



Northwest

High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area Drug Market Analysis

June 2007

U.S. Department of Justice

Preface

This assessment provides a strategic overview of the illicit drug situation in the Northwest High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA), highlighting significant trends and law enforcement concerns relating to the trafficking and abuse of illicit drugs. The report was prepared through detailed analysis of

recent law enforcement reporting, information obtained through interviews with law enforcement and public health officials, and available statistical data. The report is designed to provide policymakers, resource planners, and law enforcement officials with a focused discussion of key drug issues and developments facing the Northwest HIDTA.



Figure 1. Northwest High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area.

This assessment is an outgrowth of a partnership between the NDIC and HIDTA Program for preparation of annual assessments depicting drug trafficking trends and developments in HIDTA Program areas. The report has been vetted with the HIDTA, is limited in scope to HIDTA jurisdictional boundaries, and draws upon a wide variety of sources within those boundaries.

Strategic Drug Threat Developments

- Powder methamphetamine production in the Northwest HIDTA has been decreasing over the past 3 years, largely because of the regulation of precursor chemical sales and concerted law enforcement efforts. Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) are capitalizing on declining local powder methamphetamine production by supplying drug markets in the region with increasing quantities of low-cost, high-purity ice methamphetamine produced in Mexico.
- Ice methamphetamine¹ has replaced marijuana as the most prevalent drug for treatment admissions in the Northwest HIDTA region.
- Seizures of MDMA (3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine, also known as ecstasy) have increased along the U.S.–Canada border; polydrug criminal groups are using Washington as an entry point into the United States to supply an increased demand for the drug in markets throughout the country.
- Canada-based Vietnamese criminal groups are relocating some of their cannabis cultivation operations from Canada to Washington State to reduce transportation costs and minimize the risk of interdiction by law enforcement while smuggling marijuana across the U.S.–Canada border.

HIDTA Overview

The Northwest HIDTA region encompasses Benton, Clark, Cowlitz, Franklin, King, Kitsap, Lewis, Pierce, Skagit, Snohomish, Spokane, Thurston, Whatcom, and Yakima Counties in Washington. The HIDTA region was established in 1997 to counter the threat posed to the United States by the high volume of drugs transported throughout the region and smuggled across the U.S.–Canada border. The proximity of the HIDTA region to Canada and the direct interstate access to drug sources in Mexico through a vast transportation infrastructure—numerous freeways, highways, airports, waterways, and railways—contribute to the threat of cross-border smuggling.

Drug Trafficking Organizations, Criminal Groups, and Gangs

Drug trafficking organizations are complex organizations with highly defined command-and-control structures that produce, transport, and/or distribute large quantities of one or more illicit drugs.

Criminal groups operating in the United States are numerous and range from small to moderately sized, loosely knit groups that distribute one or more drugs at the retail and midlevels.

Gangs are defined by the National Alliance of Gang Investigators' Associations as groups or associations of three or more persons with a common identifying sign, symbol, or name, the members of which individually or collectively engage in criminal activity that creates an atmosphere of fear and intimidation.

Drug Threat Overview

Ice methamphetamine poses the most significant drug threat in the Northwest HIDTA region. It dominates the region's drug markets and has emerged as the most prevalent drug for treatment admissions. Ice methamphetamine use is widespread, adversely affecting the citizenry of the HIDTA region. According to the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, most drug treatment admissions in the counties that compose the Northwest HIDTA region are for methamphetamine abuse; these treatment admissions consume significant public health resources. Moreover, the Washington State Attorney General's Office reports a significant increase in methamphetamine-related child dependency cases, largely the result of child abuse or neglect by parents who are addicted to methamphetamine—fewer than 30 percent of methamphetamine-addicted parents regain custody of their children as a result of continued addiction or clinical depression associated with methamphetamine addiction.

Marijuana is readily available and widely abused in the Northwest HIDTA region. Domestically produced high-potency marijuana is the most prevalent type; marijuana is produced in the region

1. For the purposes of this report, ice methamphetamine refers to methamphetamine that has been crystallized from powder methamphetamine.

from cannabis that is cultivated throughout the area at indoor and outdoor grow sites. High-potency Canadian marijuana also is available, but to a lesser extent. Additionally, commercial-grade Mexican marijuana is present to a limited extent in drug markets throughout the region.

