

Young people and synthetic cannabinoid drugs

A snapshot of young Aucklander's thoughts and experiences around synthetic cannabinoid drugs



Acknowledgements

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Special thanks to all the rangatahi (young people) who so openly shared their stories, thoughts and experiences with us. There is amazing power and wisdom in our young people.

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Summary of key opportunities identified

These two pages provide a high-level summary of the key opportunities identified in this research to reduce harm from synthetic cannabinoid drugs. These opportunities are based on the thoughts and information 170 young people (aged 14 to 24) shared with us during the research. Full background, methodology and findings sections follow these summary pages.

What these young people said helps to reduce harm from synthetic cannabinoid drugs – we have an opportunity to strengthen these

The young people who took part in this study had a range of ideas to help reduce harm from synthetic cannabinoids. These ideas came both from their own experience and what they had seen help others.

Having supportive people who listen



Young people said that having people around them who were supportive, kind and who listened to them was important. This let them know that someone cared for them and was interested in hearing about their life and experiences.

Hearing from people they could relate to



Young people said that getting the right people to talk to them about drugs was important. They responded well to people they could relate to and to those who made an effort to understand their perspective.

Having positive activities to engage in



Having positive activities, such as biking, singing or waka ama, to engage in was also highlighted as important to young people. These activities gave them something to spend their time on and provided connection to others.

Being in environments where drug use is not the norm



Young people said that spending time away from people who used synthetic cannabinoids was important. Being with people who engaged in non-drug-related activities created a new norm and reduced the pressure to use synthetic cannabinoids.

The greater the use of synthetic cannabinoid drugs, the more risk factors are present – we have an opportunity to reduce risk factors and strengthen protective factors for our young people

The main risk factors for synthetic cannabinoid use by the young people in this study were identified as the use of other drugs, and having close friends or family using them. Compared to those who had never used synthetic cannabinoids, those who had used them were:

- twice as likely to have consumed alcohol in the last week and to have drunk to harmful levels
- twice as likely to have ever smoked cannabis and used party pills
- five times more likely to have used amphetamines, hallucinogens and inhalants.

Young people who had used synthetic cannabinoids were also twice as likely than those who hadn't to have seen a close friend or family use them. Understanding these and other risk factors is important for providing effective support to more frequent users.

The majority of youth surveyed had never used synthetic cannabinoid drugs – we have an opportunity to challenge the perception that ‘everybody is using’

70%

Of these young people said they had never used synthetic cannabinoids

Young people can often feel that ‘everybody is doing it’ when it comes to alcohol and drugs. Helping young people understand that the majority of young people have not used synthetic cannabinoids is important.

91%

Of the young people who had tried or used synthetic cannabinoids had stopped using them

The majority of young people who had tried synthetic cannabinoids had stopped using them. This was largely due to the negative effects they experienced. Only 2% of young people in the study had heavy or more frequent use.

Respondents expressed that they understood that synthetic cannabinoid drugs are very harmful, but this does not stop them from trying these drugs – we have an opportunity to explore messaging beyond just highlighting risks

Young people overwhelmingly used negative language when talking about these drugs. The most commonly used words to describe them were **“dangerous”, “scary”, “deadly”, “disgusting”, “unnatural”** and **“poison”**.

85%

Of youth participants who had used synthetic cannabinoids had experienced at least one negative effect from them

The majority of young people who had used synthetic cannabinoids had experienced a negative effect. The negative effects had also worsened since the drugs started being produced on the black market. The most common negative effects experienced included anxiety, a racing heart, vomiting and dizziness.

Curiosity was the most common reason given for use, with very few young people using synthetic cannabinoids for positive or therapeutic benefits, such as relaxation.

This highlights that young people are aware of the dangers of these drugs and, in general, do not enjoy their effects. However, this knowledge did not always stop young people from trying them. Frequent users still used these drugs despite describing them in this negative way. Focusing solely on communicating the risks associated with synthetic cannabinoids may therefore not be the best harm reduction approach for all young people.

Youth respondents had inaccurate information about synthetic cannabinoid drugs – we have an opportunity to broaden the way we educate young people about drugs and promote critical thinking

Young people were puzzled about why a drug would be legally available and then ‘taken off the shelves’. Many said that the fact they were once available in shops led to people thinking they were safe. Some young people were not sure whether they were currently legal or illegal. Some saw the currently available synthetic cannabinoids as the same drug as those available in shops pre-2014, when in reality the drug substance is very different now. In comparison to synthetic cannabinoids, cannabis was talked about as being a safer option. Consequently, young people had an overly positive view of cannabis in comparison to synthetic cannabinoids. There is an opportunity to broaden drug education to improve understanding of the legal history and current status of these drugs in New Zealand, and to ensure that young people have balanced information from various sources to enable them to critically assess the risks.

Study background

The origin of this study

This study was developed in response to a community-identified concern around synthetic cannabinoids. Community Action Youth and Drugs (CAYAD) was approached by community and youth organisations, marae, residents' groups, and schools that were concerned and wanted to do something to reduce harm for rangatahi around the use of these drugs.

This study was a result of these conversations. Community and youth organisations are the intended audience of this report. The research was conducted in partnership with 15 youth-related agencies (Alternative Education, Youth Justice, and Youth and Social Service providers) across west, south and central Auckland. The research was developed with support and input from the Auckland Council Research and Evaluation Unit and Human Participants Ethics Committee. A Steering Group with representatives from some of the participating agencies was also established to guide the development of this report.

