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## **Rocky Mountain**

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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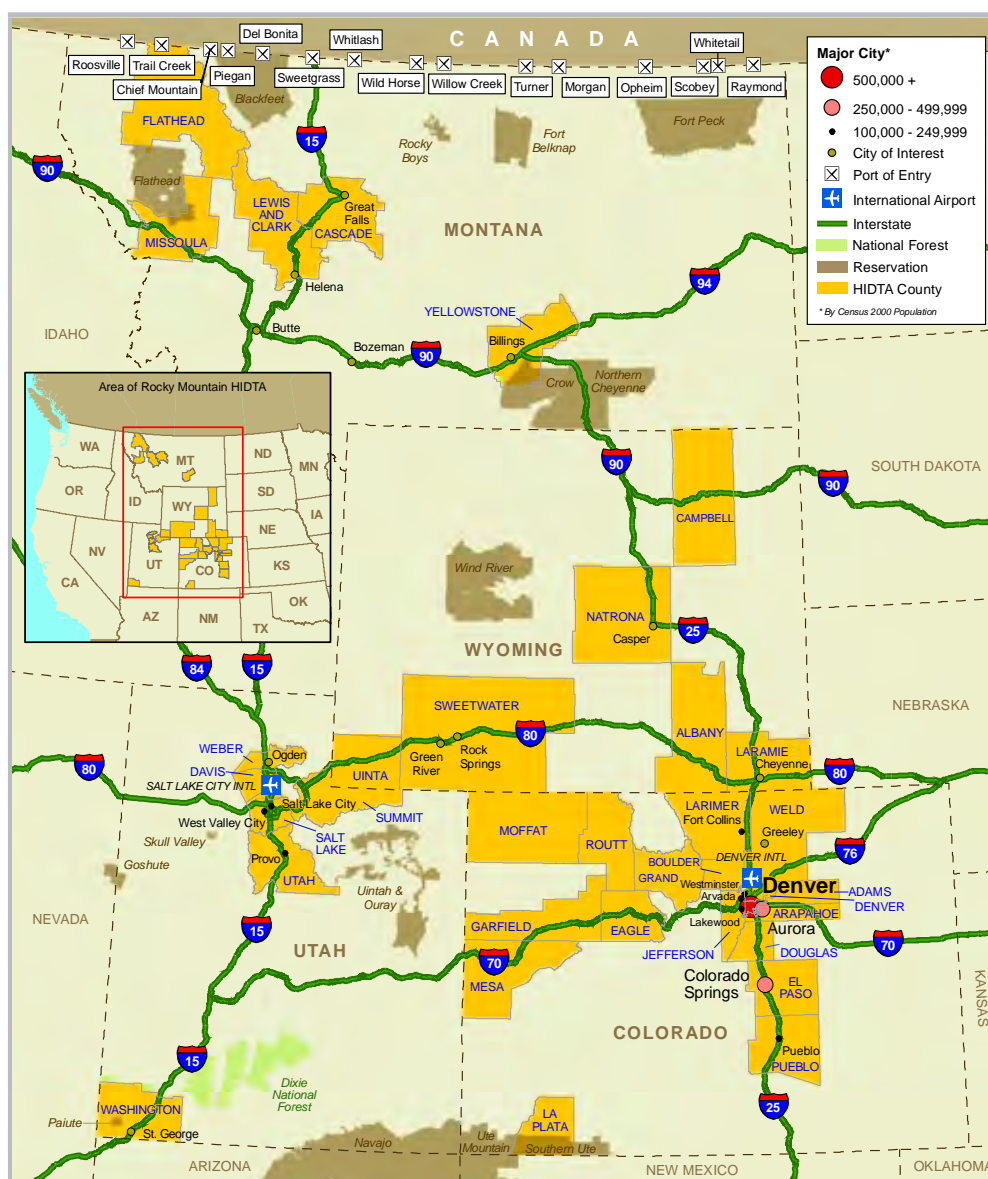
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# Preface

This assessment provides a strategic overview of the illicit drug situation in the Rocky Mountain 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 Rocky Mountain HIDTA.

**Figure 1. Rocky Mountain High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area**



## Strategic Drug Threat Developments

- Local methamphetamine production may be increasing in southern Colorado in response to a shortage of Mexican ice methamphetamine. Local producers and criminal groups are circumventing pseudoephedrine sales restrictions by making multiple small-quantity purchases of products that contain pseudoephedrine for use in production operations.
- Controlled prescription drug (CPD) abuse is a significant and rapidly growing threat in the Rocky Mountain HIDTA region. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services indicates that Utah leads the nation in nonmedical painkiller abuse. Additionally, treatment providers in Utah report that CPD overdoses accounted for the deaths of over 300 individuals in the state last year.
- The high demand for marijuana has prompted Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) to continue to transport large quantities of marijuana from Mexico and to expand their cannabis cultivation operations in the HIDTA region. Mexican criminal groups operate large outdoor cannabis plots, often composed of several thousand plants, particularly on public lands. As such, Mexican traffickers are able to respond to market demands and achieve higher profit margins.

