

GRUPPO ABELE

in cooperation with **TNI - IECAH**

and with the support of **UNICRI**

Synthetic Drugs Trafficking in Three European Cities: Major Trends and the Involvement of Organised Crime

Final Report



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The project's outcomes, together with information, bibliographies, WEB resources on the topic of synthetic drugs, both at national and international levels, can be found on the web-page named EMET (European Markets Ecstasy Trafficking) developed in the framework of this project: www.narcomafie.it/emet.

Gruppo Abele, March 2003

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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).

Introduction

This report contains the results of the project “*Synthetic Drug Trafficking in Three European Cities: Major Trends and the Involvement of Organised Crime*” 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 report deals with the analysis of the supply and distribution of synthetic drugs in Amsterdam, Barcelona and Turin. Hence, information gathered focuses mainly on the urban situation, although national and international data have been used in order to contextualize the research results and/or contrast some major findings.

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 (see Box 1). 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.

BOX 1: Summary of the Research Protocol

1. CONTEXT: THE URBAN DRUG MARKET

- Presence of different markets for different drugs;
- Presence of dealers specialised in providing specific drugs;
- Visibility of the synthetic drug market in the city investigated;
- Sites where different drugs are most frequently sold;
- Changes in the location of dealing sites during the last few years (for different drugs);
- Changes in consumer preferences;
- Price trends of the drugs available on the local market;
- Purity trends of the drugs available on the local market;

2. SUPPLY

- International and national trafficking networks;
- Trafficking and smuggling methods/routes;
- Local suppliers;
- Distribution and marketing chain from wholesale to retail level;
- Presence of specific ethnic groups;
- Presence of more established criminal groups and/or relationships with them;
- Styles of distribution at middle and retail levels;
- Organisational structure;
- Social background of the people involved;
- Distribution methods;
- Presence of market barriers;
- Market competition or co-operation among different groups;

- Quantities purchased per week/month;
- Payment methods adopted;
- Types and numbers of customers;
- Estimated retail and, possibly, wholesale profits per week/month;
- Overlap with other illegal activities/criminal markets;
- Overlap with specific legal activities;

3. LAW ENFORCEMENT ACTIVITY

- Impact of law enforcement activity on the synthetic drug market (i.e. in diverting or redirecting distribution activities, etc.);
- Changes in dealing places and practices due to law enforcement activity;
- Data on synthetic drug seizures and major police operations over the past few years;
- Data on drug dealers arrested over the past few years (i.e. number of traffickers and street dealers arrested, ethnic background, etc.);
- Law enforcement activities expressly targeting raves, 'illegal' parties, music events, etc.;
- Style and intensity of local level anti-drug law enforcement activity.

Some teams could more easily follow the research protocol structure, given that the required information was more readily available along with the possibility of relying on a network of informants with whom they had already established long-standing working relationships. Others kept the essence of some parts of the research protocol while adapting it to the local context. In some cases, this was the first study of its type on this phenomenon; the perception and understanding of which is still highly influenced by stereotypes and myths rather than being based on sound scientific research.

Although biases and limitations are an unavoidable component of any research process, it is worth mentioning that the greatest problem in studying drug markets is that they are, by nature, illegal and mostly hidden activities. Official data sometimes provides only partial and incomplete information while qualitative research often relies on just a few cases representing only a small part of the situation under investigation. In order to overcome this problem, official information has been combined with qualitative data stemming from the field research. Those teams that faced difficulties in gathering "first-hand" information from people directly involved in the synthetic drug market, made use of other research means such as: interviews, focus group discussions with privileged observers, analysis of judicial and police files and, in some cases, participant observation.

In the end, a significant amount of information was gathered in each of the three sites. For this reason 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.

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 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.

BOX 2: Summary of Project Activities

December 2001-April 2002

- Identification of a network of informants;
- Desk review of relevant literature and studies on the topic;
- Finalization of the draft research protocol;

May 2002

- Meeting in Turin with all project participants;

June-July 2002

- Implementation of the pilot phase of the project aimed at testing the methodology developed;

July 2002

- Meeting in Amsterdam with all project participants to discuss the results of the pilot phase;

July-November 2002

- Performance of field research;
- Finalisation of a draft report containing research results from each site;

December 2002

- Meeting in Barcelona with all project participants to discuss and share field research results;

- Distribution and discussion of the draft reports prepared by each team;
- Identification of the major similarities and differences among the three markets investigated;

December 2002-January 2003

- Finalisation of the project report.

This project would not have been feasible without the valuable contribution and close involvement of a number of people who strongly supported the local research teams during their field work. Most of them prefer to remain anonymous. We thank all of them for their crucial help.

A special thank to the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) and its Director, Mr. Alberto Bradanini, for their support of the project.