It is important to note that the findings of this report are not representative of all young people in Auckland. Rather, they represent the experiences of the specific young people who were engaged with various youth service and support agencies that took part in the study.

What is CAYAD?

Community Action Youth and Drugs is a Ministry of Health community-based initiative commonly called CAYAD. In Auckland, CAYAD is based within the Community Empowerment Unit in Te Kaunihera o Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland Council). CAYAD works with communities to help them understand and identify alcohol and drug issues that cause harm to rangatahi. CAYAD then supports communities to respond to these issues to create change and reduce alcohol and drug harm. CAYAD honours Te Tiriti o Waitangi and aims to specifically improve hauora (well-being) for Māori.

Drug use among young people in New Zealand

The 2012 report of the Youth 2000 health research shows that the majority of young people in New Zealand (72%) choose not to use any drugs.¹ The use of cannabis and tobacco by young people has decreased over the past two decades.² The use of alcohol by young people has been stable since 2012.³ The Youth 2000 findings highlighted that 57% of young people reported they had ever tried alcohol; 7.7% of young people under 16 and 11.9% of young people aged 16 and over were classified as very high users of alcohol. Of all young people surveyed 23% reported ever using cannabis, with 13% saying they currently use it, and 2.2% being classified as very high users. Other drug use was uncommon: 4% said they'd used party pills, 3% had used ecstasy and less than 1% had used methamphetamine. Only 2.1% of young people were classified as very high users of other drugs.⁴ Where drug use by young people does occur it is more likely to cause harm compared to adult users. Substance use can have major negative developmental consequences for younger users; therefore, to reduce harm we should be delaying use of substances by young people for as long as possible.⁵

¹ Clark, T. C., Fleming, T., Bullen, P., Denny, S., Crengle, S., Dyson, B., Fortune, S., Lucassen, M., Peiris-John, R., Robinson, E., Rossen, F., Sheridan, J., Teevale, T., Utter, J. (2013). Youth'12 Overview: The health and well-being of New Zealand secondary-school students in 2012. Auckland, New Zealand: The University of Auckland. <https://www.fmhs.auckland.ac.nz/assets/fmhs/faculty/ahrg/docs/2012-overview.pdf>

² Ibid

³ <https://www.health.govt.nz/publication/annual-update-key-results-2016-17-new-zealand-health-survey>

⁴ Fleming, T., Lee, A.C., Moselen, E., Clark, T.C., Dixon, R. & The Adolescent Health Research Group (2014). Problem substance use among New Zealand secondary-school students: Findings from the Youth'12 national youth health and well-being survey. Auckland, New Zealand: The University of Auckland. <https://www.fmhs.auckland.ac.nz/assets/fmhs/faculty/ahrg/docs/Final%20Substance%20Abuse%20Report%2016.9.14.pdf>

⁵ Matua Raki. (2017). Bridging the Gap: Young people and substance use. Wellington: Matua Raki. <https://www.matuaraki.org.nz/uploads/files/resource-assets/MR-Youth-AOD-resource-WEB.pdf>

What do we mean by synthetic cannabinoid drugs?

Synthetic cannabinoid drugs are also known as syns, synies, synthetic cannabis, spice, chronic or synthetic psychoactive substances. They are usually smoked but can also come as a liquid which can be used in a vapouriser.⁶ When smoked, the chemicals are absorbed into the bloodstream through the lungs. They are then carried to the brain where they work on cannabinoid receptors. While similar in structure to natural cannabinoids in cannabis, these synthetic cannabinoids can bind more firmly to the receptors and cause different and stronger effects.⁷

Synthetic cannabinoids are usually made using three substances, which each have their own risks:



a dried herb or plant material that is the base material which is sprayed with the synthetic cannabinoid chemicals



a synthetic cannabinoid



a liquid chemical that attaches the synthetic cannabinoid to the plant material

The legal history of synthetic cannabinoid drugs in New Zealand

Early 2000s:

Synthetic cannabinoids (a synthetic psychoactive substance) were unregulated in the early 2000s. This meant they could be sold in New Zealand unless they were proven to be unsafe. In the time it took to prove one brand was unsafe, and take it off the shelves, it had already been replaced by others. A rise in the availability and use of synthetic psychoactive substances was seen during these years.

2013 - The Psychoactive Substances Act is passed:

The Psychoactive Substances Act was introduced to regulate the sale, importation and manufacture of synthetic psychoactive substances. There was a misconception that the Act made previously illegal substances legal, when, instead, it aimed to regulate unregulated products. Some existing producers and sellers of these products were given six-month interim licences while they proved their products to be safe. The number of products was cut from about 200 to fewer than 50 and age restrictions to purchase products were put in place.

2014 - The Psychoactive Substances Amendment Act is passed:

During the six-month interim period, media and community attention was magnified on the few remaining products and retail outlets. Throughout this interim licence period no products were proved to be safe. The Amendment Act cancelled all interim licences and all synthetic psychoactive products were removed from the shelves. Animal testing of substances was also banned.

2014 to 2018 - Return to unregulated black market with more harmful synthetic psychoactive substances introduced:

Under the amended Act no substances can be proven safe without evidence from animal testing and so, by default, all products are banned. The production and sale of synthetic psychoactive substances since 2014 has taken place illegally on the black market. This has seen the introduction of more dangerous and toxic synthetic substances. These substances have been responsible for the rising number of deaths and hospitalisations in New Zealand, particularly among young people.

⁶ <https://www.drugfoundation.org.nz/info/drug-index/synthetic-cannabinoids/>

⁷ Matua Raki. (2017). Bridging the Gap: Young people and substance use. Wellington: Matua Raki.

