

# Researcher warns of spread of homemade steroids

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Bryan Denham is Campbell Professor of Sports Communication and faculty in Clemson's communication department. Credit: Clemson University

A Clemson University researcher recently published insights into homemade steroids and steroid trafficking through a study of federal court cases. The research details why homemade steroids became popular and how online tools and cryptocurrency have allowed for their rapid spread.

Bryan Denham, Campbell Professor of Sports Communication in Clemson's communication department, recently published the research in *Contemporary Drug Problems*. Considering the impact of these homemade drugs has been felt nationwide, Denham said it is imperative that athletes at all levels in every sport realize what they can easily get online may still be putting their athletics careers—and their lives—in jeopardy.

"From the standpoint of public health, purchasers of black-market steroids should understand that while homebrewers may produce actual steroids, the [substances](#) may contain unintended contaminants and inconsistent levels of active ingredients," Denham said. "In that regard, purchasing steroids is no different than buying other illicit substances, especially on the Internet."

Denham's research examined 63 [cases](#) involving 184 defendants in 41 U.S. District Courts across a five-year period beginning Jan. 1, 2013, and ending Dec. 31, 2017. In 27 of the 63 cases, defendants had obtained steroids or raw materials from the Far East to increase both volume and profit.

Denham said that when the Internet became publicly accessible, underground sellers quickly capitalized on the technology to develop a new delivery system. This caused widespread counterfeiting and many sellers therefore began to purchase their own pill presses to manufacture steroids and other substances. Homebrewers currently use bodybuilding websites and chat rooms, as well as word of mouth, to sell their products.

In one of the cases Denham examined, defendants sold steroids and other substances using the [drug](#) marketplaces Silk Road and Evolution Marketplace, ensuring anonymity in transactions through Bitcoin. The 2017 case involved 1,300 transactions and gross proceeds of \$1.9 million, with substances including methamphetamine, hydrocodone,

cocaine, marijuana and steroids.

Denham also discussed Internet pharmacies, noting that on at least two occasions, the United States Government Accountability Office has investigated rogue pharmacies operating on the Internet. In 2014, the office estimated that 36,000 rogue pharmacies operated internationally, using sophisticated methods to ship FDA-unapproved drugs, controlled substances and counterfeit pharmaceuticals to the U.S.

"When authorities succeed in shutting down one source of illicit drugs, others quickly emerge," Denham said.

Discussing geographic dispersion, Denham said the South Atlantic Division, one of nine divisions with district courts that heard steroid cases, accounted for approximately one in four cases. Defendants appeared in court at a time when law-enforcement agencies had cracked down on Florida "pill mills," known for dispensing large amounts of prescription drugs in cash-only transactions.

In fact, as part of his study, Denham came across the high-profile Biogenesis case in which an individual posing as a physician prescribed performance-enhancing drugs to high-school athletes and high-profile Major League Baseball players.

Paradoxically, while law-enforcement agencies experienced some success in cracking down on pill mills, Denham said nearly one in five cases he studied involved former law-enforcement personnel as defendants. Denham said there is often an unstated assumption that those in management ranks will not ask questions, and if the problem is left unresolved, buyers of steroids can very quickly turn into future sellers.

"The use of steroids in law enforcement does occur, which of course is a problem because obtaining steroids without a prescription from a

licensed physician is illegal," Denham said. "Additionally, someone who initially buys the drugs from that person may begin selling, and that may lead to selling other substances."

In the United States, anabolic [steroids](#) have been classified as Schedule III Controlled Substances since 1990. This means the substances have limited medicinal use and require a prescription from a licensed physician.

Denham stressed the importance of keeping the findings of his study in appropriate perspective, as the cases he analyzed appeared in federal district courts across a five-year period. Cases are also prosecuted in courts at the state level, and most states have their own policies on illicit substances.

**More information:** Bryan E. Denham, Anabolic Steroid Cases in United States District Courts (2013–2017), *Contemporary Drug Problems* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/0091450918800823](https://doi.org/10.1177/0091450918800823)

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