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# Central Valley California

High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area

# Drug Market Analysis 2009



NATIONAL DRUG INTELLIGENCE CENTER  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE





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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 coordinated with the HIDTA, is limited in scope to HIDTA jurisdictional boundaries, and draws upon a wide variety of sources within those boundaries.



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# Preface

This assessment provides a strategic overview of the illicit drug situation in the Central Valley High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA), highlighting significant trends and law enforcement concerns related 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 Central Valley HIDTA.

**Figure 1. Central Valley California High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area**



## Strategic Drug Threat Developments

- Ice methamphetamine trafficking and abuse are the most significant drug threats to the Central Valley HIDTA region. A higher incidence of violent and property crime is attributed to the trafficking and abuse of methamphetamine than to any other illicit drug. Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) are the primary producers, transporters, and distributors of the drug.
- Methamphetamine production in California has declined significantly since 2004; however, the majority of laboratories are still located in the Central Valley HIDTA region, where production may be increasing. In 2008, Mexican DTOs and criminal groups reestablished some production sites in the region, and they are using organized “smurfing” operations (see text box on page 7) in southern and central California to acquire the precursor chemicals necessary for large-scale production.
- Cannabis cultivation has increased dramatically in the Central Valley HIDTA region over the past 5 years, making the area one of the most prominent marijuana production areas in the nation. The favorable climate in central California, which supports the region’s agricultural industry, also sustains widespread outdoor cannabis cultivation operations conducted primarily by Mexican DTOs.

## HIDTA Overview

The Central Valley HIDTA, established in 1999, consists of 10 counties: Fresno, Kern, Kings, Madera, Merced, Sacramento, San Joaquin, Shasta, Stanislaus, and Tulare. The

region encompasses nearly 32,000 square miles in central California, with a population of approximately 5 million. The region includes metropolitan areas, such as Bakersfield, Fresno, Modesto, Sacramento, and Stockton, as well as expansive, sparsely populated rural areas. (See Figure 1 on page 1.)

The Central Valley HIDTA region’s proximity to illicit drug source areas, combined with its large abuser population, renders it a national-level transportation and distribution center and a significant abuse area for illicit drugs supplied by Mexican and, to a lesser extent, Asian DTOs. In addition to supplying drug markets within the region, Mexican and Asian DTOs and criminal groups transport various illicit drugs from the region to markets throughout the United States. The Central Valley HIDTA region’s highway infrastructure and direct access to drug sources located along the Southwest Border and in Mexico and Canada enable drug traffickers to transport significant quantities of illicit drugs and drug proceeds into and through the area. Interstate 80, a major east-west corridor, connects San Francisco, California, to New York, New York. Interstate 5, a north-south corridor, provides direct access to the area from the San Ysidro and Otay Mesa ports of entry (POEs) at the U.S.–Mexico border in southern California and from the Blaine, Washington, POE at the U.S.–Canada border.

## Drug Threat Overview

The trafficking and abuse of methamphetamine, primarily ice methamphetamine, pose the most significant drug threats in the Central Valley HIDTA region. Twenty-seven of the 28 state and local law enforcement agencies in the region that responded to the National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC) National Drug Threat Survey (NDTS)

2009<sup>1</sup> identify methamphetamine as the greatest drug threat in their jurisdictions. Twenty-five of the respondents also indicate that methamphetamine is the drug that most contributes to violent crime in their jurisdictions. Most of the ice methamphetamine available in the area is produced by Mexican DTOs in Mexico and in domestic laboratories within the HIDTA region. In fact, the majority of California's domestic methamphetamine production occurs within the Central Valley HIDTA. In 2008, 56 percent of the methamphetamine laboratory-related seizures in California (208 of 374) occurred within the HIDTA region. HIDTA officials in Merced and Stanislaus Counties report an increase in domestic production. Moreover, in 2008, HIDTA officials noted an increase in the incidence of Mexican DTOs and criminal groups reestablishing domestic production sites in the region. Because of the escalating violence in Mexico over the past year and Mexican Government restrictions on precursor chemical imports, HIDTA officials believe that Mexican DTOs will move more of their production operations to the United States, including the Central Valley HIDTA region.

Cannabis cultivation operations are extensive and are increasing in magnitude throughout the HIDTA region, making the Central Valley of California one of the most significant marijuana production areas in the nation. According to law enforcement officials, this situation has resulted from high levels of abuse, increased demand for high-potency marijuana, and exploitation of state medical marijuana laws by illegal cannabis cultivators and drug traffickers. The favorable climate in central California, which supports the region's

agricultural industry, also sustains widespread outdoor cannabis cultivation operations conducted by Mexican DTOs and, to a lesser extent, Asian criminal groups. Indoor cannabis cultivation is increasing in the region, primarily because of increased large-scale indoor grow operations established in residential neighborhoods by Asian DTOs. Indoor cannabis cultivation has also increased because some Caucasian growers have moved indoors to avoid improved detection and eradication of outdoor grow sites and to attain higher profit margins through the production of high-potency indoor marijuana.