Methodology and scope

Purpose of the research

To increase knowledge about the thoughts and experiences that rangatahi hold around synthetic cannabinoids and to grow understanding of how communities can respond to minimise the harm caused by the use of these drugs.

Methodology

This research project was conducted using quantitative and qualitative research methods. A synthetic drugs experience survey was completed online or with pen and paper by 132 rangatahi. Five youth narrative insight focus groups were attended by 38 rangatahi. The survey contents were pilot tested and were informed by two previous studies, one on synthetic drug use undertaken by Massey University⁸ and another on young people's experiences of substance use conducted by CAYAD.⁹ The focus groups were facilitated by a trained alcohol and drug practitioner, who provided ongoing support options to the young people who took part. Statistical and thematic analyses were used to assess the quantitative and qualitative information respectively.

The research focused on rangatahi aged 14 to 24 in west, south and central Auckland.¹⁰ Participants were engaged through Alternative Education, Youth Justice organisations, and Youth and Social Services. These agencies were selected based on evidence about risk factors for youth alcohol and drug harm, such as disconnection from mainstream education and contact with the Youth Justice system.¹¹

All young people involved consented to take part in the study. They received information about the research and their rights as participants, both verbally and in writing. Given the nature of the discussion on illegal substances, all young people's names were withheld, and all consent forms kept secure. The young people who participated were reassured of anonymity. In some cases, a tutor or mentor of the young people was present during the focus groups' discussions by request of a young person. These tutors and mentors signed a confidentiality agreement. CAYAD contact details, as well as information about alcohol and drug help lines and services, were given to all participants.

Guiding research questions

What are young people's experiences of and reasons for using synthetic cannabinoids – what are their thoughts and feelings about their use?

What supported young people to stop using synthetic cannabinoids and what were their reasons for stopping?

What have young people seen and heard about synthetic cannabinoids – what do they think and feel about what they have seen and heard?

Why do young people choose not to use synthetic cannabinoids and how do they avoid being exposed to them?

Where do young people go to for information about synthetic cannabinoids and how do they conceptualise these drugs?

What do young people think they and others, such as adults, communities, youth agencies etc., can do to reduce harm from synthetic cannabinoids?

⁸ Wilkins, C., Prasad, J., Wong, K., Rychert, M., & Graydon Guy, T. (2016). An exploratory study of the health harms and utilisation of health services of frequent legal high users under an interim regulated legal high market in central Auckland. *New Zealand Medical Journal*, 129(1431), 51-58.

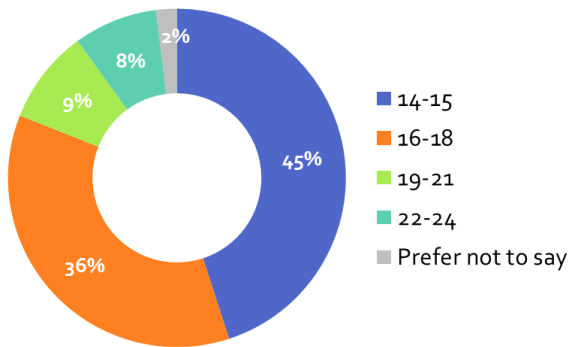
⁹ <http://temp.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/SiteCollectionDocuments/aboutcouncil/planspoliciespublications/knowingsomeonecares.pdf>

¹⁰ Twenty people outside of the age range of this study (under 14 or over 24) attempted to fill in surveys but were informed they were outside of the age range; their information is not included in this report.

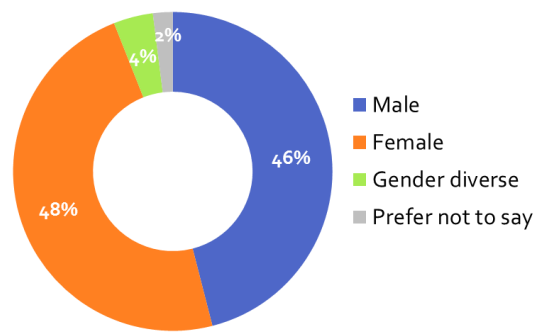
¹¹ Matua Raki. (2017). Bridging the Gap: Young people and substance use. Wellington: Matua Raki. <https://www.matuaraki.org.nz/uploads/files/resource-assets/MR-Youth-AOD-resource-WEB.pdf>

