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# Amphetamine and Methamphetamine Trafficking in Thailand and Suppression Measures in the COVID-19 Context

**Wichit Yaemyim<sup>1</sup>**

Ph.D. candidate of Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, Mahidol University

**Sunee Kanyajit<sup>2</sup>**

Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, Mahidol University

**Patchara Sinloyma<sup>3</sup>**

Royal Police Cadet Academy

## Abstract

*During the pandemic, Thai authorities reported large quantities of drug trafficking from Thailand to various countries by evading detection mechanisms of drug enforcement officers. This research aimed to identify the patterns of amphetamine and methamphetamine trafficking witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand and provide suggestions as to how Thailand can enhance its suppression of such activities. The research was produced through the conduct of 30 in-depth interviews with key informants, who comprised of narcotics officials, policy-makers, senior directors of the Thai Narcotics Control Board, scholars, experts and individuals having direct experience of drug addicts and former prisoners. The sample was selected through purposive sampling and snowballing technique with the aim to understand the novel and adaptive methods being used by cross-border drug traffickers to evade detection. The results revealed that the drug traffickers took advantage of the temporary respite from scrutiny given by the Thai Government and its various agencies to cope up with the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the new normal emerging out of the pandemic was seen to have expanded the drug trafficking networks and operation in Thailand. The study's recommendations include establishing a central repository of intelligence, increasing legal capability through new regulations, developing professional skills of law enforcement entities, developing a greater knowledge about trafficking structures and*

<sup>1</sup> Ph.D. candidate of Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, Mahidol University, Nakhon Pathom, Thailand. Email: [yaemyim.wi@gmail.com](mailto:yaemyim.wi@gmail.com) ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7100-0997>

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, Mahidol University, Nakhon Pathom, Thailand, Email: [suneeekanyajit@gmail.com](mailto:suneeekanyajit@gmail.com) ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3413-0570>

<sup>3</sup> Royal Police Cadet Academy, Nakhon Pathom, Thailand. Email: [sinloyma@gmail.com](mailto:sinloyma@gmail.com) ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3294-1863>

*trafficking operations, and consolidating postal and communication and public transportation services to detect the drug trafficking more efficiently.*

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Keywords: Drug Trafficking Suppression; Amphetamines; Methamphetamines; COVID-19; New Normal; Thailand.

## **Introduction**

The COVID-19 Pandemic has invoked widespread impact upon almost all countries, therein witnessing disruption, adaption and a “new normal” for many of the economies, societies and political structures of the world. In facing these unprecedented shifts, it has become accepted that people in all cultures and jurisdictions may need to adjust to this *new normal* – for example, in relation to a greater focus being given to remote working, the use of online services and novel payment and banking forms (e.g., digital currencies or e-banking). At the same time, the governments of respective countries have often needed to focus so strongly on designing and instituting policies set to prevent, monitor and manage COVID-19 that nefarious groups have identified a context in which they may expand upon their illegal undertakings for self-benefit, doing so in the knowledge that the attention of the state is likely to be temporarily elsewhere.

In November 2021, BBC Thai reported that large quantities of drugs were being trafficked from Thailand to various countries via means designed to evade detection by drug enforcement officers. For example, in Hong Kong, a total of 12 kilograms of liquid methamphetamine worth \$HK 10 million (\$US 1.2) was found hidden in ice packs soaked in foam boxes containing fresh shrimps, products transported by an air cargo service. Earlier in May 2021, heroin worth approximately 900 million Baht (\$US 27 million) hidden in water purifiers and coffee machines delivered via Thai cargo ships was found. Thai drug traffickers also sought to smuggle drugs hidden in food bags. In early November, Thai Customs seized 314 kilograms of heroin hidden in 270 paint drums being prepared for shipment by sea to Australia (Wolff & Ladi, 2020).

Between 2007 and 2017, the methamphetamines seized in Southeast Asia accounted for up to 45% of the total found globally, as evidences the size of this problem within the region. Moreover, in 2018, more than 116 tons of methamphetamines were seized by officers in Thailand. Notably, of the 745 million amphetamine and methamphetamine tablets seized, 515 million were seized in Thailand (Fathurrohman & Bichler, 2021). These figures reflect the analysis of the Wongwanna et al. (2019), as has found in the Golden Triangle area (the border area between Thailand, Laos and Burma) to be a major production site for illegal drugs where, between 2014 and 2018, the production and exportation of synthetic drugs (especially amphetamines and methamphetamines) expanded significantly.

