

Policy brief: Addressing the emerging threat of clandestine drug laboratories in Kenya: Evidence from wastewater analysis study report

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1. Executive summary

This policy brief presents critical evidence from Kenya's first national wastewater analysis (WWA) study, revealing a significant and previously unconfirmed threat: the presence of small-scale clandestine laboratory activity related to the illicit production of synthetic stimulants. The study, commissioned by National Authority for Campaign Against Alcohol & Drug Abuse (NACADA), detected specific chemical markers in wastewater indicating the local synthesis of methamphetamine, MDMA (ecstasy), and synthetic cathinones (bath salts). This finding represents a major shift in Kenya's drug landscape, moving beyond transit and consumption towards domestic production. Immediate, intelligence-led action is required to identify and dismantle these laboratories, control precursor chemicals, and prevent the escalation of synthetic drug availability.

2. The policy problem: Local synthetic drug production

For years, Kenya has been recognized as a transit hub for illicit drugs like heroin and cocaine. However, the NACADA study provides the first empirical evidence that a new, more complex threat is emerging: the local production of synthetic drugs.

Key evidence from the report

- i. Direct Wastewater Markers: Laboratory analysis of wastewater samples identified "propane 2-nitro (2-nitropropane)", a specific byproduct of the reductive amination synthesis process. This compound is a direct chemical signature of methamphetamine production and is not associated with drug consumption.

- ii. Confirmation of local activity: The study explicitly states that it revealed “evidence of small-scale clandestine laboratory activity related to illicit drug production of synthetic stimulants especially methamphetamine, MDMA and synthetic cathinones”.
- iii. Emerging synthetic substances: The same wastewater analysis confirmed the presence of methamphetamine, MDMA, and synthetic cathinones in the community, corroborating the production evidence.
- iv. Shift in drug supply dynamics: The synthesis of these drugs close to or within destination markets offers criminals advantages such as lower operational costs, fewer impediments to production, and a reduced risk of detection compared to traditional plant-based drug trafficking.

This is not a consumption issue. The existence of clandestine labs introduces new risks, including:

- i. Increased local supply and accessibility: Local production can lead to cheaper, more readily available, and potentially more potent synthetic drugs.
- ii. Toxic Waste and environmental hazards: Clandestine labs generate significant volumes of toxic chemical waste, which is often improperly disposed of, posing severe risks to public health and the environment.
- iii. Escalation of violence and organized crime: The establishment of production facilities often attracts more sophisticated and violent criminal networks.

3. Root causes and contributing factors

While the report focuses on detection, it implies several factors enabling this emerging threat:

- i. Diversion of precursor chemicals: The local synthesis of methamphetamine and MDMA requires precursor chemicals. Weak monitoring and control of these chemicals’ importation and distribution facilitate their diversion to illicit labs.
- ii. Simple synthetic chemistry: The report notes that the global emergence of new psychoactive substances (NPS) has been driven by “simple synthetic chemistry,” which is also applicable to the local context.
- iii. Evolving criminal tactics: Criminal enterprises are adapting to law enforcement pressure on traditional drug supply chains by shifting to synthetic production, which can be more flexible and concealed.

4. Policy recommendations

Based on the report's findings, the following recommendations are proposed to counter the threat of clandestine laboratories;

- i. Adopt Intelligence-led surveillance to identify and dismantle clandestine laboratories;
- ii. Implement strict monitoring and control of precursor chemicals;
- iii. Strengthen forensic and toxicological laboratory capacity; and
- iv. Establish a national wastewater drug surveillance and Early Warning System (EWS).

5. Conclusion

The detection of clandestine laboratory markers in Kenya's wastewater is a game-changing finding. It signals a dangerous evolution in the national drug crisis, moving beyond consumption and transit to local manufacturing. This threat requires a decisive, multi-agency response. By adopting intelligence-led policing, controlling precursor chemicals, enhancing forensic capabilities, and institutionalizing wastewater surveillance, Kenya can dismantle these illicit operations before they become entrenched, protecting public health, safety, and security. Failure to act will likely lead to a surge in the availability of highly addictive and dangerous synthetic drugs, with devastating consequences for Kenyan communities, particularly its youth.