



## **Northwest**

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 Northwest 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 Northwest HIDTA.

**Figure 1. Northwest High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area transportation infrastructure.**



## Strategic Drug Threat Developments

- Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) are increasing the availability of ice methamphetamine in the Northwest HIDTA region from production areas in Mexico and, to a lesser extent, central California.
- Outdoor cannabis plant seizures in the Northwest HIDTA counties increased 273 percent in 2008. Law enforcement authorities seized over 315,000 cannabis plants in 2008 compared with 84,514 cannabis plants in 2007. Law enforcement authorities attribute increased seizures to their enhanced capabilities to operate in remote, rugged areas through the implementation of short-term airborne operations (STABOs).
- The abuse of controlled prescription drugs<sup>1</sup> (CPDs) is rising in the region, particularly among teenagers and young adults. The leading illicit methods used to obtain CPDs in the HIDTA region are doctor-shopping, theft, and the use of Internet pharmacies.

## HIDTA Overview

The Northwest HIDTA was established in 1997 to counter the threat posed by the high volume of drugs transported throughout the area and smuggled across the U.S.–Canada border. The region encompasses 14 counties in Washington—Benton, Clark, Cowlitz, Franklin, King, Kitsap, Lewis, Pierce, Skagit, Snohomish, Spokane, Thurston, Whatcom, and Yakima. (See

Figure 1 on page 1.) Nearly one-third of the entire population of the state resides in King County, which encompasses Seattle. The proximity of the HIDTA region to Canada and direct 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. For instance, Interstate 5, a major north-south corridor, provides traffickers direct access to the area from the San Ysidro and Otay Mesa ports of entry (POEs) at the U.S.–Mexico border and the Blaine POE located in Washington at the U.S.–Canada border.

## Drug Threat Overview

Widespread trafficking and abuse of methamphetamine are the greatest threats to the Northwest HIDTA region, straining local law enforcement, public health, and social services resources, particularly in rural areas. Although local methamphetamine production has declined significantly in most areas of the region, an abundant supply of Mexican ice methamphetamine throughout the HIDTA region has fueled rising methamphetamine abuse. According to the National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC) National Drug Threat Survey (NDTS) 2009,<sup>2</sup> 26 of the 46 state and local law enforcement respondents in the Northwest HIDTA region identify methamphetamine as the drug that poses the greatest threat to their jurisdictions. Additionally, 33 respondents report that methamphetamine is the drug that most contributes to violent crime in their areas and 42 respondents report the same for property crime.

1. Not all prescription drugs are controlled prescription drugs (CPDs) under the Controlled Substances Act. However, many prescription drugs are listed in Schedules I through V of the Controlled Substances Act because of their high potential for abuse or addiction. Schedules I through V prescription drugs primarily are narcotic pain relievers and central nervous system depressants and stimulants. A complete list of controlled prescription drugs, by schedule, is available on the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) Office of Diversion Control web site: <http://www.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/schedules/schedules.htm>.

2. 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.

Mexican DTOs are the primary manufacturers, transporters, and wholesale distributors of ice methamphetamine acquired from production facilities in Mexico and conversion laboratories in California. They have generally supplied sufficient quantities of the drug to meet demand, even in the face of decreased local methamphetamine production. However, in 2007 and early 2008, the availability and purity of Mexican methamphetamine temporarily decreased in some areas of the HIDTA region, particularly at the midlevel and retail level. Restrictions enacted by the government of Mexico (GOM) on the importation and legitimate distribution of precursor chemicals in Mexico temporarily curtailed methamphetamine production in the country, leading to decreased availability of the drug in the HIDTA region throughout 2007 and early 2008. By the second quarter of 2008,<sup>3</sup> law enforcement officials reported that methamphetamine availability in the Northwest HIDTA region had returned to previously high levels.

Officials attribute the rebound in availability to increased ice methamphetamine production in Mexico and, to a lesser degree, increased production in the Central Valley of California. Mexican DTOs are circumventing chemical sales and import restrictions and are smuggling precursor chemicals into Mexico to produce ice methamphetamine. Moreover, smurfing<sup>4</sup> activity in the Central Valley has led to increased production of methamphetamine in California, some of which is transported to the Northwest HIDTA region.

Marijuana is the most widely available and frequently abused drug in the HIDTA region; 45 of the 46 state and local law enforcement

respondents to the NDTs 2009 report that the drug is highly available throughout the area. Mexican DTOs and criminal groups are the primary traffickers of commercial-grade Mexican marijuana. In addition, Mexican DTOs and criminal groups operate most of the large outdoor cannabis grow operations in the HIDTA region; these operations generally are located in counties that have extensive remote locations such as public lands and rural areas. The increasing availability of high-potency marijuana in the region is attributed to the continued smuggling of the drug from Canada and the growing prevalence of indoor cannabis grow sites operated by Asian DTOs and Caucasian independent dealers in the region.

Powder cocaine is readily available throughout the region, despite a temporary shortage of the drug in early 2008.<sup>5</sup> Crack cocaine is most prevalent in metropolitan markets such as Seattle, Spokane, and Tacoma, Washington. Many law enforcement officials and treatment providers report a recent increase in powder cocaine abuse in the region. They attribute the increase, in part, to some methamphetamine abusers who switched to cocaine when the availability of methamphetamine temporarily decreased in 2007 through early 2008. According to the NDTs 2009, 36 of 46 state and local law enforcement respondents in the region report that powder cocaine availability is moderate to high in their jurisdictions,

3. The second quarter of 2008 is composed of April, May, and June.

4. 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.