Cocaine (primarily powder cocaine), heroin, other dangerous drugs (ODDs), and diverted pharmaceuticals are also available in the HIDTA region. Crack is distributed primarily in major metropolitan areas such as Seattle, Spokane, and Tacoma. Mexican black tar heroin is the predominant type of heroin distributed in the region; it is usually sold in larger cities. The HIDTA region is a major transshipment center for MDMA manufactured in Canada and destined for Seattle and other U.S. cities. MDMA seizures in the region are high—in 2006 MDMA seizures in the HIDTA region accounted for approximately 36.7 percent of the total MDMA dosage units seized nationwide. Abuse of diverted pharmaceuticals, particularly prescription narcotics such as oxycodone, hydrocodone, hydromorphone, and methadone, has increased. Moreover, prescription narcotics (usually detected in combination with other substances) were the most common drugs identified in drug-involved deaths in 2006 in Seattle.

Drug Trafficking Organizations

Mexican DTOs and criminal groups are the predominant drug traffickers operating in the Northwest HIDTA region; their influence in the region is unrivaled. Asian DTOs and criminal groups, outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMGs), and street gangs also operate in the area.

Mexican DTOs

Mexican DTOs and criminal groups are the principal illicit drug transporters and distributors in the Northwest HIDTA region. Members of these organizations easily assimilate into the region's burgeoning Hispanic population. Mexican DTOs and criminal groups operating in the region typically obtain powder cocaine, Mexican marijuana, Mexican black tar heroin, and ice methamphetamine from other Mexican DTOs operating in California,

southwestern states, or Mexico. These traffickers distribute wholesale quantities of illicit drugs to distributors throughout the region.

Asian DTOs

Asian DTOs and criminal groups, primarily Cambodian, Chinese, Laotian, and ethnic Vietnamese, are prevalent within the Northwest HIDTA region; members of these groups typically commingle with the area's diverse Asian community while engaging in trafficking operations. Asian criminal groups supply high-potency marijuana and MDMA in the area. Canada-based Vietnamese criminal groups produce high-potency marijuana in the Northwest HIDTA region, primarily at large-scale indoor cannabis grow sites; they also smuggle Canadian marijuana and MDMA into Washington from Canada. Moreover, these groups often shield themselves from law enforcement scrutiny by employing other criminal groups to conduct some high-risk operations, such as using Canada-based East Indian drug transportation organizations for cross-border smuggling. These transportation organizations smuggle Canadian marijuana and MDMA into the United States and cocaine and bulk cash into Canada by using their own trucking companies and driving vehicles through Washington ports of entry (POEs).

Gangs

Members of OMGs are involved in the transportation and distribution of marijuana and methamphetamine (powder and ice) in the Northwest HIDTA region. These traffickers, particularly members of the Hells Angels Motorcycle Club (HAMC) OMG, often transport illicit drugs from Canada in vehicles and maritime conveyances.

Street gangs are involved primarily in retail drug distribution in the region; however, the composition of gangs and their predominance varies among major markets. In the Puget Sound and Yakima Valley areas, African American gangs are the predominant retail drug distributors, while Hispanic gangs (such as Norteños, Sureños, Mara Salvatrucha (MS 13), and Mexican Mafia) are the most active drug distributors in the Spokane area.

Production

Marijuana production in the Northwest HIDTA region has increased at both outdoor and indoor grow sites. In 2006, 107,548 cannabis plants were eradicated in the Northwest HIDTA region,² compared with 61,881 plants in 2005 and 32,838 plants in 2004. Of the 107,548 plants eradicated in 2006, 64 percent were from outdoor grow sites; 36 percent were from indoor grow sites. (See Table 1.)

Indoor cannabis cultivation sites, primarily controlled by Vietnamese criminal groups, are generally located in urban areas of King County, while large outdoor cannabis cultivation sites are typically controlled by Mexican DTOs and criminal groups and are generally located in remote areas of

public lands and Indian country such as Franklin and Yakima Counties.

