

Forum: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Issue: Addressing the concerning increase of unknown consumption and distribution of fentanyl

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Introduction

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that is known to be 50 times more powerful than heroin and 100 times more fatal than morphine¹. Fentanyls are commonly used in medicine as anesthesia and severe painkillers, and commonly employed for treating cancer. Unfortunately, fentanyl overdoses caused by its recreational consumption have suddenly become the leading cause of death in the United States. According to data from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIH)², the number of fentanyl overdoses more than doubled in the period between 2020 and 2022, and the deaths increased from 35,000 to 80,000 cases registered.

Nevertheless, fentanyl's damages extend far beyond the United States, causing worries for governments across the world to arise. This narcotic has increased the number of deaths related to opioids contributing to Canada's ongoing opioid crisis marked by a rising number of overdose deaths and widespread addiction. Similarly, Mexico has been accused of illegal production and smuggling of fentanyl to the United States. The threats posed by this substance only deteriorate Mexico's already existing issues with drug cartels. Fentanyl usage and overdoses have also been observed in European countries, such as the United Kingdom and Germany. Likewise, several Asian nations, including China, are known to be suppliers of chemicals used in the illicit synthesis of fentanyl.

Globally, opioids remain the deadliest group of drugs, accounting for two-thirds of deaths connected to drug consumption, according to a 2022 report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Moreover, what worsens this situation is the increasing toll of unreported consumption and distribution, where people unintentionally come into contact with fentanyl in a variety of substances, increasing the chance of an accidental overdose. It is also commonly detected in candy distributed to children usually around Halloween. In contrast to conventional drug use situations, in which users intentionally engage in drug consumption, a growing number of instances in which fentanyl is hidden within substances without the users' awareness is gradually increasing. Lethal doses of fentanyl may be hidden in street narcotics, fake medications,

¹ <https://shorturl.at/iyBL3>.

² <https://nida.nih.gov/research-topics/trends-statistics/overdose-death-rates>

and recreational substances, endangering people who might not be aware of the substance's composition.

Term Definitions

Opioids

Opioids are a class of drugs that derive from natural substances found in the opium poppy plant. Opioids work in the brain to produce a variety of effects, including pain relief.

Synthetic drugs

Substances that are artificially modified from naturally-occurring drugs and are capable of exhibiting both therapeutic and psychoactive effects.

Recreational substances

A drug used without medical justification for its psychoactive effects often in the belief that occasional use of such a substance is not habit-forming or addictive.

Sedative drug

A drug that calms a patient, easing agitation and permitting sleep. Sedatives generally work by modulating signals within the central nervous system.

Epidemic

An outbreak of disease that spreads quickly and affects many individuals at the same time.

Smuggling

To import or export secretly contrary to the law and especially without paying duties imposed by law.

Background Information

History of fentanyl “epidemic” in the United States

Opioid analgesics first entered the market when it was synthesized by Belgian pharmacist Paul Janssen in 1959, and began to be officially used in the United States in 1968. The largest pharmaceutical companies convinced patients and doctors of the benefits of these drugs for numerous causes, including chronic types of pain. The result of this campaign was a significant increase in sales of the opioids. During a period of 20 years, the number of prescriptions for opioid substances has grown up to 255 million³ times prescribed. According to statistics from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, in 2013 there were still 78 prescriptions for every 100 people. After the nightmare side effects first surfaced in the United States, the figure dropped to 43.1 prescriptions per 100 people.

The algorithm of the drug epidemic that has covered the country is as follows. Upon completion of a course of taking medications containing synthetic drugs, the patient experiences withdrawal syndrome. The torment he experiences drives him to the black market, where fentanyl will be offered to him for very little money. It is for this reason that there are such a significant number of overdoses by American military personnel: psychological problems are combined with physiological dependence. The quick rise in fentanyl usage can be linked to several factors, including its popularity, comparatively low manufacturing costs, and great profitability for illicit drugmakers and traffickers.