5. Cocaine supplies to six of the eight key drug markets in the Pacific Region (Las Vegas, Nevada; Portland, Oregon; Oakland, Sacramento, and San Francisco, California; and Seattle, Washington) were interrupted for at least part of the second quarter of 2008, probably because of decreased availability in Los Angeles, California, which is a major source of the region's cocaine. By the end of the second quarter, cocaine had become more available in much of the region; only three markets (Las Vegas, Oakland, and Sacramento) were assessed to have availability levels below 2006 levels, while Honolulu, Hawaii; San Francisco; and Seattle were assessed to have overall availability levels comparable with 2006 levels. Various factors contributed to the cocaine availability shortage in Los Angeles and the HIDTA region, including large seizures of cocaine in transit to the United States, successful law enforcement efforts against prominent Mexican DTOs (the High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) region's primary source of cocaine), violent conflicts among competing Mexican DTOs, and increased competition from non-U.S. markets.

and 25 of 46 respondents report the same for crack cocaine availability. Some of the powder cocaine that is transported into the HIDTA region is ultimately smuggled into Canada, where demand for the drug is also high.

Mexican black tar heroin abuse is a significant threat in the Seattle metropolitan area. The number of heroin-related treatment admissions to publicly funded facilities in King County, which encompasses Seattle, is significantly higher than in other counties of the region, according to data from the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, Division of Alcohol and Substance Abuse (DASA). Mexican DTOs remain the primary source for black tar heroin in Washington and transport the drug from distribution cities in southern California directly to the HIDTA region.

The distribution and abuse of MDMA (3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine, commonly known as ecstasy) are a growing concern to law enforcement in the HIDTA region. Much of the MDMA manufactured in Canada and destined for U.S. markets transits the Northwest HIDTA region and, as such, poses a risk to the region, particularly in markets like Seattle, where a large college age population may create demand for the drug. Officials in the HIDTA region report that MDMA tablets produced in Canada and distributed in the region often are adulterated with other dangerous substances, including methamphetamine, MDA (3,4-methylenedioxyamphetamine), LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide), BZP (N-benzylpiperazine), TF-MPP (1-(3-trifluoromethylphenyl)piperazine),<sup>6</sup>

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6. 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 (3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine, also known as ecstasy) or promoted as an alternative to MDMA. BZP is abused primarily by teenagers and young adults. The drug is often used at raves, nightclubs, private parties, and other venues where the use of club drugs, particularly MDMA, is well-established. The risks associated with BZP abuse are similar to those associated with amphetamine abuse.

ketamine, and caffeine. According to the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA), Canada-based DTOs are increasingly producing adulterated MDMA tablets, and in some instances, tablets marketed as MDMA contain little, if any, MDMA. For example, in October 2008, 203,897 tablets that appeared to be MDMA were seized at the Blaine POE; the tablets were later determined to be BZP. Asian criminal groups, Asian gangs, and independent Caucasian distributors are the primary suppliers of MDMA in the region.

The abuse of CPDs is also rising in the region. Prescription narcotics, primarily oxycodone products (OxyContin, Percocet, and Percodan) and hydrocodone products (Vicodin and Lortab), are the most abused CPDs in Washington and pose a growing abuse problem for young adults in the HIDTA region, primarily individuals from ages 18 to 25 in King County. These young adults can often acquire the drugs without leaving their homes by placing orders on Internet pharmacy web sites, a practice that is illegal.<sup>7</sup>

## Drug Trafficking Organizations

Mexican DTOs and criminal groups are the dominant illicit drug producers, transporters, and wholesale distributors in the HIDTA region. Their influence in the area is unrivaled and presents law enforcement with numerous challenges. Members of Mexican DTOs and criminal groups, which tend to be insular and family-based, easily blend with the region's sizable Hispanic population. Mexican traffickers in the HIDTA region

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7. For a prescription to be valid under federal and state law there must be a bona fide doctor-patient relationship, which requires the physician and patient to meet in person. Completing a questionnaire that is then reviewed by a physician hired by an Internet pharmacy is not considered the basis for a doctor-patient relationship in the United States.

## 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.

generally obtain illicit drugs from Mexican DTOs operating in Mexico, California, and southwestern states. They supply the drugs to distributors throughout the area. Additionally, law enforcement officials report that some members of Mexican DTOs and criminal groups also exploit Native American reservations in the region by befriending and living with female tribal members in order to establish drug distribution networks on tribal lands.

Asian DTOs and criminal groups, predominantly Vietnamese criminal groups, operate throughout the Northwest HIDTA region; they are involved primarily in indoor cannabis cultivation and high-potency marijuana production. These traffickers often attempt to shield themselves from law enforcement detection by employing other criminal groups, such as Indo-Canadian drug transportation organizations, to conduct some high-risk operations on their behalf, particularly cross-border smuggling. Asian DTOs and criminal groups routinely contract with Indo-Canadian transporters to smuggle Canadian marijuana and MDMA into the United States and cocaine and bulk cash into Canada through Washington POEs. According to law enforcement officials, the transporters are prone to violence and are adept at changing their modes of operation to avoid law enforcement detection.

Street gangs distribute a variety of illicit drugs throughout the Northwest HIDTA region—particularly at the retail level. For example, African American street gangs dominate retail drug distribution in parts of the Puget Sound area (see [Figure 1 on page 1](#)), while Hispanic street gangs control such distribution in Spokane. Regardless of which street gang dominates a particular market, the large number of street gang members in the region—as well as their willingness to violently defend their drug distribution areas—renders street gangs a significant threat to the region and a rising concern to law enforcement.

