

**Prepared Statement of Senator Chuck Grassley of Iowa  
Chairman, Senate Judiciary Committee  
Hearing on “Deadly Synthetic Drugs: The Need to Stay Ahead of the Poison Peddlers”  
Tuesday, June 7, 2016**

In many areas across this committee’s jurisdiction, we hear time and again that technology is outpacing the law. But in no other area is the result of this gap as deadly and tragic as it is with the recent rise in the production, marketing and sale of synthetic drugs to the youth of America.

Traffickers create these drugs in laboratories so they produce the same or greater effects on a user as controlled substances. But when the government acts to ban the new drug, traffickers simply tweak the chemical formula ever so slightly to evade the law.

Dealers give these substances exciting names like Vanilla Sky, Spice, and Crazy Clown, and sell them in legitimate convenience stores and gas stations -- all to market them to young people as a “legal,” and therefore presumably safe, way to get a high.

But of course, this is all a lie. These drugs are anything but safe. Often, they are pure poison.

Almost six years ago to the day, a young man from Indianola, Iowa, David Rozga, became one of the first young people in the country to die from the side effects of smoking synthetic marijuana, or K2.

David’s parents have since become outspoken advocates for education, awareness, and action against the menace of synthetic drugs. I’m honored to have them and David’s brother here with us today, and to welcome David’s father Mike to share his family’s story with the Committee.

Synthetic marijuana, or cannabinoids, are substances that have little to do with the organic marijuana plant. The substance is typically composed of plant matter that has been sprayed with chemicals designed to mimic the effect of THC, the active ingredient in marijuana, but with far more potency.

Synthetic cathinones, often marketed and purposely mislabeled as “bath salts” or “glass cleaner,” are another type of synthetic drug. These are stimulants that imitate the effects of substances such as cocaine and methamphetamines.

Even more recently, a third category of synthetic drugs has emerged as a concern: synthetic opioids, in the form of fentanyl and its derivatives.

This committee needs no introduction to the opioid crisis, of course. Fentanyl and its derivatives are synthetic opioids 50-100 times more powerful than morphine. The Drug Enforcement Administration has called them the “deadly convergence of the synthetic drug threat and current national opioid epidemic.” Just last week, it was widely reported that an overdose of fentanyl was responsible for the death of the musician Prince.

According to the DEA, synthetic drugs are largely developed outside the United States, mostly in China, and smuggled into the country through the mail, or across the southern border with Mexico. And reports have indicated that the profits are often traceable back to countries in the Middle East.

So we need to take a hard look at whether law enforcement has the tools needed to protect the public from these synthetic drugs. While this Committee acted a few years ago, it's clear the traffickers are continuing to outpace us.

In 2011, after Mike Rozga testified before the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, this Committee acted by passing my bill, the David Mitchell Rozga Act.

The bill placed a series of synthetic cannabinoids and their analogues on schedule I. It also extended the time for which a substance can be temporarily scheduled by the DEA to protect the public. The bill had broad bipartisan support on the Committee.

The next year, my bill became law as part of the Synthetic Drug Abuse Prevention Act of 2012. This was an important step to help protect our young people. Sure enough, calls to poison control centers began to level off or decline for a time. And since March 2011, the DEA has used its temporary scheduling authority to place thirty-five synthetic drugs on schedule I.

But clearly, the threat posed by these drugs has not abated. Calls to poison control centers for synthetic marijuana have once again begun to spike, rising from 2,668 in 2013 to 3,682 in 2014 and 7,779 in 2015. News stories continue to depict the awful effects of ingesting these substances on our youth, and the effects on our healthcare and criminal justice systems. And law enforcement continues to encounter these substances in record numbers.

According to the DEA, substances identified from federal, state or local laboratories as synthetic marijuana increased from 23 reports in 2009 to over 37,000 reports in 2014. A similar rise in bath salts occurred as well, from 29 reports in 2009 to over 14,000 reports in 2014. Law enforcement has apparently identified hundreds of new substances that are candidates for some type of control.

So I thank all the witnesses for being here today to help us learn more about this crisis. Many of us on the Committee support legislation we think can help. But given the complex way in which drug traffickers can evade the law, this is a difficult problem without easy answers.

I now turn to my colleague Senator Feinstein who is serving as Ranking Member for this hearing, and whose leadership on this issue has been invaluable.