## HIDTA Overview

The Rocky Mountain HIDTA encompasses 34 designated counties in Colorado, Montana, Utah, and Wyoming. The region contains large metropolitan areas as well as expansive, sparsely populated areas, including public and tribal

lands. (See Figure 1 on page 1.) The HIDTA region is located between major drug source areas in Mexico and Canada and is linked by interstate highways to major domestic drug markets across the United States. Denver and Colorado Springs, Colorado, and Salt Lake City, Utah, are the three largest metropolitan areas and serve as distribution centers for other regional drug markets as well as transshipment points for drugs supplied to markets in the Midwest and the eastern United States.

Rural areas of the Rocky Mountain HIDTA region, including 27 national forests and national grasslands, provide traffickers with an opportunity to avoid detection as they engage in illicit activities, such as drug smuggling, cannabis cultivation and, to a lesser extent, powder methamphetamine production. Additionally, drug smuggling from Canada through remote areas in the northern area of the HIDTA region is a particular concern for law enforcement agencies. The 585-mile U.S.–Canada border in Montana has 15 official ports of entry (POEs)<sup>1</sup> as well as hundreds of easily accessible, unofficial crossings that are often used by traffickers to transport drugs from Canada into the region using private and commercial vehicles, all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), snowmobiles, private aircraft, and couriers who transport the drugs on foot.

## Drug Threat Overview

The Rocky Mountain HIDTA region is a significant distribution and transshipment center for illicit drugs supplied by Mexican DTOs. They exploit the region's centralized location, proximity to Mexican sources of supply, and extensive transportation infrastructure to distribute wholesale quantities of ice methamphetamine, cocaine, marijuana, and heroin. Mexican DTOs

1. The ports of entry (POEs) are based on those listed by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), Office of Border Patrol (OBP).



and criminal groups use key distribution centers in Colorado, including Denver and Colorado Springs, as well as in Salt Lake City, to supply illicit drugs to smaller cities throughout the region, such as Fort Collins, Pueblo, and Greeley, Colorado; Billings, Montana; and Cheyenne, Wyoming, and to transship drugs to markets in the Midwest and eastern United States. Mexican DTOs and criminal groups continue to refine their operations as well as expand into the region's more remote areas to further their trafficking and distribution capabilities.

Widespread ice methamphetamine distribution and abuse pose the greatest overall drug threat to the Rocky Mountain HIDTA region, straining law enforcement, public health, and social services resources, particularly in rural areas. Of the 95 state and local law enforcement agencies in the region that responded to the National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC) National Drug Threat Survey (NDTS)<sup>2</sup> 2009, 75 identify methamphetamine as the greatest drug threat to their jurisdictions. These respondents also indicate that methamphetamine is the drug that contributes most to violent crime and property crime in their jurisdictions. (See Table 1.) Most of the ice methamphetamine and, to a lesser extent, powder methamphetamine available in the area is produced by Mexican DTOs in Mexico and California.

Methamphetamine is widely available throughout the region; however, officials at the Southern Colorado HIDTA Drug Task Force report that the availability of Mexican methamphetamine in their areas decreased during 2008, particularly at the midlevel and retail level. Officials attribute this

decline to Mexican Government-imposed import restrictions on ephedrine and pseudoephedrine and several large-scale pseudoephedrine seizures in Mexico that contributed to decreased Mexican methamphetamine production in 2007 and early 2008. According to law enforcement officials, decreasing availability of ice methamphetamine in the region has resulted in lower purity levels; midlevel and retail-level distributors are increasingly cutting the drug to stretch supplies and maintain profit levels. In southern Colorado the price of Mexican methamphetamine rose from a range of \$5,000 to \$6,000 per pound in 2006 to \$14,000 to \$16,000 per pound in 2007 and to \$19,000 per pound in 2008. Law enforcement officials in southern Colorado seized 14 methamphetamine laboratories in 2008, compared with 11 in 2007, a small increase that may be indicative of a rise in local production as producers attempt to offset the decreased availability of Mexican methamphetamine.