## Mexican Drug Trafficking Organization Dismantled

On November 14, 2008, the U.S. Attorney for the Western District of Washington announced that more than a dozen individuals face federal cocaine trafficking charges following a year-long investigation of a Mexican DTO operating in the Seattle, Washington, and Rexburg, Idaho, areas. Using court-authorized wiretaps, law enforcement officers tracked the activities of the organization and arrested the Seattle area distributor as he received delivery of 15 kilograms of cocaine. Overall, authorities seized 20 kilograms of cocaine, 7.3 kilograms of methamphetamine, numerous cars and boats, and approximately \$940,000. This organization had been smuggling large quantities of cocaine and methamphetamine from Mexico into the HIDTA region.

Source: U.S. Attorney Western District of Washington.

Members of outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMGs), particularly some members of the Hells Angels Motorcycle Club (HAMC) OMG, transport illicit drugs into the region, principally from Canada, and distribute them in various drug markets. For instance, law enforcement officials report that some HAMC members smuggle significant quantities of high-potency Canadian marijuana and MDMA into the region.

## Production

Methamphetamine production in the Northwest HIDTA region has steadily declined over the past several years as a result of sustained law enforcement interdiction efforts, enhanced precursor chemical controls, increased public awareness campaigns, and rising availability of Mexican ice methamphetamine. However, local production persists; some laboratory operators—usually Caucasian independent producers—continue to operate small-capacity methamphetamine laboratories in rural areas, producing ounce quantities of the drug. These producers typically use anhydrous ammonia (a common crop fertilizer) to produce methamphetamine; the chemical is widely available throughout the region, as it is commonly used for legitimate agricultural purposes. National Seizure System (NSS) data reveal that although laboratory seizures in the region have decreased significantly, the number of seizures is still relatively high, especially in Pierce County. (See Table 1.)

Overall, the state of Washington is one of the top-producing cannabis cultivation areas in the nation and is designated by federal counterdrug officials as an “M7” state.<sup>8</sup> Outdoor cannabis eradication in Washington was significant in 2008, with the majority of the cannabis eradicated at outdoor sites located in HIDTA counties. (See Table 2 on page 7.)

8. M7 states are identified by the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) as the seven primary cannabis cultivation and marijuana production states in the nation; in 2007 the M7 states were California, Hawaii, Kentucky, Oregon, Tennessee, Washington, and West Virginia.

**Table 1. Methamphetamine Laboratory Seizures in Northwest HIDTA Counties and the State of Washington, 2005–2008**

County	2005	2006	2007	2008
Benton	6	1	0	0
Clark	3	3	1	0
Cowlitz	1	3	3	0
Franklin	2	0	0	0
King	32	6	5	0
Kitsap	6	1	2	9
Lewis	2	4	0	2
Pierce	82	32	37	11
Skagit	3	2	1	0
Snohomish	27	6	3	0
Spokane	6	4	3	2
Thurston	8	0	1	0
Whatcom	2	3	0	0
Yakima	1	3	1	0
<b>HIDTA Total</b>	<b>181</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>State Total</b>	<b>211</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>24</b>

Source: National Seizure System, run date February 2, 2009.

Outdoor cannabis cultivation in the HIDTA region is largely controlled by Mexican DTOs and criminal groups. In 2008 more than 315,000 cannabis plants were eradicated from outdoor plots in the HIDTA region—the largest number of cannabis plants ever seized by law enforcement from outdoor plots for any year. Increased eradication is largely attributed to STABOs that are managed by the Washington State Patrol; they are used to increase the ability of law enforcement agencies to combat cannabis cultivation in remote areas of the region by deploying personnel in helicopters to these areas. Local officials report that outdoor cannabis cultivation in the Northwest HIDTA region may increase even further in the near term as the result of a cannabis seed that produces faster-growing plants. These seeds are currently being used by Mexican DTOs in California and Oregon.

**Table 2. Cannabis Plants Eradicated From Outdoor Grow Sites, by Northwest HIDTA Counties and the State of Washington 2005–2008**

County	2005	2006	2007	2008
Benton	3,527	4,163	8,966	43,021
Clark	685	253	6,664	8,404
Cowlitz	62	110	0	5,489
Franklin	8,386	15,382	23,905	14,360
King	32	178	549	506
Kitsap	477	203	119	930
Lewis	105	766	2,980	2,589
Pierce	0	136	1,092	801
Skagit	971	243	74	6,993
Snohomish	215	245	18	85
Spokane	457	99	39	127
Thurston	2,173	168	131	883
Whatcom	37	138	32	16,799
Yakima	14,788	46,825	39,945	214,036
<b>HIDTA Total</b>	<b>31,915</b>	<b>68,909</b>	<b>84,514</b>	<b>315,023</b>
<b>State Total</b>	<b>101,882</b>	<b>100,765</b>	<b>241,097</b>	<b>538,918</b>

Source: Northwest High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area, run date January 20, 2009.

Law enforcement officials are concerned that Mexican DTOs that operate grow sites in those states may introduce this seed into the Northwest HIDTA region; these plants have a 90-day grow cycle, as opposed to the normal 5- to 6-month grow cycle.

