia and non-EU Switzerland

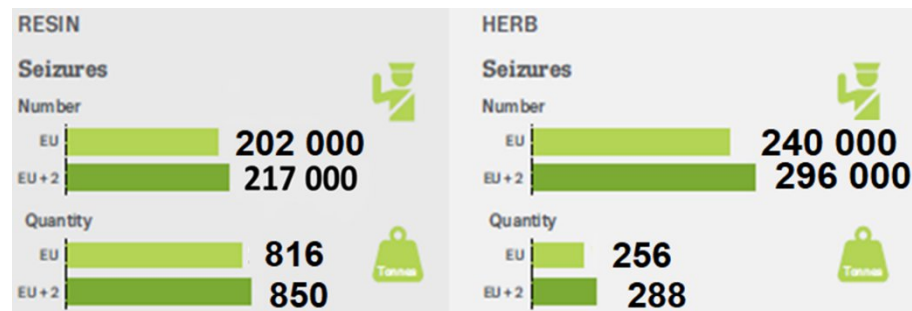
Medical use of cannabis: most EU MS allow it

Policy changes: assessment of impact requires baseline data for monitoring and evaluation

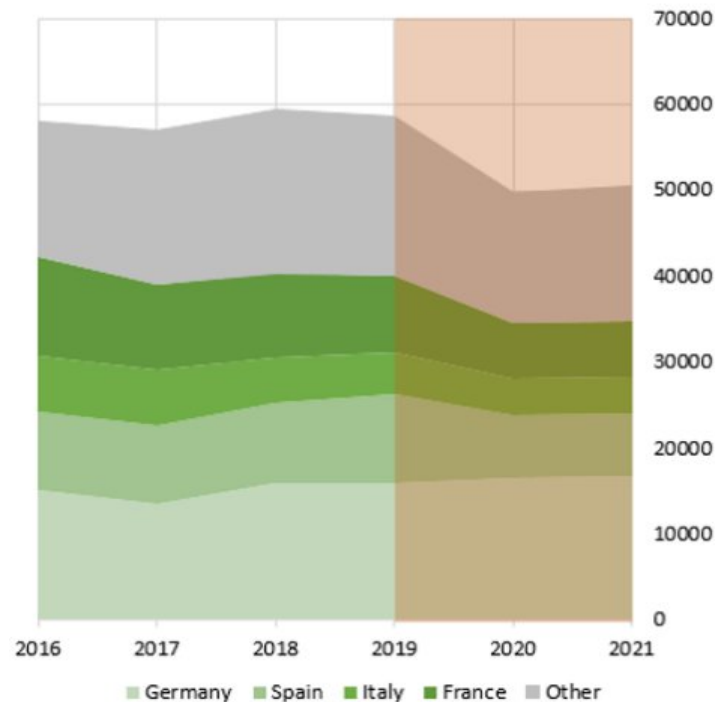


EDR 2023: Understanding the public health implications of the high availability and use of cannabis products

- **Prevalence:** 15.1 % of 15-34 year olds used cannabis in the last year
- **2021 seizures in EU:** 816 tonnes of resin, 256 of herb
- **THC content:** resin's (20 %) twice herb's (9.5 %)
- **Treatment:** 97 000 clients, 55 000 first-time entrants - declined during pandemic, not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels
- **Cannabis products:** extracts and edibles (high THC content), CBD products (low THC content)
- **Understand better:** extent of cannabis users help seeking, most appropriate services for them



Trends in first-time cannabis treatment entrants



EDR 2023: Illicit cannabis products: diversification and adulteration

Increasing cannabis product diversity: high-potency extracts and edibles

Adulteration: increase in 2021 of herbal material containing THC alongside synthetic cannabinoids

Purchased unknowingly as illegal cannabis: adulterated herbal materials similar to natural cannabis, can be mis-sold as cannabis