Cocaine is widely available and abused in the Rocky Mountain region. Mexican DTOs transport wholesale quantities of powder cocaine to the region from Mexico, California, and New Mexico. Cocaine availability decreased in Cheyenne, Salt Lake City, and Denver during the first half of 2008, remaining below 2006 and 2007

**Table 1. Law Enforcement Responses to the National Drug Threat Survey 2009 Pertaining to Methamphetamine, Rocky Mountain HIDTA Region**

	Greatest Drug Threat	Contributes Most to Violent Crime	Contributes Most to Property Crime	Total Respondents by State
Colorado	29	28	34	36
Montana	10	14	13	14
Utah	23	27	24	31
Wyoming	13	12	12	14

Source: National Drug Threat Survey.

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.

levels through mid-2008. Law enforcement officials attribute these shortages, in part, to intercartel violence in Mexico and in the Southwest Border area, large cocaine seizures, and effective counterdrug operations. Mexican DTOs regularly supply African American and Hispanic retail-level distributors with powder cocaine, most of which is converted to crack and distributed in many of the region's metropolitan areas.

Mexican marijuana is the most widely available and abused illicit drug in the HIDTA region. Mexican DTOs typically transport commercial-grade marijuana to the region from California and the Southwest Border area, mostly by private or rental vehicle. They also transport marijuana into the region from Washington (particularly the tri-cities area of Kennewick, Pasco, and Richland). The demand for high-potency marijuana, along with distribution and abuse of the drug, is increasing in many areas of the region, such as Colorado Springs and Pueblo, and Salt Lake City, St. George, and Ogden, Utah, according to law enforcement reporting. Asian (primarily Vietnamese) traffickers transport significant quantities of high-potency marijuana to the region from Canada. Additionally, some Canada-based Asian DTOs are relocating high-potency, hydroponic indoor grow operations to the region from Canada to avoid law enforcement interdiction operations along the U.S.–Canada border and to reduce transportation costs.

Heroin (primarily Mexican black tar and brown powder) distribution and abuse levels are increasing in many areas of the Rocky Mountain HIDTA region, particularly in Salt Lake City and Denver. HIDTA officials report increased heroin distribution in secondary market areas of the region, primarily Aurora, Fort Collins, Greeley, and Pueblo, Colorado; Ogden, Orem/Provo, and St. George, Utah; Evanston, Green River, and Rocky Springs, Wyoming; and Great Falls, Montana. According to the Colorado Front Range Task Force, Mexican heroin distribution cells are

expanding in size, efficiency, and sophistication, resulting in increased heroin availability, lower prices, and higher purity levels. Law enforcement officials have noted that many younger heroin users in Utah and Wyoming began abusing prescription narcotics such as OxyContin and ultimately switched to heroin because it is cheaper and easier to obtain.

A variety of other illicit drugs, primarily CPDs, pose a significant threat to various parts of the region. CPDs such as OxyContin, Percocet, and Percodan (oxycodone); Valium (diazepam); and Lortab (hydrocodone) are a substantial concern for law enforcement officials and treatment providers in Utah; the Utah Division of Substance Abuse and Mental Health reports that the state leads the nation in nonmedical painkiller abuse. CPDs, particularly controlled prescription opioids, are commonly abused in Billings, Great Falls, Kalispell, Helena, and Missoula, Montana, and in Cheyenne, Colorado Springs, and Salt Lake City.

The availability and abuse of MDMA (3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine, commonly known as ecstasy) vary within the region; Wyoming and Montana law enforcement officials report low levels of MDMA availability and abuse, while officials in Denver and Salt Lake City report increased distribution and abuse. In the Denver metropolitan area, Asian criminal groups, Asian gangs, and independent Caucasian distributors are the primary suppliers of MDMA. The Metro Gang Task Force in Denver continues to seize large amounts of MDMA (seizures of 10,000 dosage units are not uncommon) from sources in California, particularly Los Angeles, Oakland, and San Francisco. Increasing MDMA abuse is also contributing to a revival of rave-type activities in Denver and Salt Lake City. The Denver Police Department Crime Laboratory reports that MDMA drug exhibits increased approximately 38 percent from 2007 to 2008.

Other dangerous drugs (ODDs), primarily LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide), BZP (N-benzylpiperazine),<sup>3</sup> ketamine; steroids, and GHB (gamma-hydroxybutyrate), are available and abused to a limited extent in various metropolitan areas of the HIDTA region, including Boulder, Colorado, and Salt Lake City and Orem/Provo. Officials in the Rocky Mountain HIDTA region are reporting increased instances of BZP seizures. In 2008 the Denver Police Department Crime Laboratory, Aurora Police Department Crime Laboratory, and Colorado Bureau of Investigation reported a total of 37 BZP sample exhibits. In January 2009 alone, these agencies analyzed a total of 10 BZP exhibits, indicating a possible increase in the recreational use of the drug in the region; however, the full extent of BZP availability and abuse in the region is unknown at this time.