The availability and abuse of other illicit drugs also cause significant concern to law enforcement officials and treatment providers in the Central Valley HIDTA region. Mexican DTOs transport wholesale quantities of powder cocaine, black tar heroin and, to a lesser extent, brown powder heroin from Mexico into the HIDTA region. Crack cocaine is distributed primarily by African American street gang members in the urban areas of the region. MDMA (3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine, also known as ecstasy) is typically distributed in nightclubs by Asian criminal groups and street gangs that also may be attempting to market other stimulants and hallucinogens to abusers in the region. For example, in late 2008, law enforcement officers in Fresno arrested an Asian male for attempting to sell tablets containing BZP (N-benzylpiperazine) near a local high school.<sup>2</sup> GHB (gamma-hydroxybutyrate), ketamine, LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide), PCP (phencyclidine), psilocybin, and Rohypnol (flunitrazepam) are distributed and abused to varying degrees throughout the region. Other illicit drugs, such as khat, are also abused within certain East African ethnic communities.

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1. National Drug Threat Survey (NDTS) data for 2009 cited in this report are as of February 12, 2009. NDTS data cited are raw, unweighted responses from federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies solicited through either the National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC) or the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) program. Data cited may include responses from agencies that are part of the NDTS 2009 national sample and/or agencies that are part of HIDTA solicitation lists.

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2. BZP is a common name for the synthetic stimulant N-benzylpiperazine. BZP tablets, especially those that also contain the hallucinogen TFMP (1-(3-trifluoromethylphenyl) piperazine), are often sold as MDMA or promoted as an alternative to MDMA.



Diverted controlled prescription drugs (CPDs) are a growing threat, according to law enforcement officials and treatment providers in the HIDTA region. CPDs are abused across all age groups and at high levels in the region. Distributors and abusers commonly divert CPDs through doctor-shopping, drug thefts, prescription forgeries, and Internet purchases. The ease with which drug traffickers and abusers obtain CPDs through the Internet is a growing concern for law enforcement officials and treatment providers in the HIDTA region. Benzodiazepines, hydrocodone, oxycodone, and synthetic opioids are the most frequently abused CPDs.

## Drug Trafficking Organizations

Mexican and, to a lesser extent, Asian DTOs are the primary drug traffickers in the HIDTA region and are the greatest concern to Central Valley law enforcement officials. Other criminal groups, street gangs, and independent dealers operate in the area; however, the drugs that these groups and dealers distribute are generally supplied by Mexican and Asian traffickers.

Mexican DTOs represent the most significant organizational drug threat to the Central Valley HIDTA region because they control most illicit drug production, transportation, and distribution in the region. Members of these organizations control methamphetamine and marijuana production operations throughout the HIDTA region. Additionally, Mexican DTOs regularly transport bulk quantities of ice methamphetamine, marijuana, powder cocaine, and heroin from Mexico into the area for subsequent regional- and national-level distribution. Mexican DTOs in the region use multigenerational family networks that typically consist of members who reside in California, Mexico, or various cities throughout the United States. The Hispanic migrant worker population

in the HIDTA region employed by central California's agricultural industry provides communities in which Mexican DTOs can operate with some anonymity.

Asian DTOs and criminal groups, primarily ethnic Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, and Vietnamese, are significant producers and distributors of illicit drugs in the Central Valley HIDTA region. The drug trafficking threat they pose to the area is increasing but is not as extensive as that posed by Mexican DTOs. Asian drug traffickers are increasingly cultivating cannabis at indoor grow sites, typically located at residences in new communities within the HIDTA region. Asian DTOs typically restrict involvement in their drug trafficking operations to individuals of similar race/ethnicity and familial affiliation. Asian DTOs transport Canadian high-potency marijuana and MDMA primarily from Canada for distribution in the region. They are also the primary MDMA distributors in many areas of the region.

### 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 level and midlevel.

**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.

Hispanic, African American, Asian, and Caucasian street gangs and outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMGs) are of particular concern to law enforcement officials in the Central Valley HIDTA region. These gangs are extremely violent as they establish or maintain control of their drug trafficking activities. Hispanic street gangs, affiliates of the Sureños and Norteños gangs, and independent gangs such as the Fresno Bulldogs (see text box) are involved in midlevel and retail-level distribution of methamphetamine, marijuana, cocaine, and heroin. African American street gang members, primarily affiliates of Bloods and Crips, distribute crack cocaine and marijuana at the retail level in the HIDTA region. Asian street gangs are involved primarily in retail-level MDMA and marijuana distribution. Members of OMGs, most notably Hells Angels Motorcycle Club (HAMC), are active in midlevel and retail-level distribution of powder cocaine, methamphetamine, and marijuana.

### Fresno Bulldogs

Fresno Bulldogs is a street gang that originated in Fresno, California, in the late 1960s. Bulldogs is the largest Hispanic gang operating in central California, with membership estimated at 5,000 to 6,000. Bulldogs is one of the few Hispanic gangs in California that claim neither Sureños (Southern) nor Norteños (Northern) affiliation. However, gang members associate with Nuestra Familia members, particularly when trafficking drugs. The street-level distribution of methamphetamine, marijuana, and heroin is a primary source of income for gang members. In addition, members are involved in other criminal activity, including assault, burglary, homicide, and robbery.

Source: National Drug Intelligence Center, *National Gang Threat Assessment 2009*.

