Novel Strategies in Drug Concealment

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Drug concealment is a widespread tactic used by drug traffickers and distributors to hide their illegal cargo when transporting it within and across borders. Physical concealment – occluding visibility of the contents – is one of the simplest and most widely used methods. Imaging concealment – the attempt to avoid detection by coating drugs with layers or containers that reduce or impair interaction with electromagnetic detection techniques – is important when surveillance equipment, such as X-rays, is used. Drug traffickers may also attempt to carry drugs though body packing, i.e. ingesting or inserting drug packets into body cavities, which can represent a major health risk for those undertaking. More recently, drug traffickers have started using prodrugs and precursors as a strategy for transporting drugs across borders, which raises new challenges in drug classification and detection. It is important to adequately identify the strategies used, shortcomings in adequate detection, and update legislation to allow for the classification of chemically masked drugs of abuse.

INTRODUCTION

Drug concealment is a widespread tactic used by drug traffickers to hide their illegal cargo when transporting it within and across borders. Because of different demands in crop growth for *Cannabis sativa*, *Erithroxylum coca* and *Papaver somniferum* (from which THC, cocaine and opium are extracted, respectively), some plants

from which drugs are extracted can only grow in a very limited area (World Drug Report, 2022). While for cannabis, local growth is preferred - potentially due to the degradation of herbal material, bulk of finished product and THC converting to Cannabinol (CBN) over time - for drugs such as cocaine, long international travel may be required before reaching the final users.

Still, while 154 countries report illicit crops of Cannabis, for the opium poppy, only 57 have such reports, with 3 countries - Afghanistan, Myanmar and Mexico - responsible for over 95% of global cultivation. For cocaine, which can only grow in a very limited range of temperature and altitude, there are 8 countries that grow it, but Colombia, Peru and Bolivia are virtually responsible for all the global cultivation of the plant (WDR,2022).

In 2020, nearly half of all seizures in the world were cannabis derivatives - herb, resin, plant and others, followed by Amphetamine-type stimulants (17%), opioids and cocaine (11% each) and NPS (1%) (WDR,2022). There is also considerable evidence that illegal drug trafficking is strongly associated with other potentially criminal activities, including terrorism (Omelicheva et al, 2018), human trafficking (Shelley, 2012) and wildlife trafficking (van Uhm et al, 2012).

If we consider illegal drug trafficking a supply chain operation, as stated by Kickert, 1985, attempts to conceal drugs would be classified in the last step: packaging (although that would classically be the case for chemical concealment, in which production is affected). Supply chain follows a series of operations, and when uncertain future environmental development (i.e. potential seizure by police forces), adaptations may need to be made. Illegal drug traffickers must first source the heavily controlled precursors (chemicals or plants), produce the desired drug - or an adequate substitute that can be transported across borders or delivered to consumers - and packaging that can reduce the risk of detection - although that can also be achieved by changing smuggling routes (Basu, 2014).

It is then, especially when border security or monitoring is involved, interesting for traffickers to avoid detection, ensuring their product arrives at the final consumer without losing quality. It also justifies the increases in price as drugs get farther and farther from point of production.

PHYSICAL CONCEALMENT OF DRUGS

Physically concealing illicit drugs may be as simple as covering it in agricultural crops, wrapping it in seemingly innocent packaging or creating layers to hamper potential visual inspection.

While drug traffickers will often choose paths or roads that are not heavily monitored or at least partially covered - by forest foliage, for example - (Medel et al.,