

NSA Podcast Episode Draft Script

Narration

Last year, in partnership with law enforcement partners around the world, the NCA seized a staggering 230 tonnes of class A drugs, mostly cocaine.

Key convictions included the dismantling of an international drug trafficking gang led by Paul Green. The organised crime group was responsible for smuggling billions of pounds worth of drugs, including cocaine, into the UK.

In September, Colombian national Didier Reyes was jailed for his role in a plot to smuggle more than half a tonne of cocaine into the country. The haul had a street value of 42 million pounds, and Reyes worked with two others to import the cocaine by boat before it was intercepted by the NCA.

Adam Thompson

So my name's Adam Thompson. I'm the head of drug threats at the National Crime Agency. Our activity has been linked to over 200 tonnes of cocaine being seized overseas each year for the last few years. So we know we know we're having a decent amount of success taking out large volumes of cocaine. Yet we still see, you know, significant demand in the UK and, and, you know, significant consumption. So that just reflects that absolutely enormous amount that is being produced.

Narration

The threat from cocaine remains high. Deaths from the class A drug have increased more than tenfold in the last decade. And it fuels serious and violent crime on our streets. Cocaine production in South America is at a record high, and wholesale prices are a historic low.

Adam Thompson

The cocaine sort of threat to the UK has been increasing significantly over the last few years. So we've seen huge increases in the amount of coca leaf that's been produced in various Latin American countries. And what that's done is create these opportunities for organised crime groups to traffic that cocaine towards Europe and the UK and the UK has got a really significant demand for cocaine. We're sort of one of the biggest, global uses of cocaine. That means that those of organised crime groups are particularly targeting the UK.

The cocaine trade causes utter devastation all the way from source countries where it's produced, the countries through which it's trafficked to the UK as well, where it's associated with organised crime groups who are involved in serious violence, knife crime, firearms related violence, fighting over drugs territories, corruption at our ports. And also we've seen a fairly significant increase in deaths linked to cocaine over the last few years. And that's sort of attributed to higher purities of cocaine, which are available because there's no need for the organised crime groups to adulterate it with cutting agents to keep the profitability and also sort of poly drug use as well. So people using cocaine alongside alcohol, as well as other sorts of types of drugs as well. So we've seen cocaine use alongside things like ketamine.

Narration

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As law enforcement around the world continue to meet the cocaine threat head on, the NCA is consistently working with partners to share intelligence on how organised crime groups or OCGs are adapting. As part of this work, a growing trend has been identified as cartels scramble to find new ways to smuggle the deadly drug into Europe and the UK.

Graeme Biggar

Criminals are getting more inventive in attempting to hide drugs as they cross borders. We are seeing more chemical concealment where cocaine is altered at a molecular level to bond with another material, be it charcoal, glue or plastic. It crosses the border as something innocent and is extracted at the other end. The cocaine is not hidden inside a box of bananas. It is the box of bananas.

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That was the NCA Director General, Graham Biggar, delivering this year's National Strategic Assessment, an annual report that outlines the most significant threats facing the UK. Among the key findings was that organised crime groups are resorting to complex chemistry in a bid to disguise their shipments of cocaine as they are smuggled across borders.

Pete Coughbrough is a manager in our threat leadership team and is an expert on the issues surrounding cocaine.

Pete Coughbrough

There's two versions of chemically concealed cocaine. What we have is what it described as mixed. The cocaine is literally just mixed with a carry material. So as an example, fertilizer, and it's generally just mixed in with that, that particular carrier material. And then you get what we call chemically bonded. This is done to a molecular level. So what you'll have is the actual cocaine is physically bonded to the molecules that are then attached to the carrying material.

It's very, very clever and sophisticated. We're aware of over 150 examples of chemically concealed cocaine shipments being seized around the globe since 2022, and the carry materials are changing regularly. Some of the regular ones we've seen at the UK border - charcoal, industrial lime powder, spices, turmeric is one. Basically anything can be used to attract it to the carry material, even plastics.

So there's been examples of plastic pieces being seized with cocaine chemically bonded to it. And if you look at plastics as an example, we're only one step away from the cocaine effectively being used to make a plastic bottle, like a drinking bottle water.

Narration

The idea of altering the appearance and nature of cocaine to make it harder to detect is not in itself new, and has been used by cartels for more than two decades. High profile examples include the method made famous by drug lord Pablo Escobar, which saw the highly soluble drug mixed into products like wine and fruit pulp. It was even soaked into jeans and hidden in legitimate shipments that were then exported to the US.



Another, more recent example saw cocaine diluted into a lacquer, which was then used to varnish 508 broom handles and imported into the UK.

But this method means the cocaine is still detectable by sniffer dogs and field-testing kits. And it is only in the last few years that law enforcement have uncovered the more complex method of altering the chemical makeup of the drug so that it is no longer cocaine hydrochloride and is therefore harder to detect.

