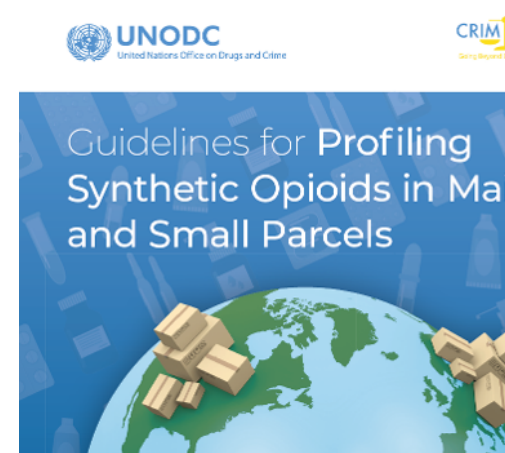


# UNODC launches Operation Azure to prevent synthetic opioid trafficking in Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa

## PRESS RELEASE

**17 September 2021** - The growing availability, proliferation and high potency of synthetic opioids has blurred the traditional security, health and legal standards used to prosecute and adjudicate drug trafficking cases. While the trafficking of unapproved dosages of pharmaceutical opioids caused numbers of tramadol consumers entering treatment to rise dramatically in West Africa, nearly 50,000 opioid overdose deaths, mainly driven by fentanyl, were reported in the United States in 2019 alone, more than double than that reported in 2010. With some 1.2 per cent of the global population now having reported using opioids for non-medical purposes, the world is in the midst of an opioids epidemic.

Against this backdrop, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), under the framework of the Opioid Strategy funded by the U.S. Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), is working with law enforcement and criminal justice agencies worldwide to strengthen their investigative and prosecution capacities, to develop innovative and integrated legal strategies and to draw upon international cooperation to safely and fairly curb the supply of opioids for non-medical use and effectively prosecute and deter their trafficking. As part of this effort, the CRIMJUST Global Programme is launching “Operation Azure” – a global initiative to equip thirteen countries in Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa with the knowledge, training, and resources to address synthetic opioids trafficking via the postal service. CRIMJUST is notably releasing two technical guidelines, for “*Profiling Synthetic Opioids in Mail and Small Parcels*” and for “*Prosecutors and Judges Adjudicating Synthetic Opioid Cases*”, to support law enforcement and criminal justice agencies investigate and prosecute the diversion and trafficking of synthetic opioids. These guidelines will underpin a series of capacity-building activities and two phases of operational activity in building the necessary institutional capacity for countries of origin, transit and destination to address the opioid crisis.



At the crossroads of licit and illicit, effectively regulating the supply chain of synthetic opioids has proven challenging as international and national health bodies struggle to prevent the misuse of pharmaceutical opioids without impeding access to medication. To be clear, the term “opioids” is a generic term encompassing natural, semi-synthetic and synthetic substances. These substances help with pain relief by interacting with opioid receptors in the body responsible for triggering brain reward systems and producing analgesia. In fact, many synthetic opioids, such as methadone, pethidine, tramadol, and fentanyl, are legally produced by the pharmaceutical industry as part of very important effort to produce effective opioids for pain management. In other words, it is not the use of opioids per say, but rather of their non-medical use, often in higher dosages than legally prescribed or recommended, that has caused the outbreak of this health crisis. To this day, it is why the World Health Organization (WHO) has been reluctant to place certain synthetic opioids, including tramadol, under international control due to well held concern that it would hamper access and availability of effective and cheap pain medication in regions already facing chronic shortages of medicine.

In West Africa, it is hard to pinpoint the exact origin or start of the opioid crisis, as it emerged as a result of a confluence of factors, including its low cost and ease of manufacture, the prevalence of a loosely regulated pharmaceutical market and the existence of informal markets, a culture of self-medication, and lack of access to health care facilities. At the same time,

absence of international control over tramadol not only meant its consumption carried less stigma than other traditional drugs among society at large, but organized crime groups were quick to exploit this grey area in its regulation which saw them smuggle synthetic opioids into West Africa at an industrial scale, particularly in the period from 2017 to 2019.