Survey participants' demographics

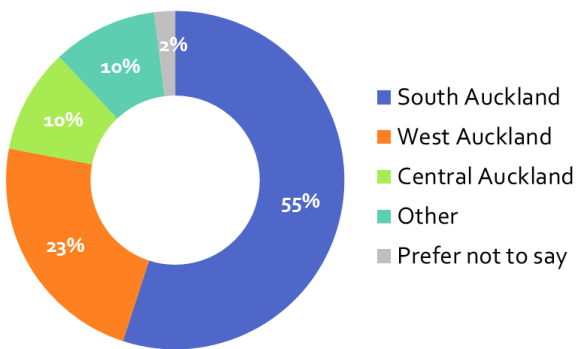
Age¹²



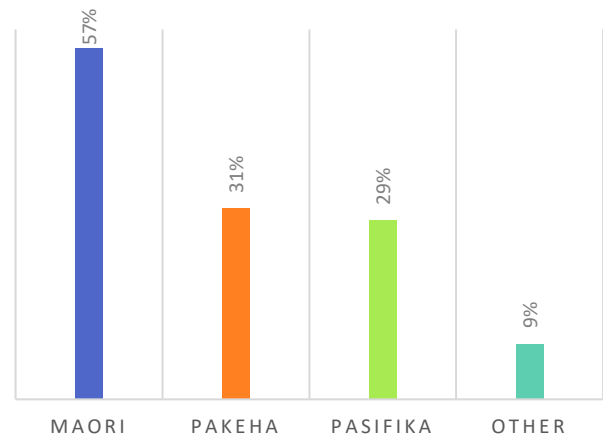
Gender



Location

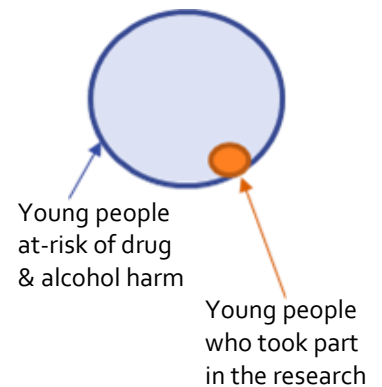


Ethnicity¹³



Study scope

The intention of this research is to help the specific agencies engaged in the study to understand and respond to issues around synthetic cannabinoids for the young people they work with. It focuses on a small sample of young people at risk of alcohol and drug harm, as illustrated in the diagram opposite. We acknowledge it will not be representative and is targeted towards informing and supporting key youth agencies, their rangatahi and their communities. The findings may be transferrable to other Alternative Education, Youth Justice organisations and Youth and Social Service providers in Auckland.



Turning research into community action

Our hope for this research is that the hauora of our rangatahi will be strengthened through the sharing of their own stories, as well as by the use of these findings, to lead the way in harm reduction around synthetic cannabinoids. Those who participated in this research are seen as the owners of this knowledge. All the findings in this report will be shared with the agencies and rangatahi that participated. Rangatahi will then be invited to take part in a process designed to transform these findings into community-action initiatives.

¹² In consultation with a member of the Human Participants Ethics Committee at Auckland Council, it was deemed permissible to include young people aged 14 and 15 in the study without their parents' consent, due to sensitivity of the study topic and potential for adverse consequences.

¹³ Young people could select as many ethnicity groups as they wanted; therefore, the total does not equal 100%.

Findings around young people's level of

The findings in this section relate to the level of synthetic cannabinoid use in young people who participated group, the research looked at the presence of associated factors. Two main risk factors emerged: use of reasons for their level of use, which are also listed. Finally, this section provides a summary of appropriate

Level of use

70% ⁽⁹³⁾ of young people surveyed had never used synthetic cannabinoid drugs
24% of young people surveyed had never used any drugs

23% ⁽³⁰⁾ had used in the past but have now stopped

2% ⁽³⁾ were still using and may use more regularly

Associated risk factors*

Least risk factors

Young people in the study who had never used synthetic cannabinoids:

- Had lower rates of other alcohol and drug use compared to those who use synthetic cannabinoids
- Had a lower likelihood of having seen close friends and whānau use synthetic cannabinoids



More risk factors

Young people in the study who had used synthetic cannabinoids at some point:

- Had higher rates of other drug use compared to those who have not used (twice as likely to have consumed alcohol to harmful levels, smoked cannabis and used party pills, and five times more likely to have used amphetamines, hallucinogens and inhalants)
- Were more likely to have seen close friends and whānau using synthetic cannabinoids (78% have witnessed this, compared to 35% of those who have not used)



Highest presence of risk factors

Young people in the study who were more frequent users of synthetic cannabinoids:

- Have the highest number of risk factors, including: higher rates of other drug and alcohol use; likely to have close friends and whānau using synthetic cannabinoids; likely to be rough sleepers or have other complex challenges



Least risk factors

Most risk factors

Note: 5% of young people who completed the survey selected 'prefer not to say' to the question about whether they had used synthetic drugs, they are not included in the above 3 groups

*Risk factors are circumstances that increase the likelihood of difficulties in life and poor health and wellbeing. There are a wide range of risk factors that can contribute to some young people being vulnerable to harm from substance use. Matua Raki. (2017). Bridging the Gap: Young people and substance use. Wellington: Matua Raki. <https://www.matuaraki.org.nz/uploads/files/resource-assets/MR-Youth-AOD-resource-WEB.pdf>

synthetic cannabinoid drug use

in this study. Young people's use fell into three groups¹: never used, used and stopped, and still using. For each other drugs and use of synthetic cannabinoids by close friends or whānau. Young people gave a range of intervention approaches for young people, depending on their level of use.

Reasons for use or non-use

These rangatahi chose not to use synthetic cannabinoids due to:

- Being able to participate in other positive activities, such as sport
- Being in an environment where there was no, or low, drug use
- Choosing to use cannabis instead
- Not wanting to experience the negative effects they may have seen others experience from synthetic cannabinoids

Intervention approach

Prevention

For general groups of young people, sharing the key prevention messages below can be our main form of intervention:

- Not using synthetic cannabinoids is the safest option
- None of the new synthetic products have been tested as safe, they are dangerous and more toxic than the ones previously available
- Call 111 if you see someone having a bad response to synthetic cannabinoids

The main reasons these rangatahi used synthetic cannabinoids were:

- They wanted to try them
- They didn't know they were synthetic products
- They liked the buzz
- They were easier and cheaper to get than cannabis

These rangatahi chose to stop using synthetic cannabinoids due to:

- Not wanting to experience the negative effects
- Wanting to stop to save their relationships or to be a good example to their children
- Re-engaging in other, positive activities
- Moving away from people who were high drug users
- Having supportive people around them

Harm reduction

For groups of young people who are at a higher risk of using synthetic cannabinoids or who are already using, we need to share harm reduction strategies. These young people are likely to know the dangers of synthetic cannabinoids, but this may not stop them from trying these drugs.