## **Problem Statement and Research Rationale**

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, 616,049 crimes were reported in Thailand in 2020 (where the government was a victim and an arrest was made by the Thai Police), with the highest proportion of these cases (65.25%, 401,981 in number) being drug-related (Chalermripinyorat, 2020). When analyzing the trafficking of amphetamines in Thailand, it was found that the northern areas of the country (such as the provinces of

Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai and Lampang) witnessed the highest rates of activity, with this being followed by the north eastern areas (such as the provinces of Nong Khai, Mukdahan and Bueng Kan). Such drug trafficking utilizes both domestic and international networks, here employing technological advancements, novel digital currencies/payment means, social media and changing social structures to produce the movement of these goods as well as any associated sales. This has resulted in an increasingly rapid and extensive circulation of drugs worldwide, as is making prevention and suppression more difficult (Clark et al., 2020). In the efforts given to combatting the trafficking of drugs, attention is frequently given to a core area of production of amphetamines, methamphetamines, heroin and ketamine – the Thai-Myanmar border. Similarly, the Thai-Laos border also witnessed the production and trafficking of amphetamines and methamphetamines, but to a lesser extent. In the Thai-Myanmar border area between January 2019 and December 2019, 147,569 drug-related arrests occurred, 119,419 (80.92%) of which pertained to amphetamine and methamphetamine cases (Huizer et al., 2021).

Thailand has recognized the need to institute drug trafficking suppression policy, having determined this as an urgent security issue within the country's 20-Year National Strategy (2018-2037). Relevant agencies must thus implement provisions designed to prevent drug trafficking in wider support of this 20-Year National Strategy Kunpeuk et al. (2020). therein adhering to the conceptualization of addressing upstream-midstream-downstream systemic operations. In this regard, Thai policy-makers focusing on the suppression of drug trafficking must focus on eliminating the pivotal structures, influential people and governmental corruption inherent in the drug trafficking of the region, with this being achieved through the integration of intelligence, technological investigation, financial and digital currency investigation as well as the elimination of domestic drug storage sites (Plageron et al., 2019).

Importantly, despite Thailand continuing to face the upheaval of the ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic, its pertinent government agencies must continue to give serious effort towards solving the problems faced in the area of drug trafficking – including through the issuing national policies and law to support proactive operations and the determining of effective guidelines and regulations. This is because the research available suggests that this problem has yet to be effectively controlled through prior effort and that the efforts of drug traffickers continue to adapt to new opportunities (and thus outpace the responses of government officials and law enforcement entities). This paper therefore considers which recommended approaches can be provided to the Thai State. Ultimately, this paper presents next the research which has been undertaken to illustrate the contemporary forms of drug trafficking occurring in Thailand and, from this knowledge, it sets out practical solutions through which Thailand can enhance its suppression of this activity.

## **Literature Review**

- *Critical Theory*

In this section, three theories are surveyed – Strain Theory, Rational Choice Theory and Differential Association Theory. From this overview, it can then be considered how these schools of thought interact with the undertaking of drug trafficking. First, Merton's Theory can be applied to the principle of society without norms to explain criminal behavior, wherein it is suggested that society has goals but no means to achieve these. As

such, social conditions influence the cultivating of a person to have values or certain desires. At the same time, social structures allow specific groups of people to achieve such goals but restrict other groups from doing so. This results in a “goals–means disjunction” condition where social structures can contribute to the encouraging of some groups to possess behaviors not accepted by people in society (Curtis et al., 2002).

The second theory, the Rational Choice Theory explains how an offence is liable to arise via 3 principles. Firstly, an individual shall deliberate the potential benefit and loss liable to derive from the committing of an offense, whereby an aim shall be held to achieve the maximum benefit with the least loss. Secondly, a choice shall be made primarily on the basis of the perceived likelihood of the desired benefit being obtained. Thirdly, different decision-making and behaviors will be undertaken in relation to the activity/crime under consideration, wherein the surrounding environment, opportunities, potential benefits and losses, risks and motives all are important factors (Loos, 1998). Here, a criminal has free will towards choosing to become involved in a crime whereupon they consider the possible outcomes via a pleasure-pain principle. In other words, a criminal may commit a crime despite acknowledging the potential pain they will receive (Bell & Congram, 2013).

Finally, Differential Association Theory suggests that criminal behavior is caused by how a person learns to interact with others through communication processes relating to techniques and methods of committing a crime alongside the motives and values held and how the committing of a crime is believed to cause pleasure. Such processes will vary according to factors of the frequency, duration, priority and intensity of committing crime (Chalardsakul et al., 2020).