Some Canada-based Vietnamese criminal groups have moved their cannabis cultivation operations from Canada into the HIDTA region to minimize transportation costs and to avoid law enforcement interdiction along the U.S.–Canada border. These criminal groups typically cultivate cannabis in residences, often using state-of-the-art technology, lighting, and irrigation systems. These sophisticated indoor systems enable the growers to cultivate cannabis year-round and reduce their risk of law enforcement discovery. The relocation of operations from Canada has resulted in the increased availability of high-potency marijuana in the HIDTA

Table 1. Cannabis Plants Eradicated From Indoor/Outdoor Grow Sites in the Northwest HIDTA Region, 2004–2006

County	2004		2005		2006	
	Indoor	Outdoor	Indoor	Outdoor	Indoor	Outdoor
Benton	37	5,353	165	3,527	0	4,163
Clark	331	112	1,042	685	1,421	253
Cowlitz	1,365	726	58	62	47	110
Franklin	0	1,103	0	8,386	0	15,382
King	2,023	4	17,103	32	24,077	178
Kitsap	2,998	453	949	477	1,545	203
Lewis	1,034	382	941	105	312	766
Pierce	2,225	435	2,005	0	2,077	136
Skagit	151	573	988	971	484	243
Snohomish	1,224	1,174	1,562	215	1,996	245
Spokane	495	51	2,358	457	2,171	99
Thurston	977	284	1,039	2,173	441	168
Whatcom	455	459	338	37	2,305	138
Yakima	901	7,513	1,418	14,788	1,763	46,825
Total	14,216	18,622	29,966	31,915	38,639	68,909

Source: Northwest High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area.

2. Total eradication statistics for the state of Washington during 2006 were approximately 144,406 plants.

region. In fact, according to the Northwest HIDTA, high-potency domestic marijuana has replaced high-potency Canadian marijuana as the most prevalent type of marijuana available in the HIDTA region.

Mexican DTOs that control large outdoor cannabis cultivation sites often employ illegal aliens to tend crops and provide site protection. In tending cannabis crops, these grow site operators often contaminate watersheds, divert natural water-courses, clear-cut vegetation, and create wildfire hazards. Moreover, the toxic chemicals (insecticides, fertilizers, etc.) that grow site operators use in tending cannabis often contaminate the area and affect residential water supplies.

Methamphetamine production is decreasing in the region, continuing a 3-year declining trend. (See [Table 2.](#)) Sustained law enforcement efforts, strict chemical precursor regulations, harsher sentencing

for methamphetamine production offenses, and increased availability of Mexican ice methamphetamine have reduced the number of small-capacity powder methamphetamine laboratories in the HIDTA region. However, some Caucasian independent producers have continued to produce powder methamphetamine in rural areas of the region; they generally produce quantities sufficient only for personal use and limited distribution.

Crack cocaine is converted from powder cocaine in the Northwest HIDTA region. Retail distributors often convert powder cocaine to crack at or near distribution sites on an as-needed basis. In fact, 75 percent of state and local law enforcement officials in the Northwest HIDTA region who responded to NDIC's National Drug Threat Survey (NDTS) 2006 report that powder cocaine is converted to crack in their areas.

Table 2. Number of Seizures of Methamphetamine Laboratories, Chemicals, Glass, and Equipment at Dumpsites in Northwest HIDTA Counties, 2004–2006

County	2004	2005	2006
Benton	38	15	6
Clark	12	6	3
Cowlitz	10	3	5
Franklin	9	3	1
King	138	82	18
Kitsap	28	10	1
Lewis	21	9	12
Pierce	426	252	64
Skagit	11	6	2
Snohomish	59	39	12
Spokane	44	21	14
Thurston	23	15	7
Whatcom	31	7	1
Yakima	11	1	2
Totals	861	469	148

Source: National Clandestine Laboratory Seizure System as of March 06, 2007.



Figure 2. Northwest HIDTA transportation infrastructure.