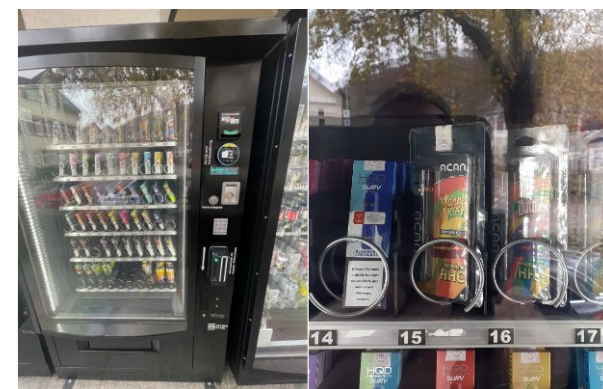
Cannabis edibles: typically 'sweets', more available in Europe since 2021, can be mistaken for legitimate commercial products, health risks from THC or synthetic cannabinoids

Health risks: more intense intoxication, mental, physical and behavioural effects than cannabis, some



EDR 2023: HHC, first semi-synthetic cannabinoid on Europe's illicit drug market

- **Europe's diverse cannabis Market:** hexahydrocannabinol (HHC), emerged May 2022, reported by 19 EU MS by December 2022
Pharmacology and toxicology: chemically similar to delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (delta-9-THC), toxicology in humans currently unknown
- **Availability:** sold openly as 'legal' cannabis replacement in some EU MS
- **Products:** sold as low-THC cannabis flower and resin sprayed or mixed with HHC, vapes, and edibles (sweets)
- **Inadvertent consumption:** Low-THC cannabis flower and resin containing HHC have a similar look and smell to illicit cannabis
- **Uncertainty:** impact on human health unknown



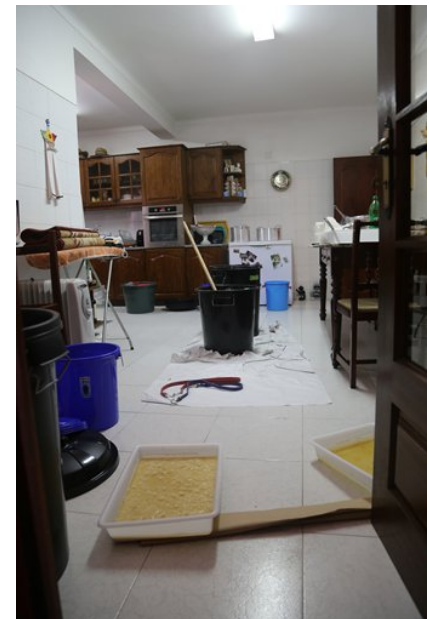
EDR 2023: Scale and complexity of illicit drug production within Europe continues to grow

Dismantled laboratories: 434 reported in 2021

Heroin (3) Cocaine (34)
Amphetamine (105) Methamphetamine (261)
MDMA (15) Cathinones (15)
Ketamine (1)

228 drug production waste dumping sites reported in 2021

Wider set of chemicals: complex challenge for customs, law enforcement and legal regulation

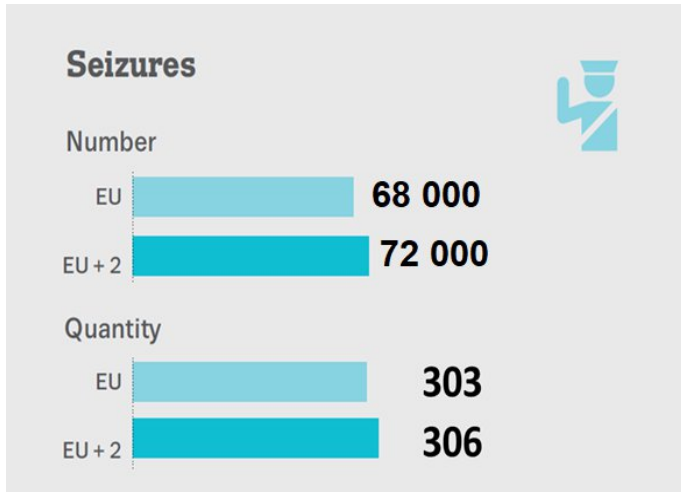


EDR 2023: Synthetic stimulants – more diversity in the illicit drug market linked to more risks for public health