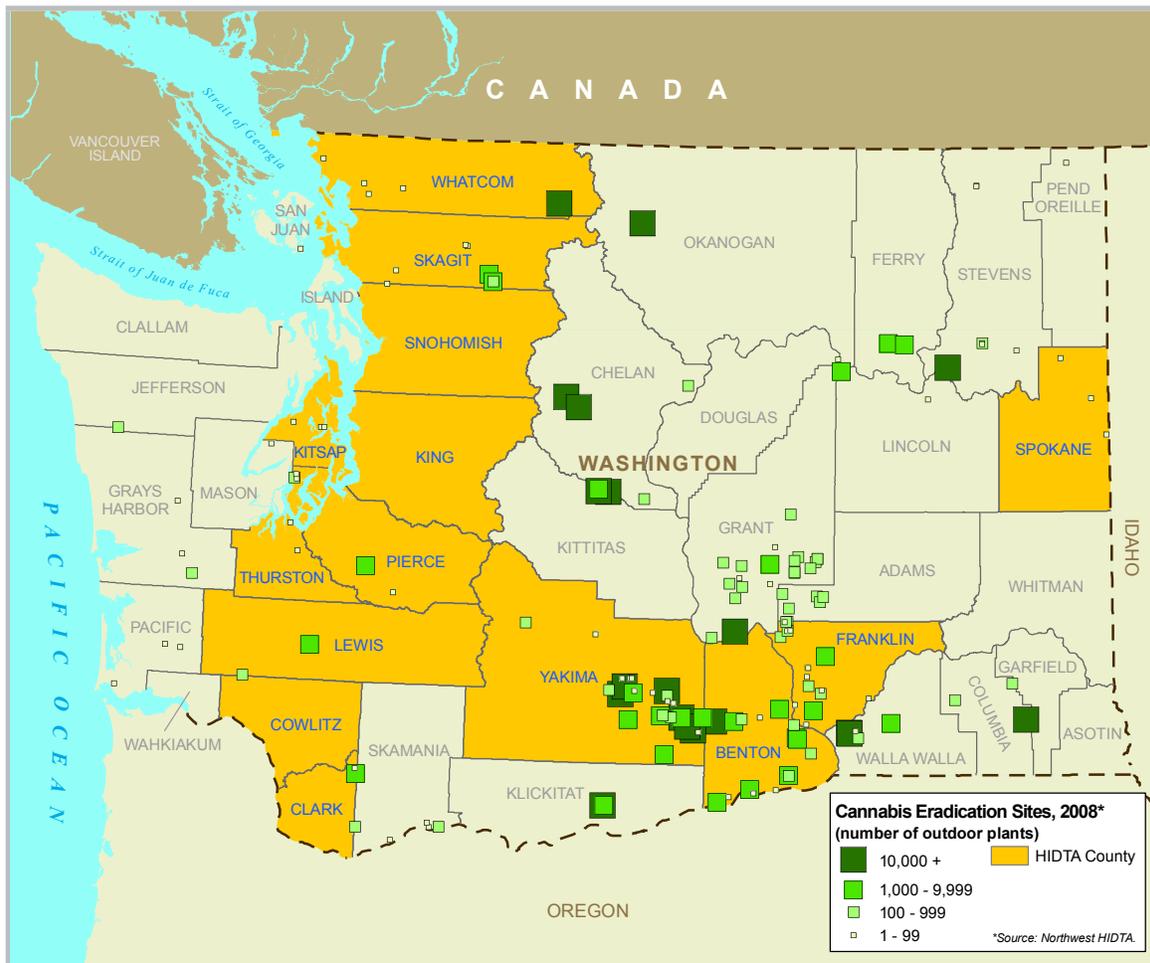
Outdoor cannabis cultivation operations are commonly located on public lands, adversely affecting national parks, forests, and the mountain areas in the region. Law enforcement officials report that outdoor cannabis grow operations in the Yakima Valley and Tri-Cities<sup>9</sup> areas of the region are usually situated in extremely remote locations with limited access. From 2004 through 2008, Yakima County recorded the highest out-

door grow eradication statistics for all counties in the HIDTA region. (See Table 2; see Figure 2 on page 8.) Grow site operators in these remote locations often contaminate and alter watersheds; divert natural water courses; clear all the native vegetation; poach protected wildlife; discard garbage, nonbiodegradable materials, and human waste when deserting sites; and create wildfire hazards. Moreover, the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA) reports that while preparing land for cannabis cultivation, growers commonly clear the forest understory, which allows nonnative plants to supplant native ones, adversely affecting the ecosystem. They also terrace the land—especially in mountainous areas—which often results in rapid erosion. The cost of restoring land damaged by such outdoor cultivation is significant; the National Park Service estimates that for every acre of forest planted with marijuana, 10 acres are damaged, and further, the cost to repair and restore an outdoor cultivation site is approximately \$11,000 per acre.

Indoor cannabis cultivation is prevalent throughout the HIDTA region, particularly in the Puget Sound area. (See Table 3 on page 9.) Caucasian criminal groups and independent producers and Vietnamese DTOs are the primary cultivators of indoor cannabis in the region. Law enforcement reporting indicates that Vietnamese DTOs are increasingly establishing indoor grow operations in the area. Some Vietnamese DTOs have relocated their high-potency indoor cannabis cultivation operations from Canada to the Puget Sound area, particularly in King, Pierce, and Snohomish Counties, resulting in an increase in the availability of high-potency marijuana in local drug markets. In doing so, Vietnamese traffickers seek to capitalize on rising demand for high-potency marijuana in the United States while minimizing their exposure to law enforcement officials at the U.S.–Canada border, including seizure of Canadian marijuana shipments. Additionally, some Vietnamese criminal groups operate garden supply shops in the area to help Vietnamese cannabis cultivators and other

9. The Tri-Cities area comprises Richland, Pasco, and Kennewick.

Figure 2. Outdoor cannabis eradication in Washington, 2008.



growers establish and maintain indoor grow operations. Shop operators typically stock supplies that they acquire from associates in Canada. While the level of indoor cannabis cultivation remains high, the eradication of indoor grows in the HIDTA region decreased from 51,190 cannabis plants in 2007 to 39,081 in 2008.