Transportation

Mexican DTOs and criminal groups are the primary transporters of powder cocaine and Mexican marijuana, black tar heroin, and ice methamphetamine into and through the region. They transport these drugs primarily in personal vehicles from Mexico, through California and Oregon on Interstates 5, 82, 84, and 90. (See Figure 2.) According to the Northwest HIDTA, in 2006 law enforcement officials made the most drug seizures in the region on I-5, which provides a direct north-south throughway from the Otay Mesa POE at the U.S.–Mexico border to the Blaine POE located in Washington at the U.S.–Canada border, followed by I-90, a major east-west route. Respondents to the Northwest HIDTA Threat Assessment Survey (TAS) 2007 report that the most prevalent transportation routes, in descending order, are by road, land, air, and water for both retail and wholesale drug trafficking.

Caucasian criminal groups and independent dealers, Asian criminal groups (primarily Vietnamese), and OMGs transport MDMA and high-potency Canadian marijuana from Canada to and through the HIDTA region. These traffickers typically transport the drugs in private vehicles across the U.S.–Canada border; however, some traffickers have used tractor-trailers. Moreover, some traffickers have concealed MDMA in larger shipments of marijuana.

According to law enforcement reporting, marijuana seizures along the border have declined since 2005 as a result of Canada-based Vietnamese criminal groups that have relocated some of their cannabis cultivation operations from Canada to Washington. In contrast, MDMA seizures have increased along the U.S.–Canada border in Washington. In 2006, 27 percent of the seizures reported by the Pacific Integrated Border Intelligence Team (IBIT) were

Canadian Man Convicted of Cocaine Trafficking: Trucker Had More Than 250 Pounds of Cocaine Hidden in Fuel Tanks

A Canadian truck driver was convicted in U.S. District Court in Seattle of possession of cocaine with intent to distribute on January 18, 2007. According to court records, the truck driver had been attempting to enter Canada from the United States at the Port of Lynden. The tractor-trailer rig that he was driving was empty. While the driver was being interviewed, an officer became suspicious after looking at the rig's fuel tanks. Upon closer inspection, investigators found three duffel bags containing 115 kilograms of cocaine. The cocaine had an estimated wholesale value of \$1.8 million. Because of the large amount of cocaine involved, the truck driver faces a 10-year mandatory minimum sentence.

MDMA-related; this figure is an increase over 2005 (15.5%) and 2004 (4.5%) figures.

Distribution

Mexican and Asian DTOs and criminal groups, Caucasian criminal groups and independent dealers, and various street gangs, OMGs, and independent dealers distribute illicit drugs in the Northwest HIDTA region. According to the Northwest HIDTA, 98 DTOs are involved in drug distribution in the region: 38 are involved in wholesale distribution, 11 are involved in retail distribution, and 49 are involved in both wholesale and retail drug distribution.

Mexican DTOs and criminal groups distribute wholesale quantities of cocaine and Mexican methamphetamine, marijuana, and black tar heroin. They typically supply these drugs to various criminal groups, independent dealers, street gangs, and OMGs in the HIDTA region for lower-level distribution. Asian DTOs and criminal groups, predominantly Vietnamese, are the primary distributors of high-potency marijuana and MDMA at all distribution levels.

Caucasian criminal groups and independent dealers are the dominant wholesale distributors of

marijuana produced in the HIDTA region. They also distribute wholesale quantities of high-potency Canadian marijuana and commercial-grade Mexican marijuana as well as locally produced powder methamphetamine and limited quantities of Mexican ice methamphetamine.

Retail-level drug distribution is conducted by various criminal groups, independent dealers, and street gangs. Mexican criminal groups distribute methamphetamine, Mexican marijuana, and Mexican black tar heroin at the retail level in the region. Caucasian criminal groups and independent dealers supply abusers with retail-level quantities of locally produced marijuana, locally produced powder methamphetamine, and MDMA. Asian criminal groups distribute retail quantities of high-potency Canadian marijuana and MDMA. Members of street gangs, primarily African American and Hispanic, and OMGs, including Bandidos, Gypsy Jokers, Iron Horsemen, and HAMC, distribute methamphetamine, powder cocaine, and crack cocaine at the retail level. Members of street gangs also distribute retail quantities of locally produced and Canadian marijuana.

Retail drug distribution generally takes place at open-air drug markets and prearranged locations. ODDs, particularly MDMA, are sometimes distributed at raves, in nightclubs, and on college campuses. Several Internet web sites advertise weekly rave events in the HIDTA region.