There is a list of key harm reduction messages on page 15.

These young people found it hard to stop using synthetic cannabinoids due to:

- These drugs being highly addictive - *"worse than meth", "all you want is the next bag"*
- The perception that they are an accepted part of the culture and many people around them are using them - *"it's everywhere", "it's just out in the open"*
- It being hard to get high on cannabis after using synthetic cannabinoids for a long time

Specialised intervention

For groups of young people who are frequent users of synthetic cannabinoids, we can share harm reduction messages but will also need to find appropriate specialised interventions to support them. These may involve specialised alcohol and drug treatments but could also include access to housing and medical care, as well as mental health support and treatment.

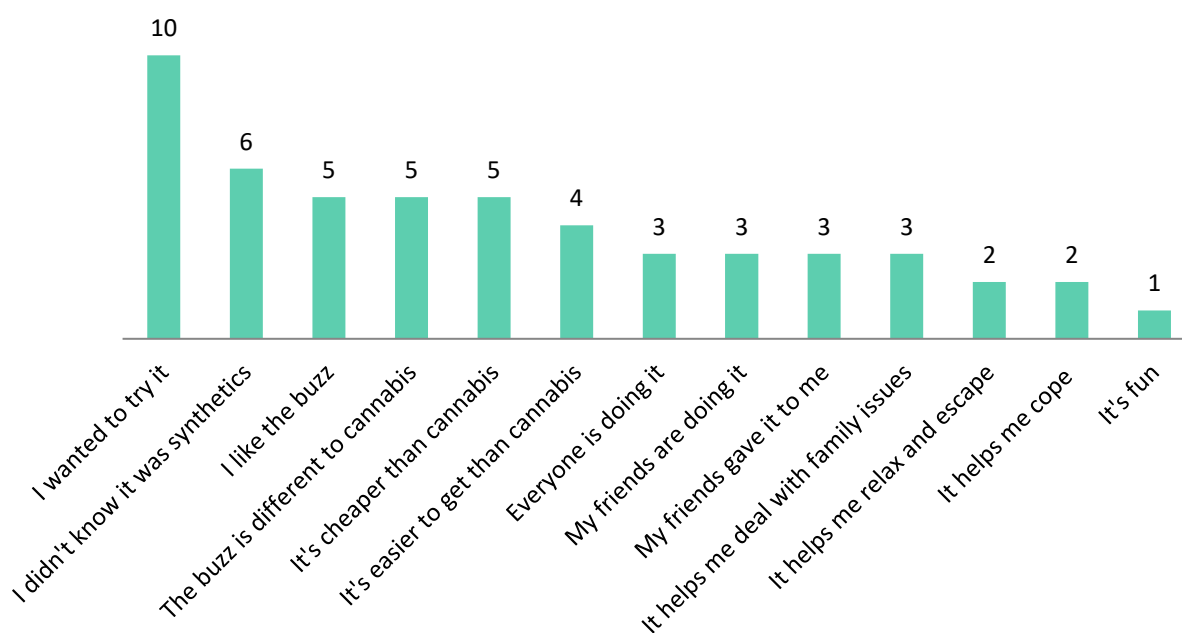
Findings around young people's experience of using synthetic cannabinoid drugs

The findings in this section come from the quantitative survey completed by 132 rangatahi.

The majority of young people surveyed used synthetic cannabinoid drugs due to curiosity (n=31)

The reasons young people gave for using synthetic cannabinoids are detailed in the table below. The main reason, mentioned by a third who had used, was because they wanted to try them. Around a fifth of those who tried these drugs did not realise they were synthetic, either because they were already **"too stoned"**, or they did not ask what they were smoking. The other reasons for using were because they 'liked the buzz', and because they were 'cheaper and easier to get than cannabis'. The lowest given reasons for using were: it 'helps me relax', 'helps me cope' and 'it's fun'.

Young people's reasons for using synthetic cannabinoid drugs



The reasons given by young people in this study are consistent with a similar study conducted in Australia. The Australian study found that curiosity and easy availability were the highest reasons given for synthetic drug use, while therapeutic benefits, such as relaxation and coping, were the lowest reasons given for having used synthetic cannabinoids.¹⁴ By comparison, therapeutic benefits, such as relaxation, enhancing pleasure and reducing negative mood, are often listed by young people as a reason for their use of other drugs.¹⁵ However, these did not seem to be motivating factors for trying or using synthetic cannabinoids.

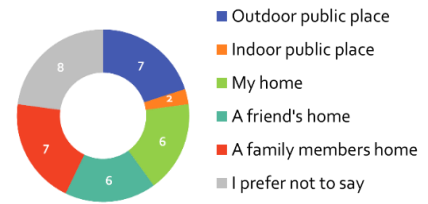
¹⁴ Barratt, M., Cacic, V., Lenton, S. (2003). Patterns of synthetic cannabinoid use in Australia. *Drug and Alcohol Review*. 32(2):141–146.

¹⁵ Matua Raki. (2017). Bridging the Gap: Young people and substance use. Wellington: Matua Raki. <https://www.matuaraki.org.nz/uploads/files/resource-assets/MR-Youth-AOD-resource-WEB.pdf>

Novacek, J., Raskin, R., Hogan, R. (1991). Why do adolescents use drugs? Age, sex and user differences. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. 20(5): 475–492.
Boys, A., Marsden, J., Strang, J. (2001). Understanding reasons for drug use amongst young people: a functional perspective. *Health Educ Res*. 16(4):457-469.