Dave Taylor is a forensic operations manager at the NCA and experienced first-hand the challenges this evolving methodology presented.

Dave Taylor

The first time it came in, we had intelligence that cocaine was in a load of animal feed. We had never seen this before. We were unable to get a positive result at the ports. We then started to see more and more. And it did become an issue for us because we, we just couldn't identify it and actually find out where the cocaine was been hidden. They're changing the chemical structure, the normal tests that we use at the ports can't ID it and identify it.

Dave Taylor

It's a really ingenious way of concealing cocaine or the commodity and bringing it into the country. It reminds me of Breaking Bad, the chemistry and the techniques behind it and the amount of work that goes into it. It's just a natural progression for them where they're trying to get the commodity into the, the country.

Adam Thompson

Every chemist who's employed by the organised crime groups has its own, has their own sort of recipe for doing that. So, it gets bonded to the substance, which is then transited across the world to the destination country. And then we see the chemist flying out following the route of that, that, that sort of shipment, and come into the destination country where they then reverse that process, that chemical process.

Adam Thompson

What we do know is that these people are, you know, likely to have, you know, fairly developed chemistry skills. So we're talking sort of, you know, degree level, chemistry that would be needed to be able to understand how to lock in the cocaine and then extract it again at the other end.

Pete Couborough

We believe there's highly skilled chemists that have got the ability to do this, but as, as we move on in time, it's likely they are passing their skills on to others.

The next stage is it'll actually be imported by the of the crime group that's actually going to take receipt of it. It could go to an industrial unit or it could indeed go to a farm premises which are slightly more remote and draw less attention to themselves. Certainly, there's examples in the Netherlands where they're almost industrial scale extraction facilities.



There's certain paraphernalia that you'd expect, obviously you'd expect some evidence of the actual carry material that the cocaine is being extracted from. Quite often you'll have a hydraulic press because once the cocaine has been extracted, then basically they want to turn it back into the more traditional blocks that we see quite often with, with seizures. Some sort of heating element to it. Microwaves possibly. One of the key things in terms of the actual extraction is the, the smell. So one of the things that they quite often have in place is some sort of extraction facility similar to a takeaway would have.

A lot of the chemicals can be purchased from a local DIY store. There's, there's nothing particularly special about the chemicals used. It's just the quantities in which they're actually used, which are needed to wash the cocaine through the process.

Narration

A very sophisticated technique that requires specialist resources from the OCGs. So why then are criminal gangs innovating in this way?

Kate Appleby

I'm Kate Appleby and I'm the Deputy Director for Drugs, Firearms and Borders. Serious and organised criminals are business people, at the end of the day. You can see the pattern. There's a gap in the market, so they fill it. There's competition in the market, so they adapt, they innovate to become more ambitious. And you know, the best business person will survive.

The drugs trade in particular is global and is seeing such an uptick at the moment. That has actually created increased collaborative working across the world and we are seeing new partnerships form, coming together like never before. So, in response to really good work that we've done with partners, it's been a lot harder for drugs gangs to get cocaine into ports.

Adam Thompson

This year, we've seized, I think it's around nearly 30 tonnes of cocaine at the UK border. Because of the successes that law enforcement is having, whether that's the NCA, Border Force or just our international partners around the world, we're forcing organised crime groups to diversify the types of methods that they're using to smuggle drugs into the UK.

The whole reason that the organised crime groups sort of take this approach is to change the makeup of the cocaine to such a degree that our sort of usual tests don't detect cocaine. And frankly, the organised crime groups know about that. They know what equipment law enforcement uses at the border.

So, they're going to even greater lengths to, to change the makeup and try and get around this testing equipment that we have, you know, in place at the moment.

Pete Coubrough

Obviously, the more traditional kilo blocks that you will come across with the tape and these, the logos actually on it, you know, once, once they're detected, it's pretty much game over. It's cocaine or it's going to be a drug. By going through this process, it makes actual detection of cocaine very, very difficult.



And one of the things about going through the process of extraction is it does actually remove quite a lot of the impurities that are actually put into the cocaine at source.

Adam Thompson

Clearly it's had some degree of success because we know that they're investing in it. And we started to see laboratories in the UK at fairly small scale. But, we're seeing them sort of invest in, the chemicals that you need to extract that cocaine, the time, and also, you know, just that chemistry and that expertise. So, so, it's obvious that there is, you know, some, benefit to the organised crime groups from pursuing this.

Narration

With a relatively small number of cases identified around the world so far, it's obvious that chemical concealment is not the only method being used by OCGs to smuggle cocaine. Adam and Pete explore some of the other, more traditional methods that are still in use, and where chemical concealment might factor into the strategies employed by drugs gangs.