Drug-Related Crime

Ice methamphetamine abuse is the leading cause of drug-related criminal activity in the HIDTA region. It fuels much of the area's property crime. Abusers of powder and ice methamphetamine often commit robbery, property theft, and fraud to obtain money to purchase the drugs. Moreover, an increased number of methamphetamine abusers are implicated in domestic violence, child abuse, and child neglect in the region. Children of methamphetamine abusers often live in appalling conditions; many have been exposed to toxic chemicals used in methamphetamine production. Additionally, the Pediatric Interim Care Center (PICC), a nonprofit organization that provides interim care

for drug-affected infants, reports that prenatal methamphetamine exposure admissions exceed all other drug-related exposure admissions for infants. In 2006 PICC reported 37 cases of infant treatments for exposure to methamphetamine and 29 additional cases for exposure to methamphetamine in combination with another drug.

Abuse

Illicit drug abuse levels in the Northwest HIDTA region are high. According to the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, admissions to publicly funded treatment facilities for methamphetamine, marijuana, cocaine, and heroin abuse increased in the Northwest HIDTA region from 2003 through 2005, the latest year for which such data are available. Ice methamphetamine accounts for the most drug treatment admissions in the region; the drug also accounts for the sharpest rise in admissions during this 3-year period. (See Figure 3.)

Canadian and locally produced high-potency marijuana; powder and crack cocaine; Mexican black tar heroin; ODDs, primarily MDMA; and diverted pharmaceuticals are also commonly distributed and abused in the region. The abuse of diverted pharmaceuticals, particularly prescription narcotics such as oxycodone, hydrocodone, hydromorphone, and methadone, has increased. According to the NDTs 2006, 82.5 percent of state and local law enforcement agencies in the Northwest HIDTA region report the availability of diverted pharmaceuticals as being high or moderate in their jurisdictions.

Illicit Finance

Bulk cash transport is the most common method used to move drug proceeds in the Northwest HIDTA region, particularly by Mexican and Asian DTOs. Mexican DTOs bulk-transport most of the illicit drug proceeds that they generate to Mexico, while Asian DTOs bulk-transport most proceeds to Canada. DTOs, criminal groups, and