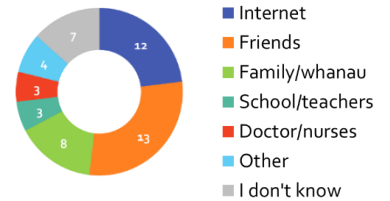
These young people used synthetic cannabinoids in a home (n=29)

The majority of young people who had used synthetic cannabinoids had used them in a home (their own, a friend's, or a whānau member's). About a quarter said they had used them in a public outdoor place, like a park or car park. The majority of use is therefore likely to be hidden from public places.



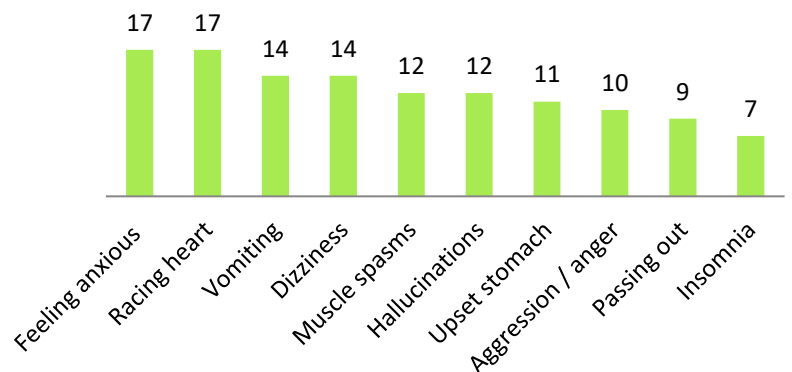
These young people went to friends and the internet if they wanted to find out information about synthetic cannabinoids (n=32)

The majority of young people said that if they wanted to find out information about synthetic cannabinoids they would go to friends or the internet. This can help inform the way we provide information to young people about drugs and their associated risks.



Youth respondents experienced at least one negative effect when using synthetic cannabinoids (n=31)

Of those who have used synthetic cannabinoids, 85% (28) said they had experienced at least one negative side effect. The most common negative effects were feeling anxious and a racing heart, which were experienced by more than half of all users. Other frequently mentioned negative effects were vomiting, dizziness, muscle spasms and hallucinations.



These young people are experiencing worsened effects from synthetic cannabinoids now that they are buying them on the black market

Compared to a study conducted by Massey University in 2014,¹⁶ when synthetic cannabinoids were legally available, the number of people experiencing negative effects seems to have increased significantly. This indicates that harm has increased since these drugs started being sold illegally. This was also discussed in the focus groups, where young people talked about these drugs as having become more dangerous and risky since they **"came off the shelves"**.

¹⁶ Wilkins, C., Prasad, J., Wong, K., Rychert, M., & Graydon Guy, T. (2016). An exploratory study of the health harms and utilisation of health services of frequent legal high users under an interim regulated legal high market in central Auckland. *New Zealand Medical Journal*, 129(1431), 51-58.

Findings around young people's thoughts about synthetic cannabinoid drugs

The findings in this section come from the focus groups (attended by 38 rangatahi) and from the open-ended questions in the survey (completed by 132 rangatahi). Broad questions were asked regarding young people's perceptions and understanding of synthetic cannabinoids. Information shared by young people was analysed using a thematic approach¹⁷ for the common themes. The common themes are presented below.

These young people have negative perceptions of synthetic cannabinoids

These word clouds represent quotes from young people about synthetic cannabinoids. They demonstrate that young people, even those using synthetic cannabinoids, perceive these drugs as overwhelmingly negative. Young people spoke of them as being dangerous and risky and of finding them scary and disgusting, mostly due to having watched someone have a negative reaction to them.

A word cloud of quotes from young people about synthetic cannabinoids. The most prominent words are "scary" and "disgusting". Other quotes include "horrible", "it eats your soul", "ugly", "you lose control", "zombie", "disturbing", "destroys your mana", "freaked me out", "it scared me", "spin out", "sickening seeing people on it", and "they looked possessed".

A word cloud of quotes from young people about synthetic cannabinoids. The most prominent words are "deadly" and "dangerous". Other quotes include "destroys life", "risky", "really bad", "kills", "people are dying from it", "fucks you up", and "sends you to your tupuna".

Young people who had used or were still using synthetic drugs said they wouldn't recommend them to others. Those who had whānau or friends using synthetic drugs felt worried for them. Young people were aware of the possible negative effects of using synthetic drugs, and while this was given by some as a reason for not using, some had used them despite holding these views. Having seen or experienced something negative around these drugs was, therefore, not the sole reason young people either chose to use or not use them.

These young people thought synthetic cannabinoids were very visible and accessible

Synthetic drugs were talked about as being everywhere. Those who had used them said they were easily and quickly accessible. In addition, of those who used them 78% had used them had witnessed a close friend or whānau member using them too, making them appear even more present. The use of synthetic drugs was also talked about as being visible, with people, particularly rough sleepers, using them in public places. Forty-seven per cent of all survey participants had witnessed a close friend or whānau member using synthetic cannabinoids.