The adaptation patterns of people in society, according to Merton's Theory, can be used to explain how offences related to drug trafficking may arise. Society emphasizes the gaining of success that focuses on wealth, yet the potential for all to achieve this goal may be unequal due to the different and unequal social structures and cultures witnessed. Although drug trafficking is illegal and conflicts with social norms, the huge profits that may be gained is a motivation to undertake such activity. In this regard, the societal pressure faced means that some people will commit acts to achieve economic status regardless of whether these go against the law or violate social morals or traditions.

Rational Choice Theory can be used to consider the motives of those who commit drug trafficking offences, wherein such figures can be understood as having deliberately determined that the benefits to be gained are significant enough to outweigh the risked negative consequences of being arrested and prosecuted. Those with experience in committing crime (and not being detected or punished) will likely perceive the benefits available to outweigh the risks faced. Thus, under Rational Choice Theory, drug trafficking will continue as long as individuals view the benefits as significant and consistently dismiss the risk of potential losses.

Differential Association Theory can explain the behavior of drug traffickers by identifying how learning and assimilation arises towards the act of drug trafficking being an accepted value. People therefore engage in drug-related offences as they will develop learned behavior in relation to the dealing, transportation and distribution of drugs. This learnt behavior shall be exacerbated when a network forms among friends or relatives, with the extent of this learning depending on the duration, frequency, priority and intensity of the relationships formed.

- *Drugs in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic*

Naeim and Rezaeisharif (2021), in studying the crystal meth epidemic during the COVID-19 Pandemic, have suggested that problems relating to drugs have caused as much damage as COVID-19, with the latter potentially being less dangerous since vaccines are available through which to mitigate the spread and effects of COVID-19. Ardebili et al. (2021) has found that drug trafficking patterns changed in the COVID-19 context as an economic downturn was experienced in which many people lost their jobs and had their ways of living changed. In this regard, the COVID-19 Pandemic invoked opportunities for drug trafficking to expand rapidly and saw new individuals becoming involved in this activity. Furthermore, the ever-expanding technological capabilities of social media have allowed new networks and network forms to manifest. Moreover, the exponential growth of delivery service businesses (as offer parcel and food delivery) in many jurisdictions has enhanced the number of channels available through which drugs can be trafficked and sold to customers. Consequently, customers may be more likely to buy larger quantities of drugs due to the convenient delivery available, the low prices offered and the privileges/promotions accessible.

Demant et al. (2019) have also argued that social media is now being used as a sales channel, with drug smuggling arising through postal systems after these products are bought via Instagram, Facebook, Line and Twitter. Twitter is considered the most popular social media channel in Thailand, with almost all types of drugs sold and clear information being provided as to their price and channels of delivery (e.g., face-to-face handoff and the use of public or private postal systems). Furthermore, trust is built by showing real products and reviews from customers.

Eck (1994), in studying crime patterns, drug trade behavior, marketing situations and drug networks on social media, have found that the trafficking of drugs through social media is growing in popularity and is witnessing the movement of many drug and medicine types. The most popular channels here include Facebook and Twitter, as these forums make it difficult to identify the customers and dealers involved. Notably, delivery is mostly achieved through face-to-face handoff and digital payments are utilized. In the communications used, slang is commonly employed when referring to each drug.

The research of Matano et al. (2000) has indicated epidemic rates of drug usage among factory and manual labor workers, with this certainly being higher than among the general population. This drug use is witnessed especially strongly in relation to methamphetamines, as are taken to enhance the user's work. At the same time, workers in the entertainment sector saw rates of consumption at 22 times higher than the general population; workers in the transportation sector saw rates of consumption at 7 times higher than the general population; workers in the construction sector saw rates of consumption at 3 times higher than the general population and workers in the agricultural and fishery sector saw rates of consumption at 2 times higher than the general population.

Luong (2015) studied the patterns of transnational drug trafficking of the West African Drug Syndicate Networks (WADSNs) in Vietnam and found that WADSNs have diverse patterns and methods of transporting drugs to countries in Southeast Asia (such as Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos to China along Vietnam's borders).

Vietnamese people and those from neighboring countries, especially women, are hired to transfer drugs over-land (e.g., by walking or using cars), via air transportation and through postal means across Southeast Asia.

