

Drug gangs boost cocaine purity to compete with internet highs

EXCLUSIVE

Max Daly

Drug gangs are stepping up the purity of cocaine in response to competition from the new generation of stimulants such as mephedrone, according to Britain's organised crime agency.

Analysis of police seizures between April last year and June this year reveals the average purity of powder cocaine seized by police has jumped from a record low of 17 per cent last year to 26 per cent this year.

The Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) said it believed the upturn in purity – to 2008 levels – is a direct result of high-end British dealers reacting to the explosion of mephedrone onto the drug scene last year.

The cathinone, known also as m-cat and meow meow, was sold as a cheap and legal substitute for cocaine and ecstasy. It was seen by drug users as a more potent and reliable high than cocaine, because it was not heavily cut with inert substances such as benzocaine.

Despite being banned in April, mephedrone and a string of other legal and illegal stimulants remain widely available over the internet and on the streets. Seizures of mephedrone have continued to rise after the ban. "There has been an impact from the competition of so-called legal highs," said SOCA's Head of Drug Intelligence, Nigel Kirby, told *Druglink*. He

added that dealers accepted that the new generation of stimulants had become popular because cocaine was cut to the bone. "To some extent the market has realised that it has cut cocaine below an acceptable level for most users."

SOCA said the rise in purity was also likely to have been influenced by a clampdown by police on the movement of cocaine cuttings agents and increased supply of cocaine into the UK caused by gangs finding new routes and methods of smuggling. "Law enforcement action against the cutting agent trade has raised the cost and reduced the availability of substances such as lignocaine and benzocaine," said Kirby. "A slight increase in the availability of cocaine had been predicted due to observed adjustments by organised crime groups to successful disruptions in the international supply chain."

Cocaine seized at customs has risen slightly in purity, from around 57 per cent last year to 64 per cent this year.

Until last year, cocaine purity had been falling steadily from levels of over 60 per cent in the 1980s. But rather than follow the trend set by amphetamine, which over the last decade has fallen to an average purity of under 10 per cent, cocaine purity appears to be on the rise after hitting rock bottom.



Purity on the rise: analysis by the Forensic Science Service shows cocaine now has an average 26 per cent purity compared to 17 per cent last year

DRUGS QUOTE

It was a backstage secret. To be able to make two shows a day, maybe 500 miles apart. You need some sustenance and it's not just food and water.

Rolling Stone Keith Richards explains on the Andrew Marr Show how the band got into drugs

All jobs carry an element of risk, and I am conscious of that, but I also know that I have to do something to combat the problems we face

Marisol Valles, a 20-year-old criminology student, has been made police chief in a border town in the northern state of Chihuahua, one of Mexico's most violent areas.

I haven't lived an admirable life, but I'm trying to do the right thing here. For everyone.

Longterm heroin user Alan Mitchell tells the Daily Mail, why he accepted £200 from Project Prevention to get sterilised.

I'm just doing this to put the air bubbles out of it. If an air bubble goes into your brain, that's you gone. Now what I need to do is pull my sleeve up.

Robyn, a 16-year-old homeless drug user, filmed injecting heroin for a Channel 4 documentary, True Vision.