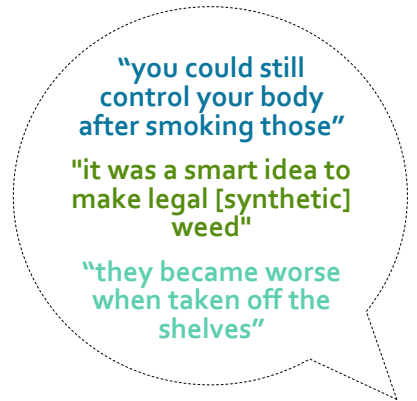
A word cloud of quotes from young people about synthetic cannabinoids. The most prominent words are "everywhere" and "visible". Other quotes include "its flooded New Zealand", "easy to get", "it's just out in the open", "easier to get than weed", "heaps around", "just a normal occurrence", and "can get them in 5 minutes".

¹⁷ Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2): 77-101. ISSN 1478-0887. Available from: <http://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/11735>

Youth respondents had inaccurate information about the legal status and history of synthetic cannabinoids

Young people questioned why a drug would supposedly be made legal and then made illegal again. There was also some confusion about whether the use of synthetic cannabinoids was currently legal or illegal. Those who had used them while they could be purchased legally talked about them as being safe, that you could trust what was in them and that they didn't experience negative effects. By comparison, young people said that synthetic cannabinoids became more dangerous, addictive and deadly once they went 'underground' and were produced on the black market.

There is an opportunity to dispel some misinformation around these drugs and their past and current legal status.



These young people talked about cannabis as a safe alternative to synthetic cannabinoids

Rangatahi who were involved in the focus groups compared synthetic cannabinoids with cannabis continuously, despite this not being a specific question in these groups. Young people talked about synthetic cannabinoids as "**unnatural**", bad and "**fake**" and cannabis as "**natural**", "**good for you**" and thereby safe.¹⁸

All but one said they preferred cannabis to synthetic drugs, and there was high cannabis use across all participants, with 52% of those who had never used synthetic drugs and 92% of those who had ever used synthetic cannabinoids reporting they used cannabis.

The way young people conceptualised synthetic cannabinoids in comparison to cannabis appeared to lead to most young people to have an overly positive, glorified view of cannabis. This highlights an opportunity to ensure that young people receive balanced information about all substances, especially as cannabis and other drug use still holds significant risk for young people.¹⁹

Young people's perceptions of synthetic cannabinoids:

"don't know what you're smoking"
"plastic" "**unnatural**"
"**poison**" "manufactured, I don't trust it"
"artificial high" "**fake**" "gives weed a bad name"
"you can smell the chemicals"
"tastes like shit" "toxic"

Young people's perceptions of cannabis:

"it grows" "good for you"
"you know what you're smoking" "**natural**"
"plant of god" "you won't die"
"**weed is medicine**"
"you don't lose control"

¹⁸ This study is not focused on cannabis; however, young people's experiences and thoughts of cannabis have also been well studied - some information can be found here: <https://www.drugfoundation.org.nz/info/drug-index/cannabis/> and here: Bonn-Miller, M; Zvolensky, M. (2009). An Evaluation of the Nature of Marijuana Use and Its Motives among Young Adult Active Users. The American Journal of Addiction. 18(5).

¹⁹ <https://www.otago.ac.nz/christchurch/otago018744.pdf>

Findings around young people's thoughts on how to reduce harm from synthetic cannabinoid drugs

Young people had a range of ideas when asked what would help reduce harm from synthetic cannabinoids. These came from their own experiences, what they had seen to be of help to others, and from a variety of societal views on drugs.

Supportive people who listen

People who were supportive, kind and who listened were seen as important and helpful - ***"let them know they have your support", "try talking to them"***.

Those who had used synthetic drugs and stopped said that having ***"caring people", "a helpful partner"*** and a ***"supportive agency"*** had helped them.



Having positive activities to engage in

Engaging young people in positive activities and having these accessible to them was highlighted as important - ***"distract them with something they're interested in"***.

Those who had used synthetic drugs and stopped said that having positive activities, such as ***"biking", "going to the gym"*** and ***"going to church"***, had helped them.



Being around people who do not use drugs

Spending time with people not using synthetic drugs was highlighted as important, especially by those who had stopped using - ***"be around people not using", "not having it around"***.

Those who had used synthetic drugs and stopped said that moving out of social groups where synthetic drug use was common had helped them - ***"we stay home and watch movies now", "avoided hanging out with people who were using", "have new friends"***.



Talking to people they can relate to

Young people said that getting the right people to talk with others and to share their story was important - ***"we want to talk to kids our own age", "get young people to share their stories", "people who used it should share", "the Government should listen to those with experience"***.

Young people said that those using might respond well to listening to people their own age who have used synthetic drugs. They also felt the Government should talk to people with experience of using synthetic drugs before making decisions about them.



Prison and residential treatment were recognised consequences of synthetic cannabinoid use but were thought to be ineffective in promoting change

Some young people initially mentioned prison, rehab and physical violence as ways to help people:

- sending people selling it to jail - **"do a whole bust", "lock them up", "shut the supplier down"**
- forcing people to detox - **"lock them in a room", "put them in rehab"**
- using physical violence to get people to stop using - **"smash them up", "give them a hiding"**

Young people also suggested:

- Raising the price of synthetic drugs
- Banning synthetic drugs
- Stopping the sale of chemicals used to make synthetic drugs

These reveal some of the confusion about the legality of synthetic cannabinoids and highlight a need for further awareness-raising around the legal status and history of synthetic cannabinoids.