## **Methodology**

- *Data collection*

To fully understand how Thailand is, at present, seeking to tackle drug trafficking (primarily that relating to amphetamines and methamphetamines) in the country and to identify where limitations may be being faced here, the researcher collected data through two venues: first, documentary research produced through the consultation of books, academic journals, annual reports and the publications of various agencies; second, In-depth interviews undertaken with 30 key informants to gain their first-hand knowledge of the topic.

The data gained from the interviews and documentary research were transcribed for coding and indexing and producing the content analysis.

- *Sample Selection*

An initial group of 4 key informants was identified via purposive sampling. This group was selected because it possessed direct experience in the prevention and suppression of drug trafficking along with experience in arresting of drug dealers and addicts. This group was then contacted and asked to share the invitation to participate with pertinent contacts, thereby utilizing snowball sampling until 30 research participants had been gained. The interviewees were required to possess at least 3 years of work experience in the area of narcotics prevention and suppression. The 30 research participants constituted: 6 drug prevention and suppression policy-makers, as were executives or directors from the Thai Office of the Narcotics Control Board, the Thai Narcotics Suppression Bureau and the Bangkok Metropolitan Police; 18 drug prevention and suppression officers, as were specialists from the Thai Office of the Narcotics Control Board and the Bangkok Metropolitan Police Division 1 – 9; three scholars from educational institutions, government agencies or the Private Sector who have researched or studied drug prevention and suppression; and three individuals with experience in dealing with drugs or former prisoners who committed narcotic-related offences.

- *Interview Process*

The in-depth interviews sought to gain insight as to the contemporary trade of amphetamines and methamphetamines in Thailand; the ineffectiveness faced in suppressing amphetamine and methamphetamine trafficking in Thailand at present; and how amphetamines and methamphetamines trafficking in Thailand can be better suppressed.

In the interview process, the researcher explained the research objectives to the interviewer, gained informed consent and received approval for the interview to be recorded and for notes to be taken. Each interview lasted between 45-90 minutes. Where some aspects of an interviewee's responses were not clear, the interviewee was later approached for clarity. The anonymity of each interviewee was maintained and all of the research ethical guidance of the Human Research Ethics Committee in the Field of Social Sciences at Mahidol University, Thailand, was adhered to. This need

had arisen in relation to the knowledge that some of the research participants were ex-convicts and former drug addicts, and the interview questions were also structured sensitively to avoid adverse outcomes.

## Results

Through the two strands of data collection in this study – documentary research and in-depth interviews – an understanding was gained as to i) the movement of amphetamines and methamphetamines within Thailand, ii) the international transportation of amphetamines and methamphetamines from Thailand, iii) the trade of amphetamines and methamphetamines between dealers and users, iv) the impact of COVID-19 on amphetamine and methamphetamine trafficking in Thailand and v) the use of price promotions and property exchange for amphetamines and methamphetamines in Thailand. The knowledge detailed below was derived from the respective areas of expertise and experience possessed by the different interviewee groups. For example, the law enforcement entities interviewed provided insight as to the movement of drugs into and throughout Thailand. Former drug dealers/addicts who were interviewed provided insight as to the cost, presentation and promotion of amphetamines and methamphetamines in Thailand.

- *Movement of Amphetamines and Methamphetamines Within Thailand*

The transportation of amphetamines and methamphetamines from their production site in the Golden Triangle area into the border areas of Thailand is commonly conducted by car. Here, drug traffickers take their products to pre-set meeting points or waiting points near Northern-Thailand border areas, with armed groups providing protection here. At the given waiting point, various groups living in villages near the border are hired to transport the drugs across the border on foot – with these groups comprising 2-3 people taking the drugs in backpacks and walking through dense forest areas or routes inaccessible to vehicles to avoid law enforcement entities. When they reach the second meeting point, they handover the drugs and return to their residence. This research found that due to violent insurgencies in this geographical area, some of these drug trafficking routes were adapted and traffickers had begun to hire local fisherman to carry drugs across the border via the Mekhong River.

*“Due to the civil war in the western neighboring state, drug trafficking via the north-eastern route has become advantageous over the common route”* (Office of the Narcotics Control Board interviewee).

When these drugs reached a waiting point in Thailand, people were then hired to transport the products to storage points, from where they shall be transported into central areas of the country – either on-foot or by vehicular means (e.g., using trucks, private cars, pickups, motorcycles and sports utility vehicles), which depended on the nature of the given waiting point. Another group would then assume responsibility for transporting the drugs into the metropolitan areas of Thailand. When being transported by road, the vehicles used were modified to create gaps within which the products can be concealed. When large trucks were used, such drugs were placed together with other products (e.g., vegetables, fruits and consumer goods).