According to law enforcement officials, some cannabis cultivators are exploiting Washington's medical marijuana law as a pretext for conducting indoor grow operations. Washington's Chapter 69.51A Revised Code of Washington (RCW) was enacted by voters in 1998 as an initiative that allowed doctors to legally recommend the use of marijuana to patients for some

medical conditions.<sup>10</sup> Under state law, patients were permitted to possess a 60-day supply of medical marijuana based on a doctor's written recommendation. However, a 60-day supply was not defined in law or rule. In an attempt to clarify the situation, the Washington State Department of Public Health issued a new rule (Washington Administrative Code (WAC) 246-75-010, effective November 2008) that defines a 60-day supply as 15 plants and 24 ounces of smokable marijuana.

10. The law allows patients with terminal or debilitating illnesses to use marijuana as a medical treatment under their physician's care. Some of the illnesses are chemotherapy-related nausea and vomiting in cancer patients, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) Wasting Syndrome, severe muscle spasms associated with multiple sclerosis and other spasticity disorders, epilepsy, acute or chronic glaucoma, and some forms of intractable pain.

**Table 3. Cannabis Plants Eradicated From Indoor Grow Sites in Northwest HIDTA Counties and the State of Washington, 2005–2008**

County	2005	2006	2007	2008
Benton	165	0	0	57
Clark	1,042	1,421	4,908	959
Cowlitz	58	47	124	0
Franklin	0	0	0	0
King	17,103	24,077	26,359	23,222
Kitsap	949	1,545	379	983
Lewis	941	312	1,941	800
Pierce	2,005	2,077	7,836	2,738
Skagit	988	484	481	561
Snohomish	1,562	1,996	5,185	5,682
Spokane	2,358	2,171	1,809	1,999
Thurston	1,039	441	858	1,394
Whatcom	338	2,305	1,026	405
Yakima	1,418	1,763	284	281
<b>HIDTA Total</b>	<b>29,966</b>	<b>38,639</b>	<b>51,190</b>	<b>39,081</b>
<b>State Total</b>	<b>34,276</b>	<b>43,641</b>	<b>55,514</b>	<b>41,381</b>

Source: Northwest High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area, run date January 20, 2009.

## Transportation

The Northwest HIDTA region's proximity to illicit drug source areas and a multifaceted transportation infrastructure enable traffickers to transport significant quantities of illicit drugs into the area. Major highways in the region, such as I-5, provide traffickers with direct access to drug sources in California, Mexico, and Canada. Traffickers also exploit Washington's 430-mile border with Canada to smuggle drugs. Fifteen POEs are located along the U.S.–Canada border, through which traffickers transport illicit drugs by vehicle. A significant portion of the border is a vast, dense forest that provides excellent cover for trafficking operations. Several waterways are also located at the border, through which traffickers smuggle illicit drugs into the region. In crossing

forestlands, traffickers often use all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), snowmobiles, and couriers with backpacks; they generally use small boats and kayaks to negotiate waterways.

Mexican DTOs and criminal groups are the dominant transporters of powder cocaine and Mexican marijuana, black tar heroin, and ice methamphetamine to and through the HIDTA region. These groups obtain illicit drugs from other Mexican DTOs and often coordinate receipt of drug shipments through family members or associates in Mexico, California, or other Southwest Border states. Mexican traffickers generally transport illicit drugs to the region in private and commercial vehicles, traveling on I-5. Their vehicles are typically equipped with false compartments that range, in terms of sophistication, from false gas tanks and hollowed-out tire wells to electronically coded access hatches.

Vietnamese DTOs and criminal groups transport high-potency Canadian marijuana and MDMA to the region, particularly to the Puget Sound area. They often employ Indo-Canadian criminal groups to transport the drugs across the U.S.–Canada border through land POEs, especially the Blaine POE. (See Figure 1 on page 1.) These traffickers capitalize on the high volume of traffic at POEs, which limits close inspection of vehicles and cargo. (See Table 4 on page 10.) Additionally, some Canada-based traffickers smuggle precursor chemicals used in methamphetamine production, such as pseudoephedrine and ephedrine, from Canada into Washington for use at laboratories in the region and elsewhere. However, there is no large-scale smuggling of precursor chemicals into the HIDTA region, according to the Northwest HIDTA.

Some DTOs and criminal groups operating in the HIDTA region also use maritime and air cargo to move illicit drugs to the region, according to law enforcement reporting. However, the extent to which such modalities are used by

**Table 4. Inbound Crossings Through Washington Land POEs, 2007**

POE	Private Vehicles	Trucks	Loaded Containers	Pedestrians	Buses	Trains
Anacortes	27,699	926	0	6,657	23	*
Blaine	2,763,389	438,001	333,623	**	14,405	1,251
Boundary	72,410	14	6,601	62	12	217
Danville	59,973	164	0	304	37	*
Ferry	10,485	59	0	48	11	*
Friday Harbor	2,439	*	0	5,195	*	*
Frontier	39,302	21,089	10,274	42	103	*
Laurier	62,873	8,550	11,971	379	44	226
Lynden	589,627	58,957	24,678	2,132	10	*
Metaline Falls	26,501	10,050	2,107	3	50	*
Oroville	240,645	44,618	35,287	1,093	359	*
Nighthawk	8,074	10	0	22	*	*
Point Roberts	710,725	18,344	0	14,762	986	*
Port Angeles	61,677	2,187	0	*	64	*
Sumas	634,764	135,678	129,387	33,341	1,974	305
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,310,583</b>	<b>738,647</b>	<b>553,928</b>	<b>64,040</b>	<b>18,078</b>	<b>1,999</b>

Source: U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, Research and Innovative Technology Administration, run date February 13, 2009.