- **Commonly used synthetic stimulants:** alongside cocaine and amphetamine, signs that methamphetamine and cathinones are now also contributing more to Europe's drugs problems
- **Consumers:** may view different stimulants as functionally similar, willing to try new products
- **Administration routes:** swallowing, sniffing and injecting
- **Availability:** found in similar looking powders or pills, risk consumers unaware what stimulants or drugs mixtures they are taking
- **Harms:** greater risk of adverse health outcomes, including poisonings, acute and chronic mental health problems, infectious diseases and deaths

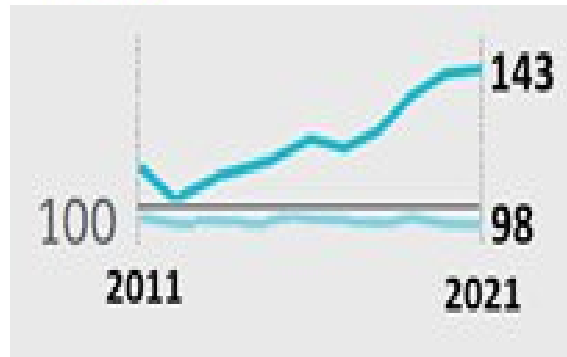


EDR 2023: Cocaine: record cocaine seizures highlight threats to health

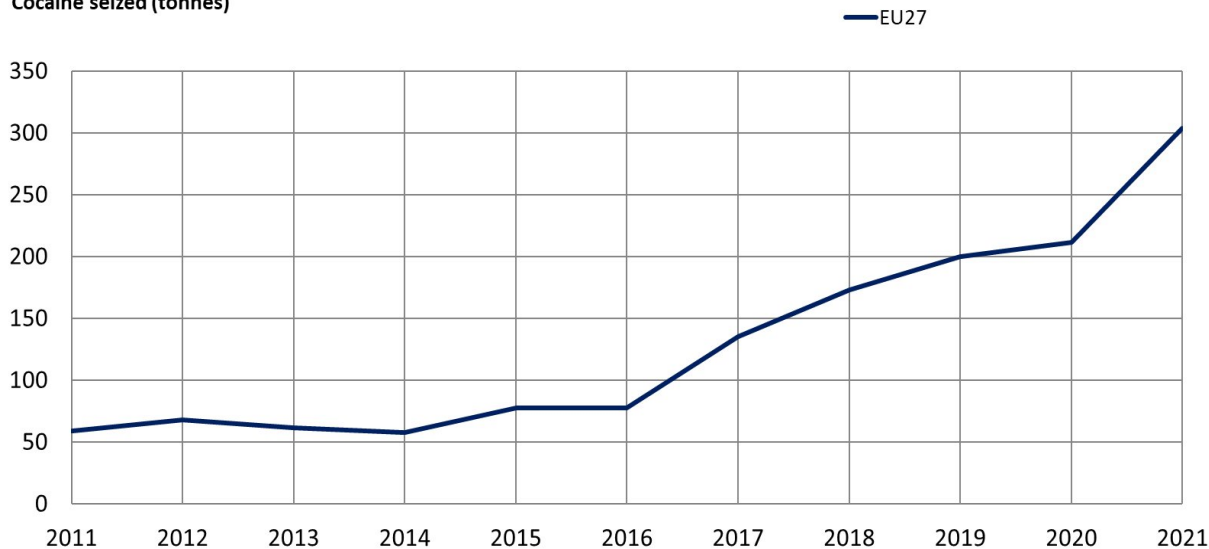


Indexed trends

Retail price and purity

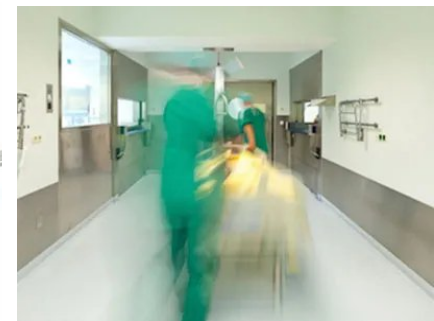


Cocaine seized (tonnes)



