

Stopping the Misuse of Fentanyl and Other Synthetic Opioids

HIGHLIGHTS FROM GAO-18-205

What are synthetic opioids?

-  Synthetic opioids are chemically produced in a lab.
-  They mimic the effects of natural opioids derived from the poppy plant, like heroin and morphine.

-  Legitimate synthetic opioids are pharmaceuticals that doctors prescribe for severe pain.
-  Illicit synthetic opioids are relatively inexpensive to produce, and are sold on the black market.

Synthetic opioids such as fentanyl can be extremely potent.

According to the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), just two milligrams of fentanyl can be lethal.



Penny (2x scale)

Relative size of a potentially lethal dose of fentanyl.

Source: Adapted from DEA.

In 2016

Nearly 64,000 Americans



died from drug overdoses.



That's about 175 people every day.

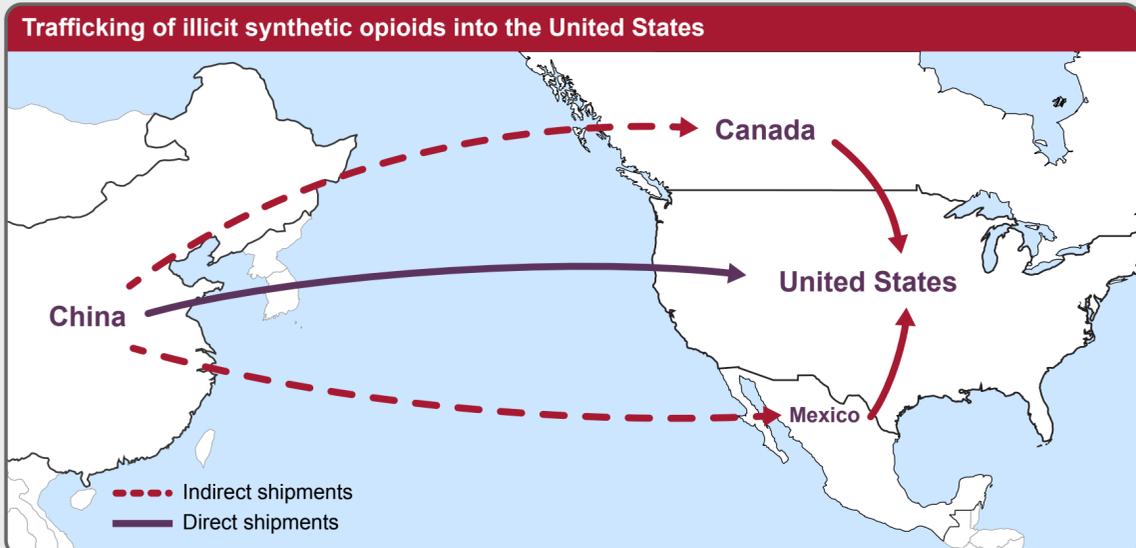


31 percent of those overdose deaths involved synthetic opioids such as fentanyl—more than any other drug category.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

What is the federal government doing to curb the supply of illicit synthetic opioids?

According to federal law enforcement agencies, China is the primary source of illicit synthetic opioids in the U.S. market.



Source: GAO analysis of DEA information, Map Resources (map).

Federal agencies have been working with foreign officials to

-  share information
-  coordinate on drug investigations

For example



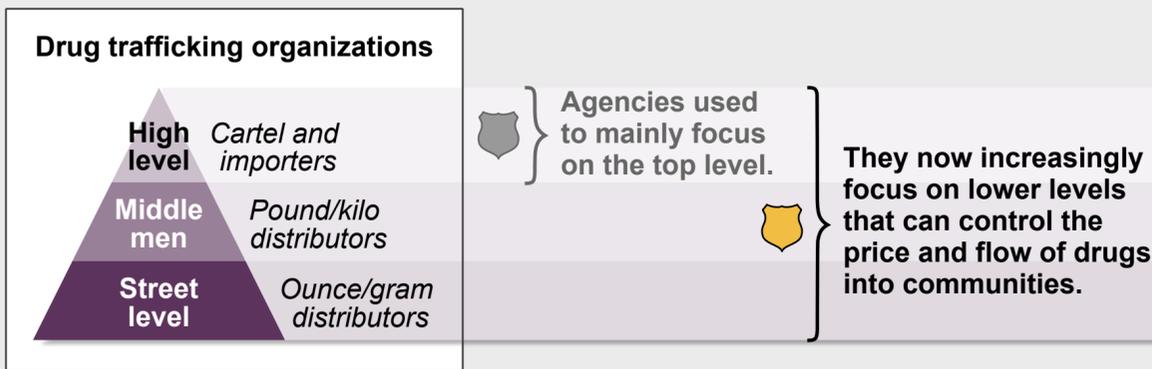
A foreign government informed a U.S. agency about an inbound fentanyl shipment in 2017



which allowed the agency to seize the shipment before it reached the United States.

What is the federal government doing to curb synthetic opioid abuse?

Federal law enforcement agencies are shifting their focus.



Additionally

-  Law enforcement is increasingly treating overdose deaths like crime scenes
-  by collecting evidence to identify the source of the drugs that caused the overdose.

Federal agencies could do more.

-  Improve data collection and sharing between law enforcement and public health officials to better track trends in drug use.
-  Reduce backlogs at key Customs and Border Protection labs that test suspicious substances at ports of entry.
-  Develop ways to measure the impact of federal efforts to combat the opioid epidemic—such as documented decreases in the number of overdose deaths.