Adam Thompson

So we still see, you know, very significant seizures in containers, coming directly from Latin America or routed through sort of other key nexus points, like West Africa, for example. We see parcels being shipped from Latin American and from other sort of routes on the supply chain. But also one of the most significant, you know, methodologies is in the back of lorries. So we see roll on, roll off, you know, ferry traffic. Over the last 12 months in particular, we've seen a new trend where organised crime groups are getting hold of what we call go fast vessels. So these are sort of large, rigid hulled inflatable boats which are powered by hundreds of horsepower engines. They go out of Spain and Portugal usually and will meet what we call mother vessels, which have come out of Latin America.

And the cocaine will be handed over to the go-fast vessels so if they, you know, get into a situation where law enforcement are trying to stop them, they can, you know, use these go fast vessels to outrun them. And they're taking those drugs into places like Spain and Portugal. And then because the UK has such high demand for cocaine, it's likely that that will be transported up to the UK in the back of lorries.

Pete Coubrough

We are seeing narco subs. Certainly last year we, we did see a slight increase in the number of narco subs being used across the Atlantic, mainly moving towards the Iberian Peninsula. So not so much the U, you know, the UK. At sea drop offs is another example whereby a commercial vessel is used and the drugs are literally jettisoned over the side to be retrieved by a crime group using a, a fast RHIB or another fishing vessel, maybe, and then it'll be taken back to shore.

I think the thing with the crime groups is that they're very adaptable, and they adapt at pace. So law enforcement it's always a challenge to try and keep up with that pace. And because they've got the ability to move the cocaine in various different methods, that's exactly how they will adapt. So it might be the same crime group will be doing an at sea drop off. Also they'll do a, a shipment of chemically concealed cocaine. But at the same time, they may also be doing go fast activity into, into Spain.

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Adam Thompson

We take an intelligence led approach to where we deploy our resources and how we work with our colleagues in Border Force. And we use all of the different contacts that we have and the capabilities that we have across the globe to identify shipments heading for, for Europe and the UK. And to be able to stop them at the UK border is our sort of last line of defence.

Katie Appleby

The NCA has got lots of capabilities in this space so firstly, as a national organisation obviously we can bring together the UK Law Enforcement response so policing partners, regional organised crime units, HMRC. I mean there's too many to name. As well as the domestic response, we also have great work happening overseas, we've got people posted all across the world working with local partners. We make sure that, you know, as a community of law enforcement people, we are taking the best of each other's approaches in order to tackle the gangs.

Narration

With OCGs developing increasingly sophisticated methodologies, it is vital that the response from law enforcement is equally innovative. To do this, officers at the NCA are deploying their expert knowledge and capabilities to help the international forensic community develop new testing that will detect chemically concealed cocaine.

Dave Taylor, our forensic specialist, explains how the NCA set about responding to this growing threat.

Dave Taylor

It's been very, very challenging. For example, it's taken my, myself and my team the best part of two years to work on this, and that's working hands on with our colleagues in the Netherlands, in particular, who without them, we would not have been able to, you know, do this. It's been trial and error, using cocaine that we've seized in the past and seeing how we can actually do it, stage by stage.

So that's, from me, that's been really interesting because it's very unusual for forensic services to be able to get down into the dirty end of the business, as it were, utilising facilities in the Netherlands. We've been able to do that successfully, document it fully in a way that it will be accredited and is being accredited in the UK forensic laboratories, and again, worldwide to, you know, international standards.

I can't obviously go into that in too much details, but we now know how the crime groups are doing it and we're getting pretty good now at identifying it and being able to extract the cocaine ourselves.

Pete Coubrough

I think I would be quite happy to say that NCA forensics are leading the charge in terms of what we can do in terms of testing. We know that Colombian partners are also doing similar research over in Latin America. So, it's a case of building what we know from both sides,

Protecting the public from serious and organised crime



putting them together and hopefully taking it further forward. And I think that's, that's, that's really what it's about is it's such a challenging and sophisticated method of concealment, we need to work together with our partners to do this.

Dave Taylor

We are working across all areas from the point of seizure so when it comes into the, the country, at the ports, allowing Border Force to have confidence in their techniques and their field testing equipment, and then at the same time, when we then take on the investigation, within the National Crime Agency or a provincial police force, that they are then able to send the samples that have been seized into a forensic laboratory, and that laboratory are then able to identify the cocaine, extract it, quantify it, and tell us how much cocaine is actually in, that commodity.

So, for example, a 25 kilogram sack of animal feed - they could then tell you how much cocaine is actually in that sack and how pure the cocaine is.

Narration

Expertise, collaboration and hard work. The NCA launched a multifaceted operation to respond to the issues presented by chemical concealment and as a result, we've begun training forensic service providers in new testing.

This means greater opportunities to detect chemically concealed cocaine, empowering law enforcement to make arrests, seize drugs and disrupt organised gangs who bring harm to our communities. But what does confronting this challenge tell us about the wider landscape and how criminal ingenuity is impacting other threat areas?