When transporting amphetamines and methamphetamines, 3 to 5 cars are used with each having a separate purpose. Here, the first car would be responsible for surveying whether there was a police checkpoint in operation, thereby travelling 10 kilometers ahead of the vehicle containing the drugs. A range of map applications (such as Google Maps) may be used to create routes as they can identify where traffic is slow – as may suggest the presence of a police checkpoint in that area. Such information allows those transporting the drugs to be responsive to changing circumstances. Notably, most transportation occurred at night as this provided a stronger ability to identify changes in traffic flow and to use the darkness to escape from police in the case of being stopped.

*“Now, drug traffickers employ modern technology such as Google Maps and GPS to survey police checkpoints. Then, they can inform their colleague to allow them to escape detection or inspection”* (Narcotics Suppression Bureau interviewee).

When these convoys reach their intended area, a meeting point is set so that another group could take possession of the drugs and continue the transportation. In general, a meeting point is set only when the convoy reaches the general area, with this being practice designed to prevent information leaks. After the handoff occurs, the new group transports the amphetamines and methamphetamines to a storage point – often a warehouse, room, rented house or any other appropriate place believed to be concealed from law enforcement entities. From this moment, a process begins of distributing the products to various areas and people (e.g., middle-men and small traffickers). Some quantities of these drugs are packaged for concealment to then be transported to a third country.

- *International Transportation of Amphetamines and Methamphetamines From Thailand*

Four main routes are used to transport amphetamines and methamphetamines to other countries. 1) Via land transportation, using cars to move drugs from the northern, northeastern and western border areas of Thailand into central areas of the country and then to southern areas so as to forward to traffickers in Malaysia; 2) Via ship transportation, where the drugs are packaged together with other exported products and moved through Bangkok Port (Khlong Toei) and Laem Chabang Port to destinations including Australia, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong and The Philippines; 3) Via air transportation, with drugs having mostly been detected at Don Mueang Airport and Suvarnabhumi Airport in Bangkok. Here, the drugs are hidden in parcels or luggage but in small amounts, with the recipients being Thai workers who work abroad; and 4) Via international post, where the drugs are placed with various consumer products. Figure 1 summarizes how such drugs are trafficked into Thailand and to third countries.