## Production

Methamphetamine production in California has declined significantly since 2004, largely as a result of successful law enforcement operations and regulatory efforts in the United States and Mexico to control precursor chemicals. While laboratory seizures have decreased overall, most of the methamphetamine production in California still takes place in the Central Valley HIDTA region. In 2008, 56 percent of the methamphetamine laboratory-related seizures in California (208 of 374) occurred within the HIDTA region, according to the California Department of Toxic Substances Control. (See Table 1 on page 6.) Methamphetamine laboratory cleanup costs in the Central Valley HIDTA counties totaled \$584,667, which accounts for approximately 57 percent of the \$1,026,767 spent by the state of California to remediate methamphetamine laboratories and dumpsites in 2008. Seizures of methamphetamine laboratories capable of producing 2 or more pounds per production cycle increased from five laboratories seized in 2007 to seven in 2008. (See Table 2 on page 6.) Additionally, in 2008, officials in Merced and Stanislaus Counties reported increased numbers of laboratories, dumpsites, and abandoned laboratory sites in predominantly rural and agricultural areas.

Strong pseudoephedrine import restrictions and law enforcement pressure in Mexico have contributed to a decrease in Mexican methamphetamine production, the primary source of the drug in the Central Valley HIDTA area. Because it is difficult for Mexican DTOs to obtain sufficient supplies of pseudoephedrine in Mexico, law enforcement and intelligence officials report that some of these DTOs are relocating their production operations to California and acquiring ephedrine and pseudoephedrine through large-scale smurfing operations in southern and central

**Table 1. Methamphetamine Clandestine Laboratory Removals in Central Valley HIDTA Counties, 2004–2008**

Year	Items Seized	Fresno	Kern	Kings	Madera	Merced	Sacramento	San Joaquin	Shasta	Stanislaus	Tulare	HIDTA Total	CA State Total
2004	Abandonments*	14	2	0	22	77	5	39	2	72	9	242	359
	Laboratories	16	12	2	3	21	21	27	7	38	6	153	605
	<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>395</b>	<b>964</b>
	Cleanup Costs	\$53,204	\$39,905	\$3,888	\$44,013	\$217,078	\$53,741	\$186,602	\$11,505	\$236,150	\$59,302	\$905,388	\$2,053,325
2005	Abandonments	17	3	0	5	92	5	22	1	96	10	251	316
	Laboratories	7	3	0	3	25	8	14	2	25	3	90	326
	<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>341</b>	<b>642</b>
	Cleanup Costs	\$39,298	\$13,468	NA	\$15,234	\$231,371	\$22,407	\$69,081	\$4,572	\$264,773	\$29,984	\$690,188	\$1,265,784
2006	Abandonments	26	0	1	3	41	3	10	1	75	9	169	224
	Laboratories	4	2	0	0	10	10	21	3	10	8	68	252
	<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>237</b>	<b>476</b>
	Cleanup Costs	\$64,646	\$3,281	\$2,434	\$7,217	\$99,400	\$25,609	\$64,672	\$7,286	\$146,106	\$34,704	\$473,355	\$1,005,257
2007	Abandonments	30	2	1	12	73	0	6	0	22	5	151	189
	Laboratories	5	6	2	1	2	6	8	2	5	2	39	163
	<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>190</b>	<b>352</b>
	Cleanup Costs	\$68,313	\$17,630	\$3,831	\$26,950	\$157,883	\$9,738	\$20,925	\$2,419	\$49,693	\$12,014	\$369,396	\$772,971
2008	Abandonments	9	5	0	14	68	1	8	1	43	8	157	190
	Laboratories	5	1	0	3	12	3	8	0	16	3	51	184
	<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>208</b>	<b>374</b>
	Cleanup Costs	\$25,703	\$24,327	NA	\$54,108	\$262,738	\$7,778	\$42,677	\$1,280	\$136,934	\$29,122	\$584,667	\$1,026,767

Source: California Department of Toxic Substances Control.

\*An abandonment is either a dumpsite or an incomplete laboratory; i.e., the seizure of chemical containers, glassware, and equipment.

NA—Not applicable.

**Table 2. Methamphetamine Laboratories Seized in the Central Valley HIDTA Region by Yield per Production Cycle, 2004–2008**

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Less than 2 pounds	86	48	36	41	31
2–9 pounds	22	2	2	0	3
More than 10 pounds	10	13	7	5	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>118</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>38</b>

Source: National Seizure System. Data run on January 30, 2009.

## Ephedrine and Pseudoephedrine Smurfing

Ephedrine and pseudoephedrine smurfing is a method used by some methamphetamine traffickers to acquire large quantities of precursor chemicals. Methamphetamine producers purchase the chemicals in quantities at or below legal thresholds from multiple retail locations. Methamphetamine producers often enlist the assistance of several friends or associates in smurfing operations to increase the speed of the operation and the quantity of chemicals acquired. The Fresno Methamphetamine Task Force (FMTF) reports that much of the pseudoephedrine evidence discovered at superlabs and dumpsites in its jurisdiction can be traced directly to smurfing operations, and most of this evidence can be traced back to smurfing operations based in central and southern California.

### Empty Pseudoephedrine Blisterpacks Seized at a Methamphetamine Dumpsite in the Central Valley, California



California Bureau of Narcotics Enforcement

Source: Fresno Methamphetamine Task Force.

California. Hispanic street gangs and other individuals in the Central Valley HIDTA region often organize these smurfing operations and then sell the precursor chemicals to methamphetamine producers. In fact, the HIDTA reports that the methamphetamine laboratories seized in its area

are producing methamphetamine with ephedrine and pseudoephedrine acquired primarily through smurfing. Moreover, FMTF reports that its officers have seized gallon-size plastic freezer bags of pseudoephedrine tablets that were collected during smurfing operations based in central and southern California and have encountered similar bags containing residue from pseudoephedrine tablets at laboratory dumpsites throughout their jurisdiction.