Some young people challenged these ideas as solutions by sharing that:

- they do not think jail works to prevent people selling or using drugs - **"they make mates in there", "they do worse stuff when they get home", "my dad went in for weed and then started taking heroin"**
- young people don't listen if you just tell them not to do it; they may know the dangers and still use the drugs to be cool or because they are addicted - **"won't listen if you just say quit", "won't listen to older people"**



Summary of key research insights

- Young people suggested a range of positive interventions to reduce the harm from synthetic drugs. These include: hearing from people who they could relate to, being away from groups of people who were high drug users, having supportive people who listened, and having positive activities to engage in.
- The majority of young people (70%) who took part in the study had never used synthetic cannabinoids. This is important to emphasise as young people may think 'everyone is doing them'.
- Of those who had used synthetic drugs, the majority (91%) stopped of their own will due, mostly, to the negative effects they experienced. Having supportive people and positive activities to engage in helped them avoid using these drugs.
- Use of other drugs and seeing a close friend or family member use synthetic cannabinoids are risk factors for young people's use of these drugs.
- Curiosity was the main reason for using synthetic cannabinoids, followed by not knowing they were synthetic drugs and their easy availability. The least given reasons were positive or therapeutic benefits.
- The negative effects experienced after using synthetic cannabinoids have worsened compared to when they were legally available, and young people in the study negatively conceptualised synthetic cannabinoids. Despite this, some still used them which highlights the need to move beyond messaging that only communicates the dangers of using these drugs.
- There was a lot of confusion around the legality and safety of synthetic cannabinoids, especially in comparison to cannabis. Awareness information is needed that both clarifies the legal status of these drugs and highlights that while cannabis may seem safer by comparison, it still has its own risks.

Key harm reduction messages for synthetic cannabinoid drugs

Note: these messages can be shared in harm reduction interventions with young people who are already using, or suspected of using, synthetic cannabinoids.



No synthetic cannabinoids have been tested as safe, and it is impossible to know how they will affect an individual.



Know what you are taking, always ask what you have been given, and if you do not know what it is, or if it does not smell like cannabis, do not use it.



Only use a small amount.



Take breaks and eat food and drink water often.



Don't mix with alcohol and other drugs. Mixing synthetic cannabinoids with other drugs or alcohol is dangerous.



Seek professional help if you are finding it hard to stop using, needing to use more and more to get the same effect, or are experiencing negative mental health.



Look after your mates. If someone is unconscious, frothing at the mouth, having difficulty breathing, or is extremely agitated or aggressive, call 111.

What to do if someone is using synthetic cannabinoids²⁰

If someone is experiencing an overdose or toxic reaction

- Call 111, stay with them, find a safe place to calm them down and reassure them, lie them on their side with airways open.
- Ensure that they are immediately connected with support services upon discharge from hospital as people are likely to experience a comedown for a few days and experience strong cravings.
- Follow up with this person a few days later to make sure they are connected with local services that are relevant, which can include housing services, mental health support and addiction treatment services.

If someone is affected by synthetic cannabinoids but not requiring emergency medical attention

- Reassure them and, if possible, move them to a quiet space.
- Stay with them; they are likely to be affected for up to 4 hours.
- Provide them with contacts of services if they need them (Health line, local mental health contact, alcohol and drug helpline, poisons centre).
- Let them know they can talk to you about their synthetics use if they want to.
- Work out strategies to not use again if they want to.
- Call 111 if symptoms get worse.

²⁰ This guidance is from the NZ Drug Foundation resource "Community response to synthetics guide" (unpublished)

Links to more information

- **NZ Drug Foundation** information on <https://www.drugfoundation.org.nz/info/drug-index/synthetic-cannabinoids/>
- **Did You Know** Synthetic Psychoactive Substances Poster and Synthetic Psychoactive Substances Video <https://www.drugfoundation.org.nz/news-media-and-events/did-you-know-the-facts-about-synthetics/>
Information for young people about common drugs in New Zealand and tools that give people confidence and guidance about starting difficult conversations about drugs with a young person.
- **Bridging the Gap: Young people and substance use** <https://www.matuaraki.org.nz/uploads/files/resource-assets/MR-Youth-AOD-resource-WEB.pdf>
The aim of this resource is to increase the knowledge and confidence of those working alongside young people in the primary care environment (including youth workers, school counsellors and others in youth-focused practices) to address issues related to alcohol and other substance use.

Next steps – turning research into community action

The next steps of this research project are to turn the findings into community action. This will be done in the following ways:

1. Sharing the findings with rangatahi and agencies

Sharing the results with young people who took part in the research through a range of interactive activities. Sharing the findings report with youth agencies.

2. Exploring a response

Rangatahi will identify a specific issue they would like to focus on in their community in response to the findings. CAYAD will support youth agencies to access further information and evidence around useful solutions to synthetic cannabinoid issues with the young people they work with and connect them with key stakeholders in areas they want to address.

3. Project planning

Rangatahi and youth agencies will work together through a design process to create a small project/initiative which addresses the issue they have identified.

4. Youth-led projects/initiatives

Rangatahi deliver their community projects with the support of their agency. Youth agencies may also deliver their own response initiatives.

5. Evaluation and debrief

Rangatahi and agencies evaluate their projects' success and lessons learned. Their projects and learning are added to a second version of this report.

Getting help and support

If you need to talk to someone about your own or someone else's alcohol or drug use, you can contact the organisations below:

Alcohol Drug Helpline

0800 787 797
Free TXT 8681
alcoholdrughelp.org.nz

Youthline

0800 376 633
Free TXT 234
youthline.co.nz

CADS Community Alcohol and Drug Services

09 845 1818 cads.org.nz
Tupu (Pacific Service)
Te Atea Marino (Māori Service)