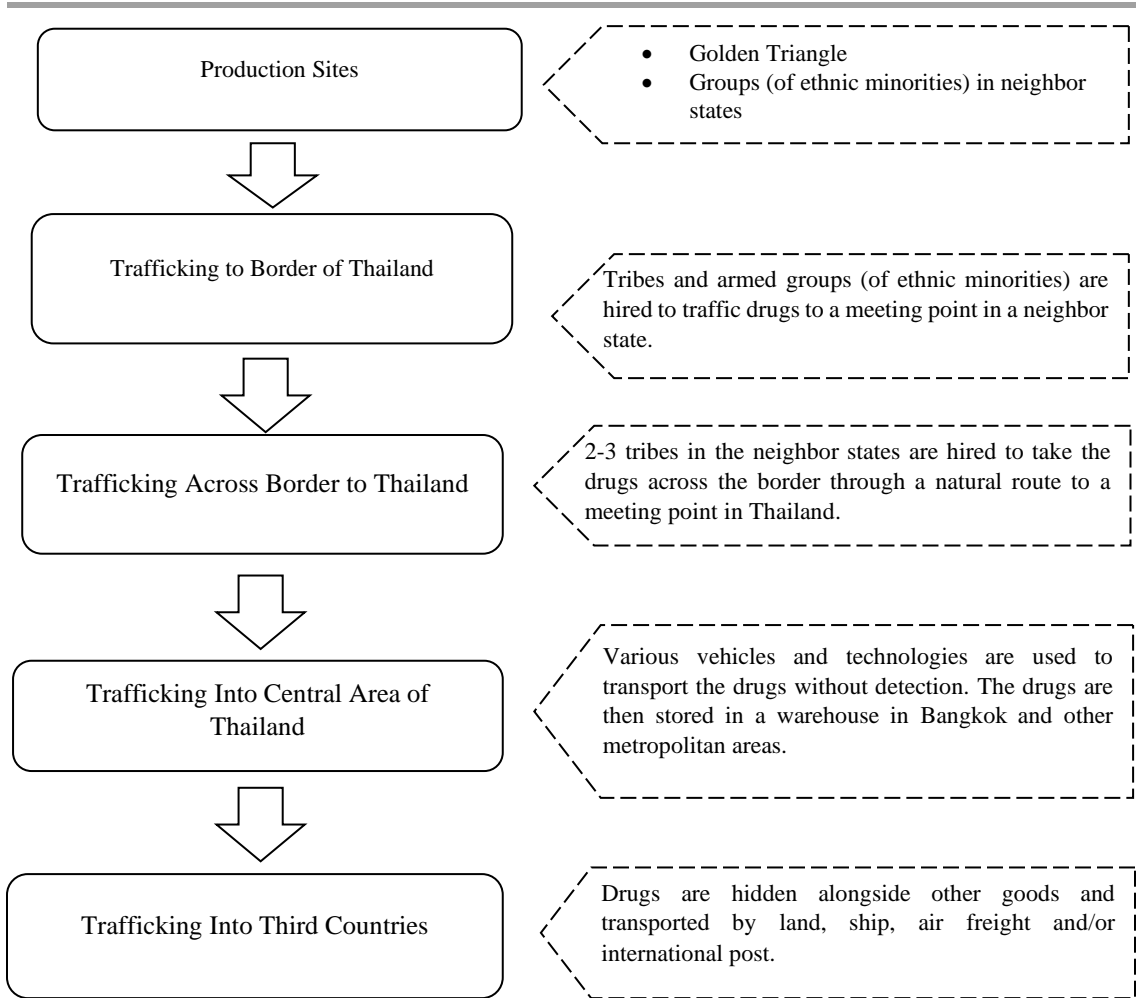


Figure 1: Trafficking of Amphetamines and Methamphetamines into Thailand and to Third Countries

• *Trade of Amphetamines and Methamphetamines Between Dealers and Users*

Small-scale traffickers and drug users communicate via a diverse range of methods – including face-to-face, telephone and social media means, the latter witnessing the creation of specific groups through Line, Facebook, Twitter and Telegram wherein slang known to the users and dealers is used and chat is undertaken through online systems or online games. For example, after initially completing an agreement in a game, they will contact each other to agree the details later.

The movement of amphetamines and methamphetamines through online social media may include a level 1 dealer, level 2 dealer, drug delivery person and customer/drug user. The level 1 dealer is responsible for providing drugs and a delivery person. When the drugs and a delivery person are provided, the delivery person is ordered to take a picture of the drugs with a message. Then, the level 1 dealer shall forward a picture to the level 2 dealer to post on various social media channels advertising the sale of the products. The level 2 dealer can determine the price of the drugs. When an order arrives, the level 1 dealer shall inform a delivery

person to pack and deliver the products to a customer through a postal parcel service. In addition, the level 1 dealer shall obtain the returns from the difference in cost between that imposed by the major trafficker and the price determined by the level 2 dealer. The level 2 dealer obtains the returns from the price they determined. The delivery person obtains the returns from the number of deliveries they have made.

Amphetamine and methamphetamines are distributed to small traffickers in an area via communication with an agent. Importantly, this agent is only responsible for manifesting the liaison between various parties and is not involved in the associated transportation, delivery or payment. The only exception to this is when the agent has been dealt with for a long time and has gained the trust of various groups. After an agreement has been formed between the major trafficker and a small trafficker, another group is responsible for providing a delivery person to provide the target groups and small traffickers. The meeting point is conveyed and delivery is undertaken either with a face-to-face handoff or by positioning the drugs in a set meeting point and conveying that this drop-off has been made.

Some groups deliver drugs by using public transportation companies. They initially deliver common products (such as fruit and food supplies) for 2-3 times to become familiar with the operations undertaken by that company and any drug suppression activities encountered when such products are being delivered. If it is perceived that drug products could be shipped through that means without being identified, amphetamines and methamphetamines are smuggled alongside normal parcels. Advancements and expansions in the transportation means available (e.g., food delivery services and online seller platforms) are exploited here.

- *Impact of COVID-19 on Amphetamines and Methamphetamines Trafficking in Thailand*

During the COVID-19 Pandemic, the number of drug trafficking checkpoints in operation in Thailand declined due to the reduction in the number of law enforcement officers available – a result of staff sickness. Furthermore, the Thai State devoted much of its focus to combatting COVID-19. As a result, Thailand was unable to adequately suppress and detect drug trafficking. These factors provided numerous opportunities for drug traffickers to exploit, thereby making their cross-border activities easier. This resulted in greater levels of amphetamines and methamphetamines flowing into Thailand.