According to law enforcement and intelligence reporting, large-scale methamphetamine producers in the Central Valley HIDTA are using hypophosphorous acid instead of red phosphorus as the primary reagent in their pseudoephedrine reduction operations. Law enforcement and intelligence reporting indicates that hypophosphorous acid (a clear liquid) is easier to smuggle than red phosphorus (a crimson powder) because hypophosphorous acid can easily be mistaken for water or other liquids, and law enforcement pressure on red phosphorus smugglers, as well as restrictions on the sale and distribution of red phosphorus, has made the chemical difficult to obtain. The increased use of hypophosphorous acid is evidenced by increased seizures of 5-gallon plastic gas cans filled with hypophosphorous acid at superlabs and dumpsites in the region. Most large-scale production operations are located in very rural areas—typically on rented property, particularly farms—for an extended period. The operators produce methamphetamine continuously until they believe the location is no longer secure.

The Central Valley HIDTA region is one of the most significant cannabis cultivation areas in the nation, and in some areas cultivation is increasing. According to the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) Domestic Cannabis Eradication/Suppression Program (DCE/SP) data, in 2008 more than 5.3 million cannabis plants were eradicated from illicit outdoor and indoor grow operations in California; 1,256,885 of these plants were seized in the Central Valley HIDTA region.

### Use of Hypophosphorous Acid in Methamphetamine Production

Hypophosphorous acid is a clear liquid, and it is often concealed in empty water bottles at methamphetamine laboratories. This is a serious law enforcement and public safety concern because the content of the bottles could easily be mistaken for water and consumed by an unsuspecting victim.

#### Water Bottles Containing Hypophosphorous Acid Seized at a Methamphetamine Laboratory Site in the Central Valley, California



California Bureau of Narcotics Enforcement

Source: Fresno Methamphetamine Task Force.

### Methamphetamine Dumpsites

To evade law enforcement detection, methamphetamine producers also burn, shred, or bury the waste from their laboratory sites because they are aware that investigators examine material at dumpsites to identify operators and the locations of their laboratories. This practice is a significant environmental and wildfire hazard.

#### A Burned Methamphetamine Laboratory Site Seized in the Central Valley, California



California Bureau of Narcotics Enforcement

Source: Fresno Methamphetamine Task Force.

DCE/SP data also show that outdoor cultivation has increased significantly over the last 5 years, primarily in Fresno, Kern, Shasta, and Tulare Counties. (See Tables 3 and 4 on page 9; see Figure 2 on page 10.)

Mexican DTOs represent the primary organizational threat with regard to cannabis cultivation and marijuana production operations in the Central Valley HIDTA region. Mexican DTOs operate a majority of the large outdoor grow sites that average between 5,000 and 7,000 cannabis plants. They generally establish such grow sites in counties that encompass extensive remote locations, public lands, and rural areas. Mexican-controlled cannabis grow sites are commonly seized on public and National Forest System

lands, including portions of national forests that lie within the region. According to the U.S. Forest Service, the Los Padres, Sequoia, and Sierra National Forests rank among the top 10 national forests for eradication of cannabis plants on National Forest System lands.

Mexican DTOs typically employ illegal aliens to tend crop sites, provide protection from intruders (including law enforcement officers), and harvest the cannabis. Most workers at Mexican-operated grow sites in the region are illegal aliens from Mexico, particularly the state of Michoacán. Law enforcement officials have noted that cannabis cultivators are increasingly arming themselves to protect their operations, as evidenced by an increased presence of weapons

**Table 3. Top-Ranking States for the Number of Cannabis Plants Eradicated, 2004–2008**

2004		2005		2006		2007		2008	
California	1,214,420	California	2,011,277	California	2,995,285	California	4,951,976	California	5,322,053
Kentucky	476,803	Kentucky	510,502	Kentucky	558,756	Kentucky	492,615	Washington	580,415
Tennessee	416,012	Tennessee	440,362	Tennessee	483,271	Washington	295,573	Tennessee	539,370
Hawaii	379,644	Hawaii	255,113	Hawaii	201,100	Oregon	277,766	Kentucky	353,170
Washington	134,474	Washington	136,165	Washington	144,181	Tennessee	178,322	West Virginia	146,553
Oregon	62,621	Arizona	113,523	Oregon	113,608	Hawaii	139,089	North Carolina	105,200

Source: Domestic Cannabis Eradication/Suppression Program.

**Table 4. Cannabis Plants Seized in the Central Valley HIDTA Region, 2004–2008**

County	Outdoor Plants					Indoor Plants				
	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Fresno	69,364	137,600	85,761	181,407	172,302	0	0	7,160	2,656	1,340
Kern	21,283	61,726	44,510	146,586	159,336	0	1,349	196	998	40
Kings	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Madera	27,417	12,159	8,576	37,652	0	0	0	0	0	0
Merced	10,388	2,145	1,949	58,537	22,266	172	1,393	628	299	798
Sacramento	369	0	0	0	0	0	0	16,901	0	0
San Joaquin	3,986	11,944	6,207	9,517	16,560	0	18	7,600	5,944	2,262
Shasta	70,458	218,384	237,299	356,462	407,386	113	24	12	64	284
Stanislaus	0	21,962	2,751	0	0	0	2,561	3,664	1,636	0
Tulare	150,865	157,441	65,912	330,621	474,215	167	69	26	365	96
<b>Total</b>	<b>354,130</b>	<b>623,361</b>	<b>452,965</b>	<b>1,120,782</b>	<b>1,252,065</b>	<b>452</b>	<b>5,414</b>	<b>36,187</b>	<b>11,962</b>	<b>4,820</b>

Source: Domestic Cannabis Eradication/Suppression Program.