## Drug Trafficking Organizations

Mexican DTOs and criminal groups are the greatest organizational threat in the Rocky Mountain HIDTA region. They are well organized, extensively networked, and deeply entrenched in many communities throughout the region, which they use as a base of operation for regional and national-level drug trafficking and money laundering activities. Mexican DTOs and criminal groups exploit the Rocky Mountain HIDTA region's centralized location and highly developed transportation infrastructure to supply wholesale quantities of ice methamphetamine, cocaine,

marijuana, and heroin to the region from sources of supply in Mexico and distribution cells along the Southwest Border. These highly organized and compartmentalized drug trafficking groups often have connections to Mexican sources of supply in Chihuahua, Durango, Guerrero, Juárez, Michoacán, Nayarit, Sinaloa, and Sonora, Mexico. They often use familial connections within the HIDTA region's large Mexican population to facilitate and conceal their illicit operations. Mexican DTOs operating in the Rocky Mountain HIDTA region maintain alliances with various criminal groups, prison gangs, street gangs, and outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMGs) to capitalize on the organizational networks that these gangs have established in the region by using them to transport, store, package, and distribute illicit drugs and to assist in money laundering activities.

Asian DTOs and criminal groups (typically Vietnamese) are the primary transporters and distributors of Canadian high-potency marijuana and MDMA in the region. Canada-based Asian criminal groups smuggle high-potency marijuana and MDMA into the region across the U.S.–Canada border through Washington and Montana. Asian DTOs are also reducing the costs and risks associated with marijuana smuggling by increasing the number of indoor cannabis grow sites that they operate within the HIDTA region. Asian traffickers coordinate the smuggling of Canadian marijuana and MDMA into the United States and the smuggling of cocaine and bulk cash into Canada, using fixed-wing aircraft, float planes, helicopters, and commercial and private vehicles. Officials also report that Asian traffickers hire local individuals as “mules” to cross the Montana–Canada border between POEs while carrying 50- to 100-pound quantities of marijuana, typically in hockey equipment bags. These loads are often transported in private vehicles, all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), and snowmobiles as well as on foot.

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3. BZP is a common name for the synthetic stimulant N-benzylpiperazine. BZP tablets, especially those that also contain the hallucinogen TFMPP (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 in which the use of club drugs, particularly MDMA, is well established. The risks associated with BZP abuse are similar to those associated with amphetamine abuse.

Street gangs (primarily Hispanic and African American), OMGs, Caucasian criminal groups, and local independent dealers are actively engaged in midlevel and retail-level drug distribution throughout the region. Street gangs are a significant concern to law enforcement officials because they often resort to violence when establishing and maintaining control of drug distribution territories. Hispanic street gangs, primarily affiliates of Sureños and Norteños, are midlevel and retail distributors of ice methamphetamine, powder cocaine, marijuana, black tar heroin and, to a lesser extent, crack cocaine throughout the area. Hispanic gangs are responsible for most of the assaults, home invasion robberies, and homicides that take place in major metropolitan areas of the region, such as Denver, Colorado Springs, and Salt Lake City. African American street gangs, most notably affiliates of Bloods and Crips, are the primary converters and retail distributors of crack cocaine and PCP (phencyclidine). They often convert crack cocaine locally and occasionally transport small quantities into the region after obtaining it from gang contacts in southern California. OMGs, particularly Hells Angels Motorcycle Club (HAMC), Outlaws, Bandidos, and Sons of Silence, distribute ice methamphetamine and high-potency marijuana in some areas of the region. These OMGs obtain methamphetamine from Mexican traffickers and also transport the drug from California and southwestern states. Members of HAMC smuggle significant quantities of high-potency marijuana from Canada into the United States, primarily through and between POEs in British Columbia but increasingly through POEs in Alberta and Saskatchewan, which allows them to transport it directly into the HIDTA region. Caucasian criminal groups and local independent dealers also distribute MDMA and high-potency marijuana, some of which is produced from cannabis cultivated in local indoor grow operations.

### 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.

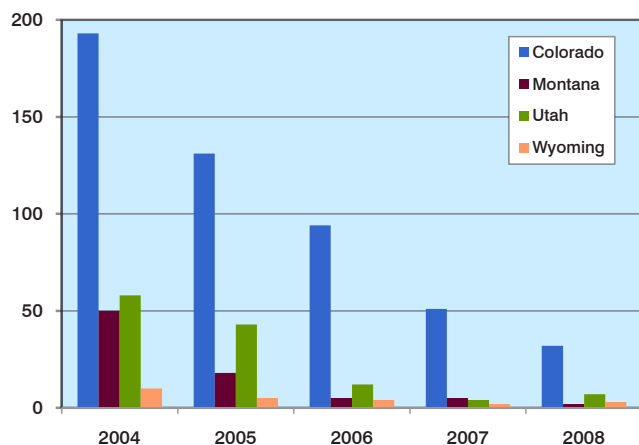
**Gangs** are defined by the National Alliance of Gang Investigators' Associations as groups or associations of three or more persons with a common identifying sign, symbol, or name, the members of which individually or collectively engage in criminal activity that creates an atmosphere of fear and intimidation.

