

The Newest Danger that Correctional Institutions Face

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K2
SPICE

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During our long careers in corrections you meet new and sometimes very dangerous challenges every day. In present day corrections, we find another new challenge that administrators, correctional staff, officers and civilian personnel deal with daily. Many of us have heard of Spice or K2. This product is also known as a synthetic cannabinoid. There are also other terms such as: fake pot, synthetic marijuana, legal weed, etc. This substance is manufactured from dried plant material that comes from chopped up herbs. The active components are chemicals that are synthetic cannabinoids that are sprayed onto the plant material (Spice Addiction Support, 2018). According to Merriam Webster, the definition of cannabinoid is as follows:

Any of various naturally-occurring, biologically active, chemical constituents (such as cannabidiol or cannabinol) of hemp or cannabis including some (such as THC) that possess psychoactive properties.

In recent months, our correctional institutions have been experiencing an epidemic of sorts that is affecting our correctional officers. Just recently, on the county correctional level, the Allegheny County Bureau of Corrections located in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, which has a maximum population of 3,000 inmates, was placed under emergency lockdown when 11 correctional employees reported off after coming down ill on Sunday evening on September 2, 2018. On Tuesday, September 4, 2018, during this lockdown, it was ordered that inmates were confined to their cells and recreation was limited. Attorney visits were shifted to rooms that were outside of the inmates' housing pods. This lockdown was promulgated when nine correctional officers and two medical staffers at the jail experienced dizziness and high blood pressure in three different localities of the facility: the housing pods, intake, and the visiting waiting area. "Warden Harper was not sure that K-2 was the cause of the officers and staff illness." He was also not sure that it was caused by a different narcotic but these effects that the staff suffered are symptomatic of a synthetic cannabinoid (Silver and Ward, 2018).

According to Harper (2018):

"Who indicated that the progress of tracking down contraband and conducting interviews as

investigators try to identify the substance that affected jail staff. We suspect it to be some kind of a narcotic, but we're not sure now. We've interviewed a lot of different people to find out what the contraband is and how it got in there" (Silver and Ward, 2018).

A week prior to the Allegheny County Bureau of Correction's lockdown, Corrections Secretary John Wetzel of the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (PADOC) ordered a statewide lockdown. This order restricted that the inmates will be secured inside their cells. Part of this restriction also included a halt to all the inmates' incoming mail with the exclusion of legal correspondence, and a temporary halt was also imposed on the inmates' visitors (Silver and Ward, 2018).

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"Over the past week, these state prison restrictions on Tuesday, had been eased stated by a spokeswoman Wendy Worden from the DOC." The relaxation of this order over the weekend began to ease where the inmates were able to use the phones, showers, and outside recreation areas for some inmates. "Ms. Worden also said that her boss, Mr. Wetzel, is aiming to have things back to normal by next week" (Silver and Ward, 2018).

After these justified lockdowns were implemented for the safety of correctional personnel and inmates alike, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Pennsylvania provided their following statement. According to Reggie Shuford, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Pennsylvania (2018):

"[The relaxation of the order] is inadequate. ... We do not accept the notion that the DOC can

hold prisoners in their cells 24 hours per day, stop mail, and end visitations and phone calls in every state facility every time a staff person becomes ill."

Mr. Shuford also stated that "a statewide lockdown is a heavy-handed response that is detrimental to the long-term health of people who are incarcerated." With the order entering its seventh day, the ACLU criticized the corrections department for what it called a lack of transparency, "leaving loved ones of people who are incarcerated uninformed and anxious about what is happening. It called on the department to restore inmate mail and visits" (Silver and Ward, 2018).

This article will analyze these problems stated and show how they are impacting correctional systems across the country. This article will also address the definition of the problem that these synthetic cannabinoids are creating and will look at the methods of distribution and methods of detection that are being used by correctional administrators and their correctional personnel to combat this challenge they face.



At the height of this K2 epidemic, mail often has been slowed or halted at many facilities, leaving inmates and their families uninformed and anxious.