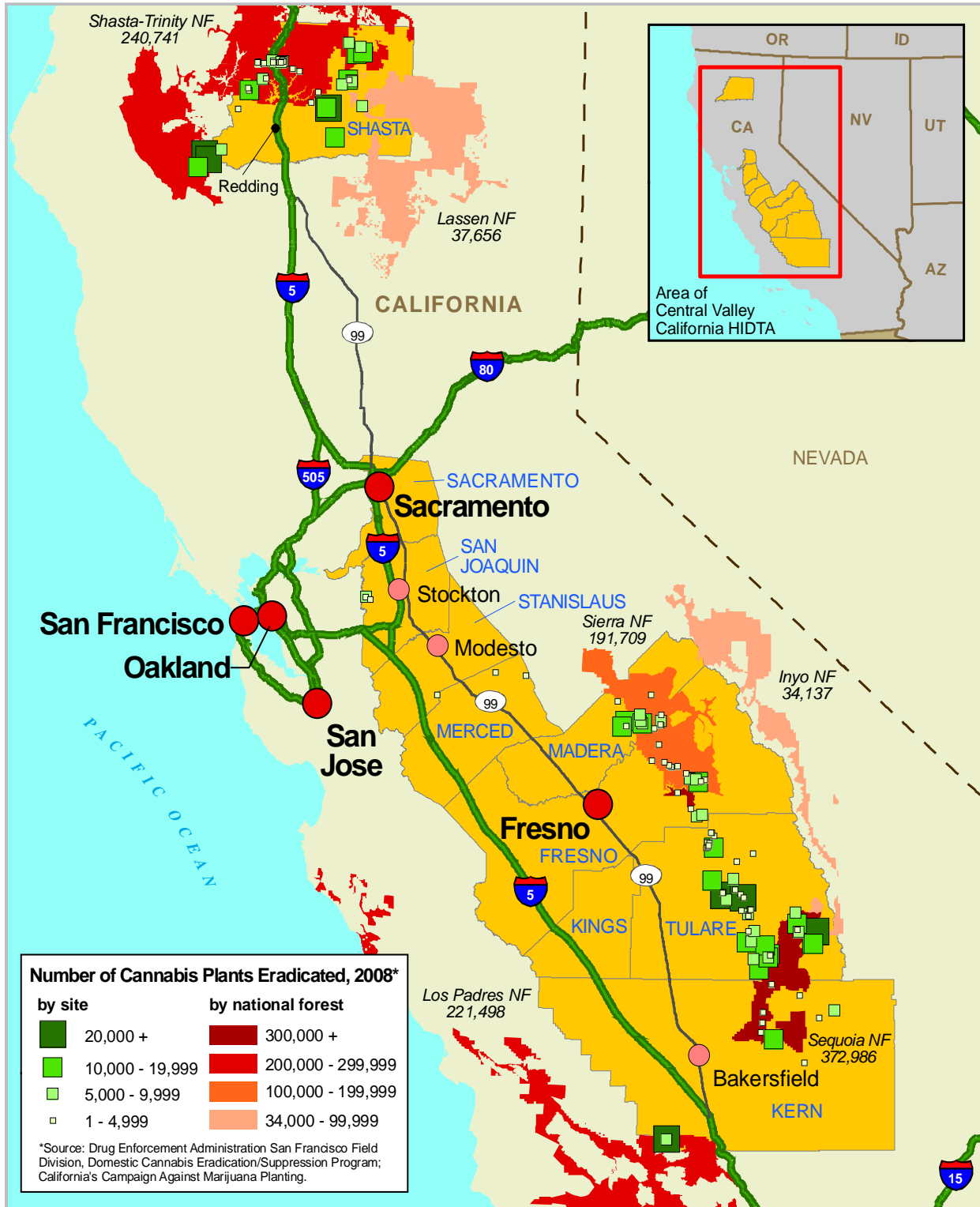
at grow sites. As such, cannabis cultivation operations are a threat to the safety of law enforcement officers as well as unwitting visitors, hunters, and hikers.

Asian DTOs and criminal groups also maintain some outdoor marijuana grow sites in the region, but on a much smaller scale than Mexican DTOs. These groups, primarily Hmong criminal groups, cultivate cannabis outdoors, typically in agricultural areas of the region. These groups employ individuals who work in the local agricultural industry to cultivate the plants on behalf of the criminal group. Asian criminal groups' cannabis grows are often interspersed among

legitimate crops such as bitter melon, strawberries, and grapes; because the cannabis plants are spread among the other foliage, they are difficult to differentiate from the legitimate crops.

