



2020

DRUG ENFORCEMENT ADMINISTRATION

NDTA

NATIONAL DRUG THREAT

KEY FINDINGS

The 2020 National Drug Threat Assessment (NDTA) is DEA's annual review of the threats posed to the United States by the trafficking and abuse of illicit drugs, the diversion and abuse of licit drugs, and the laundering of illicit drug proceeds. The assessment also addresses the role of foreign and domestic drug trafficking organizations in drug trafficking.

The 2020 NDTA is a valuable strategic resource for all Americans, but especially those elected officials, law enforcement personnel, prevention and treatment specialists, and others who develop counter-drug policies, oversee law enforcement operations, and allocate resources.

The information in the 2020 NDTA is derived from many sources. These include, but are not limited to: drug investigations and seizures by law enforcement, data on drug purity and other analyses of drugs by DEA and other laboratories; U.S. Government drug cultivation and production estimates; treatment, use, and other open source information; and information on transnational and domestic criminal groups.

The drug landscape in the United States is evolving; illicit fentanyl remains a primary driver behind the epidemic of drug overdose deaths in the United States as heroin and prescription opioids also remain significant public health and law enforcement challenges. The methamphetamine threat is persistent with deaths and seizures sharply rising. The cocaine threat is still prevalent; the marijuana threat remains challenging; and New Psychoactive Substances continue to be a concern. The 2020 pandemic of COVID-19 and the associated restrictions on daily travel, U.S. border closings, closure of nonessential businesses, and broad shelter-in-place orders temporarily posed new challenges to criminal organizations' movement of drugs during the first half of 2020.

- ▶ In 2018, deaths involving prescription opioids, heroin, and fentanyl represented over two-thirds of all drug-poisoning deaths, a record. Over 67,000 Americans died from drug poisoning in 2018.<sup>a</sup>
- ▶ The U.S. fentanyl market is increasingly being supplied by Mexican cartels while the supply of fentanyl directly from China has decreased substantially following China's enactment of fentanyl-class controls in May 2019. Mexican cartels have established laboratories for the synthesis of fentanyl as well as are producing and trafficking large quantities of fentanyl-laced counterfeit pills. The precursor chemicals used in these laboratories predominantly come from China, as fentanyl precursors remain largely uncontrolled there.
- ▶ Fentanyl may be supplanting or surpassing significant portions of select heroin markets. The increased presence of fentanyl in white powder heroin at the street level results in higher rates of fentanyl-related overdose deaths.
- ▶ Heroin-related overdose deaths continue declining moderately as fentanyl-related overdose deaths continue rising sharply. The domestic heroin market likely remains in flux based on analysis of price and purity data, forensic laboratory exhibits, and law enforcement reporting.
- ▶ Heroin available in U.S. markets remains overwhelmingly Mexico-sourced, although opium poppy cultivation and heroin production in Mexico decreased 28 percent in 2019 compared to 2018.
- ▶ The methamphetamine threat remains significant as traffickers push to increase the drug's availability and to expand the domestic market. Mexican cartels' production of methamphetamine continues at high levels, which has led to increased seizures of large quantities of highly pure and highly potent methamphetamine from industrial-scale clandestine laboratories.
- ▶ Cocaine availability remain steady, driven by high levels of coca cultivation and cocaine production in Colombia. The trends of increased overall coca cultivation in Colombia, higher coca yields, higher potential cocaine production, and higher farmer profits per hectare of coca continued in 2019.
- ▶ Controlled Prescription Drugs availability remains constant although abuse levels decreased compared to the previous year. The number of opioid dosage units available on the retail market and opioid thefts and losses reached their lowest levels in nine years. Hydrocodone products represent the most commonly misused subtype of prescription pain relievers.
- ▶ Mexican cartels remain the greatest criminal drug threat in the United States. The cartels are the principal wholesale drug sources for domestic gangs, which are responsible for street distribution. The Sinaloa Cartel and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel are the most dominant in the United States.

a. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data indicates over 70,000 Americans died from drug poisoning in 2019 (4% increase).