



News release

from the EU drugs agency in Lisbon

NOVEL 'TRENDSPOTTER' ANALYSIS OFFERS RAPID INSIGHTS INTO EMERGING DRUG TRENDS

Innovative EMCDDA monitoring method sheds light on changes in Europe's cocaine market

(13.12.2018, LISBON) The latest changes in Europe's cocaine market are explored in a new report published today by the **EU drugs agency (EMCDDA)** ⁽¹⁾. The report follows an analysis in the **European Drug Report 2018**, which highlighted an increase in the availability of high-purity cocaine in Europe, shifting trafficking routes and rising numbers of first-time admissions to specialised treatment ⁽²⁾. Drawing on the agency's innovative 'trendspotter' methodology, the new publication looks behind the scenes at factors driving these developments.

Today's report is the result of a recent study, applying the 'trendspotter' methodology, which is used by the agency to explore emerging drug trends, new patterns of use and developing drug markets. This method — which complements more traditional drug monitoring techniques — incorporates data from multiple sources and uses a variety of investigative approaches to allow for rapid assessments of topics of concern. The study included: two web surveys among national experts; an expert meeting and a review of international literature and monitoring data.

Europe is the second largest market for cocaine in the world (after North America) with an annual estimated retail market value of at least EUR 5.7 billion. Cocaine is the most commonly used illicit stimulant drug in Europe, with around 2.3 million young adults (15–34 years) having used it in the last year (EU-28). Around 98 000 seizures of cocaine were reported in the EU in 2016 (90 000 in 2015), amounting to 70.9 tonnes. Although the price of cocaine remained stable, its purity at street level reached its highest level in a decade in 2016.

Competition and innovation in the cocaine trade — call centres and fast delivery

The report describes new developments in the cocaine trade, including greater competition and innovation. This is occurring against a backdrop of rising coca cultivation and cocaine production in Latin America (since 2014), one of the main drivers behind the surge in supply. A greater number of organised crime groups (OCGs), operating in the European cocaine market, are now directly involved in the trade with cocaine source countries. Traditional cocaine smuggling methods are also evolving, with increasingly innovative concealment methods used, new trafficking routes emerging, and entry points into Europe multiplying. 'As a result, large quantities of cocaine appear to be entering Europe at a regular pace, and law enforcement and customs agents are facing challenges in containing the flow', states the report.

Novel technologies, such as encrypted communication applications, cryptomarkets and social media are playing an increasing role in enabling smaller groups and individual 'entrepreneurs' to engage in cocaine dealing. Innovative distribution strategies include cocaine-exclusive 'call centres' with couriers delivering 'anywhere at any time'.

The report states: 'We are now seeing a qualitative change in the nature of cocaine dealing, whereby social media are used to promote cocaine and other illicit drugs relatively openly, with the aim of reaching as many potential consumers as possible'.

Spread to new and emerging markets — rural areas, eastern Europe and Asia

According to today's report, cocaine is emerging in new markets, with OCGs in some countries expanding their operations from major cities to smaller towns and rural areas. There are also signs that cocaine is spreading into new markets in eastern Europe, where amphetamines have long been the stimulant drug of choice. A question raised by the study is whether Europe has become a transit region for new cocaine markets in western Asia.

Consumer dynamics — 'normalisation'

Targeted surveys and data collection in nightlife settings, drug consumption rooms and wastewater studies appear to point to a rise in cocaine use in recent years. The study reveals that, in certain youth cultures, there appears to be a lower risk perception towards cocaine. Trendspotter experts reporting on nightlife settings described the increasing acceptability and 'normalisation' of the use of powder cocaine across diverse social groups, manifested in 'greater overtness and visibility of use'.

Harms and implications for policy

Various harms have been linked to recent increases in the availability and use of cocaine. At a societal level, some countries report violence among small OCGs competing for local cocaine markets. At consumer level, data from hospital emergency units reveal that it is primarily a young population of cocaine users which appears in emergency rooms at weekends (often as a result of co-use of cocaine and alcohol). Higher purity levels of cocaine may further increase the potential for harm. The number of deaths involving cocaine, mostly in association with alcohol and opioids, has increased in several countries in recent years. Health experts surveyed in the study highlighted the limited availability of tailored treatment and harm reduction options for stimulant users (especially for younger cocaine users) and stressed the need for further investment.

Also published today...

The **EMCDDA** also releases today a ***Trendspotter manual — A handbook for the rapid assessment of emerging drug-related trends*** ⁽³⁾. This user-friendly guide, presenting the trendspotter methodology, is a key component of an **EMCDDA** training package and has been piloted in national studies.

EMCDDA Director Alexis Goosdeel says: 'The EMCDDA trendspotter approach has become an essential tool for the agency in its work to understand and obtain rapid insights into Europe's new drug trends and drug-related phenomena. Today we share important insights into the latest dynamics in Europe's cocaine market across different user groups, settings and national drug markets. Results from trendspotter studies of this kind can be invaluable to all those working in the drugs field who may need to respond rapidly to new challenges'.

Notes

⁽¹⁾ Rapid communication — *Recent changes in Europe's cocaine market: results from an EMCDDA trendspotter study* (December 2018).

www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/rapid-communications/recent-changes-in-europes-cocaine-market

⁽²⁾ *European Drug Report 2018: Trends and Developments* (June 2018) www.emcdda.europa.eu/edr2018
www.emcdda.europa.eu/news/2018/5/european-drug-report-2018-highlights

⁽³⁾ *Trendspotter manual — A handbook for the rapid assessment of emerging drug-related trends* (December 2018).
www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/manuals/trendspotter-manual

This news release is available in English at:

www.emcdda.europa.eu/news/2018/10/trendspotter-method-europes-cocaine-market