

Overview of the “ecstasy” market

Compared to methamphetamine, the “ecstasy”³¹ market in East and Southeast Asia remains small. Europe remains a main source for “ecstasy” flows into the region. However, “ecstasy” manufacturing facilities continue to be found in the region.

The use of “ecstasy” in the region continues to be limited

In 2021, four countries in the region provided expert perception on “ecstasy” use, with Cambodia and Singapore reporting increases in use, while Malaysia and Thailand reported decreases. Meanwhile, the number of people who were admitted to treatment for “ecstasy” use remains low. Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand all reported that less than one per cent of drug treatment admissions were due to “ecstasy”, while in Singapore, it was below two per cent.³²

Drop in seizures of “ecstasy” in East and Southeast Asia

Preliminary data for 2021 shows a significant drop in the amount of “ecstasy” seized in the region, both in East Asia and Southeast Asia from the equivalent of 8.9 million tablets in 2020 to 3.7 million tablets in 2021. In East Asia, although seizures of the drug increased in the Republic of Korea and Japan, the amount of “ecstasy” seized in China, including Hong Kong, declined sharply compared to the previous year.³³ As in previous years, “ecstasy” seizures in Southeast Asia were primarily driven by Indonesia and Malaysia, where the combined amounts seized declined significantly from 5.2 million tablets in 2020 to only 1.8 million in 2021.³⁴ However, increases in “ecstasy” seizures were observed in Myanmar, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, and Thailand.³⁵

31 “Ecstasy” tablets sold in East and Southeast Asia may contain a range of substances in varying composition and quantities in addition or instead of MDMA.

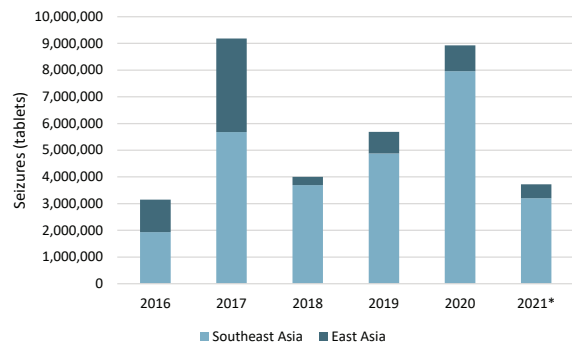
32 See the Cambodia, Singapore, Thailand, and Philippines country chapters for more information.

33 Official communication with NNCC, March 2022; Japan Customs, “Summary of Japan Customs’ Enforcement in 2021”, February 2022.

34 Official communication with BNN and NADA, April 2022.

35 See the Myanmar, Philippines, Republic of Korea, and Thailand country chapters for more information.

Figure 17. Seizures of “ecstasy” tablets in East and Southeast Asia, 2016-2021

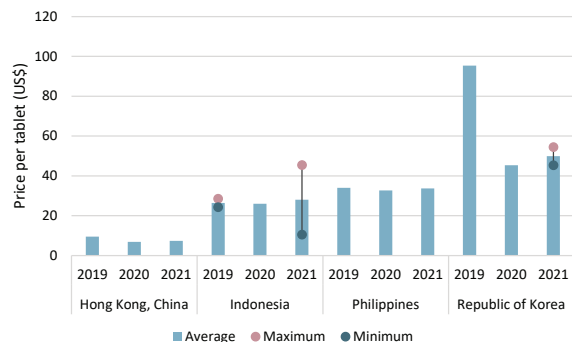


Sources: DAINAP; UNODC, responses to the ARQ; Official communication with national drug agencies in the region, February-May 2022.

Note: * Data are preliminary. Figures reported other than the number of tablets were converted into estimated tablet equivalents at 300 mg per tablet.

Despite the fluctuations in the amount of “ecstasy” seized over the past few years, retail prices of the drug have not changed significantly, except for the Republic of Korea, where the retail price per tablet halved in 2020 and remained stable through 2021.³⁶

Figure 18. Typical retail prices of “ecstasy” tablets in Hong Kong, China, Indonesia, the Philippines, and the Republic of Korea, 2019-2021 (US\$)



Sources: Official communication with the National Narcotics Control Commission (NNCC) of China, BNN of Indonesia, DDB of the Philippines, and SPO of the Republic of Korea, March-April 2022.

