



Research at a glance

Synthetic Cannabinoid Use in Correctional Populations – An Emerging Challenge for Offender Health and Safety? A Brief Review

Use of Synthetic Cannabinoid (SC) products is becoming increasingly common in correctional settings and can result in severe adverse health outcomes. Canadian correctional facilities must prepare for the potential health and safety consequences associated with SC use.

Why we did this study

Synthetic cannabinoids (SCs) have become increasingly available among various user populations and have emerged as common alternatives to organic cannabis products. SCs belong to a continually evolving series of synthetic psychoactive product groups, commonly marketed as mixtures that mimic cannabis' psychoactive effects. SCs have been associated with a variety of distinct and intensive adverse health outcomes (including mortality). While all forms of SCs are banned in correctional institutions, they are becoming increasingly available for use among offenders and pose novel challenges for administrations charged with the responsibility for offender health and safety. To better understand SC use, and possible health and safety consequences for offenders, this report reviewed pertinent national and international literature on SC use, supply, and related health outcomes.

What we did

We conducted electronic searches for both peer-reviewed and grey publications in primary scientific (i.e., PubMed, Google Scholar, etc.) and general databases based on pertinent keywords (e.g., Synthetic Cannabinoids, health outcomes, corrections, etc.). Studies were included if they contained information on prevalence and/or health outcomes related to SCs, and specifically among offenders. Relevant data and information were screened, extracted and narratively summarized.

What we found

SCs are an emerging category of drugs that fall under the umbrella of New Psychoactive Substances (NPS), which are becoming increasingly common. Compared to natural cannabis products, SCs pose distinct, and overall more serious (especially acute) threats to users' health, including: elevated levels of cardiovascular problems, kidney problems, seizures, psychosis and anxiety, among others. Various jurisdictions have reported high numbers of

presentations to emergency departments, as well as cases of mortality, directly related to the use of SCs. It appears that the increasing appeal is extending into correctional populations - including in Canada - although specific epidemiological data are sparse. SCs present a number of new and distinct challenges to offender health and safety.

SCs may evade major routine drug interdiction and drug testing systems established by correctional systems, and hence, are attractive for illicit use, trade, and import in correctional settings. SC use results in potentially powerful stimulant effects which may also make them attractive for use by offenders, but result in adverse outcomes such as aggravation, psychosis/hallucinations, and violence, all of which come with potentially undesirable or hazardous consequences for offender behaviour and safety.

What it means

Better data and information on the use, availability, and health outcomes of SC use in Canadian correctional facilities are required. Education of offenders and correctional staff on the risks of SC use needs to be facilitated and correctional systems should prepare for the potential health and safety consequences of increased SC use in Canada while awaiting the results and guidance offered by future research.

For more information

Ali, F., Hill, C., & Fischer, B. (2017). *Synthetic cannabinoid use in correctional populations - An emerging challenge for offender health and safety.* (Research Report R-397). Ottawa, Ontario: Correctional Service of Canada.

To obtain a PDF version of the full report, or for other inquiries, please e-mail the [Research Branch](#) or contact us by phone at (613) 995-3975. You can also visit the [Research Publications](#) section for a full list of reports and one-page summaries.

