

# DRUGS AND THE INTERNET

Issue 5, October 2015

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To date the availability of illicit drugs in Australia has largely been examined through household surveys and interviews with people who use drugs; indicators such as drug seizures and arrests; and analyses of hospital admissions and drug-related deaths. Over the past decade there has been an increasing awareness and interest in online marketplaces as a source for discussion about and purchase of drugs (Walsh, 2011). The advent of the Silk Road in 2011, as an online marketplace, broadened out the availability of new psychoactive substances (NPS) and other more conventional illicit substances (such as cannabis and MDMA). After the closure of the Silk Road in October 2013, multiple new marketplaces emerged to take its place (Van Buskirk, Roxburgh, Farrell, & Burns, 2014). The closure of Silk Road 2.0 and a large international law enforcement operation in November 2014 (dubbed Operation Onymous) have seen major changes in remaining dark net marketplaces. In addition to this, threats such as hacking attacks and exit scams continue to cause disarray in dark net markets.

This bulletin is the fifth in a series by Drug Trends that provides analysis of trends over time in the availability and type of substances sold via the internet to Australia. The current bulletin reports for the time period January 2015 to June 2015.

## Key findings

- The largest marketplace identified in the previous bulletin, Evolution, **was revealed to be an exit scam**, with moderators leaving with up to \$12 million worth of customers' Bitcoins.
- The current monitoring period saw **considerable downtime across marketplaces**, in which markets were not able to be accessed. This appeared to be largely due to attacks from rival marketplaces, marketplace concerns over security and other unknown reasons.
- **Agora and Nucleus** were the largest marketplaces at the end of the monitoring period by number of unique retailers.
- **Agora closed for trading on the 25th of August** due to concerns around vulnerabilities in the TOR. Marketplace moderators asked all vendors and buyers to finalise transactions and withdraw money as quickly as possible. To date Agora has not re-opened.
- Across the three largest marketplaces during the monitoring period, **cannabis**,

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**pharmaceuticals, MDMA, cocaine and methamphetamine** were the five most commonly sold substances across all marketplaces, with NPS popularity slightly declining.

- **Fifteen marketplaces** were actively monitored during this period, and seven of these marketplaces were first identified during this time.
- By June 2015, **four of these marketplaces had closed**, either as a result of scams, or various other reasons, reinforcing the volatility of these marketplaces.

### METHODS USED IN THIS BULLETIN

#### *'Surface Web' Monitoring*

The methodology for monitoring the 'surface web' was adapted from the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction outlined in Solberg, Sedefov, and Griffiths (2011). 'Surface web' sites are those that are registered with search engines, and hence can be identified using tools such as Google web searches. Retailers were located by using a generic list of search terms (e.g. "herbal highs", "research chemicals", "legal ecstasy", etc.) on the Zoo search engine (<http://www.zoo.com>).

Expanding on the above methodology employed in previous bulletins, online forums discussing NPS use were also monitored for mention of surface web retailers that offered NPS for sale.

Once retailers were identified, availability of selling and shipping to Australia was confirmed and the substances on offer were recorded. Searches were conducted monthly from January 2015 until June 2015, between the 15th and the 25th of each month. Searches were ceased once saturation point was determined, i.e. when no new retailers were returned within the first 100 search results for each search term. Retailers identified in previous searches were revisited and current activity confirmed, including current availability of substances for sale.

#### *Dark Web Marketplace ('Dark Web') Monitoring*

Dark net marketplaces were accessed weekly using a dedicated domestic user account. Exhaustive snapshots of each accessible marketplace were taken, including information on retailer name, listing description and, where possible, country of origin. Substance listings were placed into one of sixteen mutually exclusive categories – cannabis, cocaine, GHB, illicit opioids, ketamine, LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide), magic mushrooms, MDMA (3,4-methylenedioxy-methamphetamine), methamphetamine, NPS (new psychoactive substances), pharmaceuticals, PIEDs (performance and image enhancing drugs), precursors, synthetic cannabinoids, tobacco and weight loss. See Table 6 in Appendix A for a detailed description of the categories of substances available on dark net marketplaces.

