

**Fentanyl: Situation Report
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Overview – Clandestinely produced fentanyl has been linked to hundreds of fatal and nonfatal overdoses across the Midwest, Northeast, and Mid-Atlantic Regions of the United States since late 2005. Fentanyl is a synthetic opiate approximately 50 times more potent than heroin. From 1990 through 2005 at least nine clandestine fentanyl laboratories were seized in the United States; however, sensitive intelligence related to ongoing law enforcement operations indicates that Mexico likely is the source of at least some of the fentanyl associated with these recent overdoses. In May 2006 Mexican law enforcement authorities seized a fentanyl laboratory in Toluca, Mexico. In February 2006 U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents seized a wholesale shipment of fentanyl powder just north of the U.S.–Mexico border.

Availability – Clandestinely produced fentanyl powder, fentanyl mixed with heroin, and, to a lesser extent, fentanyl mixed with cocaine have been distributed in the Midwest, Northeast, and Mid-Atlantic Regions. The primary markets have included Chicago (IL), Detroit (MI), and Philadelphia (PA)/Camden (NJ). Overdoses linked to fentanyl have been reported in areas of Delaware, Illinois, Maryland, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. In many cases abusers had purchased the drugs in the primary market areas and transported them elsewhere. Because specialized forensic laboratory testing is required to detect clandestinely produced fentanyl versus pharmaceutical fentanyl, the extent of availability and source of the fentanyl has not yet been conclusively determined.

Abuse – Fentanyl has been sold to drug abusers, primarily heroin abusers, in drug markets in each of the aforementioned areas, and abusers typically reflect the population demographics of those areas. Currently, there are an estimated 800,000 to 1,000,000 hard-core and casual heroin abusers in the United States who constitute the potential fentanyl market. An intravenous dose of fentanyl hydrochloride for pain relief is approximately 45 micrograms (a grain of salt is approximately 60 micrograms); however, depending on the weight of the abuser and his or her level of opiate tolerance, an abuser may tolerate a higher or lower dose. Accordingly, a small error in diluting, or cutting, fentanyl can easily lead to an overdose.

Because fentanyl is an opiate and specialized toxicological testing is required to detect fentanyl in biological samples, many fentanyl overdoses were initially classified as heroin overdoses. The severity of the situation did not become apparent until the public health community noticed the above-average number of overdoses. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is currently examining the number of fatalities that may have been directly related to clandestinely produced fentanyl.

Production – Intelligence indicates that Mexico is the most likely source of at least some of the fentanyl associated with the recent overdoses in the United States. On May 21, 2006, Mexican Federal Investigative Agency (AFI) agents and officials from the Mexican Attorney General's Office Organized Crime Division (PGR/SIEDO) seized a fentanyl laboratory in Toluca, Mexico, and arrested the laboratory operator and four associates. However, at least nine clandestine fentanyl laboratories were seized in the United States—seven of which were in California—from 1990 through 2005. Continued fentanyl production in the United States cannot be ruled out.

- November 2005—Azusa, California
- June 15, 2005—San Diego, California
- May 3, 2004—Santa Clara, California
- December 17, 2003—Newton Square, Pennsylvania
- December 4, 2000—Big Bear, California
- February 3, 1993—Wichita, Kansas
- December 31, 1991—Fallbrook, California
- August 15, 1990—San Jose, California.
- April 14, 1990—Bonita, California

The two methods most commonly used to produce fentanyl rely upon one of the two precursor chemicals—N-benzyl-4-piperidone or N-phenethyl-4-piperidone (NPP). NPP is used in the most common clandestine method. Dozens of scientific companies supply NPP legitimately. The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) is investigating the control of NPP. However, fentanyl producers can potentially manufacture the precursors or obtain them illicitly.

Transportation – On February 27, 2006, CBP agents seized 2.6 pounds of 83-percent-pure fentanyl and 41 pounds of ice methamphetamine at a checkpoint along U.S. Highway 86 near Westmoreland, California, just north of the U.S.–Mexico border. The drugs were concealed beneath the floorboards in a passenger vehicle with Mexico license plates.

Distribution – Fentanyl investigations are ongoing in all of the areas in which the overdoses have been occurring. Although limited, some information has been revealed regarding the distributors.

- In the Philadelphia/Camden area, the distributors are Dominican and Puerto Rican criminals.
- In May 2006, officers arrested a reputed member of the Latin Kings street gang in his Camden, New Jersey, home with over 1,300 bags of fentanyl-laced heroin and \$5,200.
- The first week of May 2006, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Philadelphia police arrested eight Hispanic drug distributors and seized 25,000 bags of fentanyl-tainted heroin in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
- In the Chicago area, the distributors were reported to be West African, Mexican, or Colombian criminals.

Outlook – Some indicators point to decreased availability of clandestinely produced fentanyl in some of the primary market areas. For example, public health authorities in New Jersey are reporting an increase in methadone overdoses among heroin abusers; the heroin abusers report they are unable to obtain a sufficient supply of heroin and have begun abusing methadone. Additionally, the number of opiate overdoses had decreased in Wayne County (Detroit), Michigan, the last week of May/first week of June. Only three suspected opiate overdose deaths were reported from May 29 through June 2, 2006; earlier in May, more than four deaths per day occurred in Wayne County. Moreover, public health authorities in Maryland and Delaware reported no new fentanyl-related events the last week of May. However, during the first weekend of June 2006, approximately 20 suspicious heroin overdoses were reported in Pittsburgh (PA); testing has yet to conclusively link these overdoses to fentanyl. NDIC continues to monitor law enforcement and public health indicators for further developments in the fentanyl situation.