

# Synthetic Drugs Gender & Age Thailand 2023



Thailand  
ITTC

This survey is sponsored by UNOV and UNODC and supported by Office of the Narcotics Control Board of Thailand. The data collection and analysis were conducted by several researchers from the Substance Abuse Centers in northern, northeastern, eastern, western, and southern areas during November-December 2023.

**Synthetic drugs** are becoming more prevalent as they are cheaper and easier to obtain than plant-based drugs. Minors mix narcotics with substances not yet classified as illegal, like marijuana and kratom, which are sold openly. This survey of Thailand's synthetic drug situation was conducted in November-December 2023 sponsored by UNOV and UNODC and supported by ONCB Thailand.

**Availability.** A large amount of methamphetamine tablets, crystal methamphetamine, heroin, ketamine, and cannabis are produced abroad and smuggled into Thailand across northern and northeastern border areas, although the routes via west and south borders are not uncommon. Drug gangs use various ways to traffic drugs, like ports, airports, posts, checkpoints, and paths. Transport is often facilitated by local individuals, with more men involved than women. Youth are used in narcotics transportation as they face lighter penalties compared to adults. Women also participate to evade detection. Drug market includes a variety of narcotics, with synthetic drugs being particularly cheap and accessible. The internet has become a platform for illegal drug sales, with small traders distributing drugs at various open locations as well as public transport. The substances vary in price. Online monitoring of drug market and sales has been developed recently. In 2023, there were 5,864 advertising posts detected, mostly on Twitter and Facebook targeted for young nightclubbers aged 25-34 with drug quality assurance plus 24-hour sales, free delivery, and cash on delivery. The most popular drugs posts were crystal meth and meth followed by heroin, ecstasy, ketamine and 'cocktail'. The number of cocktail sellers on social media have been remarkably increasing in 2023. Most sellers are new sellers and sell more than one type of drug. The most popular cocktail drugs on sale are K milk powder or K desert followed by happy water, mixed instant coffee in a sachet and collagen.

**Use.** Population estimated from 2007 to 2019 showed an increasing trend of synthetic drugs use. Types of narcotics used are influenced by economic status. Purchases often include a mix of different drugs, increasing the complexity and risks of the trade. Most of mixed drugs act as stimulants, hallucinogens, prescribed sleeping pills, and sedatives. The finding reveals a broad spectrum of users across diverse age groups, including children, adults, and elders, encompassing both genders. The user base comprises both locals and tourists. Notably, instances of drug usage among monks and novices have been observed. The motivations for narcotic usage vary significantly, ranging from productivity enhancement to recreational purposes, social enjoyment, therapeutic reasons such as nutrition, stress relief and as a tonic. Working adults primarily use these drugs to increase work efficiency, whereas tourists and teenagers are more inclined towards recreational usage and experimentation starting with experiment and progressing into retail sales. The locations of drug consumption are varied, including private spaces like homes, secluded outdoor areas (gardens and farms), and hotels, as well as public places like parks and entertainment venues.

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**Treatment and rehabilitation.** Since the Narcotics Code of Thailand became effective and entered into force in December, 2021, Thailand places an importance on encouraging drug users to undergo voluntary rather than compulsory treatment and providing them with social rehabilitation through quality-of-life improvements in terms of residence, education, and occupation. Authorities also monitor users until they can be reintegrated into society. In 2022, there were 100,986 drug users admitted to treatment, of which 65% were new drug patients and 73% were at the age of 25 and over. Methamphetamine tablets, crystal methamphetamine and heroin were the most common drugs used by patients. Family involvement is crucial in guiding patients to seek treatment.

**Gender.** Adult males are the primary traders and leaders in the process of transportation and sales. Women tend to assist in various aspects, such as transportation. They are involved undercover in the selling process acting as contacts for customers buying drugs and use their presence to divert suspicion from the police. Youths serve as sub-traders, distributing and delivering narcotics to various locations as they are less likely to be punished compared to adults because the penalties for youths involved in drug trafficking are generally less severe. There is a network involving family, friends, and others who collectively engage in buying and selling narcotics. The policy is shifting from prosecuting individuals for drug use to considering them as patients, leading to reduced incarcerations and detentions. It is found that drugs are used across various ages, including children, adults, and the elderly, and among both genders, encompassing locals and tourists alike. The purposes for use vary from increasing productivity at work or in studies (methamphetamine), recreational purposes (methamphetamine, ice, and pills), and for therapeutic reasons such as stimulants to alleviate stress. Behaviors differ across genders with respect to different synthetic drugs.