Europe continues to be a prominent source of “ecstasy” trafficked into the region.³⁷ In addition to “ecstasy” tablets trafficked from Europe, Thai authorities also reported “ecstasy” tablets trafficked through its northeastern provinces bordering Lao PDR.³⁸

36 Official communication with SPO, March 2022.

37 BNN, “Latest situation on synthetic drugs and responses to the threats in Indonesia”, presented at the Global SMART Programme Regional Workshop, November-December 2021; Official communication with ONCB, May 2022.

38 Bilateral meeting with Thai authorities in northeastern provinces, December 2021.

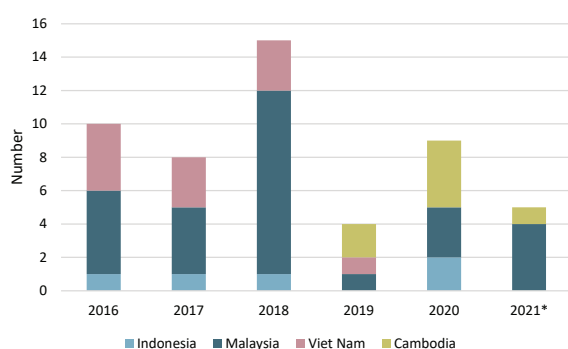
Growing scale of “ecstasy” manufacture in the region

Though the “ecstasy” market in East and Southeast Asia is small, there has been continued production of the drug in region, notably in Cambodia and Malaysia. Cambodia, especially, has been increasingly targeted for the illicit manufacture of synthetic drugs, including “ecstasy”.

In July 2021, a drug production facility was dismantled in Cambodia, where 102 kg of MDMA was seized, together with 39.9 kg of mephedrone and over 1,114 kg of chemical substances. Incidentally, tableting tools found at the site matched with the physical characteristics and designs of “ecstasy” tablets found in the region.³⁹ Moreover a tableting tool matching the design for a pharmaceutical product⁴⁰ was found. This shows the flexibility of organized crime groups in using facilities to produce multiple drug types.⁴¹

While the number of manufacturing facilities dismantled does not indicate the scale of manufacture, it can still provide a picture on the changing dynamic of manufacture. The number of “ecstasy” manufacturing facilities dismantled in Viet Nam and Indonesia declined in the past two years, while manufacture in Malaysia seems to be re-emerging.⁴²

Figure 19. Number of clandestine “ecstasy” manufacturing facilities dismantled in Southeast Asia, 2016-2021



Sources: Official communication with BNN of Indonesia, NADA of Malaysia, SODC of Viet Nam and NACD of Cambodia, March-April 2022.

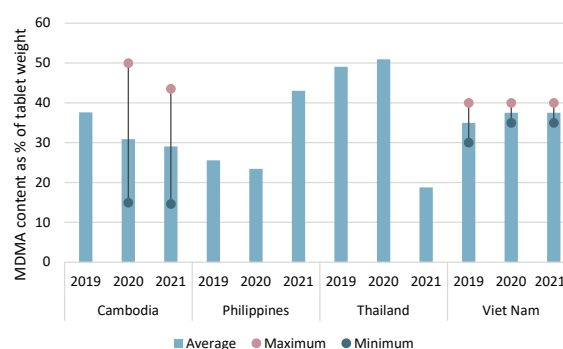
Note: * Data are preliminary.

- 39 Information on the destination of the drugs produced at the facility are not available.
 40 The tableting tool design matched with an acetaminophen and hydrocodone bitartrate pharmaceutical product produced by Watson Laboratories, Inc.
 41 Official communication with NACD, March 2022.
 42 Official communication with NADA, April 2022.

