



In 2023, the United States Secretary of State, Antony Blinken launched the [Global Coalition to Address Synthetic Drug Threats](#). The Coalition is designed to bring together a geographically, economically, and politically diverse group of stakeholders to produce action and results in response to the rise in synthetic drug threats. With over 140 countries and international organizations participating, the resolve of our global community in combatting the urgent challenges posed by synthetic drugs is clear. The Coalition convenes through Working Group and Sub-Working Group meetings to identify and advance concrete actions and outcomes.

The coalition is guided by the Ministerial Declaration on Accelerating and Strengthening the Global Response to Synthetic Drugs, participating governments expressed their commitment to "taking into account input from civil society in Coalition objectives."

1) Synthetic and Semi-Synthetic Cannabis Use Among Young People - Preliminary Findings (Tobias Niblock)

I have been conducting qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 25 practitioners working in the fields of youth work, alternative education, policing, restorative justice and substance use services in Northern Ireland. My research seeks to uncover the extent of young people's involvement in drug distribution in Northern Ireland alongside the motivations for participation, risks and interventions for exiting. It is important to note that these findings are preliminary and my research is not focusing on NPS, rather this is just something that has occurred frequently and I will begin to analyse the issues further over the course of my research.

One of the dominant – and unexpected – themes of my research has been the use of synthetic cannabinoids among young people ages 14-25. Primarily, these substances are being vaped, reflecting the contemporary climate and pervasiveness of vaping among young people. Often referred to as 'spice' or 'pine', almost all of the professionals I have spoken with thus far have raised concerns around the vaping of synthetic cannabinoids. In the opinion of professionals, the use of spice has been causing significant mental and physical health issues. Whilst claims of physical health issues are to a lesser extent, mental health issue such as anxiety, paranoia and depression have been discussed frequently. For many service providers, their aim is preventing young people vaping spice due to the adverse effects.

It is thought that spice is both being intentionally purchased but also purchased under the impression it is THC e-liquid/disposable vapes. THC vapes are common in Northern Ireland, costing >£50. However, the vapes touted as containing synthetic cannabinoids are sold for £10-£50 per bottle of e-liquid. Seemingly, some young people are purchasing e-liquid or a disposable vape thinking it contains THC or semi-synthetic derivative (for example Delta-9-THC/HHC/HXC), and are instead being sold spice. While I have not gotten any samples tested, it is unknown what the substance actually is, however I discuss this in the

context of spice as that is what my participants are calling. The cost has been said to be a primarily factor in the prevalence due to it being affordable for young people.

Schools are having significant problems with spice being bought, sold and used on their premises and during class time. For some practitioners they thought that incidents occurred daily in the school setting. Peer pressure has suggested as a primary factor for use. However, there have been some reports of 'spiking' in schools, whereby someone is given a vape that they think contains THC and instead is a synthetic cannabinoid. The accessibility is another motivating factor with the substance being easy to obtain, conceal and inexpensive.

From what I have gathered, it appears that this is a serious issue and very little understanding of how to deal with it. There is minimal harm reduction advice available related to spice use. Moreover, is this actually spice or what other substance is it? It is a pervasive issue due to the effects it is having and effects which differ to those of cannabis. For many, just putting an end to the use is their key objective, whilst substituting spice for cannabis where practitioners are better versed in harm reduction in Northern Ireland. Vaping it much more easily concealable and accessible than smoking making it easier to evade detection from parents/guardians/teachers or the general public. Since vaping is prevalent among young people, they view it as less harmful than smoking and at times may doubt the strength of spice oil. The harm reduction is difficult to implement due to there being a lack of understanding around the substance and dosing. Anecdotal accounts claim that e-liquids have been sent away for testing and a vast number of substances have been found but this is crucial to get a good understanding of the substance(s) we are dealing with.

Based on my findings, harm reduction measures which can be beneficial include:

- Lab Testing – testing e-liquid substances will indicate what they contain and potentially mitigate further harms.
- Raising Awareness – education among young people in a formal and informal education setting would inform young people on how to use spice in a safer manner, or how the effects are supposed to feel.
- Education – promote education for practitioners who work with young people, making them aware of the symptoms of negative reactions.
- Testing Strips – offering testing strips to check for certain substances, this is particularly important as nitazenes begin to emerge in the UK and NI drug market.

2) Lessons Learned and Recommendations on Harm Reduction for Young Opioid Users - from Youth RISE's publication on [YPWUO](#)

Alfonso Chávez, the harm reduction coordinator at Prevensa in Tijuana, Mexico, has nearly a decade of experience. Prevensa works to reduce HIV and STI transmission and provides free healthcare and harm reduction services to young people in challenging conditions, such as drug users, migrants, deportees, sex workers, and the homeless.

In Tijuana, a heavily militarized area with significant fentanyl presence, young opioid users face high risks due to limited access to naloxone and methadone. Between 2021 and 2022, Chávez and his colleagues reversed over 900 overdoses, with a 99% success rate in preventing fatalities. This highlights the critical importance of naloxone and harm reduction services and the need for empathy towards young drug users.

During December, Chávez and harm reduction practitioners from various countries discussed challenges and proposed recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders. Key lessons learned and recommendations include:

1. **Safe Drug Supply:** The absence of a safe drug supply increases harm and overdoses. Policies must ensure drug testing facilities and safe consumption rooms. Providing a safe drug supply is crucial to reducing accidental overdoses.
2. **Prohibition and Punitive Policies:** These contribute to stigma and discrimination, deterring young opioid users from seeking services. Policymakers must adopt supportive, health-centered approaches to reduce stigma and encourage service access.
3. **Quality Healthcare:** Stigma and surveillance hinder access to medical and social support. Efforts should create youth-tailored healthcare services and dismantle access barriers. Training for healthcare providers to offer compassionate, non-judgmental care is essential.
4. **Political Inaction:** The lack of political commitment and funding obstructs effective responses. Prioritizing accessible naloxone, syringe and needle access, and funding for harm reduction organizations is critical. Resources like safe consumption rooms are essential.
5. **Supportive Services Over Surveillance:** Creating non-judgmental environments that promote access to services is vital. Supportive services should focus on well-being rather than punitive surveillance.
6. **Comprehensive Drug Education:** Promote drug education to counter myths, targeting police, officials, healthcare providers, decision-makers, parents, tutors, educators, and society. Education should include overdose response training.
7. **Reliable Data:** Developing accurate data is essential for effective policies and strategies that protect young opioid users and communities. Data-driven approaches ensure targeted interventions.
8. **Youth-Tailored Services:** Consulting young people in designing and delivering services ensures relevance and empathy, enhancing effectiveness.
9. **Policy Changes and Engagement:** Stakeholders must commit to ending prohibition and regulating drugs to ensure a safe supply and support harm reduction strategies. Policy changes should prioritize health and human rights over criminalization.
10. **Sustainable Funding:** Essential resources such as naloxone, needles, syringes, and safe consumption rooms require sustainable funding to ensure harm reduction services' continuity and effectiveness.