\*POE not listed for this category.

traffickers is relatively unknown because of the inherent difficulty that law enforcement officials experience in inspecting the large volume of maritime and air cargo that passes through seaports and airports in Washington. For instance, the Port of Seattle alone handled approximately 14,584,816 metric tons (MT) of containerized cargo during 2008, while roughly 319,013 MT of air cargo passed through the Seattle International Airport; 31,296,628 passengers also passed through the airport in 2008.

## Distribution

Mexican DTOs and criminal groups dominate wholesale drug distribution in the Northwest HIDTA region. They supply wholesale quantities of powder cocaine, commercial-grade Mexican marijuana, Mexican black tar heroin, and Mexican

ice methamphetamine to various distributors, including other Mexican criminal groups, independent dealers, street gangs, and OMGs for midlevel and retail-level distribution. These traffickers often use front businesses, restaurants, trucking companies, and auto repair services as wholesale distribution points. For example, in Operation Pink Tiger, a recent Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force (OCDETF) investigation, law enforcement authorities identified a restaurant in Burien, Washington, that was used by Mexican traffickers to distribute kilogram quantities of cocaine and heroin sold in the HIDTA region.

Mexican DTOs often employ advanced communication technology and techniques to coordinate their illicit drug trafficking activities in the Northwest HIDTA region. Law enforcement reporting indicates that several Mexican DTOs use Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), satellite

technology (broadband satellite instant messaging), encrypted messaging, cell phone technology, two-way radios, scanner devices, and text messaging to communicate with DTO members. In some cases they use high-frequency radios with encryption and rolling codes to communicate during operations.

Asian traffickers, primarily Vietnamese DTOs and criminal groups, are the primary wholesale distributors of Canadian marijuana and MDMA in the region. These traffickers supply these drugs to other local Asian criminal groups, street gangs, and OMGs for retail distribution, primarily within the Puget Sound area. Canada-based Vietnamese DTOs and criminal groups also use the region as a key transshipment center for large quantities of Canadian marijuana and MDMA destined for drug markets throughout the country. Moreover, Asian DTOs are expanding their working relationships with other DTOs, criminal groups, and gangs in order to increase their wholesale- and retail-level distribution of high-potency marijuana and MDMA. Some Asian DTOs also trade marijuana and MDMA for cocaine supplied by Mexican DTOs and smuggle the drug into Canada. Law enforcement reporting indicates that some Asian DTOs use countersurveillance measures against law enforcement officers who work in the same areas as the DTOs.

Street gangs dominate retail-level drug distribution throughout the Northwest HIDTA region. African American gangs in Seattle such as Rolling 60's and Rolling 90's, Hispanic street gangs such as Sureños 13 gang sets,<sup>11</sup> and Asian street gangs such as Young Seattle Boyz control much of the retail-level drug distribution that takes place in the city. In the Yakima area, Hispanic street gangs, including Baby Gangster Sureños and East Side Sureños, actively distribute retail quantities of most illicit drugs. In Spokane,

African American street gangs such as Insane Gangster Crips, Rolling 60's, Elm Street Piru, and Southside Avenue Piru, as well as Sureños and Norteños gang sets, engage in retail drug distribution. Other criminal groups and OMGs also engage in retail-level distribution in the region, but to a lesser extent.

Retail-level distributors use cell phones to facilitate drug distribution in the HIDTA region. Distributors also use pagers to negotiate transactions and prearrange meetings with customers. Traffickers prefer to conduct business conversations on phones with point-to-point capabilities, believing that these communications are difficult for law enforcement to intercept. Distributors also use text messaging to communicate and arrange meetings. They typically use a cell phone for a limited time before switching to a new phone with a new number to further reduce the possibility of having calls monitored.

## Drug-Related Crime

A large percentage of the property and violent crime that occurs within the region is associated with the trafficking and abuse of drugs, particularly methamphetamine. According to data from the NDTs 2009, 33 of 46 state and local law enforcement respondents report that methamphetamine is the drug that most contributes to violent crime in their areas, and 42 respondents report the same for property crime. Methamphetamine abusers in the region commit property crimes, such as mail theft, forgery, and identity theft, to acquire funds to purchase the drug, a situation that may worsen as the overall economic situation in the HIDTA region continues to decline. Methamphetamine distributors also commit such crimes to fund their operations. They are often armed and use weapons to collect drug debts. Methamphetamine abusers have also been implicated in incidents of domestic violence and child neglect. For example, law enforcement officials report that children of

11. Sureños gang sets active in the Seattle area include Barrio Loco Humilde, Brown Pride Locos, Brown Pride Mexicans, Brown Pride Sureños, Callejones Escondidos, El Monte Flores, Florencia 13, Gangster Sureños Cliqua, Insieme Sureños Lokotes, La Posada Sureños, Little Valley Lokotes, Mara Salvatrucha, Pasadena Locos Salvatrucha, South Los, and South Park Locos.

methamphetamine abusers often live in unsanitary conditions and are sometimes exposed to the toxic chemicals used in methamphetamine production, resulting in long-term health problems.