*“My division has 12 police officers designated to drug suppression activities. Now, many of the police officers in my division are sick with COVID-19 and only a senior police officer and I can work. Due to the unbalanced workload, it is hard to set checkpoints or patrols to detect drug trafficking” (Narcotics Suppression Bureau interviewee).*

In addition, the COVID-19 Pandemic forced many people to adapt to a “new normal” which witnessed remote working, online learning, digital meetings and shopping for food and supplies through electronic commerce platforms becoming highly prevalent. Through the interviews conducted in this research, it was identified that, as a result of the rapid expansion of digital courier and food delivery services, many small-scale drug dealers chose to deliver amphetamines and methamphetamines to consumers through these means. Here, amphetamines and

methamphetamines are hidden in parcels or food boxes when being delivered, thus enabling the evasion of detection by authorities. This concealment is also enhanced by the high levels of consumer goods being delivered directly to people's homes in the COVID-19 context. In other words, it was impossible for law enforcement entities to inspect all such deliveries.

*"Private courier companies and food delivery businesses seek to make as much profit as they can, thereby transporting parcels and goods in huge quantities. This means they do not have much time to inspect those parcels and goods"* (Metropolitan Police interviewee).

- *Use of Price Promotions and Property Exchange for Amphetamines and Methamphetamines*

In 2021, the price of amphetamines direct from the production site was 12,000 – 15,000 Baht per pack containing 200 pills (\$US 360-500). In the northern area of Thailand, the price was 20,000 – 25,000 Baht per pack containing 200 pills (\$US 600-750). The wholesale price of methamphetamines in neighboring states was 60,000 – 70,000 Baht (\$US 1,800-2,200) per kilogram. However, upon the amphetamines being transported to the Thai border area, the price was witnessed to have increased to 90,000 – 100,000 Baht per kilogram (\$US 2500-2800), yet for orders over 10 kilograms, a discount of up to 2,000 Baht per kilogram may be offered to customers. Internally of Thailand, the price was witnessed to be 200,000 – 250,000 Baht per kilogram (\$US 6,000-7,500). To break this price down another way, the price of an amphetamine tablet was 50 – 100 Baht while the price for a gram of methamphetamine was 300 – 800 Baht. In addition, methamphetamines were sold in the form of a "scoop", the price of which started at only 100 Baht per scoop (as usually did not exceed 2 grams according to the research participants).

In addition to the exchange of money, other property can be used as a medium of exchange when trafficking drugs. For example, in the international trafficking of drugs, payment may be made in the form of fuel or construction material (such as structural steel) which commands a high price. Some drug traffickers employ a form of credibility (with a slang term of "K" being used) to access drugs on a buy-now pay-later basis. In this regard, the more a person has arrest warrants held against them or the longer they have been active in undertaking drug trafficking, the more creditability they will be perceived to possess.

## Discussion

From the results of this research and the insights of the research participants, it has been found that the pattern of trafficking amphetamines and methamphetamines from their production site in neighboring countries into Thailand within the COVID-19 context remained consistent with that identified in the study of Luong (2015) – and as explored the transnational drug trafficking of West African Drug Syndicate Networks (WADSNs) into Southeast Asian countries using Vietnam as a border crossing point. In this practice, Vietnamese people are hired to transport drugs across borders by foot, car and air as well as through the use of postal system deliveries.

Despite this strong knowledge being held as to the means of trafficking here, the COVID-19 context has invoked gaps in the ability to appropriately prevent and

suppress the movement of drugs in Thailand, primarily as the Thai State and its pertinent agencies have given most of their attention to responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic in the last two years. Notably, drug traffickers have exploited these gaps and the new normal for society to expand their drug trafficking networks, doing so at a pace that law enforcement entities cannot keep up with.

This research also identified that most of the drugs smuggled from Thailand to third countries were methamphetamines, namely as there was a significant demand for these products in other nations. It was also identified that amphetamines were popular among Thai people working abroad, a finding consistent with the research of Eck (1994) and its argument that drug consumption among factory and manual labor workers was higher than among the general people. Moreover, the interviewees in this present study identified how various pricing and payment mechanisms had risen through which to enhance the networks of amphetamine and methamphetamine trafficking. Despite the high demand witnessed for these drugs, their price remained relatively low and thus these products remain at an accessible cost for many people. This finding is concurrent with the study of Pinyopornpanish et al. (2017), which found that it was the repeat purchase of drugs by consumers that created profits for drug traffickers rather than single sales. To invoke repeat purchases, discounts were offered – thereby attracting old customers and gained new customers at the same time. In addition, new and expanding technology forms were being utilized to ensure drugs were trafficked effectively and reached users without the detection of law enforcement entities – as includes the use of mapping technology to avoid police checks and the creation of secret groups through social media.

