



focus on

by Rebecca Chambers



SPICE is now the most popular drug in UK prisons

What the research tells us:

There has been significant concern about the rapid rise in the use of New Psychoactive Substances (NPS) in prisons over the last 18 months. Spice, along with Black Mamba – synthetic cannabinoids (SC) often promoted as an ‘alternative’ to cannabis - are now the most popular drugs in UK prisons, with 1 in 3 prisoners having reported using them in the previous month.ⁱ

Evidence suggests that use of SC is developing into a serious problem in UK prisons, with experts warning that their widespread availability is fuelling an increase in violence, bullying and debts to dealers within British prisons.ⁱⁱ On the 26th May 2016, the Psychoactive Substances Act came into force. The Act prohibits the production and sale of NPS, and is punishable by up to 2 years in prison.

Why the popularity?

- ✦ Conventional **drug testing methods cannot detect synthetic cannabis**ⁱⁱⁱ
- ✦ NPS are **relatively affordable** in prisons, making them more accessible^{iv}
- ✦ **Alleviates boredom** and helps prisoners cope with the stresses of prison life
- ✦ Some prisoners do not see themselves as having a problem with their usage, making them more reluctant to engage with substance misuse teams

What are the effects?

- ✦ **Opioid-like withdrawal symptoms**
- ✦ Exponential increase of **seizures**; there were 737 seizures in 2014, compared to 15 in 2010ⁱ
- ✦ Up until May 2016, there had been 39 NPS related **deaths** in British prisonsⁱ
- ✦ **Physical health problems** which are often heightened by the inconsistency of Spice batches, making the effects unpredictableⁱⁱ
- ✦ **Psychological effects** such as paranoia and delusions, previously only associated with use of strong illicit drugs. Spice can exaggerate underlying mental health problems such as anxiety and self-harmingⁱ
- ✦ **Violence & Bullying** - including forcing others to overdose for entertainmentⁱⁱⁱ

It is clear that research into the effects of NPS in prisons is crucial to determining successful management of the problems associated with these drugs. Prisons and substance misuse services must work together to develop longer-term treatment to provide clinical and psychosocial support / harm reduction services and peer-led interventions, such as training, advice and mentoring.

ⁱ Spice: The Bird Killer, User Voice, May 2016.

ⁱⁱ Changing patterns of substance misuse in adult prisons and service responses, HM Inspectorate of Prisons, December 2015

ⁱⁱⁱ The true horrors of using NPS in prisons, Russell Webster, June 2016

^{iv} NPS in prisons: A toolkit for prison staff, Public Health England, December 2015

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