**Men** tend to use substances for socializing, group activities, and work. There is a trend of a higher increase in substance usage among males compared to females. This includes in situations of excessive use, severe use, overdose on heavy drugs which can lead to fatalities, and often exhibit violent behavior especially when reprimanded, commit crimes, including robbery and theft. There are instances of aggressive behavior, violence, and risky behaviors such as speeding while driving and shared needle drug use. Needle injection is more prevalent among men. **Women** typically use narcotics like methamphetamine, ice, and pills for work purposes. Women engage more in smoking drugs. While less likely to use heavily and have lower risks of fatal drugs, women face a higher risk of sexual abuse and unwanted pregnancies due to drug use. **The LGBTQIA+** community is exposed to use multiple drugs in combination with diverse drug use patterns and engage in unsafe sexual practices.

Men generally have greater access to treatment, followed by the LGBTQIA+ community and women. LGBTQIA+ individuals often hesitate to seek help due to the dual stigma of their sexual orientation and narcotic use, fearing societal rejection. Women, facing societal stigma around addiction, usually conceal their usage and seek treatment only when symptoms become severe. Families become divided by drug use offences regardless of whether they are male or female. Post-treatment, it is observed that women generally reintegrate into the community more easily than men, often receiving more support and financial opportunities.

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**Children and youth age.** Currently, synthetic drugs play a more significant role due to their availability and lower cost, replacing traditional plant-based narcotics. Ketamine, methamphetamine, and other synthetic drugs are mostly sourced from production in neighboring countries and sent through border routes. Children are often used as couriers because they face lighter penalties than adults and are less likely to be arrested. They are involved in both transporting and selling drugs to earn money to purchase narcotics. A variety of drugs are being used. Thai teenagers, aged 10-18, 16.5% reported that they had used at least one substance. The substances used by teenagers are kratom especially kratom liquid, sedatives, cannabis especially dried cannabis, stimulants especially methamphetamine, depressants especially tramadol and codeine, and hallucinogens, listed in order of popularity. Polysubstance usage is also reported.

Synthetic drugs are often used according to financial status because there are various prices for addictive substances. Young synthetic drugs users often exhibit behavioral problems when under the influence, such as aggression and violent behavior. They get into accidents due to drunken driving and speeding. They tend to engage in risky sexual activities compared to adults and have an increased risk of unsafe sex practices. Children and youth also suffer from infections and hepatitis. They also face an increased risk of criminal arrest. When children and youth involved in offences related to synthetic drugs, their families confront difficult issues including conflicts, physical violence among family members, economic problems leading to separation. Community has a negative image due to the use, supply, and trafficking of synthetic drugs.

Among adolescents, family problems and peer influence significantly contribute to drug initiation and progression from experimentation to addiction. Adolescents perceive that the community and environment play significant roles in facilitating substance abuse. Compared to adults, children and youth are less likely to seek treatment. This is partly because children often do not recognize the severity of the issue and referrals from schools are lacking. Without parental cooperation, it becomes challenging to get children the treatment they need.

Across all genders and age groups, continuous drug use has similar adverse effects as follows: (a) immediate health impacts like aggression and risky behaviors (b) long-term effects such as lung diseases, mental health issues like depression, and sexually transmitted infections (d) negative impacts on education, leading to increased diligence initially but eventually resulting in drug-induced inability to focus on studies, absenteeism, and dropping out (e) increased domestic violence stemming from family members' aggressive behaviors due to drug use and demands for money to purchase drugs (f) increased accidents due to impaired driving caused by substance use, such as loss of consciousness and reckless speeding (g) drug-related crimes like theft or harming others for money to buy drugs (h) financial issues, including threat of violence due to failure to repay drug-related debts and (i) combination drug use is prevalent due and based on personal preferences. Marijuana and inhalants are used together or as alternatives when unable to procure other narcotics. Overall risk escalates if the drug used involves injections or is unclean, sharing needles and leading to infections. Long-term drug users may experience mental health issues and depression.