### **Conclusion, Recommendations and Limitations**

Drugs such as amphetamines and methamphetamines possess a higher production potential for manufacturers as the required reactants and chemicals are relatively accessible. Moreover, modern technology further facilitates its production in large quantities in a short timeframe. The providing of discounts has also acted as a promotional mechanism which attracts both old and new customers while also expanding drug trafficking networks in all areas and among a diversity of groups (including ethnic minority groups living along Thailand's borders, major trafficking agents, small traffickers and traffickers using Thailand as a transit state for transporting drugs to other countries). Furthermore, new forms of transportation, distribution and communication patterns are continuously arising, with this making it difficult for law enforcement entities to keep pace with the changes and to respond accordingly.

To appropriately respond to this context and to enact effective prevention and suppression activity of drug trafficking in Thailand, it is important to understand the diversity of patterns and relationships that exist between the networks of amphetamine and methamphetamine drug traffickers in Thailand and its neighboring countries. These networks include horizontal relationships (e.g., among major agents) and vertical relationships (where there is a hierarchical structure of command). It can be seen that the interactions between production site owners and investors manifest a horizontal relationship in the form of a partnership, with a clear distribution of business benefits arising between these parties. In contrast, among the

parties at the lower level, a vertical relationship is manifested whereby orders are received from a coordinator (as may be anonymous) and the missions undertaken are directly assigned. Here, even those within the same group may not know each other personally, with this structure being designed to obscure the identify of those at higher levels.

In light of this knowledge, a few suggestions emerge as to how best to manage the trafficking of amphetamines and methamphetamines in the present context in Thailand, namely: A stronger capability within law and regulations should be developed to engage in negotiations with drug traffickers in Thailand. It is necessary to gain a greater knowledge about trafficking structures, personnel, and drug trafficking movements and networks in the country. Through such collation of information, a central repository of intelligence should be produced which would allow certain entities to take decisive action in combatting the trade of drugs. For example, the Bank of Thailand should adopt a policy which allows the examination and freezing of bank accounts suspected of being linked with a drug-related activity. Through the possession of tangible evidence, restrictions can be placed on the assets of suspects to prevent their transference. For those who provide knowledge about drug trafficking, financial incentives (direct or indirect) may be offered. Such information should be provided to law enforcement entities that lead to prevention of the spread of drug trafficking, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality. It is also suggested that more stringent legal measures must be imposed over the postal and communication services and public transportation companies, to identify suspicious packages or ascertaining the legitimacy of senders.

The professional skills of law enforcement entities should be developed in response to the needs faced. To achieve this, assessment must be made of what resources are needed (e.g., technology, budgets and equipment) and what skill gaps exist among officers to appropriately suppress the trafficking of amphetamines and methamphetamines in Thailand. Once these needs have been identified, operational training should be provided on a regular basis, with a focus to develop knowledge and expertise in suppression of drug trafficking. The performance of law enforcement officers should be regularly monitored to ensure that good governance prevails in their drug trafficking suppression activities. Officials must be encouraged to show commitment, performance with honesty and trust, and courage to combat the evil of drug trafficking. The efforts of law enforcement entities to curb drug trafficking should be widely publicized with educational motives, thereby discouraging people from involving in drug trafficking. The public should understand that it is now possible to detect drug traffickers and that severe punishments are imposed. Individuals receiving treatment for drug addiction should not be involved in any drug eradication programs as this might lead to forming of networks, pushing them into drug trafficking once again. Those who have overcome drug addiction or who have served a sentence for drug trafficking, and those who are committed to rehabilitation of drug addicts, should be able to access opportunities in all sectors to allow them to rebuild their life and to ensure they do not return to their former illegal activity.

There were a few limitations of this research. First, its focus was only on the current situation of amphetamine and methamphetamine trafficking in Thailand, when drug trafficking was on hold for a while due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

It is likely that once things normalize, it cannot be stated with certainty that many of the opportunities which had arisen for drug traffickers in the last two years would remain perpetual. However, the Thai State and law enforcement entities must remain responsive to the ever-changing landscape. Secondly, this study did not review much the new technological forms and means of trafficking, which drug traffickers in Thailand and its neighboring states were exploiting rapidly. The law enforcement entities must undergo regular assessment of technological means to ensure that they are well-equipped with the technological resources and skills to appropriately keep pace with the activities and operations of the drug traffickers.

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