EDR 2023: Increasing evidence of the negative impact of high cocaine availability

- **Second most frequently reported drug:** among first-time treatment entrants and acute drug toxicity presentations in 2021
- **Deaths:** involved in about a fifth of overdose deaths in 2021
- **Some signs of diffusion:** cocaine injecting, use of crack cocaine, reported in some countries. An estimated 7 500 crack treatment clients in 2021
- **Harms:** high-frequency use causes mental and physical health and social problems, injecting raises HIV and HCV infection risks

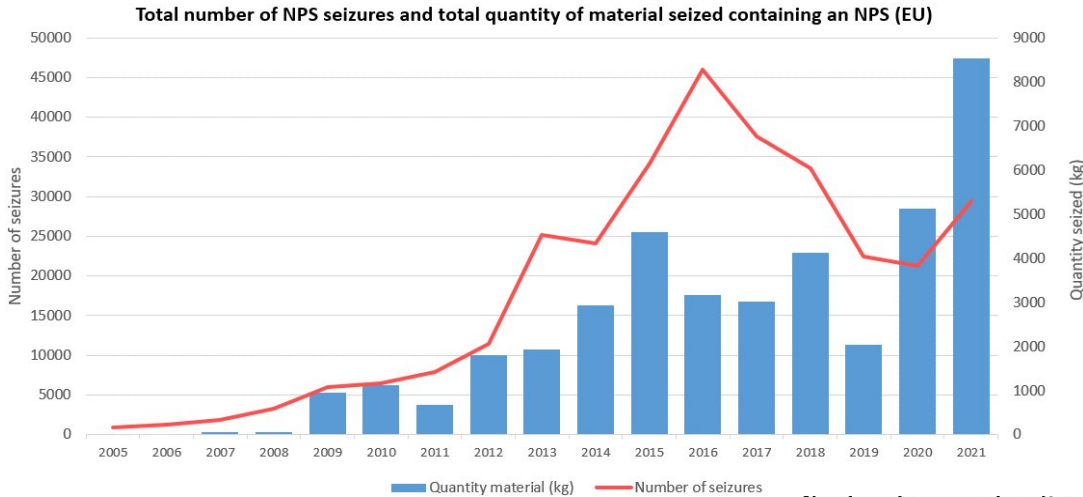


EDR 2023: Greater recognition of the role played by stimulants in harms associated with drug injecting

- **Injecting:** 19 % of first-time heroin treatment clients in 2021 reported injecting as main route of use (38 % in 2013)
- **Diverse drugs injected:** opioids, heroin, amphetamines, cocaine, synthetic cathinones, opioid medications and other medicines
- **Syringe residue analysis:** out of 1 845 used syringes in 2021-22, heroin most commonly detected drug 5 out of 12 cities, stimulants, mostly cocaine, detected in all cities
- **Use patterns:** a third of syringes contained two or more drugs, most commonly stimulant and an opioid, indicating polydrug use or re-use of injecting paraphernalia
- **Harms:** blood-borne infections, vascular damage, drug overdoses, death
- **Responses:** understanding harms from injecting patterns key to designing interventions