## Abuse

Drug-related treatment admissions to publicly funded facilities in the region are at relatively high levels. According to DASA data, the number of methamphetamine-related treatment admissions increased from 5,913 admissions in 2004 to 9,005 admissions in 2006, before decreasing to 8,231 admissions in 2007, the latest year for which such data are available. (See Table 5; see Table 6 on page 13.) Law enforcement officials reported a decline in methamphetamine availability in 2007, which may have resulted in fewer methamphetamine treatment admissions for that year. Methamphetamine availability in the region has since returned to higher levels, which may lead to increased abuse of the drug and increased admissions to treatment facilities in the HIDTA region. In King County, where nearly one-third of the state's population resides, methamphetamine abusers over 40 years of age are the fastest-growing abuser population seeking treatment at publicly funded treatment facilities, according to DASA.

The number of marijuana-related treatment admissions to publicly funded facilities has also increased in the HIDTA region. (See Table 5.) In 2004, 6,705 marijuana-related treatment admissions were reported by DASA; such treatment admissions increased to 7,535 in 2007. According to public health officials, increasing abuse of high-potency marijuana is a probable cause of the increase in marijuana-related treatment admissions. While marijuana abuse crosses all age groups in King County, those 26 years and older are increasingly seeking treatment at public treatment facilities.

**Table 5. Drug-Related Treatment Admissions to Publicly Funded Facilities, Northwest HIDTA Region, State Fiscal Year 2004–2007\***

Drug	2004	2005	2006	2007
Methamphetamine	5,913	7,364	9,005	8,231
Marijuana	6,705	6,973	4,028	7,535
Cocaine	2,998	3,356	4,028	4,336
Heroin	2,492	3,554	3,302	2,973

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

\*State fiscal year (SFY) is from July 1 to June 30.

Cocaine-related treatment admissions in the HIDTA region similarly increased from 2,998 in 2004 to 4,336 in 2007. According to law enforcement officials, cocaine abuse in the region may have increased as some methamphetamine abusers, faced with diminished supplies of the drug in 2007 and early 2008, substituted cocaine for methamphetamine. In King County, individuals 40 years of age and older are the fastest-growing abuser population seeking treatment for cocaine abuse at publicly funded treatment facilities, according to DASA.

The number of heroin-related treatment admissions to publicly funded facilities in the HIDTA region decreased in 2007 (2,973) from 2006 (3,302), after peaking in 2005 (3,554). (See Table 5.) However, adult treatment admissions to publicly funded facilities for prescription opioid<sup>12</sup> abuse are increasing statewide, according to DASA, which may indicate that some abusers are substituting prescription opioids for heroin. Despite the decline in heroin-related treatment admissions, heroin abuse is still a major health concern in larger metropolitan areas such as King County. DASA reports that individuals under 30 years of age and individuals 50 and older are the fastest-growing heroin abuser populations seeking treatment in King County.

12. Prescription opioids include nonheroin opioids and synthetics, oxycodone, hydrocodone, and prescribed opioid substitutes.

**Table 6. Drug-Related Treatment Admissions to Publicly Funded Facilities in Northwest HIDTA Counties, State Fiscal Year 2007\***

HIDTA County	Methamphetamine	Marijuana	Cocaine	Heroin
Benton	348	255	68	29
Clark	880	510	132	192
Cowlitz	378	186	29	117
Franklin	92	135	42	3
King	1,089	1,532	1,785	1,177
Kitsap	418	325	75	41
Lewis	188	160	5	16
Pierce	1,243	1,020	759	368
Skagit	290	232	170	137
Snohomish	770	631	359	261
Spokane	897	933	409	229
Thurston	483	438	76	86
Whatcom	299	313	178	156
Yakima	856	865	249	161
<b>Total</b>	<b>8,231</b>	<b>7,535</b>	<b>4,336</b>	<b>2,973</b>

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

\*SFY is from July 1 to June 30.

Other drugs are abused throughout the region. Abusers and distributors acquire CPDs through a variety of means, including Internet purchases, doctor-shopping, drug theft, and prescription fraud. Washington has a prescription drug monitoring program (RCW 70.225) to identify and curtail CPD diversion, but the Washington State Department of Health has not yet finalized rules and regulations for data collection that may help to reduce instances of illegal diversion. According to DASA, individuals 30 years of age and younger are the fastest-growing abuser population seeking treatment for CPD abuse in King County. Additionally, other dangerous drugs (ODDs) such as MDMA, LSD, psilocybin mushrooms, ketamine, and GHB (gamma-hydroxybutyrate) are distributed and abused within the region.

## Illicit Finance

Traffickers launder illicit drug proceeds generated in the HIDTA region using various methods. Mexican DTOs and criminal groups generally transport cash in bulk to southwestern states, where the funds are typically aggregated and eventually smuggled to Mexico. Once in Mexico, bulk cash is often deposited into a Mexican bank or a *casa de cambio* (exchange house) and subsequently repatriated to the United States. Asian DTOs and criminal groups also use bulk cash smuggling to move their illicit proceeds out of the region; they typically transport illicit proceeds to Canada in private vehicles through POEs along the U.S.–Canada border.

Traffickers operating in the HIDTA region also structure<sup>13</sup> drug proceeds through electronic wire transfer services and domestic banks,<sup>14</sup> commingle drug proceeds with funds from cash-intensive businesses, use casinos to mask the nature of illicit proceeds, and use their funds to purchase real estate and luxury items such as automobiles and jewelry. For example, Spokane law enforcement officials report that members of Mexican criminal groups frequently use front businesses such as restaurants, cleaning services, and landscaping firms to launder drug proceeds.