Production of fentanyl

The production of drugs of plant origin on a planetary scale is localized: Central Asia, South America, and the Asia-Pacific region. The drug is also widely illegally manufactured and sold by criminal gangs. Most of the illegal fentanyl found in the US is trafficked from Mexico using chemicals sourced from China, according to the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). It is important to notice that such production requires serious investments and the labor of millions of people. For instance, the

³ <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/rxrate-maps/index.html>

cultivation and sales of raw materials for drug production accounted for up to a third of Afghanistan's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). With their appearance in the early 2010s, many players in the drug market changed their production specialization. As a result, the largest criminal market in the world with a turnover of \$500 billion began to transform structurally. Its fentanyl segment is projected to double over the next 12 years to \$35 billion, according to MarketWatch⁴.

Effects of fentanyl on human bodies

Fentanyl differs from other opioids by being significantly more hazardous and can lead to an overdose in a shorter period of time, since it moves through the body way faster and its effects of fentanyl last for a shorter period of time. The signs of an overdose are similar to those caused by other opioids. Typical signs of an overdose include: loss of consciousness, limp body, unresponsiveness to touch or noises, uneven breathing, slow pulse and clammy skin.

The mechanism of overdose usually flows as follows: as tolerance increases, the dose also increases. However, fentanyl is absorbed very slowly and is also excreted from the body. Thus, a person who, after some time, takes it a second time to ease withdrawal symptoms, receives a combination of two doses. The result is an overdose and probable death.

Consumption and uses of fentanyl

Fentanyl can be used for severe pain in strictly controlled clinical settings. However, the fentanyl that someone can obtain online, or from a dealer is almost always produced illegally. It can be found mixed with other opioids such as heroin or other recreational drugs such as methamphetamine, cocaine and MDMA. Mixing drugs is generally not the choice of the seller or user - they most often do not know that their drugs contain fentanyl, and the effects of these mixed drugs are much more dangerous.

The United States Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) issued a statement warning of the deadliest way of consuming this opioid - a combination of fentanyl and xylazine, a

⁴<https://www.marketwatch.com/press-release/fentanyl-market-size-with-growth-opportunities-top-countries-data-future-trends-and-share-with-revenue-forecast-2030-2023-05-01>

sedative often used in veterinary medicine. Use of the "zombie drug", so named because of the permanent sores it leaves on the body, is growing progressively, the DEA says. Cases have been reported in 48 of the 50 US states.

Countries and Organizations Involved

United States

Fentanyl and other opioids are composing the worst narcotics crisis in the history of the United States. Opioids are the leading cause of mortal substance overdoses in the United States, with over 1,500 people dying every week from consuming them, according to the data provided by Council on Foreign Regulations (CFR)⁵. This major outbreak caused by the growing use of the synthetic opioids including fentanyl for recreational purposes is currently invading the United States. The fentanyl overdose crisis in the United States is often referred to as an "epidemic" due to its devastating impacts on the country, killing over a million people since 2000. Most of the fentanyl in the United States is smuggled across the Mexican border, made out of chemicals produced in China.

Mexico

The rise in fentanyl overdoses in the US is majorly influenced by Mexico due to their significant contribution to the illicit fentanyl production. For that reason, Mexican drug cartels are key players in the United States opioid "epidemic". These cartels have produced and smuggled large quantities of fentanyl and its analogs across the border, capitalizing on the demand for opioids. Moreover, the permeable nature of the border between the United States and Mexico makes it difficult for law authorities to stop these illegal shipments.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) is one the main agencies involved in worldwide efforts to combat the global fentanyl breakouts. In order to tackle

⁵ <https://www.cfr.org/background/fentanyl-and-us-opioid-epidemic>

the illegal drug distribution, the organization works towards strengthening nations' legal systems and enhancing their law enforcement capabilities in addition to improving intelligence sharing among the states. UNODC also supports countries in their efforts to eliminate the production and distribution of fentanyl by offering technical assistance and capacity-building programs. Moreover, the organization attempts to advance harm reduction tactics, public health strategies, and international collaboration to tackle the fallouts brought by the opioid crisis.