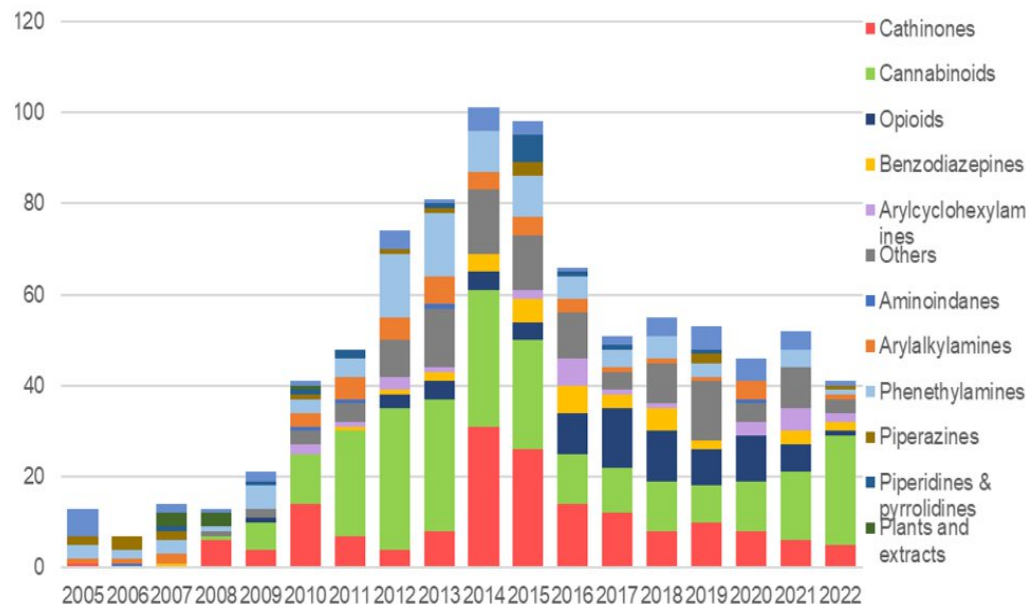


EDR 2023: New psychoactive substances - potentially harmful drugs continue to appear



- **Seizures:** 2021 record 8.5 tonnes, 400 NPS detected in seizures
- **Increase:** small number of large seizures of cathinones
- **Resilient diverse market:** end of 2022 EWS monitoring 930 NPS, 41 of which first reported in 2022

Number of new psychoactive substances reported for the first time to the EU Early Warning System, by category, 2005–2022



EDR 2023: Signs ketamine more established drug of choice among some groups

- **Seizures:** 0.9 tonnes reported to EU EWS in 2021, 1 laboratory dismantled in 2021, theft and diversion from veterinary medicine a concern
- **Availability:** consistently present in some drug markets, drug of choice for some, found in MDMA tablets, drugs mixtures
- **Prevalence:** 2021 Web Survey on Drugs: 13 % of respondents using drugs in last year used ketamine
- 2022 wastewater analysis: very low ketamine residue levels reported by 15 cities
- **Route of use:** mainly sniffing
- **Harms:** various acute and chronic harms, including urological complications and bladder damage
- **Treatment:** 4 EU MS report overall numbers rising from 93 in 2015 to 414 clients in 2021



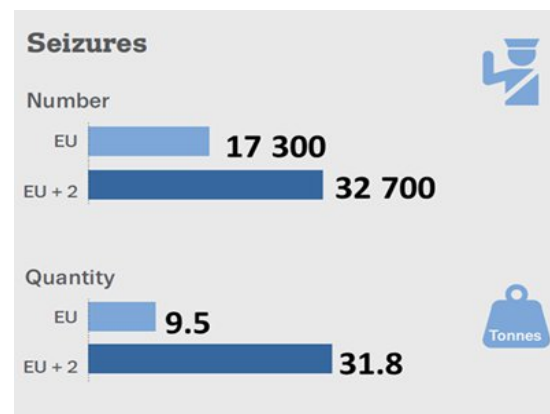
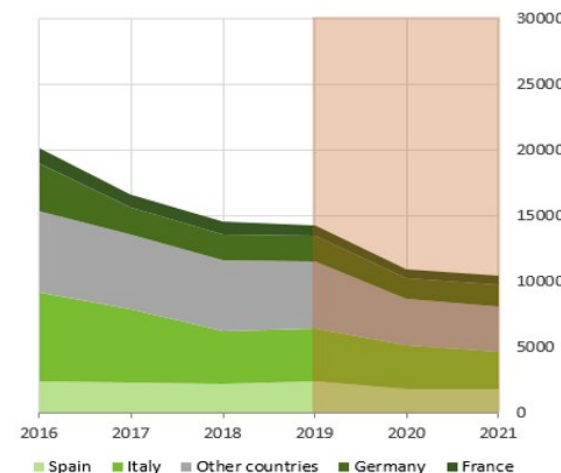
EDR 2023: Health concerns about nitrous oxide use among young people