The monitoring methods employed aim to replicate consumer access to these marketplaces. That is, repeated attempts are made to access a marketplace across the monitoring day, but if that marketplace cannot be accessed, i.e. is 'down', it will not be accessed on the following day. In addition, partial snapshots are not entered into the dataset. If a marketplace is inaccessible, or only partially accessible for whatever reason, it will be treated as missing

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data. A marketplace may be down for multiple reasons, including server outages, distributed denial of service attacks (DDoS; in which multiple sources are used to generate a large amount of traffic to an online service, thereby overwhelming its servers), law enforcement seizures, exit scams and hacking attacks. If a marketplace is down at one time point, unless there is reason to believe it will not return (in the case of seizures or exit scams), attempts will be made to access it at the next time point.

Marketplaces were excluded from monitoring if they had less than one hundred listings for sale, or only one retailer operating on the marketplace. Marketplaces that were language and country specific were also excluded as many did not ship to Australia.

### RESULTS

#### *Number of Retailers*

##### *Surface Web*

The number of retailers on the surface web selling to Australia appeared to increase over the current monitoring period (38 retailers in January 2015 to 48 in June 2015). These numbers represent an overall decrease from the previous bulletin and in light of this surface web monitoring methods will be reassessed before the next bulletin. Specifically, forum discussion will be monitored for the identification of new retailers as well as investigating websites that list chemically specific substances for synthesis.

**Table 1 :** Number of unique Retailers Operating on the Surface Web by Time Point for Silk Road searches.

Month	Jan 15	Feb 15	Mar 15	Apr 15	May 15	Jun 15
Number of surface web retailers	38	41	44	46	48	48

##### *Dark Web Marketplaces*

##### *Escrow Systems*

Although the Dark net marketplaces identified in this bulletin sold largely comparable products in terms of illicit substances and NPS, many offered additional products such as erotica, hacking tools, drug paraphernalia and occasionally firearms. In addition, these marketplaces varied in transaction processes, with around half operating on a multi-signature escrow system, and half operating on a centralised escrow system. Escrow is the process of holding funds for a transaction until that transaction is completed and the product delivered, at which point the funds are released (Christin, 2012). In a centralised escrow system, funds are released when the buyer indicates that the product was received, with funds being stored in the marketplace itself. Therefore, if a marketplace's security is compromised, so too are the funds held in escrow. With multi-signature escrow, multiple signatures (encrypted 'keys' used to access funds) are

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required to release the funds. Two out of three participants in the sale (i.e. the buyer, the seller and the marketplace) must provide their specific keys for the funds to be released. This means that even when a marketplace's security is compromised, funds may still not be released without the approval of two of the three involved parties.

### *Evolution Exit Scam*

On the 18th of March, 2015, Evolution marketplace went offline and ceased all trading. This was subsequently revealed to be a large-scale exit scam, in which moderators of the market stole all customer BitCoins that were currently being held in escrow. An estimated twelve million US dollars' worth of BitCoins were stolen in this way, causing considerable backlash and uncertainty in the dark net community (DeepDotWeb, 2015).

### *Marketplaces Monitored*

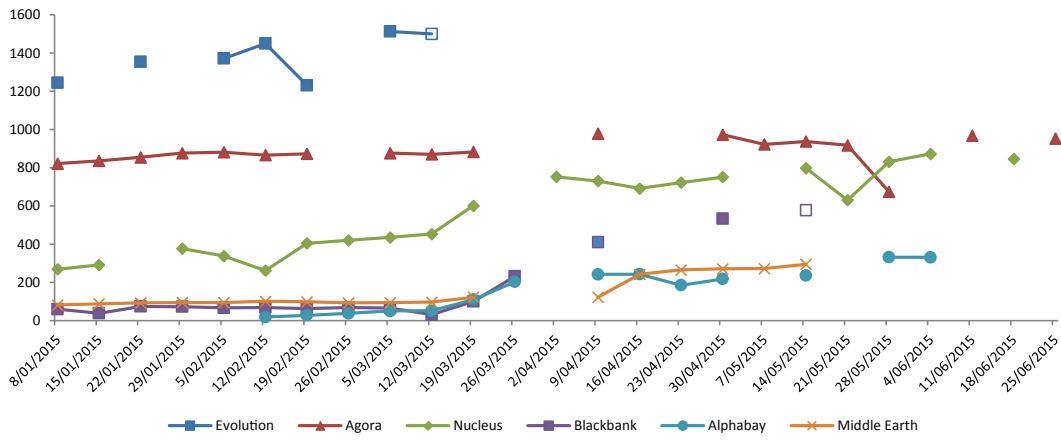
The marketplaces over the current monitoring period, from January to June 2015, along with their current status, and transaction process are outlined in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Classification and Status of Marketplaces Active during Monitoring Period.

