

James M. Jeffords Center's  
Vermont Legislative Research Service



Synthetic Drugs

Synthetic drugs, unlike drugs that naturally occur, are chemically produced in a laboratory. The purpose of such drugs is to slightly modify the molecular chemical structure in order to circumvent existing drug laws.<sup>1</sup> In states lacking prohibitive legislation, synthetic drugs may be purchased legally at retail outlets as “herbal incense” or “plant food,” labeled “not for human consumption.”<sup>2</sup> This masks the intended purpose and is meant to subvert organizations such as the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) from regulatory oversight.<sup>3</sup>

Recently, two categories of drugs, synthetic cannabinoids (hereinafter, “synthetic marijuana”) and substituted cathinones (hereinafter, “bath salts”), have been a topic of legislators throughout the country due to the recent emergence of the drugs.<sup>4</sup> Beginning in spring 2010 states began outlawing synthetic marijuana and bath salts in response to a rapid increase in use.<sup>5,6</sup> The federal government took action on July 9, 2012 when President Obama signed into law a bill that outlawed synthetic drugs at the federal level. Synthetic marijuana is chemically engineered to be similar to tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the active ingredient in marijuana.<sup>7</sup> The chemical is then sprayed on dry herbs, concealing its intended purpose and making it legal to purchase. It is typically marketed as “K2” or “Spice.” These synthetic substitutes may be used for the purpose of achieving a “marijuana-

yet known. Use of such substances could have serious potentially harmful ramifications on the human body.<sup>8</sup>

Bath salts are a stimulant containing amphetamine-like chemicals, which

heart attacks. The chemical also dramatically raises blood pressure and heart rate, while lowering the blood supply to the heart—known as myocardial ischemia. Users may also experience withdrawal and addiction symptoms that are common with almost all Schedule I controlled substances.<sup>14</sup> A Schedule I controlled substance is the classification given to the most



resources to monitor each state. For this reason certain states have chosen to ban the drugs on a state level to grant the state drug enforcement authorities the proper power to more strictly enforce federal law.<sup>21</sup>

### What Are States and Communities Doing to Deal with the Problem

Synthetic marijuana has been banned by 41 state legislatures. The nine states that have not banned the substance include Massachusetts, Maryland, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Washington, and Vermont. Bath salts have been banned by 42 state legislatures. The eight states that have not banned the substances are California, Massachusetts, Montana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, Oregon, Washington, and Vermont.<sup>22</sup>

Maine