## Production

Illicit drug production in the Rocky Mountain HIDTA region is typically limited to small-scale methamphetamine laboratories, outdoor and indoor cannabis grow operations, and crack cocaine conversion. Local methamphetamine production has decreased dramatically since 2004 as a result of precursor chemical control legislation. According to National Seizure System (NSS) data, the number of methamphetamine laboratories seized in the Rocky Mountain HIDTA region decreased 86 percent, from 311 laboratories in 2004 to 44 laboratories in 2008. However, law enforcement officials at the Southern Colorado HIDTA Drug Task Force report that a shortage of Mexican methamphetamine in their jurisdiction during the summer of 2008 led to higher methamphetamine prices and a small increase in local methamphetamine production. The task force seized 14 laboratories in 2008, compared with 11 in 2007.



**Figure 2. Methamphetamine Laboratory Seizures, Rocky Mountain HIDTA Counties, 2004–2008**



Source: National Seizure System, as of March 18, 2009.

African American street gang members and independent dealers routinely convert powder cocaine to crack cocaine. Because of harsh federal criminal penalties associated with trafficking crack cocaine, street gang members and independent dealers typically convert powder cocaine to crack in residential settings that are close to the intended market in order to limit exposure to law enforcement operations.

Mexican DTOs have increased their efforts to expand outdoor cannabis cultivation in the

region and typically conduct their operations in remote, rural areas, primarily on public lands. Law enforcement officials in Utah seized several large-scale outdoor cultivation sites on public lands; in 2008, 44,716 cannabis plants were seized on public lands in the state. Included in this total were 26,863 cannabis plants eradicated by the Washington County Sheriff's Department and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in August 2008 from several fields in the Dixie National Forest located in southern Utah. These outdoor grow sites are generally tended by laborers recruited from Mexico who live at the sites to maintain operations and provide site security. The environmental damage caused by outdoor cannabis cultivators, particularly on public lands, is a serious concern and includes erosion, contaminated watersheds, nonbiodegradable garbage, and human waste.

High-potency marijuana is produced at numerous indoor cannabis grow operations in the region to meet the increasing demand for the drug. Indoor cannabis cultivation operations are generally managed by Asian DTOs and criminal groups. Additionally, some Canada-based Asian DTOs are relocating high-potency, hydroponic indoor grow operations to the region from Canada to avoid law enforcement interdiction

**Figure 3. Indoor Grow Operation Powered by a 20,000-Watt Diesel Generator**



Larimer County Sheriff's Office

operations along the U.S.–Canada border and to reduce transportation costs. Caucasian and Hispanic local independent dealers also operate indoor cannabis grow sites. In October 2008 the Larimer County Sheriff's Office in Fort Collins, Colorado, seized a three-house grow operation conducted by two Caucasians who used their illicit proceeds to start a legitimate construction business and to purchase property. The seizure consisted of more than 1,300 cannabis plants and 47 pounds of marijuana from one house. This complex indoor cannabis grow operation featured a hydroponic system that was powered by a 20,000-watt diesel generator buried beneath a horse stable to muffle the noise. (See Figure 3 on page 7.)

## Transportation

Mexican DTOs and criminal groups are the principal transporters of multikilogram quantities of methamphetamine, cocaine, and marijuana and smaller quantities of Mexican black tar heroin and brown powder heroin to the HIDTA region. Mexican traffickers obtain these drugs from source areas in Mexico such as Chihuahua, Durango, Guerrero, Juárez, Michoacán, Nayarit, Sinaloa, and Sonora, and later transport them through and between POEs along the U.S. Southwest Border. Interstates 15, 25, 70, and 80 are the principal routes used by Mexican traffickers to transport drugs into the region; however, they also use various state and U.S. highways to attempt to avoid law enforcement interdiction efforts. Interstate 70 begins in Utah, passes through Denver, Colorado, and has a direct connection with 21 major cities before terminating in Pennsylvania. Interstate 15 begins near the U.S.–Mexico border in San Diego and passes through numerous drug markets in the region, including St. George and Salt Lake City, Utah, and Butte and Great Falls, Montana, before terminating at the Sweetgrass POE at the U.S.–Canada border. Interstate 25 begins at the U.S.–Mexico border in El Paso, Texas, and passes through Colorado Springs; Denver; Cheyenne; and Casper, Wyoming. Interstate 80 begins in San

Francisco and passes through Salt Lake City and Cheyenne.