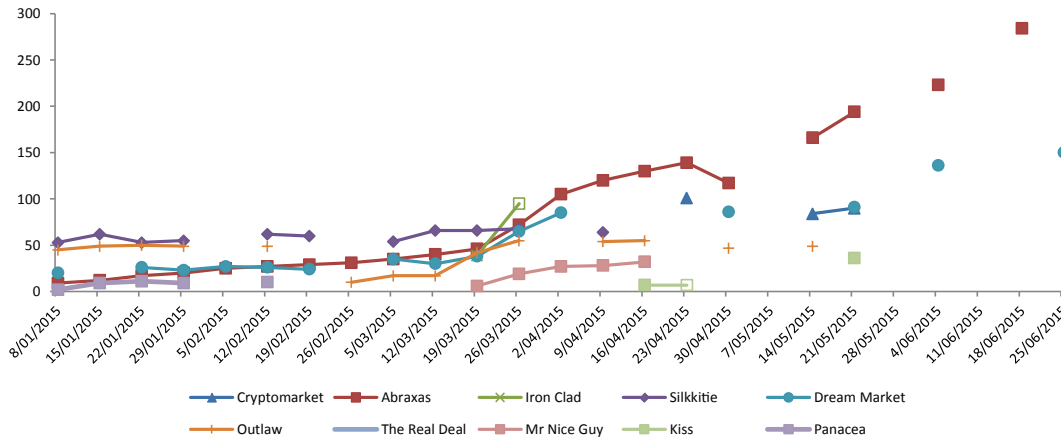
Marketplace	Escrow System	First monitored	Last Monitored	Current Status
<b>Active at Final Time Point</b>				
Agora	Centralised	30/01/2014	Ongoing	Active
Middle Earth	Centralised	7/03/2014	Ongoing	Active
Outlaw	Centralised	29/05/2014	Ongoing	Active
Nucleus	Centralised	30/10/2014	Ongoing	Active
Silkkitie	Centralised	30/10/2014	Ongoing	Active
Dream Market	Centralised	30/10/2014	Ongoing	Active
Abraxas	Centralised	8/01/2015	Ongoing	Active
Alphabay	Multisignature	12/02/2015	Ongoing	Active
Mr Nice Guy	Centralised	19/03/2015	Ongoing	Active
Cryptomarket	Centralised	23/04/2015	Ongoing	Active
The Real Deal	Multisignature	14/05/2015	Ongoing	Active
<b>Closed During Monitoring Period</b>				
Evolution	Multisignature	27/02/2014	12/03/2015	Exit Scam
Panacea	Multisignature	6/11/2014	12/02/2015	Apparently hacked
Kiss Marketplace	Centralised	16/04/2015	21/05/2015	Apparently hacked
Iron Clad	Centralised	19/03/2015	26/03/2015	Closed for unknown reasons

The total number of retailers on each marketplace at each time point for all monitored dark net marketplaces is shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

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**Figure 1:** Number of retailers across the largest five marketplaces by time point.  
**NB:** missing data points indicate temporary marketplace outages. Empty markers indicate permanent closure of marketplace.



**Figure 2:** Number of retailers across smaller marketplaces by time point.  
**NB:** missing data points indicate temporary marketplace outages. Empty markers indicate permanent closure of marketplace.

Over the current monitoring period, seven new marketplaces were identified and actively monitored, totalling 15 marketplaces over the monitoring period. Of these, four were closed over the same time period, one due to an exit scam, two that were apparently hacked, and one due to unknown reasons. At the end of the monitoring period, the two main marketplaces remaining were Agora and Nucleus, operating at 952 retailers and 845 retailers, respectively. In particular, retailer numbers on Nucleus increased substantially following Operation Onymous, seen in the previous bulletin (Van Buskirk, Roxburgh, Bruno, & Burns, 2015), and this market has further increased in size since this time. For further detail, please see Appendix B for an extended version of Figure 1, with monthly time points dating back to June 2014.

Smaller marketplaces saw an increase in retailer numbers following the closure of Evolution, with Abraxas and Dream Market in particular seeing a large increase in retailer numbers. Abraxas

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increased from 9 retailers at the beginning of the monitoring period to 284 by the final time point, with Dream Market increasing from 20 to 150 retailers. Throughout the monitoring period, there was considerable instability in these marketplaces, with many being inaccessible between March and April 2015. All major marketplaces experienced downtime across the monitoring period, for an average of 6 time points each, ranging from 1 to 14.

### SUBSTANCES FOR SALE

#### Total Substances Available

Table 4 outlines the substances available from the top six marketplaces by origin ranked by the number of unique retailers identified selling each substance. Consistent with previous findings (Van Buskirk, Roxburgh, Bruno, & Burns, 2014), the top three available substances sold by international marketplaces were cannabis, pharmaceuticals and MDMA. This was followed by cocaine, NPS and methamphetamine. This bulletin only includes data from the six largest marketplaces. The ranking of individual substances did not vary greatly across marketplaces, especially among smaller marketplaces, and so it may be assumed the rankings on excluded marketplaces are similar to those seen on marketplaces listed in Table 3. For information on availability across the excluded marketplaces, please contact the lead author.

**Table 3 :** Number of unique retailers selling each substance class on the top six marketplaces in order of total unique retailers across each substance class.

Substance	Agora		Evolution*		Nucleus		Blackbank*		Alphabay		Middle Earth	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Cannabis	949	41%	831	43%	655	42%	295	39%	257	41%	253	45%
Pharmaceuticals	856	37%	696	36%	594	38%	248	33%	236	38%	161	28%
MDMA	636	28%	501	26%	360	23%	157	21%	110	18%	129	23%
Cocaine	490	21%	389	20%	280	18%	127	17%	85	14%	104	18%
Methamphetamine	409	18%	347	18%	243	16%	105	14%	70	11%	69	12%
NPS	373	16%	333	17%	228	15%	98	13%	79	13%	80	14%
Illicit Opioids	230	10%	197	10%	158	10%	101	13%	48	8%	65	11%
LSD	218	9%	176	9%	122	8%	55	7%	24	4%	74	13%
Magic Mushrooms	137	6%	95	5%	88	6%	54	7%	30	5%	42	7%
PIEDs	130	6%	114	6%	52	3%	24	3%	23	4%	12	2%
Ketamine	97	4%	43	2%	59	4%	15	2%	17	3%	22	4%
Weight Loss	65	3%	28	1%	17	1%	2	0%	6	1%	0	0%
GHB	39	2%	26	1%	19	1%	8	1%	7	1%	1	0%
Synthetic Cannabinoids	38	2%	22	1%	9	1%	6	1%	4	1%	7	1%
<b>Total Unique</b>	<b>2306</b>		<b>1916</b>		<b>1546</b>		<b>754</b>		<b>620</b>		<b>566</b>	

**NB:** NPS = New Psychoactive Substances; PIEDs = Performance and Image Enhancing Drugs; Asterisks denote marketplaces that were closed during the monitoring period. Percentages listed reflect the proportion of unique retailers selling each substance class as a percentage of total unique retailers on that marketplace. As retailers often sell multiple substance classes, percentages do not add up to 100%. For a further clarification of the categories used in the above table, please see Appendix B.

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### NPS Available from All Retailers

Table 5 details the ten most commonly sold NPS on the top six marketplaces (ranked by unique retailers selling NPS). The categories of 2C-x, NBOMe family and 5-MeO family (5-methoxy-substituted) were used for clarity as many of these drugs in these categories (e.g. 2C-B, 2C-I, 2C-E in the 2C-x category) are sold in the same form, and are advertised as having similar effects. Synthetic Cannabinoids were collapsed into one category given the large number of variations of these that exist (Ammann, McLaren, Gerostamoulos, & Beyer, 2012). Additionally, synthetic cannabinoids were often sold as blends, consisting of different combinations of many chemicals, making classification more complex. Although forum discussions appear to reveal preferences among users for a number of specific substances, collapsing synthetic cannabinoids provides the most accurate estimation of their popularity on these marketplaces

Drugs from the DMT, 2C-x and NBOMe categories were the most commonly sold, with some variation across marketplaces. This represents a slight change in popularity from previous bulletins in which NBOMe was most commonly sold. Mephedrone remains the fifth most commonly sold NPS, with synthetic cannabinoids slightly more prevalent than in previous bulletins. However, NPS as a category declined overall.

**Table 4 :** Number of retailers from the top six marketplaces selling the ten most common NPS by average rank across all marketplaces.

Substance	Agora		Evolution		Nucleus		Blackbank		Alphabay		Middle Earth	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
DMT	75	23%	52	15%	32	15%	16	16%	11	14%	13	16%
2C-x	77	24%	56	16%	18	8%	14	14%	8	10%	13	16%
NBOMe	51	16%	55	16%	31	15%	20	20%	12	16%	11	13%
Methoxetamine	50	16%	35	10%	34	16%	15	15%	8	10%	9	11%
Mephedrone	46	14%	43	13%	23	11%	7	7%	1	1%	7	9%
Synthetic Cannabinoids	36	11%	22	6%	8	4%	6	6%	4	5%	7	9%
MDA	31	10%	21	6%	13	6%	7	7%	5	6%	10	12%
α-PVP	30	9%	20	6%	10	5%	6	6%	8	10%	4	5%
Dox	21	7%	20	6%	10	5%	8	8%	6	8%	8	10%
Ethylone	28	9%	21	6%	14	7%	6	6%	6	8%	4	5%
<b>Total Unique</b>	<b>320</b>		<b>340</b>		<b>212</b>		<b>99</b>		<b>77</b>		<b>82</b>	

**NB:** Percentages indicate proportion of unique NPS retailers on the listed marketplace, while the final row percentage denotes proportion of all unique retailers on that marketplace. For further information on the substances and categories listed, please see Appendices A and B.



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### SUMMARY

- Considerable downtime was observed across all marketplaces during this monitoring period, indicated the greatest marketplace instability observed over the entire monitoring period of the DNeT system.
- A large scale exit scam by Evolution (the largest marketplace at the time) appears to have been the catalyst for this downtime, with instability increasing after its closure (date).
- The two largest marketplaces operating at the end of the monitoring period were Agora and Nucleus, though both were operating with retailer numbers lower than what was observed for Evolution before it closed.
- As of the 25th of August, Agora closed due to security concerns and it remains to be seen if it will reopen in the future.
- Despite downtime, there was continued growth in smaller marketplaces with increased retailer numbers observed across all of these marketplaces.
- Substances sold across all marketplaces appeared to be consistent with previous bulletins, with cannabis, pharmaceuticals and MDMA most commonly sold.
- The specific types of NPS sold across dark net marketplaces were largely consistent with those observed in earlier bulletins, with NBOMe declining slightly in availability, and synthetic cannabinoids increasing slightly.
- Consistent with previous findings, the most commonly available substances on these marketplaces are largely traditional illicit substances (cannabis and ecstasy) and pharmaceuticals, rather than NPS, reflecting findings from surveys on people who use drugs.

As in previous bulletins, it is not possible from these results to determine how often, and in what amounts, illicit and emerging substances are being purchased online in Australia. The 2014 EDRS report suggested low usage of the internet for purchasing drugs among these participants. Only 7% of the sample had used the internet for their most recent drug purchase, preferring instead to purchase from friends and dealers (Sindicich & Burns, 2014). Consistent with this, published findings from the Global Drug Survey (GDS – an online survey of people who use drugs) also reported that 7% of Australians had purchased drugs on the Silk Road (Barratt, Ferris, & Winstock, 2014).

### IMPLICATIONS

The current monitoring period saw the greatest period of instability across marketplaces observed to date. The closure and exit scam of Evolution on the 18th of March, 2015 appeared to serve as a catalyst for this instability. DDoS attacks targeted multiple marketplaces with varying consumer suspicions as to who was responsible (Bennett, 2015). At least some, if not





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most, of these attacks appear to have been committed as part of a campaign to extract a ransom for their cessation (Cox, 2015).

Although dark net marketplaces are often argued to cause a reduction in street level violence related to the sale of drugs in more traditional drug markets (Ingraham, 2014; Winstock, 2015), it appears that considerable 'digital conflict', such as distributed denial of service attacks and hacking, is occurring on these markets. Although these threats, for the most part, are not aimed at the consumer, the level of conflict over digital territory and market share is tangible. Extortion by parties external to the market is an interesting development, and one not dissimilar to traditional drug markets. In traditional markets, organised crime networks may seek to extract illegal rents from participating parties within the community via extortive methods in exchange for 'protection' from the violence they may themselves administer (Calderón, 2015). The rise of 'digital conflict' in the interest of extorting money from dark net markets indicates a greater recognition by external parties of the profits to be gained from these markets. While it is beyond the scope of this bulletin to discuss the potentially far-reaching implications of this development, future research examining the extent to which dark net markets may evolve to emulate established drug markets and trafficking networks in this respect is warranted.

The current bulletin represents the first departure from the trend identified in previous bulletins of an overall increasing number of retailers across all marketplaces over time. Following Operation Onymous in November 2014, Evolution, then the second largest market, saw a dramatic increase in retailer numbers (Van Buskirk et al., 2015), likely due to a dispersion of retailers from closed marketplaces. A similar trend, however, was not seen when Evolution was revealed to be an exit scam, with numbers on the larger markets remaining relatively stable following Evolution's closure. Smaller markets such as Abraxas and Dream Market did see accelerated increases in retailer numbers, though these are still operating at relatively low numbers, and both had considerable downtimes. The next monitoring period will reveal whether these markets will continue to increase in size and if they will surpass the current six larger marketplaces in numbers of retailers. Nonetheless, it appears that dark net marketplaces have not recovered as rapidly in the wake of these major disruptions, as they did following Operation Onymous. These disruptions appear to be having longer lasting effects on consumer confidence.

Given the rapid rate at which dark net marketplaces appear and subsequently close, continued monitoring of these markets is critical. Future bulletins in this series will continue to provide timely and accurate updates on the state of dark net marketplaces and seek to assess their impact on traditional street marketplaces, as well as the impact of the Internet as a whole on illicit drug use in Australia. Future monitoring will incorporate qualitative analysis of forum discussion to assess changes in discussion themes in the wake of disruptions and the evolution of marketplaces overall.

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## Appendix A: Chemical classification of substances and explanation of categories used in this bulletin

**Table 5 :** Chemical classification of mentioned NPS

NPS	Category	Subcategory
2C-x	Phenethylamine	Psychedelic
5-MeO Family	Tryptamine	Psychedelic
α-PVP	Other Stimulant	Norepinephrine-Dopamine Reuptake Inhibitor
DMT	Tryptamine	Psychedelic
DOx	Phenethylamine	Psychedelic Amphetamine
Ethylone	Phenethylamine	Entactogen
Mephedrone	Phenethylamine	Amphetamine Type Stimulant
Methoxetamine	Dissociative	Arylcyclohexylamines
Methylone	Phenethylamine	Entactogen
NBOMe Family	Phenethylamine	Psychedelic

**Table 6 :** Glossary of categories and abbreviations used in bulletin

Category	Commonly Available Examples
2C-x	2C-B, 2C-E, 2C-I
5-MeO Family	5-MeO-DMT, 5-MeO-DiPT
Cannabis	Marijuana, hash, edibles (THC infused foods)
DOx	DOI, DOM, DOC
Illicit Opioids	Heroin, Opium
MDMA	MDMA powder, 'Ecstasy' pills
Methamphetamine	Powder (Speed), crystal (Ice)
NBOMe Family	25C-NBOMe, 25I-NBOMe, 25E-NBOMe
Pharmaceuticals	Pharmaceutical Opioids, Benzodiazepines, Sildenafil (Viagra)
PIEDs	Clenbuterol, Nordicor, Biogen
Synthetic Cannabinoids	JWH Family, AM2201, UR144

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Appendix B: Figure 1 extended including data from June to December 2014

