

“Synthetic Drugs Trafficking in Three European Cities: Major Trends and Involvement of Organized Crime”

*A study on synthetic drugs markets
just published by Gruppo Abele (Italy),
in collaboration with TNI (The Netherlands) and IECAH (Spain),
and with the support of the European Commission*

*by Monica Massari
Coordinator of the project*

Introduction

During the past few years, the availability of synthetic drugs in the illegal markets of many European cities has steadily grown. Evidence of this comes from the considerable amount of “new drugs” seized by law enforcement agencies of several countries and by the increasing number of consumers being reported by various organizations. Institutions, associations and NGOs involved in prevention and information campaigns in the field have expressed their concern on the risks related to the abuse of these substances. However, although some studies have been recently carried out on the extent of drugs consumption among the young population of some major cities, the dynamics and the strategies of synthetic drugs production, trafficking and commercialization inside the European Union have not been thoroughly analyzed yet. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that a comprehensive strategy aimed at curbing the growing availability of synthetic drugs in the illegal drug market cannot be exclusively focused on activities aimed at addressing the demand-side of the phenomenon. Hence, the analysis of the mechanisms which surround the supply of synthetic drugs to a growing population of end users and an in-depth knowledge of the strategies carried out by organized crime groups involved in trafficking activities represent a priority in order to design and implement effective prevention policies in the field.

The Objectives

The main goal of the project was to carry out a qualitative and cross-national study on the mechanisms surrounding synthetic drugs production, trafficking and distribution in three European cities: Amsterdam, Barcelona and Turin. Moreover, the project aimed at providing a sound and scientific overview on the phenomenon which could contribute to strengthen European Union’s policies in the field of prevention and fight against synthetic drugs trafficking. Finally, the project set up the basis for the design and implementation of a on-line clearing house (named European Market Ecstasy Trafficking – EMET – available at www.narcomafie.it/emet) containing the outcomes of the project and a wide number of web resources on synthetic drugs.

The Team

The project “*Synthetic Drug Trafficking in Three European Cities: Major Trends and the Involvement of Organised Crime*” was sponsored by Gruppo Abele (Italy) in co-operation with the Transnational Institute (TNI – The Netherlands) and the Institute of Studies on Conflicts and Humanitarian Activities (IECAH – Spain), with the support of the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) based in Italy. The project was co-financed by the European Commission (reference number JAI/B5831/2001/004). It began at the end of 2001 and continued throughout 2002 in three European cities: Amsterdam, Barcelona and Turin.

The research project was co-ordinated by Monica Massari who also lead the field-work in Turin. The research group there was composed of Manuela Mareso, Paola Monzini and Maurizio Veglio.

The Amsterdam group was co-ordinated by Tom Blickman and included Dirk J. Korf, Dina Siegel and Damián Zaitch. In Barcelona, Mila Barruti, José Luis Domínguez and Joan Pallarés made up the group supervised by Virginia Montañés.

The Project

The project followed a multifaceted methodology which favoured the use of qualitative research methods based on a wide range of sociological, ethnographic and criminological tools. In addition, the entire project benefited strongly from working arrangements established to make the greatest use of the multidisciplinary backgrounds of the researchers involved in the study. This approach helped create a relatively innovative perspective on how synthetic drug markets emerge, function and develop and – we would hope – also suggest guidelines for developing informed policies on the phenomenon.

The general question examined by the research teams was how the various actors supplying and distributing synthetic drugs on the illegal urban markets are organised, owned and managed, with special attention paid to the larger social context in which they operate. From the very beginning, it was clear the three markets investigated were at different stages of development. Furthermore, the bulk of studies, literature and research already existing on the topic varied significantly from city to city. Finally, a number of sources suggested that the three cities analysed played different roles in the geopolitics of both national and international synthetic drug supplies. Therefore, an attempt was made to ensure the research methods adopted a certain degree of flexibility in order to reflect particular dynamics and situations.

Each team carried out field research and finalised the local report based on research protocol developed jointly by the three groups. This tool turned out to be extremely useful in identifying the major issues on which the project should focus and ensuring a certain level of homogeneity and/or comparability of the information gathered.