Denver, Colorado Springs, and Salt Lake City serve as principal distribution centers for other regional drug markets as well as transshipment centers for drugs supplied to markets in the Midwest and the eastern United States. Mexican DTOs further transport illicit drugs from Denver and Colorado Springs to other markets in the region, such as Billings and Cheyenne, and to major Midwest and eastern drug markets, such as Chicago, Illinois; Kansas City, Missouri; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and New York, New York. They also use Salt Lake City as a distribution and transshipment center for secondary drug markets in the HIDTA region as well as markets in Arizona, California, and other neighboring states.

Canada-based Asian DTOs and other traffickers smuggle large quantities of MDMA and high-potency marijuana into the region through and between POEs along the U.S.–Canada border. Asian DTOs based in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, supply multikilogram quantities of MDMA to Asian DTOs operating in Los Angeles, who supply the drug to distributors in Colorado. U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officials in Great Falls report that significant quantities of these drugs are smuggled by traffickers through POEs in Piegan, Roosevelt, Sweetgrass, and Raymond, Montana. Asian DTOs, OMGs (HAMC and Bandidos), and Caucasian criminal groups based in British Columbia and Alberta, Canada, use Interstates 15, 25, and 90 to transport high-potency marijuana and MDMA across the U.S.–Canada border through Washington and western Montana in private and commercial vehicles. For example, in February 2008 the Montana Highway Patrol seized 150 pounds of MDMA from a Canadian courier who was transporting the drug in three large duffle bags; the courier was paid \$5,000 to smuggle the drug across the border by vehicle. The rugged terrain and remote locations also allow smuggling groups to use other

modes of transportation, including ATVs, snowmobiles, and private aircraft (both fixed-wing and helicopter). Most of the high-potency marijuana and MDMA smuggled across the border is transported to distribution centers in Denver; Salt Lake City; Las Vegas, Nevada; and Los Angeles and San Francisco. After smuggling drug shipments into the United States, these groups often smuggle powder cocaine and illicit drug proceeds into Canada on the return trip.

Traffickers who operate in the Midwest and eastern United States often transit the Rocky Mountain HIDTA region with illicit drug shipments that were obtained in Southwest Border states, Mexico, or the Pacific Northwest. Denver, Colorado Springs, and Salt Lake City are the major transshipment and distribution centers in the Rocky Mountain HIDTA region. The Colorado State Patrol (CSP) reports that most of the drugs seized by that agency are in transit to other states; Illinois, Montana, New York, New Jersey, and Utah are primary destinations. Law enforcement officials from the Front Range HIDTA Task Force<sup>4</sup> report that some Mexican couriers transit Denver aboard Amtrak passenger trains while transporting heroin from the Southwest Border to eastern destinations, including New York and New Jersey.

Traffickers in the region typically transport drugs in private and commercial vehicles along major interstate highways into and through the region; they also employ couriers on trains, buses, and private and commercial aircraft to transport illicit drugs. Law enforcement reporting indicates that drug traffickers in the region exploit the numerous flat, remote, rural areas to transport drugs into the area, largely undetected, aboard light, private aircraft. Illicit drugs transported in private vehicles are often placed in hidden compartments; drugs transported in commercial vehicles are

typically placed in hidden compartments or commingled with legitimate products such as produce, car parts, building materials, or heavy machinery. Some criminal groups ship marijuana, cocaine, and MDMA through the U.S. Postal Service or use package delivery services in order to reduce transportation costs and seizures and to increase profits.

## Distribution

Mexican DTOs and criminal groups control wholesale distribution and are involved in most midlevel distribution of methamphetamine, powder cocaine, Mexican black tar and brown powder heroin, and commercial-grade marijuana in the Rocky Mountain HIDTA region. Mexican traffickers and criminal groups use Colorado Springs, Denver, and Salt Lake City as principal distribution centers. They generally do not stockpile drug shipments for extended periods of time but, rather, use vacant stash houses and apartments for short-term storage and distribution to midlevel dealers. Mexican wholesale and midlevel dealers are the primary sources of supply for local Hispanic, African American, and Asian criminal groups and street gangs and for other distributors in secondary markets in the HIDTA region. Distributors in remote areas of the region often travel to Denver and Salt Lake City to obtain drugs from Mexican DTOs for distribution in their communities. Mexican traffickers operating in the Rocky Mountain HIDTA region also supply illicit drugs to other major domestic drug markets, such as Chicago; Kansas City and Wichita, Kansas; Omaha, Nebraska; and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Hispanic criminal groups and street gangs are significant midlevel and retail-level illicit drug distributors in the region. Hispanic street gangs, such as Sureños 13, distribute methamphetamine, cocaine, marijuana, and heroin that they obtain from Mexican traffickers. These gangs are aggressively expanding their retail-level crack

4. The Front Range Task Force is a collaborative, multiagency effort to identify, investigate, and dismantle DTOs operating in the Colorado communities of Aurora, Boulder, Castle Rock, Colorado Springs, Denver, Fort Collins, Greeley, Longmont, Loveland, and Pueblo.

