

Ecstasy across the border; a study of ecstasy couriers and petty smugglers

H. van de Bunt, D. Kunst, D. Siegel

Rotterdam, Erasmus University, Faculty of law, 2003

Summary

In recent years, it has become clear that the Netherlands holds the leading position in the distribution of ecstasy. According to Interpol and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the majority of all ecstasy confiscated worldwide comes from the Netherlands.

The memorandum 'Mutual effort against ecstasy', which was presented in the Dutch Parliament in May 2001, included an action plan to reduce the production, trade and smuggling of ecstasy. As a preventive measure, an information campaign was proposed, targeting potential couriers about the risks they may face when smuggling ecstasy abroad. In September 2002, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 268 Dutch citizens were imprisoned all over the world on the charge of ecstasy smuggling. Many of these 'ecstasy prisoners' had had dealings with the police before. Almost one third of them had a record of at least five previous offences, the majority of which were not related to drug smuggling.

Up until now, almost nothing was known about the backgrounds and motives of ecstasy couriers and petty smugglers. Who are these people? Are they experienced smugglers who are part of large networks, which include the production, distribution and smuggling of the drug? Do they have criminal connections, or are they innocent teenagers, unaware of the risks and dangers involved, and only in it to make some easy money to buy a few luxuries? Who are the people the information campaign should target?

In February 2002, we started our research at the request of the Dutch Ministry of Justice to gain more insight into persons who smuggle ecstasy abroad. We collected data on the entire population of these Dutch prisoners, while focusing on those arrested in the USA and Germany. In these two countries we conducted interviews with respectively 19 and 7 couriers and 'petty smugglers'. In addition, we analysed the literature on the phenomenon of ecstasy in general and ecstasy smuggling in particular. This report presents the data gathered in our research.

Characteristics of the total group of ecstasy prisoners

A minority of the population of 268 Dutch persons in prison all over the world for ecstasy smuggling are under thirty years old. The United States, Germany and England are the countries where most of these prisoners currently reside. More than 70% of the group had been in contact with the police or the justice department before; male prisoners had a criminal record more often than female prisoners. An analysis of their previous offences revealed that the ecstasy-couriers and smugglers are not always innocent and unsuspecting persons, seduced by ruthless drug criminals to smuggle ecstasy. Taking into account their age and criminal record, this group cannot be characterized as inexperienced and naive.

Recruitment and personal initiative

There are similarities and differences between the prisoners in the USA and in Germany. The American inmates are 'real' couriers, who were approached by a third party and operated under orders from organizations involved in the export of ecstasy. In Germany, the petty smugglers operated on their own initiative and delivered to their own clients. The American couriers were approached by specific networks of Antilleans and Dominicans and came from the larger cities. The petty smugglers who operated in Germany were all native Dutch white men from the southern province of Limburg.

Both American and German smugglers are in no way 'victims', who were taken advantage of. Almost all couriers knew what they were smuggling and took the risk. In general, however, they all realized later (after their arrest) that the risk had been too high and the negative consequences worse than they had realized.

Personal background and motives

The main reason to smuggle is profit seeking. For these prisoners it is not a question of 'sport' or adventure, nor of pressure, blackmail or manipulation, but the expectation of a simple and fast way to earn money. Many respondents have financial problems, sometimes as a result of drug use, illness and unemployment. Others need the money to pay for an expensive life style. The highest level of education among the respondents was Higher General Secondary Education (Havo) but only one respondent reached graduation. Others attended lower levels of education, again without graduating. Many of them depend on social security.

In other words, the 'new drug' ecstasy has not created a 'new type of courier'. These are not privileged, successful youngsters who take a chance, but individuals with limited financial possibilities.

Methods of smuggling

The smuggling methods vary between the couriers and petty smugglers. The American couriers have to board planes and pass border controls both in Amsterdam and in the United States. This requires more and better preparation, such as special suitcases and other attributes. German smugglers use much less sophisticated ways of smuggling. Often they transport the drugs in the boot of a car or in a backpack.

Suggestions for a campaign of prevention

Different respondents emphasized that an information campaign should emphasize the hard facts; namely, that potential smugglers and couriers are taking a tremendous risk. It should be made clear to them that they are putting their future on the line for a relatively modest reward.

Within such a 'rational' approach information about the duration of the sentences and the conditions in prisons should also be provided.

The second strategy should be focused on the emotional, normative side of smuggling. The damage of ecstasy use and the negative impact that the arrest and detention could have on the life and social relations of the prisoners should be clearly conveyed. With the tolerant policy in the Netherlands regarding soft drugs in mind, many couriers consider ecstasy to be an innocent drug, much like cannabis. The respondents told us that they would never smuggle hard drugs like heroine. Therefore, it could be useful to explain to potential smugglers that in other countries ecstasy is viewed as hardly different from heroine. One should not expect too much from this strategy. One of our findings was that the respondents regret being caught more than they regret smuggling dangerous drugs.

The third strategy should take into account the differences between the target groups. The American ecstasy couriers as a group are totally different from the petty smugglers in German prisons. Both with regard to the locations where the information material should be distributed, and in the nuances and colouring of the message a certain amount of differentiation is recommended. It would also be useful if prisoners themselves could provide some of the information for the campaign.