GAO Highlights

Highlights of GAO 20-118, a report to congressional committees.

January 2020

# DRUG CONTROL

## Actions Needed to Ensure Usefulness of Data on Suspicious Opioid Orders

## Why GAO Did This Study

Since 1999, more than 700,000 people have died of a drug overdose in the United States, with about 48,000 dying of an opioid overdose in 2017 alone. The DEA administers and enforces the Controlled Substances Act as it pertains to ensuring the availability of controlled substances, including certain prescription drugs, for legitimate use while limiting their availability for abuse and diversion.

The Substance Use-Disorder Prevention that Promotes Opioid Recovery and Treatment for Patients and Communities Act, enacted in 2018 included a provision for GAO to study the reporting of suspicious opioid orders on a real-time basis nationally using computer algorithms. This report examines, among other things, how DEA obtains and uses industry-reported data to identify and address suspicious opioid orders and opportunities for DEA to improve these efforts, such as using computer algorithms or real-time reporting. GAO analyzed program documentation and DEA data, and interviewed DEA and industry officials as well as officials from national associations representing distributors, investigators, state boards of pharmacy, and other federal and state agencies.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations related to DEA's collection and use of industry-reported data. DEA agreed with three of the four recommendations, and neither agreed nor disagreed with the fourth.

View GAO-20-118. For more information, contact Triana McNeil at (202) 512-8777 or mcneilt@gao.gov

## What GAO Found

The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) collects industry-reported data on the sale and purchase of controlled substances and prescription drugs, including opioids. It uses these data to support ongoing investigations into the diversion of such substances into the illegal market place and to identify investigative leads for its field division offices.

Source: GAO. | GAO-20-118

GAO identified deficiencies associated with DEA's drug diversion efforts, including the following:

- **Limited proactive and robust analysis of industry-reported data.** While DEA's current data systems are not designed to conduct real-time analysis, and it conducts some analyses of industry-reported data, such as in response to requests from its field division offices, DEA could conduct more analyses using automated computer algorithms to help identify questionable patterns in the data. For example, DEA could analyze data to identify unusual volumes of deleted transactions or unusual volumes of drugs that were disposed of rather than sold. It could also analyze data to identify trends in distribution or drug purchases in a given geographic area. Other analysis DEA could perform is to look for unusual patterns when comparing drug orders in one geographic area with other nearby areas. These analyses could potentially help DEA proactively identify suspicious activities or registrants that may warrant investigation.
- **No data governance structure to manage all drug transaction data.** Although DEA has guidance, policies and procedures for the use of some information systems, it has not established a formal data governance structure to manage all data it collects and maintains, which are integral to its diversion control activities. A data governance structure is defined as an institutionalized set of policies and procedures for providing data governance throughout the life cycle of developing and implementing data standards. Industry and technology councils, domestic and international standards-setting organizations, and federal entities endorse the use of a governance structure to oversee the development, management, and implementation of data standards, digital content, and other data assets. While DEA began efforts to develop a governance structure, it is in the early stages of development and does not have additional details or documentation of its efforts. An effective data governance structure could help DEA ensure its important data assets are consistently and fully utilized.