The Problem

In Volusia County, Florida, at Tomoka Correctional Institution Work Camp, it was reported by a former employee who told The Miami Herald that, at mealtimes, the room appears to be reminiscent of scenes from the popular television show "The Walking Dead." Correctional Officer Keith Raimundo quit his position in June 2018 because of disagreements with the administration over frustration about how the institution was being run. According to Officer Raimundo (2018), "inmates walk around just like zombies," and that "almost every inmate who enters the inmate dining hall, enters high." Raimundo also told the Herald that red-eyed inmates shuffle in to get their dinner and sit down to eat, uncoordinated limbs struggling to place food in their mouths. Frequently, he said, someone "falls out," common vernacular for an overdose. The inmate might faceplant unconscious into his food tray, or slip from his seat, foaming at the mouth, twitching, all of his muscles seizing. At Tomoka, it's too common an occurrence to be alarming. (Blaskey, 2018).

In 2018, these figures have gotten worse. Deaths are on track this year to exceed over 500. These figures are highly significant, and the previous threshold has been unthinkable. More people are dying at a younger age. Accidental deaths have spiked and has paralleled by this dramatic rise. The rise in death has risen from 12 in 2016 to 62 in 2017. These deaths caused by drug overdoses have been reported by the Florida Department of Corrections (FDC) (Blaskey, 2018).

The problem and top killer has been attributed to FDC's audit of synthetic marijuana, most commonly labeled K2 or Spice. It was nationally reported that 70 people had overdosed within a 24-hour period on this drug in New Haven, Connecticut, home of Yale University (Blaskey, 2018).

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (n.d.),

"While synthetic cannabinoids are supposed to trigger the same receptors in the brain as THC, the naturally occurring component in marijuana that produces a high, the chemical makeup of K2 is unique from traditional marijuana. Unlike its natural counterpart, synthetic marijuana can cause aggressive behavior, hallucinations, heart

attacks, seizures like the ones Raimundo described as ‘falling out’ and death (Blaskey, 2018). ”

Many inmates prefer to use the synthetic drug K2 because it is undetectable at the FDC’s urinalysis drug-tests.

An inmate who identifies himself as Jessie on Instagram wrote the following (nd):

“Testing positive for regular marijuana use could result in a disciplinary report, confinement (a form of isolation), loss of gain time, and even loss of visitation. He estimates one third of the inmates in his housing unit frequently use K2 (Blaskey, 2018). ”

The investigation of a few death summaries showed a partial glimpse of the problem, as in the case of the following institutions. In Franklin Correctional Institution, for example, inmate Eugene Martin fell out of bed and expired from K2 when he hit the floor of his cell. At the Mayo Correctional Institution, inmate Hakim Ramatoola, after smoking K2, suffered a seizure which also caused his death. In the last half of 2017, the list goes on-and-on at the FDC where K2 has caused other deaths at that department (Blaskey, 2018).

K2 causes problems for the prison administrators because the drug is undetectable in the Florida’s Department of Corrections urinalysis drug test.

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This drug’s contents can consist of cockroach spray, rat poison, nail polish remover and ammonia according to the Florida Department of Corrections (Rivero, 2018).

Lastly, this synthetic drug has plagued correctional institutions on the federal, state and local levels. We will now analyze what methods administrators are using to

distribute and detect their methods to combat this contraband being introduced into their correctional institutions.

Methods of Distribution

The smuggling of any contraband is a major problem and breach of security protocol that can help keep officers, correctional personnel and inmates from not being safe within the confines of federal, state and local correctional facilities across the country. Unfortunately, we have our own correctional officers and other correctional staff and employees who disregard that trust that we hold sacred in our profession.

In one example, a correctional officer at Delaware County’s George W. Hill Correctional Facility, located in Thornton, PA, has been accused of allegedly smuggling K2, a synthetic cannabinoid, into the county prison according to the Delaware County District Attorney’s Office. District Attorney Copeland stated that, “Bramir Shareif Cannon, 25 of Folcroft has been charged with felony contraband and possession of a controlled substance. Charges have been filed after Cannon allegedly was caught smuggling into the prison a synthetic cannabinoid, known as K2.” When Cannon arrived for duty, he was told to report to the shift commander’s office. The shift commander noticed that Cannon was walking with a limp and also noticed that there was a large bulge in his groin area of his pants. When questioned about what was in his pants, Cannon told the shift commander that he was tired of being harassed and vacated the room. The shift commander immediately had the area secured and called for a backup of correctional officers. After Cannon was confronted by other correctional officers, he admitted that he did in fact have contraband. Cannon pulled out three bundles of a green, leafy substance and 40 cigarettes. Cannon told investigators that he needed money because his vehicle was unreliable and would breakdown. Cannon arranged with an inmate who told him that he would pay him between \$200-\$250 if he would bring contraband into the prison for him. Cannon now awaits trial on these above charges and is held after failing to post \$100,000 cash bond at his August 31st preliminary hearing arraignment. His preliminary hearing date was scheduled for September 13th according to court records (Bennett and Staff, 2018). This writer contacted the District Attorney’s Office about the Cannon case,

on November 19, 2018, and there has been no disposition for the Cannon case.