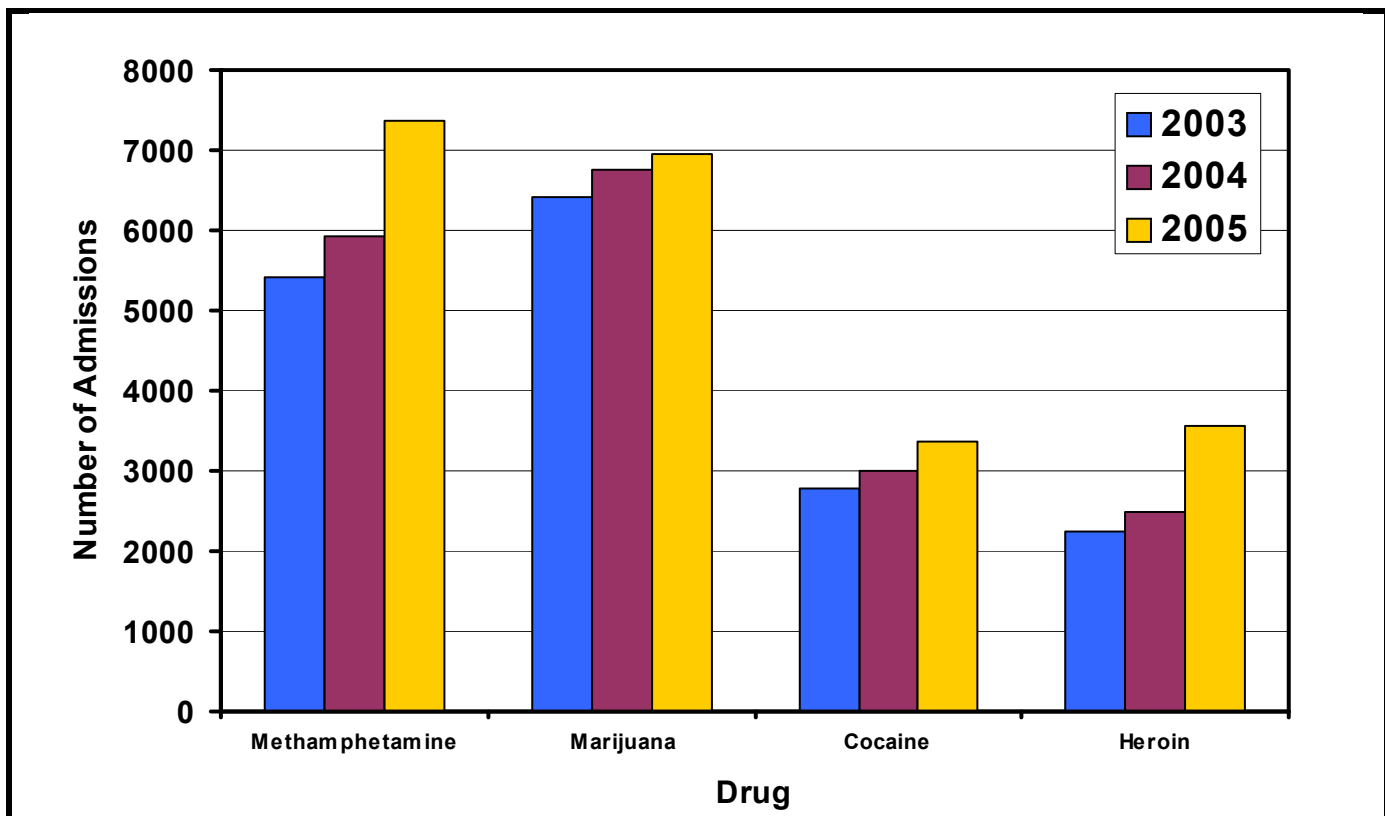


Figure 3. Northwest HIDTA adult and youth (combined) drug treatment admissions for state fiscal year (June 30–July 1), 2003–2005.

Source: Washington State Department of Social and Health Services Division of Alcohol and Substance Abuse.

gangs launder illicit proceeds through real estate investments, cash-intensive front businesses, and money services businesses. Retail-level traffickers also purchase high-value items such as clothing, jewelry, and automobiles. Additionally, traffickers operating in the region sometimes exploit casinos located in Indian country to mask the identity of their illicit proceeds.

Outlook

The trafficking and abuse of ice methamphetamine will remain the primary drug threat to the Northwest HIDTA region. Demand for the drug is high, and Mexican DTOs are positioned to meet this demand through established trafficking networks. Further, high levels of ice methamphetamine abuse in the area will contribute to an increase in drug-related crime.

Asian DTOs (primarily Vietnamese) and, to a lesser extent, Caucasian criminal groups will increase indoor cannabis cultivation operations within the Northwest HIDTA region to capitalize on the profits associated with high-potency marijuana and to avoid law enforcement interdiction along the border. These operations will quite likely mirror indoor cultivation operations established by Asian DTOs in other parts of the United States and Canada.

MDMA smuggling across the U.S.–Canada border into Washington will most likely increase in the near term as Asian DTOs and criminal groups as well as Caucasian criminal groups and independent dealers attempt to transport MDMA across the border to supply burgeoning markets in other areas of the United States.

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Sources

Local, State, and Regional

Des Moines Police Department
King County Medical Examiner's Office
King County Sheriff's Office
Seattle Police Department
Washington State Attorney General's Office
Washington State Department of Social and Health Services
 Division of Alcohol and Substance Abuse
Washington State Patrol
 Investigative Assistance Division
 K-9 Unit, Field Operations Bureau
 Pro-Active Methamphetamine Investigation Team

Federal

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 High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area
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U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
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 U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement
U.S. Department of Justice
 Bureau of Justice Assistance
 Western States Information Network
Criminal Division
 Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force
Drug Enforcement Administration
 El Paso Intelligence Center
 National Clandestine Laboratory Seizure System
 Federal-Wide Drug Seizure System
 Seattle Field Division
 System to Retrieve Information from Drug Evidence

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Financial Crimes Enforcement Network

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