The environmental damage caused by outdoor cannabis cultivation, particularly on public lands, is extensive. According to the National Forest System and California's Campaign Against Marijuana Planting (CAMP), law enforcement officers are increasingly encountering dumpsites of highly toxic insecticides, chemical repellants, and other poisons. These toxic chemicals enter and contaminate ground water, pollute watersheds, kill fish and other wildlife, and eventually enter residential

Figure 2. Cannabis Plants Eradicated in the Central Valley HIDTA, by County, 2008



## California Proposition 215

California Proposition 215 (The Compassionate Use Act of 1996, Health and Safety Code, §11362.5) allows patients and primary caregivers to possess or cultivate marijuana for medical treatment based on a physician recommendation—exempting them from criminal laws that otherwise prohibit possession or cultivation of marijuana under state law. Legal protections are also provided to physicians who recommend the use of marijuana for medical treatment. Under Proposition 215, marijuana for medicinal use can be obtained without a prescription. Patients may possess 8 ounces and 6 mature or 12 immature cannabis plants; possession of additional amounts of marijuana is permitted under this plan based on medical necessity.

In November 2008 the California Supreme Court further defined the role of a primary caregiver in the *People v. Roger William Mentch*, S148204, Ct. App. 6 H02878, Santa Cruz County, Superior Court, No. 07429. To qualify as a primary caregiver (and, consequently, to be legally permitted to provide marijuana), an individual must render assistance to provide daily life necessities. The Supreme Court opined that the defendant, whose caregiving consisted principally of supplying marijuana, did not qualify as a primary caregiver under Proposition 215.

Source: California Secretary of State.

water supplies. Redirecting natural water sources leads to erosion and impacts native vegetation.

Law enforcement reporting indicates that some Asian DTOs and local Caucasian growers are moving their outdoor operations to indoor grows to avoid intensified outdoor eradication efforts and reap higher profits through year-round production of indoor-grown, high-potency marijuana. HIDTA officials also report that some cannabis cultivators exploit California's state medical marijuana laws (see text box) to conduct illegal grow operations that exceed the cultivation and possession limits

and to cultivate cannabis for personal use and illicit distribution.

Indoor cannabis cultivators typically establish grow sites in multiple residences, often using hydroponics technology, sophisticated lighting, and irrigation systems. Indoor growers prefer the controlled environment, which allows them to avoid intensified outdoor eradication efforts while achieving higher profits because of the year-round cultivation season—a new crop of higher-potency marijuana can be turned out every 90 days. Cannabis cultivators who operate large-scale indoor grows often modify electrical circuitry in the houses or bypass meters, creating hazardous conditions that can result in electrical shock or fire. They often use exhaust systems that are insufficient to vent the carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide generated from cultivation activities. As a result of the prolonged high humidity at indoor grow sites, the buildings that contain them can be rendered uninhabitable as a result of the growth of toxic molds. Additionally, grow sites are often booby-trapped to ward off thieves and law enforcement officers.

Crack distributors throughout the Central Valley HIDTA region frequently convert powder cocaine to crack; however, crack conversion is a much lower concern to law enforcement and drug treatment providers in the region than the threat posed by methamphetamine and marijuana production.

## Transportation

The Central Valley HIDTA region is a national-level transshipment center for illicit drugs smuggled to, through, and from the HIDTA region to U.S. drug markets. Interstate 5 is routinely exploited by drug traffickers to provide direct access to drug sources located in other areas of California as well as in Mexico and Canada. (See Figure 1 on page 1.) Although most drugs remain in the area for local distribution, many of the drug shipments from Mexico—as well as methamphetamine and marijuana produced within the HIDTA—are regularly



transported from the region in private and commercial vehicles, primarily on I-80, to drug markets in the Great Lakes, Mid-Atlantic, New York/New Jersey, Southeast, and West Central Regions of the United States. Drug traffickers typically use vehicles with complex fabricated compartments that are often welded into body frames, gas tanks, and passenger areas and have electronic or magnetic switches that require several steps to open.

## Distribution

### Distribution From the HIDTA Region

The Central Valley HIDTA region is a regional- and national-level distribution center for methamphetamine and marijuana produced in the region as well as marijuana, ice methamphetamine, cocaine, and heroin smuggled from Mexico into the United States. Mexican DTOs are the primary wholesale distributors of drugs in the region, typically using stash sites located in private residences, warehouses, and storage facilities in cities and towns throughout the region. Mexican DTOs and criminal groups use the area as a base of operations for illicit drug distribution to markets throughout the United States.

Street gangs, prison gangs, and OMGs operating in the HIDTA region distribute illicit drugs to their counterparts in cities throughout the country to capitalize on the higher profits that can be made in those cities. Various traffickers in the area, including Asian DTOs, Caucasian criminal groups, and independent dealers distribute high-potency marijuana produced in the region to other areas of the country. Other dangerous drugs (ODDs) such as MDMA, diverted CPDs, and other illicit drugs such as khat are also distributed from the area.

### Stockton DTO Dismantled

In November 2008, 13 members of a Stockton area DTO were arrested for their role in a drug smuggling operation that involved the importation of drugs from Mexico, through Los Angeles, to the HIDTA region. This organization had been using vehicles that were outfitted with electronically operated hidden compartments to facilitate transportation and distribution of the drugs. Members were assigned specific roles to further the organization's goals, such as hidden compartment fabricators, money launderers, drug couriers, smugglers, straw party vehicle owners, and caretakers of various stash houses.

In addition to the 13 federal arrests, law enforcement officials seized 31 pounds of cocaine, 14 pounds of ice methamphetamine, 2 pounds of heroin, four handguns, and \$25,000 in cash. The street value of the seized drugs was estimated to be \$1.7 million.

Source: Drug Enforcement Administration, San Francisco Field Division.

