

# High Stakes: Confronting the Epidemic of new psychoactive substances in Kyrgyzstan & Its Public Health Fallout



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# Overview

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- **Global and Regional Context**
- **The Situation in Kyrgyzstan**
- **Current Challenges**
- **Community-led research on NPS : methodology, results, conclusions**
- **Strategies for Confronting the Epidemic**

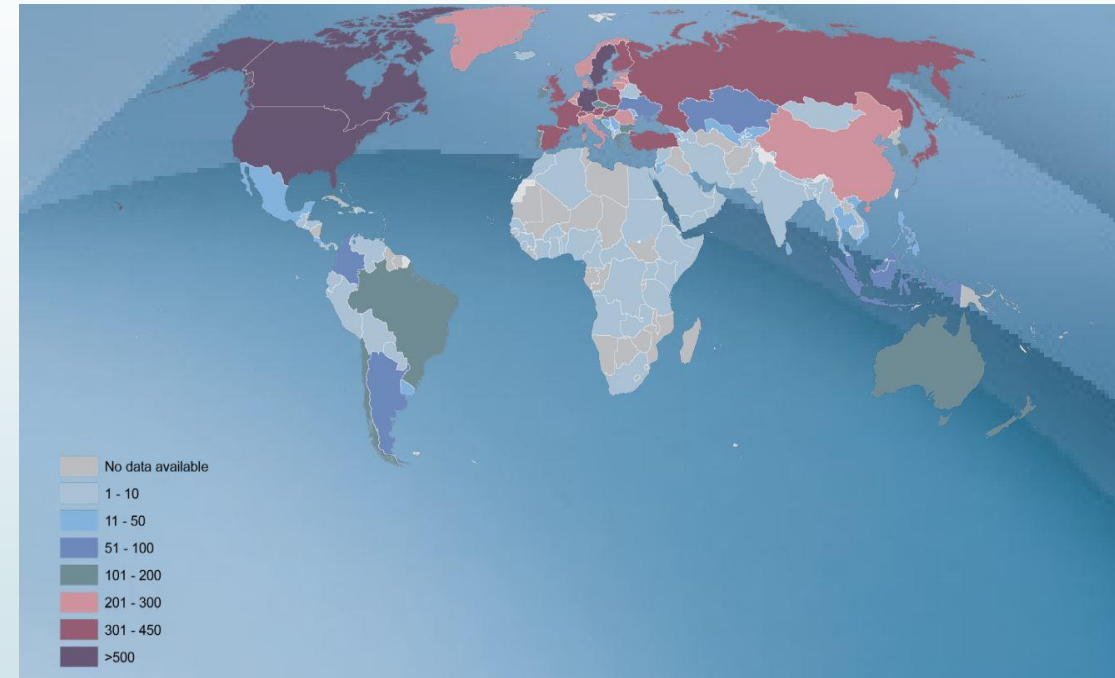
# Kyrgyzstan: Land of Wonders and Surprises

- Nestled in the heart of Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan is known for its breathtaking mountains (over 90% of the country is mountainous!) and the ancient Silk Road that once connected civilizations.
- The Kyrgyz people are proud of their nomadic heritage, celebrating traditions like horseback games, yurt building, felt-making, and epic storytelling. The "Manas" epic is one of the longest oral poems in the world!
- With over 80 ethnic groups (including Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Russian, and Uighur), Kyrgyzstan is a multicultural society where traditions blend with modern global influences.
- Fun Fact: Issyk-Kul Lake, one of the largest alpine lakes in the world, never freezes even in harsh winters — a symbol of endurance and mystery in Kyrgyz culture.



# Global and Regional Context

- NPS have become a global phenomenon with 147 countries and territories from all regions of the world having reported one or more NPS to the UNODC Early Warning Advisory (EWA) on NPS.
- Central Asia vulnerability to NPS due to trafficking routes & weak border controls: countries like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan are particularly vulnerable to NPS for a few reasons linked to trafficking routes, standing between drug-producing regions like Afghanistan and large consumer markets like Russia and the European region.
- NPS market is highly dynamic and resilient, characterized by a high turnover of potent, cheap, and available substances.



**Global emergence of new psychoactive substances.**  
[UNODC, up to July 2024]



# Current Challenges related to NPS & Public Health Fallout

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- ❑ Inadequate legal framework.
- ❑ Difficulties detecting NPS in toxicology tests.
- ❑ Lack of public awareness & education on NPS.
- ❑ Insufficient adaptation of HR facilities or training for healthcare workers.
- ❑ Social stigma and lack of support services
- ❑ Gender-related barriers



## **Public Health Fallout**

- ❖ Rise in overdoses and emergency room admissions.
- ❖ Mental health implications (psychosis, depression, suicide).
- ❖ Strain on healthcare systems.
- ❖ Lack of treatment options or services tailored for NPS users.