Here's NCA Director General Graeme Biggar to explain...

Graeme Biggar

Criminals innovate, they're entrepreneurs and part of that innovation is using technology, in this case, advanced chemistry combining with logistics and getting chemists to do it for them so contracting out to get specialist services in. And it's absolutely what we're seeing across lots of other crime.

So chemical concealment isn't the only example of technology and innovation being used in drugs. We're also seeing drones being used to carry and deliver drugs. We've seen in some other countries drones being used to carry drugs over borders, not yet into the UK. We've seen drones being used to try and kill people as well. So that's one example which can be drugs, it can be others.

We're seeing crypto currency being used to launder money. One way we can catch criminals is when they've got a bag of cash and they're handing it over from one person to another. They use crypto currency, that's harder for us to do, to spot and to trace.

And then of course, we're seeing Artificial Intelligence being used particularly in online crimes, in fraud, in cybercrime, in online child sexual abuse, in more and more sophisticated ways.

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So all the technology that all of use in our day to day lives, criminals are also using. We've said for some time in our assessments that technology enables crime. This year we have now said that it is driving crime. It is accelerating it, it's globalising it and it is making it more harmful. That's why, in the NCA and across law enforcement, we need to make sure that we're intelligence-led, that we're internationally networked and that we have lots of specialist expertise that we can deploy to counter what the criminals are doing.

Dave Taylor

We're always at the forefront for new techniques and new things that organised crime groups are trying out. We sit on intelligence groups throughout the rest of Europe and internationally where we can understand the techniques that are being used throughout the rest of Europe but we can also see the impact that's having on the UK.

Kate Appleby

You know, it's incumbent on us to be really vigilant, using those intelligence powers to really understand what criminals are working on. We then learn everything there is to know about those new trends, chemistry for example, and we will work with top chemists on that and then we will make sure that we are as able as we can be in tackling those new trends and getting ahead of them as much as possible.

It takes a network to defeat a network and, you know, serious organised crime gangs are called organised for a reason. But we also need to be more organised than the gangs. It's about bringing that response together in new ways and keeping the country safe.

Graeme Biggar

It's a really big focus of the NCA to make sure that we are at the cutting edge of technology and innovation, that we're matching them where we can, getting ahead of criminals. But when we look at law enforcement in the round, I think there are two things that matter. One we are seeing technology mean that crimes are morphing from one to the other. So criminals groups are practising more crimes, individuals within them are moving from one crime to another. Technology makes that more possible. The fact they are contracting out to other criminals makes that happen more often. So we need to make sure we are looking right across crime and not be stuck in the silos that we have had between different organisations before.

And then the second thing is we need to be able to operate at more scale. You know, we need to put our resources together so we can get real efficiencies and drive to the very best innovation and technology that we can.

So for both of those reasons, we are supporting the creation of a National Police Service that will bring together the National Crime Agency, along with CT police, our counter terrorism police, and our regional organised crime units so we can get real mass and the best technology to tackle the crimes that currently spread across our organisations.

And to make that a success, we need to do lots of things but one is to make sure that the NCA's DNA flows through the veins of this new organisation, things that we've developed over our history and the predecessor organisations before us that make us good at what we do. That's about the workforce we have, it's about the intelligence-led approach that we take, the

Protecting the public from serious and organised crime

international network that we work with and the expertise that we bring to the party. To take the best of both, along with policing's as well, those two ways of working to make sure we provide the service that the country needs for the future.

Narration

Drugs remain the single biggest driver of serious crime in the UK. The scale of the problem is growing but so is the response from the National Crime Agency.

Adam Thompson

We've got some really well-developed capabilities at the NCA, whether that's forensics experts, whether it's just subject matter experts who really understand this threat. But also, our international network makes us pretty unique. We've got officers based around the globe who are working day in, day out with international law enforcement partners, and we can do that jointly because we've got such a positive working relationship built up over many years, and they know that the NCA are trusted partners when it comes to working on some of these cutting-edge issues around the drug threat.

Dave Taylor

This is ongoing. It will change. As organised crime groups see that we are successful, they'll move on to something else. So, we're always chasing up and following leads and following new methods of bringing drugs into the UK.

Kate Appleby

It feels a bit like an arms race in that they, you know, adopt new technologies. And then we need to respond to that. So, part of the challenge for us is being able to get ahead of that change, make sure that we are on top of all the latest technological developments, and we can adequately bring those people to justice.

Adam Thompson

We have global reach. We've got excellent partnerships right across the supply chain. We are able to identify vast amounts of cocaine heading for the UK. And we will do everything we can to take that out before it hits the UK shores.

Narration

I'm Richard Beanland and you've been listening to Underworld: Behind the Scenes of the NCA.

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