People's Republic of China

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is a key player in the fentanyl outbreaks, especially in the United States by being the major producer of chemicals used in the illicit fentanyl synthesis. Historically, the wide range of available chemical ingredients required for the production of fentanyl was eased by a lack of regulations. The Chinese government has tightened controls over the production and export of these chemicals in recognition of the global impact of the fentanyl epidemic. To stop the illegal fentanyl distribution, China has put in place stricter laws and enhanced the surveillance significantly reducing the current availability of those ingredients.

Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA)

The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), is an organization that is operating on the territory of the United States and it is leading the battle against the illicit production and distribution of fentanyl. The DEA works towards an effective implementation of the country's drug-related laws and makes significant efforts towards addressing the issues brought by the fentanyl fallouts. The agency identifies and destroys drug trafficking groups engaged in the manufacturing and distribution of fentanyl through investigations and data collection in addition to the law enforcement tactics. Recognizing the global fentanyl epidemic, the DEA works closely with partners both not only domestically but also internationally to put an end to the opioid crisis.

Data on intoxications

The fatality of intoxications from fentanyl overdose registered on the territory of the United States had been progressively increasing over the past decade. The timeline below indicates the amount of victims of these overdoses, underscoring the urgency and current relevance of the issue⁶.

2011	2.666 cases
2012	2.628 cases
2013	3.105 cases
2014	5.544 cases
2015	9.580 cases
2016	19.413 cases
2017	28.466 cases
2018	31.355 cases
2019	36.359 cases
2020	36.359 cases
2021	70.601 cases
2022	73.654 cases

Relevant UN Treaties/Resolutions

U.N. Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961

The main goal of the United Nations Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs adopted in 1961 in New York City is to prevent the diversion of narcotic drugs into illegal channels while ensuring effective control over their production, distribution, and consumption for medical and recreational purposes. The convention divides the substances into four schedules according to their therapeutic usefulness and misuse potential. It highlights

⁶ Data sourced from <https://usafacts.org/articles/are-fentanyl-overdose-deaths-rising-in-the-us/> by

the significance of medical and scientific research, pushes for the implementation of policies to stop the illicit gardening of narcotic plants, and encourages worldwide collaboration in the fight against drug trafficking and misuse. The pact has greatly influenced the frameworks and strategies for drug control across the world.

U.S. Senate Resolution on Fentanyl of 2022

In April 2022, the American Senate held a hearing on International Narcotics Control in regard with the prevalent issue of fentanyl consumption. Unanimously passed, the resolution issued during this hearing focuses on the substance of paraphernalia used to manufacture meth and counterfeit pills containing fentanyl and fentanyl analogues and calls upon harshening the penalties for its possession or distribution.

S.Res.215

A resolution passed by the United States Congress in 2023 emphasizes the urgent need to raise awareness about the dangers of synthetic fentanyl pills, encourages law enforcement efforts, calls for proactive measures to combat counterfeit pills, and designates May 9, 2023, as "National Fentanyl Awareness Day" on US territory.

Previous Attempts to Solve Issue

The gravity of the fentanyl "epidemic" has been recognized by various global leaders, who took measures towards its eradication. Although the death tolls are still peaking, the measures mentioned below allowed the world to avoid numerous unfortunate overdoses.

China restricting fentanyl exports

One of the countries that had begun working towards the eradication of this issue was the People's Republic of China (PRC). Being one of the largest illicit fentanyl manufacturers, later exported to the United States, two states needed to come to an agreement to address the issue. Thus, China's National Narcotics Control Commission issued a directive citing existing laws on narcotics and customs controls as a reminder

to logistics businesses in the country on preventing the shipment of narcotics and psychotropic drugs abroad. Ultimately, the harsh regulations and strict border controls had reduced the amount of illegal narcotic smuggling to the United States. This measure has significantly reduced the amount of illicit substances produced on Chinese territories this contributing to eradicating the issue.