Content of MDMA in “ecstasy” tablets remains high⁴³

Though the average MDMA content in “ecstasy” tablets varies among countries in the region, the proportion of MDMA per “ecstasy” tablet has remained high or stable in 2021 in most countries, with significant changes only observed in the Philippines and Thailand. In the Philippines, the average MDMA content in “ecstasy” tablets nearly doubled from 23.4 per cent in 2020 to 43 per cent in 2021.⁴⁴ In contrast, the MDMA content in “ecstasy” tablets in Thailand dropped from 50.9 per cent in 2020 to only 18.8 per cent.⁴⁵ This decrease was in part due to about a quarter of the analysed samples containing a mixture of substances other than MDMA, particularly methamphetamine and ketamine.⁴⁶

Figure 20. Changes in MDMA content in “ecstasy” tablets analysed in Cambodia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Viet Nam, 2019-2021*


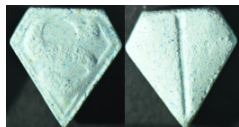




Sources: Official communication with NACD of Cambodia, DDB of the Philippines, ONCB of Thailand and SODC of Viet Nam, March-May 2022.

Note: * Data are preliminary and as of September 2021. This graph should be interpreted with caution because it does not consider changes in the average weight of “ecstasy” tablets analysed during the period in the four countries.

- 43 The figures in this subsection should be interpreted with caution as “ecstasy” tablets are of different weights, and average weights may change from year to year. Nevertheless, these figures can still provide insight to changes to “ecstasy” found in the region.
 44 Official communication with DDB, March 2022.
 45 Official communication with ONCB, May 2022.
 46 Of the 68 “ecstasy” samples containing a mixture of compounds analysed, 17 did not contain MDMA. Other samples contained a mixture of MDMA and other substances, including methamphetamine, amphetamine, ketamine, MDA, and paramethoxymethamphetamine.

Table 2. Examples of synthetic drug tablets sold as “ecstasy” with substances other than MDMA present analysed in Southeast Asia, 2021*

Photo	Reporting country	Weight of tablet	Other substance(s) present (per cent of substance content where available)
	Singapore	180 mg	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diazepam • Methamphetamine
	Singapore	240 mg	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4-Fluoro-MDMB-BUTICA • Caffeine • Methamphetamine • Eutylone • Ketamine
	Thailand	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Methamphetamine (12.09-18.92%) • Ketamine (8.03-9.23%) <p><i>Note: No MDMA present.</i></p>
	Thailand	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ketamine (0.22-2.67%) • Methamphetamine (0.67-1.90%)



Sources: Official communication with CNB of Singapore and ONCB of Thailand, March-May 2022; ONCB, “Latest situation on synthetic drugs and responses to the threats in Thailand”, presented at the Global SMART Programme Regional Workshop, November-December 2021.

Box story: Emergence of ‘happy water’ in Thailand

With the surplus of synthetic drugs in the region, over the years organised crime groups have combined various illicit substances and marketed them as new products to appeal to drug users. ‘Happy water’ is one such mixture.

Though previously identified and subsequently banned in China, this drug cocktail has recently been found in Thailand, illegally sold online through social media, as well as at entertainment venues where the drug is commonly used. It is sold as a liquid or in powder form to be mixed with water or other drinks. Whereas the ‘happy water’ marketed in China contained a mixture of MDMA, methamphetamine, amphetamine, and ketamine, the seized ‘happy water’ samples analyzed in Thailand contained MDMA, methamphetamine, diazepam, caffeine, tramadol, and ketamine.⁴⁷

Table 3. Content of samples of ‘happy water’ analysed in Thailand, 2022

No.	Images	Forensic profile	Number of samples
1		MDMA (2.26%), ketamine (5.40%) and caffeine	2
2		Methamphetamine (46.18%) and diazepam (24.59%)	3

Source: Official communication with ONCB of Thailand, May 2022.

47 Department of Medical Services of Thailand, “The Princess Mother National Institute on Drug Abuse Treatment issues warning on ‘happy water’: a drug mixture with severe effects and potentially fatal consequences”, press release, April 2022; Official communication with ONCB, May 2022.