With some 125 tons of tramadol seized worldwide in 2017 – the majority of which was intercepted in Africa and a remarkable increase over the 10 kg seized in 2010 – organized crime groups have capitalized on structural weaknesses characterizing countries in West Africa to profit from the trafficking of pharmaceutical opioids. In 2018, in response to reports of tramadol overwhelmingly originating from India, the country placed the substance under national control substantially reducing the number of exports of shipments of tramadol capsules in unapproved dosages. Still, frequent seizures over the past couple of years suggest that trafficking of pharmaceutical opioids for non-medical use continues. In fact, in addition to traditional *modus operandi* and trafficking routes, criminal networks have taken to importing synthetic opioids by postal parcels, capitalizing on the advent of e-commerce and wider availability of online platforms, along with the high potency of opioids to send small quantities while yielding high profits.

It is why the CRIMJUST technical guidelines for law enforcement and judicial officials seek to support criminal justice actors safely and effectively address synthetic opioids trafficking. Specifically, the *“Guidelines for Profiling Synthetic Opioids in Mail and Small Parcels”* have been developed to support law enforcement officials target higher-risk or suspicious articles and to inform profiling strategies drawing upon intelligence and knowledge of criminal landscapes and drug markets. Meanwhile, the *“Guidelines for Prosecutors and Judges adjudicating Synthetic Opioid Cases”* aims to support criminal justice practitioners to present evidence as well as to make charging and sentencing determinations. To do so, the guideline first calls upon prosecution and judicial agencies to account for the level of potency of opioids, rather than their quantity, when prosecuting seizures of synthetic drugs. Second, it recommends the implementation of innovative legal approaches to address the development for analogues of controlled synthetic opioids or novel synthetic opioids at a rate far higher than the scheduling of controlled substances.



CRIMJUST is organizing two sets of trainings to disseminate the key recommendations of these technical guidelines, first from 14 to 24 September 2021, in Accra, to operatives from Nigeria, South Africa and Ghana, and later from 4 to 15 October 2021 in Bogota, to officials from Panama, Dominican Republic, Colombia, Peru, Mexico, Uruguay, Paraguay, Argentina, Bolivia and Ecuador. These trainings will include *“Profiling of Mail and Small Parcels”*, *“Providing Forensic Evidence in Synthetic Opioid Cases”*, *“Safe Handling of Synthetic Opioids”*, and on the *“Use of Raman Drug Detecting Device and Crime Scene Kits”* as well as complemented by a training on *“Special Investigative Technique: Controlled Deliveries”* funded by the European Union. In addition to enhancing the institutional capacity of these countries, these activities will seek to strengthen inter-agency collaboration and criminal justice cooperation to coordinate the targeting of illicit synthetic opioid supply chains at both national and international levels. To this end, these activities participants will operationalise this training in each country to draw upon the key recommendations of these guidelines and trainings to better and safely profile mail and small parcels, while ensuring adequate and admissible evidence is collected to build strong cases for prosecution.

As the world continues to face health and security risks posed by the opioid crisis, it is imperative that criminal justice agencies are provided with the relevant and necessary knowledge and tools to address ever-changing criminal landscapes and to prevent the development and dissemination of increasingly potent synthetic drugs. Better awareness of the risks posed by the non-medical use of pharmaceutical opioids, along with a stronger understanding of the legislative constraints and requirements of prosecuting synthetic opioid cases, are necessary steps should the international community wish to alleviate the health and safety damage brought about by the opioid crises. The UNODC is determined to work with countries located along opioid supply chains to support national stakeholders respond and foresee current and emerging criminal dynamics and so honour their commitments to building safer and more peaceful societies by 2030.

For more information, please visit:

- [Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs](#) (INL)
- [European Union - Global Illicit Flows Programme](#)