### Distribution Within the HIDTA Region

Constantly changing factors that contribute to the strength of drug distribution groups, such as access to weapons and consistent drug supplies, have prevented any single group or gang from dominating midlevel or retail-level drug distribution in the Central Valley HIDTA for an extended period. Rather, midlevel and retail drug sales are carried out by numerous groups and individuals, in a variety of locations. These groups often sell multiple drugs or shift from one drug type to another as availability, demand, and sources of supply fluctuate. For example, according to the Fresno Police Department, throughout 2008 an increasing number of crack dealers began distributing methamphetamine because of the higher profits associated with methamphetamine distribution.

Criminal groups and independent dealers that distribute drugs at the retail level vary greatly in their preferred distribution points, the types of buyers they sell to, and their methods of communication. Drug sales in metropolitan areas often occur in open-air markets (located on streets and in parking lots) as well as in clubs and bars; distributors sell to both new, unfamiliar customers and well-known, repeat customers. Drug sales in rural areas usually occur at prearranged locations and are typically conducted between a dealer and known or referred customers. Law enforcement reporting indicates that distributors use cell phones, satellite phones, pagers, and other personal communication devices to communicate with sources and customers. In addition, distributors often use text messages consisting of code words that allow them to communicate with a reduced risk of detection.

## Drug-Related Crime

Methamphetamine trafficking and abuse significantly impact crime in the Central Valley HIDTA region. Twenty-five of the 28 state and local law enforcement officials responding to the NDTs 2009 report that methamphetamine (either powder or ice) is the drug that most contributes to violent crime and property crime in their jurisdictions. (See Table 5.) Law enforcement officials also report that most incidents of assault, armed robbery, burglary, domestic violence, and homicide that occur in the region are perpetrated by members of DTOs, criminal groups, and street

gangs in the course of their drug trafficking operations. Additionally, law enforcement reporting indicates that methamphetamine abusers commit a considerable amount of property crime in the area, including identity theft, to acquire money with which to purchase methamphetamine and other illicit drugs.

Marijuana-related violence is escalating in the HIDTA region, particularly violence perpetrated by cannabis cultivators. According to law enforcement officials, the methods that cultivators use to protect outdoor cannabis grow sites vary; however, an increasing number of armed individuals are protecting cannabis crops because of their high value, competition with other outdoor growers, and previous successful eradication efforts by law enforcement. DCE/SP data show that the number of weapons seized at both outdoor and indoor grow sites in California increased 49 percent between 2004 (749) and 2008 (1,114). According to the Central Valley Marijuana Investigation Team (CVMIT), over the past year, grow site workers began to camp near the grow sites rather than directly at them. Typically, these offsite locations are located in a position that allows the tenders, who also provide armed security for the site, a clear view of the approaches to the site. Furthermore, camping at offsite locations affords growers a rapid egress if law enforcement officials are approaching the area.

Burglaries and home invasion robberies of illegal indoor cannabis grow sites are also prevalent within

**Table 5. Central Valley HIDTA Law Enforcement Responses to the National Drug Threat Survey 2009**

Drug	Greatest Drug Threat*	Most Contributes to Violent Crime*	Most Contributes to Property Crime*
Ice methamphetamine	21	19	19
Powder methamphetamine	6	6	6
Crack cocaine	0	2	0
Heroin	0	0	2

Source: National Drug Threat Survey 2009.

Total respondents: 28

\*No response: 1

**Table 6. Drug-Related Treatment Admissions to Publicly Funded Facilities in California, 2003–2007**

Drug Type	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Methamphetamine/amphetamines	62,152	60,385	67,353	70,670	67,312
Marijuana/hashish	27,505	24,867	26,836	28,984	31,362
Cocaine	23,778	21,330	19,104	20,121	19,393
Heroin	38,682	34,028	29,707	29,825	28,493
Other opiates	3,497	3,434	3,207	4,931	6,031
PCP	1,203	899	725	685	694
Hallucinogens	184	152	167	110	111
Other stimulants	134	107	91	115	237
Tranquilizers	298	260	250	256	221
Sedatives	377	386	324	274	273

Source: Treatment Episode Data Set.

the HIDTA region. According to law enforcement officials, burglaries of grow sites, including repeat burglaries, occurred periodically in the HIDTA region during 2008. Law enforcement officials also report an increase in the number of weapons seized at indoor grow sites, suggesting that cannabis cultivators are more frequently arming themselves to protect their operations.

## Abuse

Illicit drug abuse levels in the Central Valley HIDTA region are high, particularly for ice methamphetamine. Data from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Treatment Episode Data Set (TEDS) reveal that methamphetamines/amphetamines were identified more often than any other drug, including alcohol, as the primary substance of abuse for treatment admissions to publicly funded facilities statewide in California from 2003 through 2007 (the latest year for which data are available). (See Table 6.) Treatment admissions for marijuana abuse are also high and increasing but are not considered to be as significant as those for methamphetamine abuse, the effects of which are much more difficult to treat. Cocaine,

heroin, and ODDs are also commonly distributed and abused within the HIDTA region.

Abuse of diverted CPDs is an increasing problem within the region, especially among teenagers and young adults. According to treatment providers, the most sought-after and abused CPDs are benzodiazepines, hydrocodones, oxycodones, synthetic opioids, and Schedule IV diet drugs. Distributors and abusers commonly divert CPDs through doctor-shopping, drug thefts, prescription forgery, and Internet purchases. The fraudulent and illegal sale of controlled prescription drugs over the Internet is a particular concern to law enforcement officials and treatment providers in the region.