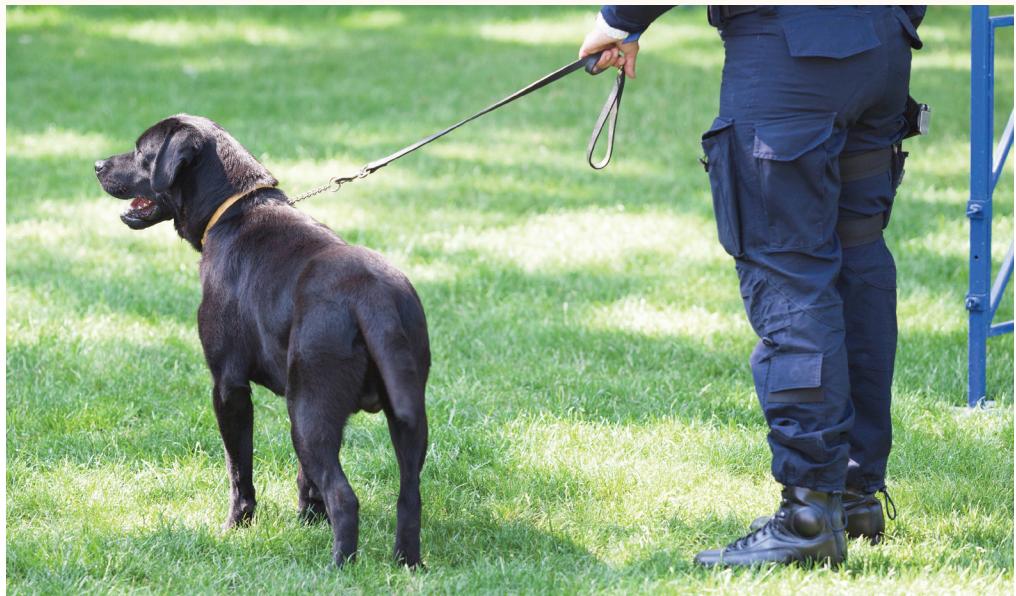
Other methods of distribution are introduced through the inmate's mail. There are several different methods being used. One example is where inmates are allowed to receive mail from their family and friends from the outside of the correctional institution. Someone discovered that they could introduce K2 through the inmate's mail by dipping liquid K2 on the paper and letting it dry. They are sending the treated mail to the correctional institutions through the mail to the inmate. Once the inmate receives the letter, he or she can then rip the paper and then smoke it. Or, if they choose to distribute it to other inmates, they can sell each one-inch square for extra cash at \$5.00 per piece. The calculation for an entire sheet, can reap as much as \$250 (RDI Blog, 2017).

Methods of Detection

The problem with K2 is the difficulty of its detection for prison administration and their staff. In Florida prisons, there has been an increase in inmates' deaths, so they have launched an educational campaign intended to show inmates what dangers exist when using the drug substance. Dr. Gregory Lydell was interviewed in a video warns that smoking K2 increases pressure on the brain and that pressure has to be relieved. In some cases, these patients need to be intubated.

According to the Merriam definition of intubation, intubation is "the introduction of a tube into a hollow organ (such as the trachea)." The patients that do experience this pressure on the brain are sent to neurosurgery immediately to have some portions of their skull removed, and in some cases, portions of their brain are also removed (Rivero, 2018).

It is imperative that this drug does not enter the jail or prison population. The FDC has a proactive program with



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K9 dogs have become instrumental in sniffing out synthetic cannabinoids like K2.

regards to the education aspect of a video for inmates and their families to help educate them on just how dangerous this drug use can be, and the dangerous effects that it can cause. The FDC has just added nine new canine dogs who are trained to intercept and prevent this type of contraband entering any of their correctional facilities. The FDC has been aggressively working toward stopping drug interdiction through all entry points of their prisons by having K9s increasing all searches to intercept this dangerous contraband (Rivero, 2018).