The Merida Initiative

Launched in 2007, the Merida Initiative is a collaboration between the United States and Mexico to address the urgency and severity of drug trafficking, with a focus on fentanyl. The project aims to combat Mexican criminal gangs involved in the production and distribution of fentanyl by improving law enforcement capacity, promoting judicial reforms, and supporting social and economic growth. This bilateral relationship entails providing financial help, training, and technology support to boost Mexico's capabilities to combat the synthetic opioid trafficking. As the fentanyl issue has increased, the Mérida Initiative has adjusted to include methods and resources expressly targeted to fight the manufacture and trafficking of this chemical.

Joe Biden making the fentanyl crisis a domestic and foreign priority

In 2023, President Joe Biden issued a statement in regard to fentanyl, highlighting its fatality and relevance on a domestic and international scale. The Biden administration has taken bold steps to combat this scourge with steadfast resolve. Domestically, there has been an increased emphasis on developing comprehensive and diversified tactics to combat the spread of fentanyl. These measures include increasing the scope of law enforcement activities and widely disseminating informative public awareness campaigns.

On a global scale, the Biden administration has launched significant diplomatic efforts, encouraging nations all around the world to collaborate in combating the production and illicit trafficking of fentanyl at its source. Although the efforts have encouraged further engagement with the issue, the efforts did not lower the death tolls.

Creation of Fentanyl Test Strips

Fentanyl test strips have appeared to be an effective harm-reduction tool in the battle against the fentanyl “epidemic”. These strips identify the presence of fentanyl in illegal substances and candy, where it is also commonly found. Thus, these strips allow people to make more informed decisions about their drug usage, potentially averting unintended overdose.

Fentanyl Test Strips equip their owners with a quick and easy way to determine presence of fentanyl, ensuring their safety and calling them upon making informed decisions to avoid the risks associated with this synthetic opioid. The use of fentanyl test strips is not only a practical harm reduction tool, but it also connects to public health initiatives targeted at tackling the fentanyl crisis. These strips are effective in their usage, however lack of awareness about their existence limits their ability to lower the death rates.

Possible Solutions

Law enforcement

The first step towards eradicating the growing problem of fentanyl consumption and distribution is enhancing law enforcement. The law enforcement organizations which are investigating and working towards eradicating fentanyl trafficking should get an increase in funding. As a result, they will be able to receive necessary resources, such as new technology, which are required for a successful intervention. Furthermore, imposing stricter punishments for fentanyl-related acts on anybody involved in the producing or distributing fentanyl, will be crucial in deterring traffickers and emphasizing the significant consequences that traffickers face.

Expanding access to treatment

Expanding access to treatment and rehabilitation programs is also an essential step. Policymakers should implement measures that will allow a greater number of people in need to access the treatment. These steps may include campaigning for insurance

coverage for rehabilitation programs, which would make therapy more accessible for patients, and promoting early detection and long-term recovery.

Integration of opioid education at schools

It is also critical to integrate mandatory education about the dangers of fentanyl and other opioids into global school curriculums. These programs would educate children about the threats associated with fentanyl usage, as well as other opioids and would emphasize the significance of making informed choices.

It is critical to provide children from a young age with the knowledge and instill understanding of the risks associated with these substances for them to make healthy decisions and avoid accidental overdoses.

Increasing the accessibility of naloxone

Expanding the access to naloxone is another vital step in combating the hazardous fentanyl usage. Naloxone is an opioid overdose reversal medicine, and it is known to be a life-saving treatment, countermanding the mortality caused by the overdoses. Making naloxone easily accessible would reverse the lethality of the fentanyls, and would reduce the death tolls. This accessibility may be achieved through promoting the awareness about its availability and including it in medical prescriptions that involve the usage of opioid substances.

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