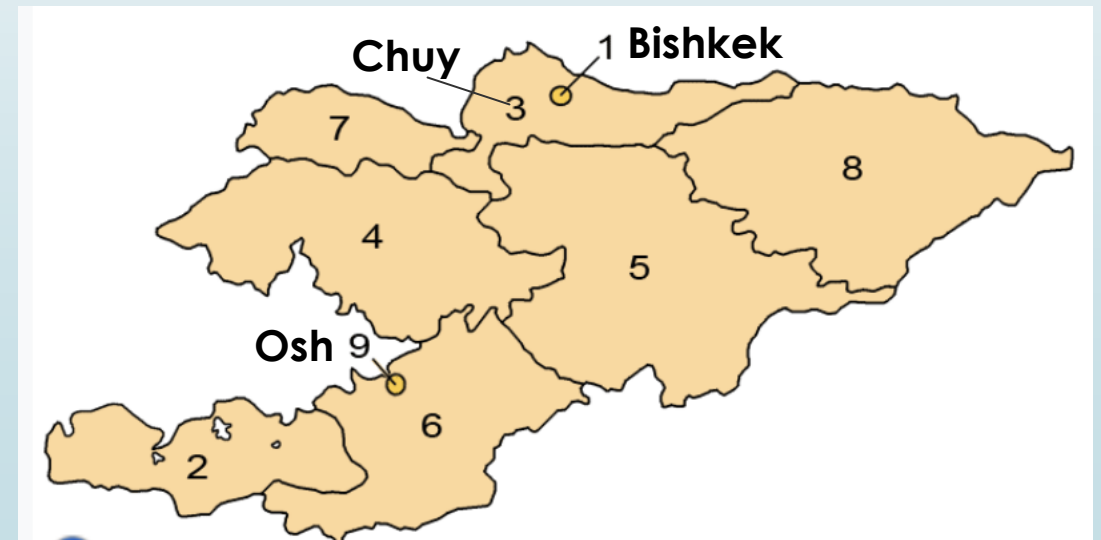
# NPS Situation in Kyrgyzstan

- ❑ As of January 1, 2024, there were 12,568 registered HIV cases in Kyrgyzstan. People who use drugs make up 51% of all HIV cases in the country, with HIV prevalence 16,5%—more than 70 times higher than in the general population.
- ❑ An estimated number of people who inject drugs is 17,379, however this number doesn't include users of new psychoactive substances (NPS). This gap in data highlights the urgent need for community-led research to better understand the evolving patterns of substance use, address the unique risks associated with NPS, and ensure that harm reduction strategies are inclusive and effective.
- ❑ Recent years have seen an increase in the use of new psychoactive substances, particularly among young people and adolescents, with alpha-PVP and mephedrone use being notably prevalent among PWUD, LGBTQI+ and trans\* people.



# NPS mixed-method research by Attika – key outcomes

- In 2024, the national drug user-led organisation Attika, in collaboration with INPUD, conducted a study using a mixed-methods approach: Surveys were administered to 100 NPS users and 30 healthcare workers across three regions of Bishkek, Osh and Chuy.
- The study assessed the adaptability of current HIV prevention and treatment services, identified challenges, and proposed solutions to improve harm reduction for NPS users.
- The objective of this study is to collect evidence and inform next GF grant in Kyrgyzstan to ensure the programmes for people who use drugs are adapted to the current changes in the drug consumption.



# Research outcomes

## ► Expansion of Online Drug Markets

- 39 active internet drug shops were identified in Bishkek, Osh and Chuy, with nearly half specializing in synthetic drugs.
- Mephedrone and Alpha-PVP (known as "salt") together make up 45.5% of the synthetic drugs found in online marketplaces. Other prevalent substances include MDMA and Spice (each at 9.1%), followed by heroin (12.1%), cocaine (6%), and smaller shares of LSD, mushrooms
- An estimated 6,507 active participants across these shops; nighttime and promotional periods see increases of up to 30% in user activity

## ► Legal and Criminal Data Analysis

- Review of 190 criminal cases (70 selected for analysis) shows a significant presence of synthetic drugs in the drug market.
- Internet-facilitated drug distribution, especially via online shops, is an emerging trend, with 41,2% of cases involving hash & weed consumption, and 8.57% related to NPS. Heroin accounts for 11% of all legal cases\*

## ► Increase in Medical Demand for NPS Users

- Between 2020–2023, the number of people seeking treatment for NPS dependence doubled.
- Notable increase among both men and women seeking help for issues linked to synthetic drug use. The gender ratio has also significantly changed with more women who use drugs taking NPS compared to previous years.

## ► Identified Gaps and Need for Community-Led Research

- Many NPS users remain hidden from traditional health and harm reduction services due to stigma and the closed nature of online communities.
- Community-led research is essential to reach hidden populations, understand new trends, and design effective, user-centered harm reduction services.

*\* Mephedrone & salts dominating the drug scene, almost no heroine in the country (appeared briefly in spring 2024 and disappeared in fall 2024).*



# Module on NPS developed by Attika

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## ► Approach:

- A 3-day modular training was developed for community-led organizations under the EpiC project.
- Focus areas: understanding NPS, health impacts, overdose prevention, gender-specific needs, online and offline counselling strategies, legal/ethical issues.

## ► Focus on Peer-Led and Gender-Sensitive Approaches

- Training emphasizes empowering peer navigators and using gender-responsive methods to better serve people who use NPS, especially women facing compounded risks.

## ► Comprehensive Skill Development for Effective Service Delivery

- Participants are trained in motivational interviewing, harm reduction strategies, communication skills, mapping services, and client-centered, non-stigmatizing support.
- Emphasis on both online outreach (web outreach, confidential communication) and field-based work.

# Strategies for Confronting NPS Epidemic

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- **Community-led research & Peer-led trainings-** module & training on NPS for drug users in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan
- **Policy level:** Updating laws, banning emerging substances, international cooperation.
- **Public health approach:** Harm reduction, education campaigns, youth outreach.
- **Healthcare system:** Training medical professionals, investing in detox/rehab services.
- **Technology & policing:** Monitoring online sales, working with social media platforms.

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**Chong rahmat!**