## Outlook

The trafficking and abuse of ice methamphetamine will remain the primary drug threats to the Northwest HIDTA region. Demand for the drug is high, and Mexican DTOs are positioned to meet this demand after resolving precursor chemical supply problems in 2007 and early 2008. Further, high levels of ice methamphetamine abuse along with a declining economic situation in the region will likely contribute to an increase in drug-related crime. Strict legislation placed on retail pseudoephedrine sales will continue to prompt local methamphetamine producers to increase smurfing activities or search for alternative means of obtaining sufficient precursor chemicals.

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13. A person structures a transaction if that person, acting alone, or in conjunction with or on behalf of other persons, conducts or attempts to conduct one or more transactions in currency, in any amount, at one or more financial institutions, on one or more days, in any manner, for the purpose of evading the reporting requirements under Title 31. "In any manner" includes but is not limited to the breaking down of a single sum of currency exceeding \$10,000 into smaller sums, including sums at or below \$10,000. The transaction or transactions need not exceed the \$10,000 reporting threshold at any single financial institution on any single day in order to constitute structuring within the meaning of this definition.

14. Options available to traffickers include the use of structured transmittals through money services businesses (MSBs), structured bank deposits, and/or structured wire transfers through banks to launder money.

Mexican DTOs will increase their cultivation of cannabis at outdoor locations in the HIDTA region to meet the high demand for the drug in the HIDTA region and in neighboring areas. Remote and fertile public lands in the region will provide Mexican DTOs with the opportunity to cultivate cannabis. Currently, there are no indications that Mexican DTOs in the HIDTA region are using a cannabis seed that yields faster-growing plants, enabling growers to plant and harvest crops in a shorter 90-day cycle, as opposed to the normal 5- to 6-month cycle. However, this type of cannabis has been discovered in California and Oregon and will likely be used by Mexican DTOs in the Northwest HIDTA region in the near term.

The Northwest HIDTA region will continue to serve as a transshipment area for cocaine smuggled into Canada. Asian DTOs and criminal groups routinely contract with Indo-Canadian transporters to smuggle Canadian marijuana and MDMA into the United States and cocaine into Canada through Washington POEs. Asian traffickers typically purchase cocaine in the United States with profits generated from the sale of Canadian marijuana and MDMA; they sometimes trade these drugs for cocaine.

The availability and abuse of CPDs in the HIDTA region will most likely increase over the next year, driven by the growing popularity of these drugs among teenagers and young adults and the relative ease with which the drugs can be obtained through various means, including Internet pharmacies. Washington has a prescription drug monitoring program (RCW 70.225) to identify and curtail CPD diversion. The Washington State Department of Health is currently developing rules and regulations for data collection. Once the program is operational, the number of incidents of prescription forgery, indiscriminate prescribing, and doctor-shopping will likely decline in the Northwest HIDTA region.

## Sources

### Local, State, and Regional

Auburn Police Department  
 Bellevue Police Department  
     Eastside Narcotics Task Force  
 Bellingham Police Department  
 Benton County Sheriff's Department  
 Blaine Police Department  
 Bonney Lake Police Department  
 Brier Police Department  
 Centralia Police Department  
 Cheney Police Department  
 Clark County Sheriff's Office  
 Des Moines Police Department  
 Edmonds Police Department  
     South Snohomish County Narcotics Task Force  
 Everett Police Department  
     Snohomish Regional Drug Task Force  
 Federal Way Police Department  
 Ferndale Police Department  
 Fife Police Department  
 Kennewick Police Department  
 Kent Police Department  
 King County Medical Examiner's Office  
 King County Sheriff's Office  
 Kitsap County Sheriff's Office  
     West Sound Narcotics Enforcement Team  
 Lacey Police Department  
     Thurston County Narcotics Task Force  
 Milton Police Department  
 Mountlake Terrace Police Department  
 Mukilteo Police Department  
 Olympia Police Department  
     Thurston County Narcotics Task Force  
 Pierce County Sheriff's Office  
 Prosser Police Department  
 Renton Police Department  
 Richland Police Department  
 Seattle Police Department  
 Selah Police Department  
 Snohomish County Sheriff's Department  
     Snohomish Regional Task Force  
 Snoqualmie Police Department  
 Spokane County Sheriff's Office  
 Spokane Police Department  
 Sultan Police Department  
 Sumner Police Department

Sunnyside Police Department  
 Tacoma Police Department  
 Thurston County Sheriff's Office  
 Toppenish Police Department  
 Tukwila Police Department  
 University of Washington  
     Alcohol and Drug Abuse Institute  
 Vancouver 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  
 West Richland Police Department  
 Yakima Police Department

### Federal

Executive Office of the President  
     Office of National Drug Control Policy  
         High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area  
         Northwest  
 U.S. Department of Agriculture  
     Forest Service  
 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
     Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration  
         Office of Applied Studies  
 U.S. Department of Homeland Security  
     U.S. Coast Guard  
     U.S. Customs and Border Protection  
     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 Seizure System  
         Federal-Wide Drug Seizure System  
         Seattle Field Division  
         System to Retrieve Information From Drug Evidence  
     Executive Office for U.S. Attorneys  
         U.S. Attorneys Offices  
         Western District of Washington  
 U.S. Department of the Interior  
     National Park Service

U.S. Department of the Treasury  
Financial Crimes Enforcement Network  
U.S. Department of Transportation  
Bureau of Transportation Statistics  
Research and Innovative Technology Administration

**Other**

National Parks Conservation Association  
Pacific Integrated Border Intelligence Team

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

**National Drug Intelligence Center**

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