**Table 2. Drug Distribution, by Group, Rocky Mountain HIDTA Region, 2008**

Drug Distribution Group	Drugs Distributed at the Wholesale Level	Drugs Distributed at the Retail Level
African American	Marijuana	Crack cocaine, heroin, marijuana, ODDs
Asian	High-potency marijuana, MDMA	Powder and crack cocaine, MDMA
Caucasian	Marijuana, MDMA	Powder cocaine, heroin, marijuana, MDMA, methamphetamine, diverted pharmaceutical drugs, ODDs
Hispanic	Powder cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine, marijuana	Crack cocaine, marijuana, methamphetamine
Mexican	Powder cocaine, black tar heroin, brown powder heroin, methamphetamine, marijuana	Powder cocaine, marijuana, methamphetamine
Native American	NA	Methamphetamine, marijuana
Street gangs	NA	Powder and crack cocaine, heroin, marijuana, MDMA, methamphetamine, diverted pharmaceutical drugs
OMGs	NA	Marijuana, methamphetamine

Source: National Drug Intelligence Center.

NA—Not applicable.

cocaine distribution operations in some metropolitan areas of the region. Moreover, law enforcement officials report that Honduran groups in Denver and other areas are becoming more involved in retail drug distribution. Honduran youths in Denver are moving aggressively into retail heroin distribution sales, and in some remote areas, such as Eagle County (100 miles west of Denver), Honduran groups are engaging in the retail distribution of ice methamphetamine and powder cocaine.

African American street gangs are significant retail-level drug distributors, particularly in metropolitan areas of the Rocky Mountain HIDTA region. African American street gangs such as Rolling 30's Crips are the primary converters and distributors of crack cocaine in metropolitan areas of the region. African American street gangs operating in Denver also distribute PCP that they acquire from gang associates who produce the drug in Los Angeles.

Asian DTOs and criminal groups are the primary wholesale suppliers of high-potency Canadian marijuana and MDMA in the Rocky Mountain

HIDTA region. These traffickers supply the drugs principally to Asian retail distributors (mostly Asian street gangs) and, to a lesser extent, Caucasian retail-level distributors in metropolitan areas of the HIDTA region, particularly in Denver and Salt Lake City.

Independent dealers and OMGs also distribute methamphetamine, marijuana, and Mexican black tar and brown powder heroin in smaller cities and rural areas of the HIDTA region. Caucasian and Hispanic independent dealers routinely travel from markets such as Cheyenne, Green River, and Rock Springs, Wyoming, and Billings to obtain illicit drugs from Mexican DTOs and street gangs in Denver and Salt Lake City for distribution in their communities. Some African American local independent dealers in Denver obtain MDMA from Canada for local distribution.

Drug distributors exploit technological advances in communication to increase mobility and enhance security while conducting criminal activities. The use of cell phones has enabled some distributors and street gang members to



relocate wholesale and midlevel distribution activities from open-air drug markets to diverse locations in metropolitan areas of the region. Distributors typically use cell phones for a limited period of time, usually 30 days, before discarding them to enhance their communication security. To ensure anonymity, some Asian gang members maintain associations with cell phone store employees to obtain phones. Many distributors also communicate using push-to-talk phones, which are similar to walkie-talkies. These communications are difficult to intercept because of direct dialing and the brief nature of the conversations. Criminals sometimes switch from conventional cell phones to push-to-talk phones in mid conversation to exchange important information. Other forms of communication that are popular among distributors are text messaging and e-mails. For example, some distributors use text messaging to share delivery and pickup information with customers. Additionally, law enforcement officials in southern Colorado report that a large-scale marijuana distributor used coded e-mails to communicate with customers. Distributors and gang members also use the Internet to access social networking sites, such as Facebook or MySpace, where they post photographs and communicate with associates.

