Forum: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Issue: Enhancing Officer Safety During The Dismantling Of Illegal Synthetic Drug Laboratories

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Introduction:

Behind the dangers and atrocities of synthetic drug use lies an even more hazardous and overlooked reality. Police officers involved in the dismantling of illegal drug laboratories face significantly more risk and can be a hazard just as much as the criminal activity and production of synthetic drugs. Exposure to hazardous substances can cause a wide range of acute (i.e., immediate) and chronic (i.e., long-term) health effects. These may include chemical burns, sensitization, irritation, and other toxic effects that may lead to death. There has been an increasing rise in the production of synthetic drugs, especially methamphetamine and other illicit substances, becoming an international concern; therefore, the responsibility of dismantling such laboratories cannot simply depend on law enforcement and procedures; it requires a coordinated approach using specialized action teams and medical expertise. Ultimately, the committee of UNODC urges nations to investigate their method of handling clandestine drug laboratories, giving utmost priority to both the effective destruction of these facilities and ensuring the safety of the officers tasked with such perilous activities.

Definition of Key Terms

1. Synthetic drugs: Man-made chemical substances created in a laboratory to mimic, alter, or enhance the effects of natural or illicit drugs

2. Clandestine/illegal laboratories: Secret, unauthorized facilities set up to manufacture, synthesize, or process controlled and illicit substances

3. Methamphetamine: Commonly referred to as **meth,** it is a powerful, synthetic central nervous system stimulant

4. Illicit Trade: The unauthorized production, movement, import, export, purchase, sale, or possession of goods and services that violate domestic or international law.

5. HAZWOPER: A comprehensive federal safety and health standard that protects workers who handle dangerous chemicals, manage hazardous waste, or respond to emergency chemical spills.

6. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE): Specialized clothing or gear worn to minimize exposure to hazards that cause serious workplace injuries, illnesses, or infections.

Background Information

Given the risks and hazards that can be present in clandestine laboratories, it is essential that adequate resources are in place at the national level and that front-line officers and fire officials who may encounter clandestine laboratories are provided with appropriate equipment and training.

Clandestine laboratories operate without restrictions, oversight, or any concern for health and safety. In whatever form they take, these laboratories pose risks to individuals and the general population and may cause short- and long-term health effects, including fatalities. Beyond this, damage to the environment, such as water, soil, and air pollution, may be a consequence of the operation of clandestine laboratories and their associated dump sites and may require long-term

remediation. In view of this, training courses should be developed in nations worldwide that cover the following topics:

- The various types of clandestine laboratories
- The types of hazards which may be encountered in clandestine laboratories
- The types and levels of personal protective equipment (PPE)
- When it is appropriate to wear specific PPE
- Types of containers suitable for evidence collection (e.g., volatile liquids)
- Dismantling and cleanup of laboratories
- Decontamination procedures

The seizure and storage of clandestine laboratory exhibits in their entirety can be fatal, hazardous, and even costly. In 2014, law enforcement personnel in Nevada reported irritability and feeling “high” after raiding and dismantling illegal SC laboratories. The CDC’s National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) conducted a thorough investigation to assess the risks posed to officers during laboratory raids by having investigators test agents’ urine for SC levels before and after the raid. DEA determined that AB-PINACA (an SC compound) and mitragynine were present in the illegal laboratory. AB-PINACA, its metabolites, and mitragynine were not detected in the agents’ urine before the raid; **however**, one or more of these substances were found in the urine of six of nine agents after the raid and processing of the SC evidence. This highlights the dangers and risks faced by law enforcement officers during the dismantling of laboratories and demonstrates the importance of implementing safety protocols and adequate protective equipment.

Another significant safety measure is the use of Self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA), which provides a mobile source of fresh air in a compressed gas cylinder or tank designed for that purpose. The face mask must be fit-checked for leaks before entering the synthetic drug laboratory. Training in SCBA is essential for proper operation and safety of the officers. SCBAs have a warning alarm to signal that the air supply is becoming low. When the alarm activates, exit from the laboratory should be immediate to exchange the air cylinder. SCBAs are also fitted

with an attached gauge which indicates the level of air remaining in the tank.

Ultimately, dismantling illegal synthetic drug laboratories requires more effort and effectiveness than law enforcement; it demands careful planning and top-notch specialized equipment paired with adequate training. Ensuring officer safety must remain a pivotal point in addressing the global issue of drug synthesis.

Major Countries and Organisations Involved

1. Belgium: In 2018, the Belgian Federal Police organised a follow-up training course on dismantling illicit synthetic drug laboratories at the Campus Vesta training centre in Emblem, Belgium. The course was attended by 21 participants from 15 EU Member States and Colombia.

2. European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training (CEPOL): Europol and CEPOL, together with the Polish Forensic Institute (CLKP), organised in May 2019 an advanced training course on dismantling illicit synthetic drug laboratories at the premises of the Polish Training Academy/ITCCCL.

3. Germany: A large-scale law enforcement action involving multiple actions targeted a network suspected of importing a large quantity of precursors used for the production of synthetic drugs in labs across multiple countries.

4. Latvia: The Latvian State Police (Valsts policija), in collaboration with Europol, has successfully dismantled a large-scale clandestine laboratory involved in the production of synthetic drugs across the European Union. The illegal laboratory was a key site for synthetic drug production in Europe.

5. Colombia: Between 2021 and 2022, the number of dismantled laboratories fell by 18 per cent to 4,707. Cocaine seizures and manual eradication have also decreased since 2021, by 1.5 per cent and 33 per cent, respectively.

Possible Solutions

1. **Implement Safety and Health Programs**

Develop, keep on-site, and implement a written safety and health program for officers involved in hazardous waste operations. Identify, evaluate, and control safety and health hazards to protect law enforcement officers and respond promptly to emergencies. The program should address, as appropriate, site analysis, engineering controls, maximum exposure limits, hazardous waste handling procedures, and uses of new technologies.

2. **Develop inter-agency cooperation and national legal frameworks**

Emphasise the importance of the development of national capacity, inter-agency cooperation, and national legal frameworks to effectively respond to challenges encountered in laboratories where substances under international control are clandestinely manufactured.

3. **Implement informational programs**

Member States can inform workers, contractors, and officers, or their representatives, about any chemical, physical, and toxicological properties of the hazardous substances to which exposure may occur *before* they begin work at the site. By equipping officers with knowledge in advance, authorities can help officers recognise potential danger and decrease the likelihood of exposure to synthetic drugs.

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