The Wernersville Community Correction Center, a halfway house located in Berks County, Pennsylvania have placed body scanners, which have reduced drug use and overdoses. The cost of these scanners is \$100,000. They can accommodate a tall person so that this individual can walk through without any difficulty. These scanners are so powerful and displays such clarity that the correctional officers can actually view on the screen, weapons and drugs. To show just how powerful these scanners are, you can even see their organs and undigested food. "Wernersville installed the scanner in January and through June there were no overdoses. If you did a comparison of the last 2 years, there were reported 32 overdoses (Esack, 2018)."

The PADOC has implemented other methods of prevention with a statement provided below from Steve

Esack. According to Esack (2018), the PADOC plans to combat the drug trade and violence by using the following methods:

- Training for how to use protective equipment when conducting searches and processing inmate mail or other items. The training, along with extra equipment, is for corrections officers, maintenance and food service staff who handle inmate clothing or property.
- Hazardous material handling training for in-house firefighters.
- Buying safety disposal equipment for unknown substances in mailrooms and elsewhere.
- Adding body scanners at state prisons and community corrections centers. Coal Township State Prison has body scanners and Huntingdon State Prison will get them soon, state officials said.
- Adding three teams of drug-sniffing dogs and buying more anti-overdosing drugs for animals.
- Instructing inmates on the dangers of using synthetic drugs.

As noted in the distribution section of this article, incoming mail can be a major problem. The Virginia Department of Corrections (VADOC) no longer allows Virginia prisoners to receive their actual mail, with the exception of legal and privileged correspondence. Each letter has a restriction of five pages. The envelopes are photocopied and the prisoners receive copies. In West Virginia, at their DOC, they have implemented a policy for their prisoners to only receive copies of incoming mail (Clarke, 2018). The Indiana DOC has issued new policies for their prisoner mail. As of April 17, 2017, they have banned colored paper and envelopes. Their policy requires to only allow letters to be written on white lined paper and to only be sent in a white envelope. This assists them in deterring the prevention of drug smuggling (Clarke, 2018).

The VADOC has implemented another policy to deter drug distribution. Prior to each visit, each inmate is strip searched, and changed into new underwear and then dressed into a jumpsuit that zips through the back before meeting with outside visitors. After finishing their visits, they again are strip searched then change back into their original prison garb. Female inmates have to wear jumpsuits, but do not have to change their underwear. The

visitors in the visiting room, no longer can make vending machine purchases in the VADOC (Clarke, 2018).

Lastly, I reached out to a colleague who works for the PADOC and is the Superintendent for the State Correctional Institution of Fayette, located in Fayette County, Pennsylvania. To enlighten the readers, here is an insightful account on a recent historic perspective of dealing with this synthetic drug which is a nightmare of this drug K2. Here are the recent developments from the lockdowns, and how the correctional administration, and correctional personnel deals with this contraband entering into their correctional institutions.

According to Capozza (2018),

Prior to the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections system wide lockdown, we were experiencing numerous incidents of staff exposure to substances requiring outside medical assessments, state-wide. Additionally, numerous inmates were being sent to outside hospitals for symptoms of K2 overdose. At SCI-Fayette, we had eight staff members sent out for medical assessment for exposure, a significant number of inmates sent out for overdose symptoms, and several staff were assaulted while attempting to render assistance to inmates who were under the influence of K2.

During the lockdown, the Department comprehensively reviewed current practices and venues of drug introduction into our facilities. As a result, mail and books are no longer directly accepted at the facilities (mail is scanned and electronically transferred through a vendor and books will be sent to a centralized depository for security review), inmate visiting security and procedures were enhanced, all facilities will be equipped with ‘drone detection’ systems, and all facilities will be equipped with ‘body scanning’ devices.

Since the implementation of ‘electronic mail’ process, we have seen a drastic reduction in the number of K2 related incidents at SCI-Fayette, as this substance was being introduced into the facility by the sending party spraying its liquid form on written correspondence. Additionally, subsequent to the state-wide lockdown, we have experienced no incidents of staff exposure symptoms as a result of the implementation of these comprehensive drug interdiction measures (Personal communication, November 26, 2018).



Conclusion

With synthetic carbenoids being smuggled into any correctional institution, this places any jail or prison administrators at a dangerous crossroad. They are responsible for the safety of all their employees and the safety of all their prisoners. It is quite unfortunate that families of the inmates have to suffer through the lockdowns and those restrictions imposed on their family members who are behind those bars. One of those restrictions is forbidding color drawings to be sent in through the mail to the prisoner from his child so that he or she can look forward to seeing their child's creation. Or, those restrictions on letters that their spouse may not be able to spray their perfume onto their letter to bring memories of a loved one.

