

Treat synthetic cannabinoids as public health issue, report says

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Credit: Ryutaro Tsukata from Pexels

A rise in the use of synthetic cannabinoids (syncans) in Houston has prompted law enforcement officials to target sellers and users of the drug. However, taking a public-health-based approach toward curbing

the use of syncans, which have caused dangerous and sometimes fatal side effects in extreme cases, may be a more effective use of city resources, according to a new report from a drug policy expert at Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy.

Marketed as "legal weed," syncans are not marijuana, according to the report's author, Katharine Neill, the Baker Institute's Alfred C. Glassell III Postdoctoral Fellow in Drug Policy. Known by a variety of names, including Kush, K2 and Spice and often sold in colorful packaging, syncans are manufactured chemical compounds that are usually sprayed on plant material to be smoked, but they are also available in liquid form. They are theoretically supposed to behave like tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the primary psychoactive element in cannabis, but in reality they tend to have a much broader and more intense array of side effects than natural cannabis, Neill said.

"Houston, like other cities across the U.S., has been significantly affected by rising syncan misuse," Neill wrote. "Users are attracted to the drugs because they are inexpensive and undetectable by traditional drug testing methods, yet they elicit a powerful high. To a nonuser, the drugs can only be seen as trouble; their effects are unpredictable, sometimes leading to violent reactions or medical complications, and they appear to offer no redeeming benefits, medical or otherwise. They have been a challenge for first responders, who have had to divert resources from other calls to respond to syncan users. Their use in public spaces, such as (Houston's) Hermann Park, has made their adverse effects visible, causing consternation among the broader public, which is disturbed by the sight of homeless people and others walking in the street and behaving erratically."

Neill's paper, "Fake Weed, Real Consequences: Effective Strategies for Addressing Synthetic Cannabinoids in Houston," reviews the current state of syncan use and some of the factors that have led to the

popularity of these designer drugs. It also examines the extent of the syncan problem in Houston and the city's response to date, which, so far, has emphasized targeting users and sellers through [law enforcement](#) resources, Neill said. "The city's efforts to crack down on businesses selling syncans should be commended, as should its pilot Public Intoxication Team," Neill wrote. "Yet there are opportunities for improvement."

A 2014 ban on possession, manufacture and sale of syncans issued by the Houston City Council has had little effect on problematic use, Neill found. While data are limited, anecdotal evidence suggests problematic syncan use has been increasing. The Houston Recovery Center reports that between April and October 2014, around the time the city ban was passed, only 3 percent of the center's admissions were for syncan use; two years later that figure had surged to 28 percent of admissions. Between September 2015 and June 30, 2016, nearly half of the 3,000 drug-overdose calls that the city's emergency medical services received were syncan-related, straining emergency response resources.

Neill outlines several ways in which Houston can better respond to syncan use. These include increasing data collection to inform policy decisions; starting a public awareness campaign founded on partnerships with community organizations; renewing and expanding the Public Intoxication Team, which has demonstrated success in responding to syncan use; decriminalizing syncan possession and use; and diverting individuals found in possession or under the influence of syncans to the Houston Recovery Center.

"Ultimately, this report urges Houston policymakers to adopt a pragmatic, public-health-based response to syncan use," Neill wrote. "The failures of the war on drugs should serve as a cautionary tale about adhering to a more punitive approach: Increasing penalties for drug use does not deter use, nor does it make the public safer, but it does waste

taxpayer money and harms the vulnerable communities it targets."

More information: Fake Weed, Real Consequences: Effective Strategies for Addressing Synthetic Cannabinoids in Houston:
[www.bakerinstitute.org/media/f ... SynthCann-030117.pdf](http://www.bakerinstitute.org/media/f...SynthCann-030117.pdf)

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