## Illicit Finance

Mexican DTOs use bulk cash smuggling as their primary means of returning drug proceeds generated in the Central Valley HIDTA to source areas in Mexico. Mexican DTOs regularly transport proceeds from wholesale drug transactions in other regions of the United States to the HIDTA region, where they are often combined with proceeds generated from wholesale transactions in the

region. The bulk cash is then transported back to Mexico for repatriation.<sup>3</sup> Asian DTOs also consolidate drug proceeds in the region, which are then transported in bulk or by wire to Canada or Asia.

## Outlook

The threat posed by the trafficking and abuse of ice methamphetamine will not diminish in the near-term and will remain the most significant drug threat to the Central Valley HIDTA region. Demand for the drug is high, and Mexican DTOs and criminal groups operating in the area are well entrenched and have operated large-scale production and smuggling operations in the area for many years. Based on their established presence in the area, Mexican DTOs will further exploit the primary drug markets within the HIDTA and throughout the nation.

The Central Valley HIDTA may experience an increase in local methamphetamine production in the near term. HIDTA officials have already noted an increase in the incidence of Mexican DTOs and criminal groups reestablishing domestic production sites. Restrictions on precursor chemical imports in Mexico and escalating violence in Mexico will quite likely cause Mexican DTOs to move more of their production operations to the region. The emergence of large-scale pseudoephedrine smurfing operations is likely to provide these producers with sufficient precursor chemicals to bring about a moderate increase in the number of large-scale methamphetamine production laboratories in the region.

The Central Valley HIDTA will remain one of the most significant cannabis cultivation and marijuana production areas in the nation. The demand for high-potency marijuana in the region is increasing, and there are no indications that this will change over the next year. Public lands in remote areas of the region will increasingly be used by Mexican traffickers for outdoor cultivation, and it is likely that cannabis cultivators will increasingly use weapons to protect their grow sites.

To meet rising demand for higher-potency marijuana and capitalize on greater profit margins, independent suppliers and Asian DTOs will quite likely establish larger, more sophisticated indoor cannabis cultivation operations in the region. Increased indoor cultivation will also be supported by a greater number of local marijuana producers moving their operations indoors to avoid outdoor eradication efforts and to gain higher profits through year-round production. Illegal cannabis cultivators will increasingly exploit state medical marijuana laws and expand their illicit cultivation operations.

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3. Each year Mexican and Colombian drug traffickers operating in the United States bulk-smuggle billions of U.S. dollars into Mexico. Repatriation—the return of these dollars to their country of origin (the United States)—is often an important part of the money laundering process for these traffickers. Repatriation of these funds is beneficial to Mexican and Colombian traffickers because it simplifies the placement of funds into the U.S. financial system.

## Sources

### Local, State, and Regional

Delano Police Department  
 Narcotics Division  
 Gangs Unit

Fresno Area Surveillance Team

Fresno County Department of Behavioral Health

Fresno County Sheriff's Office

Fresno Police Department  
 Special Investigations Department

Kern County Sheriff's Department  
 Gang Unit  
 Major Narcotics

Kings County Gang Task Force

Modesto Police Department

Multi-Agency Gang Enforcement Consortium

Sacramento County Sheriff's Office  
 Multi-Jurisdictional Methamphetamine Enforcement Team  
 Violence Suppression and Narcotics Investigations Division

Sacramento Police Department

Stanislaus County Sheriff's Office  
 Stanislaus Drug Enforcement Agency

State of California  
 Campaign Against Marijuana Planting  
 Criminal Intelligence Bureau  
 Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs  
 Office of Applied Research and Analysis  
 Department of Justice  
 California Bureau of Narcotics Enforcement  
 Central Valley Marijuana Investigative Team

Department of Public Health  
 California Alcohol and Drug Data System

Department of Toxic Substances Control

National Guard  
 Drug Demand Reduction Group

Office of the Attorney General

Secretary of State

### Federal

Executive Office of the President  
 Office of National Drug Control Policy  
 High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area  
 Central Valley  
 Fresno Methamphetamine Task Force  
 Investigative Support Center  
 Sacramento Area Intelligence Narcotic Task Force  
 Southern Tri-County Central Valley California HIDTA Task Force  
 Stanislaus, San Joaquin, Merced Task Force

U.S. Department of Agriculture  
 U.S. Forest Service  
 National Forest System

U.S. Department of Commerce  
 U.S. Census Bureau

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration  
 Office of Applied Studies  
 Drug Abuse Warning Network  
 Treatment Episode Data Set

U.S. Department of Homeland Security  
 U.S. Customs and Border Protection

U.S. Department of Justice  
 Criminal Division  
 Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force  
 Drug Enforcement Administration  
 Diversion Program  
 Domestic Cannabis Eradication/Suppression Program  
 El Paso Intelligence Center  
 National Seizure System  
 San Francisco Field Division  
 Federal Bureau of Investigation  
 U.S. Attorneys Office  
 Northern District of California

U.S. Department of the Treasury  
 Financial Crimes Enforcement Network

U.S. Postal Service

### Other

New Leaf Treatment Center, Lafayette, California

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**Questions and comments may be directed to  
Pacific/West Central Unit, Regional Threat Analysis Branch.**

**National Drug Intelligence Center**

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