The Final Report

The outcomes of the project “*Synthetic Drug Trafficking in Three European Cities: Major Trends and the Involvement of Organised Crime*” have been collected in a final report (in English) published by Gruppo Abele. Since a significant amount of information was gathered in each of the three sites (Amsterdam, Barcelona and Turin), we decided to avoid downplaying the unique qualities of the local contexts and maintain instead a vivid picture of the individual markets studied by publishing the entire reports submitted by each research group.

Beside an introductory chapter aimed at outlining the methodology adopted by the research group, the report is composed of four main Sections.

Sections I, II and III contain the three reports reflecting the results of the research done in Amsterdam, Barcelona and Turin respectively. Each one for the most part follows the research protocol structure developed by the three teams and is divided into three main chapters (except for the section on Barcelona which also contains an introductory chapter on synthetic drugs in Spain). The first provides an overview of the main characteristics, mechanisms and dynamics surrounding the specific urban drug market where the research was carried out (Context). The second chapter addresses the core issues of the research: i.e. the main actors trafficking, supplying and distributing synthetic drugs on the local market; how they are organised; and how they interact with each other and consumers (Supply). The third chapter outlines the institutional response towards the phenomenon on both national and local levels, including data concerning the impact of law enforcement activities on the urban synthetic drug markets investigated. In addition, a brief

description of the methodology adopted by each group during their field research has also been included in each section.

Section IV provides a comparative executive summary of the major findings of the research, and attempts to bring together recurrent themes and draw some patterns from the three illegal markets analysed. Finally, the report offers some suggestions and proposals for a more effective and informed strategy in the field of synthetic drugs.

For more details about this publication please visit www.narcomafie.it/emet where you can also order a free copy.

Achievements of the project

The results that came out from the project are:

- 1) final report (232 pages) in English entitled *Synthetic Drugs Trafficking in Three European Cities: Major Trends and Involvement of Organized Crime. Final Report*, Gruppo Abele, March 2003 (please see www.narcomafie.it/emet for further details and for ordering a free copy);
- 2) summary (32 pages) in Italian of the outcomes of the research implemented in Turin entitled *Il mercato delle droghe sintetiche a Torino: sintesi dei risultati dello studio*, Gruppo Abele, Marzo 2003 (please see www.narcomafie.it/emet for further details and for ordering a free copy);
- 3) on-line clearing house on synthetic drugs called EMET – European Market Ecstasy Trafficking - where you can find several bibliographic resources on synthetic drugs markets at national and international levels and update information on project and activities in this field: www.narcomafie.it/emet.

The evaluation methods adopted

The activities implemented in the framework of the project were constantly evaluated by the three research teams and by the project coordinator (with the support of several experts on the topic who participated in the various phases of the project) on the basis of the so-called “peer review” method.

Moreover, the final outcomes of the project were evaluated by two independent academic scholars (Prof. Vincenzo Ruggiero from Middlesex University, London, UK; and Prof. Rocco Sciarrone from the University of Turin, Italy) during a open half-day seminar in Turin (Italy) in March 2003.

About the Partners

Gruppo Abele is a non-governmental organisation, founded in 1966 and based in Turin (Italy). It is active both at social and cultural levels in the field of social exclusion, assistance to disadvantaged people, prevention strategies aimed at having an impact on the mechanisms which enhance exclusion and marginalisation, as well as in the area of research and information. In this regard, it has been promoting and carrying out various projects and studies - at national, European and international levels - related to the involvement of organised crime groups into various illegal markets (particularly drugs), trafficking in human beings for sexual exploitation, juvenile criminality and migration issues.

For further information: www.gruppoabele.org

Instituto de Estudios Sobre Conflictos y Accion Humanitaria (IECAH) founded in 2000, is a private initiative that includes a group of specialised analysts in the study of conflicts, global trends, humanitarian aid and development cooperation. IECAH benefits from a broad-based network of experience in theoretical areas of study as well as in specific geographical regions and countries that

is derived not only from academic perspectives but also from field research and analysis. IECAH is based in Madrid (Spain).

For further information: www.iecah.org

Transnational Institute (TNI) was founded in 1974 as a worldwide fellowship of committed scholar-activists. It is based in Amsterdam (The Netherlands). It was one of the first research institutes established to be transnational in name, composition, orientation and focus. In the spirit of public scholarship, and aligned to no political party, TNI seeks to create and promote international co-operation in analysing and finding possible solutions to such global problems as militarism and conflict, poverty and marginalisation, social injustice and environmental degradation.

For further information: www.tni.org

The project has received the support of the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI).