

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Background guide



SNISMUN 2025

**Agenda: Addressing the Rising Proliferation of Synthetic
Drugs**

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Letter from the Executive Board

Dear Delegates,

We are so excited to welcome you to SNIS MUN 2025 and to this year's simulation of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Both of us, having been on the other side of the table as delegates, know exactly how daunting and exhilarating this experience can be. The agenda we chose—Addressing the Rising Proliferation of Synthetic Drugs—is not just another academic exercise. It reflects one of the most pressing issues in global security and public health today, one that cuts across politics, economics, crime, and human suffering.

Synthetic drugs are not confined by geography. They are born in laboratories, not fields, and they can emerge from anywhere a chemist can operate. From fentanyl in North America to methamphetamine in Southeast Asia to Captagon in the Middle East, these substances are destabilizing communities, fueling organized crime, and even financing conflict. Our aim is to push you to analyze this crisis in all its complexity: the health dimension, the criminal networks, the gaps in legal frameworks, and the geopolitical stakes.

As you prepare, remember that MUN is not just about winning arguments but about building coalitions, engaging with different perspectives, and trying to think like a policymaker would. We encourage you to dig deep into your country's policies, question the effectiveness of past UN action, and be bold in proposing new directions. Most of all, we hope you enjoy the experience of debate, negotiation, and learning.

See you in committee,

Sincerely,
Executive Board

What is the United Nations?

The United Nations is an international organisation founded in 1945 to maintain international peace and security, developing friendly relations among nations and promoting social progress, better living standards and human rights by 51 countries. The United Nations has 6 principal organs.

The UN has 4 main purposes:

- 1) To keep peace throughout the world;
- 2) To develop friendly relations among nations;
- 3) To help nations work together to improve the lives of poor people, to conquer hunger, disease and illiteracy, and to encourage respect for each other's rights and freedoms;
- 4) To be a centre for harmonising the actions of nations to achieve these goals.

How to prepare for the Model United Nations?

General Research and Preparation Guidelines:

There are three consistently significant aspects of representative planning: practical, meaningful, and positional preparation. Practical readiness equips representatives with essential tools, including a clear understanding of the rules necessary to perform effectively in committee. The meaningful aspect involves acquiring specific information relevant to the subject areas under discussion. Positional planning requires students to adopt and defend perspectives that are not their own. To support this process, the Executive Board provides three key resources: the Guide to Delegate Preparation, Background Guides, and Position Papers. Together, these materials will ensure that you are fully prepared for the conference. In addition to reading and understanding the provided content, gaining practical experience through debate, resolution drafting, presentations, and similar exercises will greatly enhance your readiness.

Meaningful Preparation

The Background Guides are the result of extensive research and effort by the Executive Board and serve as the foundation for substantive preparation in each committee. We strongly recommend that you read them thoroughly, discuss them with others, and revisit them multiple times. If a delegate has not read and absorbed the information contained in the Background Guide, they will not be able to contribute effectively to the committee's proceedings. Beginning your review of the Background Guides early will allow you to fully understand the topics at hand and begin developing your own ideas. Remember that your role is to act as a policymaker, analyzing the information provided and shaping it into coherent solutions and resolutions. Engaging in discussions with other delegates will further help you refine and expand your ideas. While the Background Guide will form the core of your substantive preparation, independent research remains a valuable, rewarding, and essential component of a successful conference experience.

Positional Preparation

We expect delegates to uphold the position of their assigned country throughout. This is a crucial element of the “international” experience in MUN, as it compels delegates to critically examine the perspectives, challenges, and policies of a nation other than their own at a basic level. It is also one of the more difficult aspects of MUN, as students must confront and set aside their personal biases and national viewpoints in favour of accurate, informed representation. Position papers form the core of positional preparation prior to the conference. Though generally brief, we urge you to dedicate time and effort to researching and writing them thoroughly. Materials provided by the Executive Board are not intended to replace your independent research. Rather, they serve as a starting point, encouraging you to ask critical questions about the issues at hand. The best-prepared delegates are those who treat the provided resources as the foundation of their research and delve deeper into the topic areas. Beyond these materials lies a wide range of information sources, beginning with official UN documents. UN resources often include detailed statistics, reports, and visual data such as charts and graphs, all of which may be useful in deepening your understanding of the issues. Many UN documentation centres maintain comprehensive records of past meetings, and one of the most effective ways to understand your country's position is to observe it articulated directly by its diplomats.

Explicit assets to research include:

- a) Yearbook of the United Nations: The Yearbook serves as a useful starting point for your research. It provides an overview of actions taken on your topic during a given year, along with helpful references to past resolutions and documents.
- b) United Nations Chronicle: This publication offers general information about the workings of the UN. Pay special attention to feature articles related to your topic area, as they provide insights into the issue and the positions of various countries.
- c) UN Document Index: This comprehensive index covers all UN documents and is available in three versions: UNDI (1950–1973), UNDEX (1970–1978), and UNODC (1979–present). Depending on which version you use, you will find subject indexes, country files, and an alphanumeric listing of all published documents. This system is useful because each committee has a unique alphanumeric prefix, enabling you to locate all documents released by a committee in a specific year regardless of the topic.
- d) UN Resolutions: This collection is both important and easy to use. It compiles all resolutions from 1946 onward, allowing you to consult the most recent index to find all resolutions related to your topic that the UN has ever passed.
- e) Other UN Sources: Depending on the subject, additional relevant UN materials may be available, such as books and special reports published by the World Health Organization (WHO). Beyond UN sources, explore your school and local libraries. Check journals, magazines, and newspapers for more current information, and do not hesitate to ask librarians for assistance.
- f) Books: Up-to-date books often provide depth and accuracy that UN documents or periodicals may lack. Be sure to search library catalogs for relevant print materials. However, book research can be time-consuming, so exercise discretion when selecting books.

- g) **Periodicals:** Periodicals are useful for straightforward, current information on topics (resources like Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature and InfoTrack serve as indexes for these materials). However, do not expect them to provide the level of detail necessary for the conference.
- h) **People:** An often-overlooked resource, individuals can greatly assist your research. Consider consulting librarians, experienced delegates, staff advisors, and your committee's Director, Moderator, and Assistant Directors. These individuals can not only help you locate information but may also recommend sources you had not considered. Feel free to contact your committee Director by phone or email.
- i) **Embassies and Consular Offices:** Reach out to the government or consular offices of the country you represent. These offices are usually willing to support your research by providing statistical data and other unclassified information via mail.

Introduction to the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) is the UN's principal body tasked with addressing illicit drugs, organized crime, corruption, and terrorism. Established in 1997 through a merger of the UN Drug Control Programme and the Centre for International Crime Prevention, it operates with a mandate rooted in the major international drug conventions of 1961, 1971, and 1988. The office works closely with the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND), the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), the World Health Organization, INTERPOL, and national governments. Its work spans research, policy development, capacity-building, and technical assistance. UNODC plays a pivotal role in monitoring global drug trends, coordinating law enforcement responses, and balancing the dual imperatives of enforcement and public health.

Introduction to the Agenda

Synthetic drugs represent a distinct challenge from plant-based narcotics. While opium, coca, and cannabis require specific climates, agricultural cycles, and extensive trafficking routes, synthetic drugs can be produced in clandestine laboratories almost anywhere. Their production is cost-effective, scalable, and easily concealed. Unlike heroin or cocaine, synthetic drugs depend heavily on precursor chemicals, many of which have legitimate industrial or pharmaceutical uses. This dual-use nature makes regulation complex.

The categories of synthetic drugs are diverse. Synthetic opioids such as fentanyl, tramadol, and the newer nitazenes pose immense overdose risks due to their potency. Stimulants like methamphetamine and MDMA are tied to both party culture and criminal financing. Synthetic cannabinoids such as “spice” and “K2” often appear in prisons and among marginalized populations. Novel psychoactive substances (NPS) are constantly engineered to evade legal controls, with over 1,200 detected globally since 2009. The agenda is urgent because these drugs not only threaten health but also reshape criminal economies, destabilize regions, and challenge existing international frameworks.

Historical Context

The global fight against synthetic drugs has unfolded in phases that mirror technological change, cultural shifts, and geopolitical dynamics. In the 1960s, LSD, amphetamines, and other psychotropic substances began spreading in Western societies, creating youth-driven countercultures and raising alarm among policymakers. The 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs had little to say on these emerging synthetics, as it was largely designed to regulate opium, coca, and cannabis. By 1971, governments realized the oversight and negotiated the Convention on Psychotropic Substances, which created four schedules to regulate synthetic stimulants, hallucinogens, and depressants. The 1980s saw a dramatic expansion of synthetic drug production. In the United States, biker gangs ran clandestine methamphetamine labs, while in Japan, stimulant abuse reached epidemic levels. At the same time, cocaine dominated Latin American markets, and governments often overlooked meth as a secondary issue. Recognizing the

scale of the problem, the 1988 Convention Against Illicit Traffic went beyond drug scheduling to address precursor chemicals and money laundering, embedding enforcement measures into international law.

By the 1990s, amphetamine-type stimulants such as MDMA became symbols of rave culture in Europe and North America. Nigerian criminal groups emerged as global traffickers, while Myanmar's insurgent groups turned to meth production to finance operations. The 2000s saw tramadol abuse spread through Africa and meth become a fixture in North America and Asia. With the rise of the internet, synthetic drugs also entered the darknet economy, making regulation even harder.

The 2010s were defined by the fentanyl crisis in North America and the explosion of novel psychoactive substances worldwide. China and India emerged as major producers of precursors, while organized crime exploited every gap in enforcement. Today, the proliferation of synthetics is more dangerous than ever. Methamphetamine seizures in Asia reached historic highs, Captagon became a major financing tool in Middle Eastern conflicts, and fentanyl continues to devastate North America. The historical trajectory shows how synthetic drugs adapt faster than law, technology, and political will.

Case Studies

THE U.S. OPIOID AND FENTANYL EPIDEMIC

The United States opioid epidemic illustrates the devastating convergence of corporate negligence, regulatory failure, and organized crime. Beginning in the 1990s, pharmaceutical companies like Purdue Pharma aggressively marketed prescription opioids as safe, leading to widespread over-prescription. As regulation tightened, users shifted to heroin and eventually to fentanyl, a synthetic opioid fifty times more potent. Illicit fentanyl, produced in Chinese labs and trafficked through Mexico, has since saturated the U.S. drug supply. In 2021, over 107,000 Americans died from overdoses, with fentanyl responsible for two-thirds of those deaths. The crisis has overwhelmed healthcare systems, devastated communities, and reshaped national drug policy. The U.S. response has combined enforcement with harm reduction, from cross-border crackdowns with Mexico to

the distribution of naloxone and litigation against pharmaceutical giants. Yet despite billions spent, fentanyl remains the deadliest drug threat in American history, exemplifying how synthetic drugs can overwhelm even the most developed states.

METHAMPHETAMINE IN THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE

The Golden Triangle, long associated with opium, has transformed into the global epicenter of methamphetamine production. Political instability in Myanmar has been the catalyst. Following the 2021 coup, armed groups and militias turned to meth labs as lucrative sources of revenue. The United Wa State Army and other groups manufacture billions of “yaba” tablets and tons of crystal meth annually. These drugs flood Southeast Asia and are trafficked as far as Japan, Australia, and the Middle East. Record seizures—172 tons in 2022 alone—indicate both the scale of production and the resilience of trafficking networks. The cheap price of meth has created public health crises across Thailand and Laos, while profits fuel conflict in Myanmar. ASEAN responses have been limited by corruption and uneven enforcement, making the Golden Triangle not only a health issue but also a threat to regional stability and governance.

CAPTAGON IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Captagon, a synthetic stimulant, has become the defining narcotic of the Middle East and a central feature of its conflicts. Produced primarily in Syria and Lebanon, Captagon is smuggled in staggering quantities to Gulf states, with seizures reaching hundreds of millions of pills annually. Valued at over \$10 billion a year, Captagon is more than a drug—it is a parallel economy sustaining war-torn states. Evidence shows that revenues finance the Syrian regime, Hezbollah, and other armed actors, making Captagon both a health threat and a tool of geopolitical maneuvering. For countries like Saudi Arabia and Jordan, Captagon is both a social crisis and a national security challenge. Seizures have uncovered pills hidden in fruit shipments, cement bags, and industrial equipment, showing the ingenuity of traffickers. Internationally, the Captagon trade illustrates how synthetic drugs finance conflict, evade sanctions, and entrench state and non-state actors in the illicit economy.

Stakeholder Analysis

The United States views synthetic drugs primarily through the lens of public health and national security, with fentanyl framed as an existential crisis. Canada, while facing similar problems, emphasizes harm reduction and decriminalization debates. Mexico, at the heart of trafficking, struggles with cartel power and institutional corruption. China, once the primary source of fentanyl, has tightened controls but remains a key precursor supplier. India, as a pharmaceutical hub, faces scrutiny over tramadol exports and chemical regulation. Russia adopts a punitive approach but faces a growing synthetic opioid problem domestically. The European Union grapples with novel substances and balances harm reduction with enforcement.

Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states face Captagon as a youth crisis and national security threat. Nigeria and Ghana, as West African hubs, battle tramadol and meth while lacking capacity. Myanmar is the production hub of Asia, while Australia and New Zealand experience some of the world's highest meth consumption rates. Each stakeholder brings a mix of domestic vulnerabilities and international responsibilities, making consensus difficult.

Legal Frameworks

International law on synthetic drugs is anchored in the three UN drug conventions. The 1961 Single Convention established the principle of restricting drugs to medical and scientific purposes. The 1971 Psychotropic Convention extended this framework to synthetic substances, introducing scheduling systems. The 1988 Convention Against Illicit Traffic added enforcement obligations, requiring states to criminalize trafficking, regulate precursors, and address money laundering. Yet these frameworks face challenges: scheduling is often too slow to keep pace with new synthetics, enforcement varies by state, and political divides undermine uniformity. The 2016 UNGASS outcome document shifted focus toward treatment, prevention, and proportionality, but implementation has been uneven. CND resolutions in recent years have targeted fentanyl analogues, yet the adaptability of chemists limits their effectiveness. International human rights law, particularly the right to health under the ICESCR, frames the debate over punitive versus public-health approaches.

Previous UN/UNODC Action

UNODC has developed several initiatives to confront synthetic drugs. The annual World Drug Report provides data and trend analysis. The SMART Programme monitors synthetic drug threats in the Asia-Pacific, offering early warning. The Early Warning Advisory tracks novel psychoactive substances worldwide. UNGASS 2016 attempted to rebalance the global approach by incorporating public health measures, but divisions between enforcement-heavy and health-focused states persist. While there have been notable successes, such as improved data collection and precursor tracking, failures include slow scheduling processes, inadequate funding for developing states, and the inability to stem the fentanyl crisis in North America.

Key Issues to be Addressed

Delegates must grapple with the dual-use nature of precursors, which complicates regulation. They must consider how to police the darknet and postal services without infringing privacy. The divide between harm reduction and punishment remains unresolved, with Western states promoting health-based approaches while others demand harsher enforcement. The financing of conflict through synthetic drugs, particularly Captagon and meth, requires innovative responses. Developing states lack forensic labs and enforcement capacity, raising questions of equity in global responses. Above all, the question is how international law can keep pace with an ever-changing synthetic drug market.

QARMA

- 1) How can international legal frameworks be updated to keep pace with the rapid evolution of synthetic drugs?
- 2) What global mechanisms can effectively regulate and monitor precursor chemicals without disrupting legitimate pharmaceutical and industrial use?
- 3) To what extent should harm reduction strategies—such as naloxone access, safe consumption sites, and decriminalization—be endorsed at the international level?
- 4) How should the UN and member states address the financing of conflicts and armed groups through the trafficking of synthetic drugs such as Captagon and methamphetamine?
- 5) What support systems (financial, technological, and institutional) should be provided to developing countries to strengthen their enforcement and treatment capacity?

Annex: Relevant Documents

The 1961, 1971, and 1988 Conventions; UNGASS 2016 outcome document; CND resolutions on fentanyl; INCB annual reports; WHO guidelines on synthetic opioids; ASEAN and EU regional drug strategies.

Further Reading

UNODC World Drug Report 2023; INCB Precursor Report 2022; EMCDDA publications; ASEAN drug strategy documents; WHO reports on opioids.