- **Availability:** signs of increased use, regulation of sale and use varies among countries. Accessible and cheaper, larger gas canisters, drug litter
- **Seizures:** Some large seizures reported (e.g. 59000 canisters valued EUR 1.9 million by Irish Revenue service in December 2021)
- **Route of use:** typically inhaled via cannisters discharged into balloons
- **Harms:** debate exists on negative health risks in episodic users. Intensive and chronic use harms: poisonings, lung burns, in some cases of prolonged use, neurotoxicity from vitamin B12 deficiency
- In recent years 2 EU sentinel **hospital emergency departments** had increased presentations, 2 EU national **poisons centres** had increased notifications



EDR 2023: Heroin playing lesser role in opioid problems, but still significant cause of harms

- **Opioid-related deaths:** opioids, including heroin, present in 74 % fatal overdoses reported in EU
- **Prevalence:** 0.33 % of EU population or 1 million people used opioids in 2021
- **Acute drug toxicity presentations:** heroin third most commonly reported drug in 2021, 15 % of all reported cases
- **First-time treatment entrants:** heroin primary drug for 10 000 (74 %) of 16 000 first-time clients reporting a specific opioid as main problem drug
- Estimated 13 year lag to treatment
- **Heroin seized:** doubled in 2021 to 9.5 tonnes (4.4 tonnes in 2020) in EU



EDR 2023: Need to better understand the role played by polydrug use in opioid mortality

- **Overdose deaths:** opioids involved in 74 %, heroin's role decreasing in some countries, but usually found with other drugs - polydrug use is the norm
- An estimated **6 166 deaths** in EU in 2021, mortality rate of **18.3 deaths per million**
- **Polydrug toxicity common:** illicit opioids, other illicit drugs, medicines and alcohol. Deaths involving stimulants may be rising in some countries
- **Deaths in older age groups:** increased by 69 % among those aged 50–64 between 2012 and 2021
- **Polydrug use patterns:** improved toxicological information needed to understand them
- **Overdose prevention:** drug interactions (e.g. opioids and stimulants), potent synthetic opioids have implications for interventions (e.g. naloxone)



EDR 2023: New synthetic opioids replacing fentanyl derivatives

- **North America:** fentanyl derivatives replaced prescription opioids and heroin, driving epidemic of deaths
- **New synthetic opioids in EU:** mostly in some northern and Baltic countries
- **EU EWS:** 74 new opioids identified since 2009, recent detections not fentanyl derivatives, but benzimidazole (nitazene) opioids
- **2021 seizures:** 8.2 kg – carfentanil 4.9 kg, isotonitazene, 1.9 kg
- 7.1 kg of total seized by Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland
- Increased **harms**, including **deaths**, linked to benzimidazole opioids, carfentanil in Baltic countries
- **Drugs mixtures:** new synthetic opioids in ‘benzo-dope’ with new benzodiazepines and in ‘tranq-dope’ with xylazine in recent seizures



EDR 2023: Europe should prepare for possible implications of opium cultivation ban in Afghanistan

- **Production:** world's largest producer of illicit opium and heroin
- **2022 opium growing ban:** cultivation increased by a third in 2022, info suggests reduced opium and methamphetamine production a possibility in 2023
- **Implications for Europe:** enforced and sustained ban might reduce heroin availability, potentially changing opioid use patterns in some countries
- **Preparedness:** increased demand for drug treatment, increased demand for synthetic opioids
- **Responses:** increasing treatment capacity, reviewing harm reduction strategies, targeting synthetic opioid supply



EDR 2023: concluding remarks

- Drugs are **everywhere**, almost **everything** can be a drug, **everyone** can be affected, whether directly or indirectly
- Availability of most illicit drugs remains high, scale and complexity of drug production in Europe growing
- Greater diversity in drug availability and use creating new health and policy challenges
- Evidence-based and joined-up responses work, but often not sufficiently available
- Concern over implications of inadvertent consumption of potent drugs or drugs mixtures
- Enhanced toxicological and forensic data needed to inform policies and actions
- Humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and Ukraine continue to impact Europe's drug problems
- Our key framework for coordinated action - EU Drugs Strategy and Action Plan (2021-25)





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