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Press Release

DEA Report: Counterfeit Pills Fueling U.S. Fentanyl and Opioid Crisis

Unclassified intelligence brief outlines evolving fentanyl epidemic and China/Mexico connection

Washington, DC – Hundreds of thousands of counterfeit prescription pills, many containing deadly amounts of fentanyl and fentanyl-related compounds, have made their way into the U.S. drug market, according to a DEA intelligence report released today. Law enforcement nationwide report higher fentanyl availability, seizures, and known overdose deaths than at any other time since the drug's creation in 1959.

Fentanyl is a synthetically produced opioid that, when produced and administered legitimately, is used to treat severe pain. Overseas labs in China are mass-producing fentanyl and fentanyl-related compounds and marketing them to drug trafficking groups in Mexico, Canada and the United States.

In addition to being deadly to users, fentanyl poses a grave threat to law enforcement officials and first responders, as a lethal dose of fentanyl can be accidentally inhaled or absorbed through the skin. DEA recently released a Police Roll Call video nationwide to warn law enforcement about this danger. The video can be accessed at www.DEA.gov.

Other findings from the report:

- Fentanyl and fentanyl-related compounds are traditionally mixed into or sold as heroin, or on its own, oftentimes without the customer's knowledge. Since 2014, U.S. law enforcement agencies have been seizing a new form of fentanyl—counterfeit prescription opioid pills containing fentanyl or fentanyl-related compounds. The counterfeit pills often closely resemble the authentic medications they were designed to mimic, and the presence of fentanyl is only detected upon laboratory analysis.
- Fentanyl traffickers have been successful at expanding the fentanyl market and introducing new fentanyl-laced drug products to the U.S. drug market. The DEA National Forensic Laboratory Information System (NFLIS) reported that there were 13,002 fentanyl exhibits tested by forensic laboratories across the country in 2015 (the latest year for which data is available), which is a 65 percent increase from the 7,864 fentanyl exhibits in 2014. There were approximately eight times as many fentanyl exhibits in 2015 as there were during the 2006 fentanyl crisis, clearly demonstrating the unprecedented threat and expansion of the fentanyl market.
- The rise of counterfeit pills that contain fentanyl in the illicit drug market will likely result in more opioid-dependent individuals, overdoses, and deaths. There were over 700 fentanyl-related deaths reported in the United States between late 2013 and 2014. During 2013-2014, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reported that deaths from synthetic opioids increased 79 percent, from 3,097 to 5,544. Although the synthetic opioid category does contain other opioids, this sharp increase coincides with a sharp increase in fentanyl availability, and the CDC reports that a substantial portion of the increase appears to be related to illicit fentanyl.
- In March 2016, law enforcement officers in Lorain County, Ohio, seized 500 pills that visually appeared to be oxycodone. The pills were blue and had "A 215" markings, consistent with 30 milligram oxycodone pills. Laboratory analysis indicated that the pills did not contain oxycodone, but were instead the research chemical U-47700. U-47700 is an unscheduled synthetic opioid not studied for human use that has caused at least 17 overdoses and several deaths in the United States.
- Many Chinese laboratories illicitly manufacturing synthetic drugs, such as fentanyl and their precursors, also manufacture legitimate chemicals for purchase by U.S. companies. This means that laboratories responsible for supplying fentanyl in counterfeit pills can also run legitimate businesses. Although Chinese clandestine laboratories may be contributing to the fentanyl supply, legitimate laboratories may also be sources of supply.

· Traffickers can typically purchase a kilogram of fentanyl powder for a few thousand dollars from a Chinese supplier, transform it into hundreds of thousands of pills, and sell the counterfeit pills for millions of dollars in profit. If a particular batch has 1.5 milligrams of fentanyl per pill, approximately 666,666 counterfeit pills can be manufactured from 1 kilogram of pure fentanyl.

For the full report "***Counterfeit Prescription Pills Containing Fentanyls: A Global Threat***" click [here](#)

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