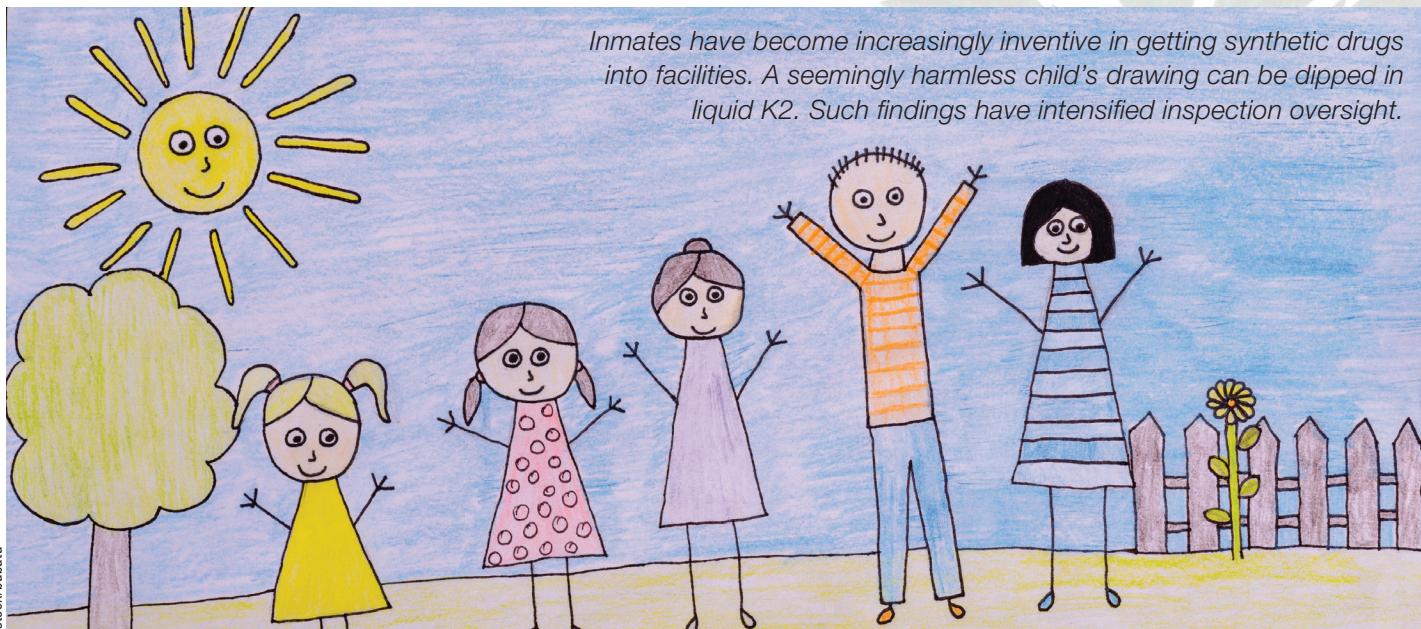
Correctional Systems such as the Allegheny County Bureau of Corrections and the PADOC have to put in-place stringent policies. These policies have to countermand an inmate or inmates, or any of their family or friends from smuggling in any dangerous contraband which can endanger the lives of any correctional employee, or any inmate who is incarcerated within their prison system such as these synthetic drugs. The inmates who are involved with the smuggling of these synthetic carbenoids into any correctional facility are those that are culpable, and responsible for those actions that are needed

to be taken by the jail or prison administration to safeguard everyone behind those walls.

As stated above, Mr. Shuford from the ACLU stated (2018),

"[T]hey do not accept the notion that the DOC can hold prisoners in their cells 24 hours per day, stop mail, and end visitations and phone calls in every state facility every time a staff person becomes ill." (Silver and Ward 2018)

This statement in this writer's belief is irresponsible. The Allegheny County Bureau of Corrections and the PADOC practiced due diligence to investigate and analyze the problem because correctional officers were getting ill. They needed to lock down their institutions, which was imperative, and a real necessity to safeguard all who work and live behind those bars. As Superintendent Mark Capozza of SCI Fayette stated above, this lockdown was instrumental in reducing K2 inside the inmate population. Due to the evaluation and the analysis of the problem at hand, K2, and if these correctional administrators did not investigate and analyze this problem at hand and if a correctional officer(s), or inmate(s) had died in the interim at any of those institutions, those correctional systems would have been held responsible for those deaths.



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