## Drug-Related Crime

High levels of violent and property crime in the Rocky Mountain HIDTA region are often associated with the distribution and abuse of illicit drugs, particularly methamphetamine. Weber-Morgan Narcotics Strike Force officials in Ogden report that methamphetamine-related crimes account for over 85 percent of their investigations. In fact, 81 of the 95 state and local law enforcement agencies that responded to the NDIC NDTs 2009 report methamphetamine as the drug that most contributes to violent crime. The majority of methamphetamine-related violent crimes, including armed robbery, assault, and homicide,

are perpetrated by members of DTOs, criminal groups, and street gangs in the course of their drug trafficking operations. Most methamphetamine-related property crimes, such as burglary, identity theft, and property theft, are committed by methamphetamine abusers. Local methamphetamine producers, often Caucasians, also “smurf”<sup>5</sup> precursor chemicals from retail stores in the region to circumvent precursor chemical control restrictions.

Crack cocaine distributors commonly commit violent crimes such as assault, carjacking, drive-by shooting, home invasion robbery, and armed robbery to establish or maintain control of local drug markets. Law enforcement officials in Colorado Springs report that a large-scale DTO that operated in Colorado and Tennessee robbed banks in Colorado, Tennessee, and Michigan, later using the proceeds to purchase powder and crack cocaine for distribution in California, Colorado, Tennessee, and New York. Abusers of cocaine, heroin, and CPDs often commit crimes such as identity theft, retail fraud, burglary, and robbery to obtain drugs or money to purchase drugs. Law enforcement officials report that the number of pharmacy robberies committed by abusers in the HIDTA region to obtain either money or drugs has increased over the past year as the demand for CPDs such as OxyContin, Percocet, and Percodan (oxycodone); Valium (diazepam); and Lortab (hydrocodone) has risen.

Violent crime associated with retail drug distribution by street gangs, primarily African American and Hispanic street gangs, is one of the primary public safety concerns for law enforcement in the HIDTA region. Many of these gangs are well established in metropolitan areas throughout the region and are starting to expand

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5. Ephedrine and pseudoephedrine smurfing is a practice employed by some methamphetamine traffickers to acquire large quantities of precursor chemicals by making numerous small-quantity purchases from multiple retail locations.

their drug distribution operations into suburban and rural areas. Members of these gangs pose a considerable threat because they often engage in violent activities to protect their drug operations and expand their territories. Street gangs in the region use drug sales as their primary funding source to conduct other gang-related activities. Denver law enforcement officials report that most criminal street gang activity involves street-level drug sales, assaults, robberies, burglaries, and shootings. Law enforcement agencies in the region report high levels of violence associated with crack cocaine and ice methamphetamine, drugs commonly distributed by street gang members.

## Abuse

Ice methamphetamine is abused at particularly high levels throughout the Rocky Mountain HIDTA region. Since 2003 the number of amphetamine/methamphetamine-related treatment admissions to publicly funded facilities in the region has increased steadily. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Treatment Episode Data Set (TEDS),<sup>6</sup> the number of treatment admissions to publicly funded facilities for amphetamines (including methamphetamine) increased 25 percent from 8,695 in 2003 to 10,880 in 2007 (the latest year for which data are available) in the Rocky Mountain HIDTA region. Methamphetamine abuse severely strains the resources of public health departments, treatment centers, and social services agencies on account of the drug's highly addictive nature, longer treatment program requirements, and high recidivism rates. Moreover, methamphetamine-related domestic violence, child abuse, and child neglect have burdened local foster care and social services programs. Rural areas are often hardest hit because of high methamphetamine abuse levels and the

limited number of treatment and social services available.

Cocaine abuse has increased in the HIDTA region—particularly the abuse of crack cocaine—in metropolitan areas. The demand for both powder and crack cocaine has surged in some areas of the Rocky Mountain HIDTA region, a development that may be the result of abusers switching from methamphetamine to cocaine, which they perceive as being less harmful to their health. Moreover, law enforcement officials report that younger illicit drug users continue to experiment with cocaine rather than methamphetamine. The surge in cocaine abuse may also be the result of law enforcement and public awareness programs targeting methamphetamine and alerting potential users to the short- and long-term consequences of methamphetamine abuse. Consequently, new illicit drug users now view methamphetamine as a “full-time” drug with dangerous consequences, while cocaine is viewed as an “occasional, casual drug” without long-term health consequences.

Marijuana is the most widely abused drug in the region. Commercial-grade Mexican marijuana<sup>7</sup> is the primary type abused in the region; however, increased availability of high-potency marijuana has contributed to rising abuse among individuals who are willing to pay higher prices for more potent marijuana. Marijuana treatment admissions to publicly funded facilities in the region increased 18 percent from 9,023 in 2003 to 10,668 in 2007 (the latest year for which data are available), according to TEDS data.

6. Treatment Episode Data Set (TEDS) data for 2007 include the entire states of Colorado, Montana, Utah, and Wyoming.

7. Mexican marijuana is produced from cannabis that is typically cultivated along the western Sierra Madre Mountains in Chihuahua, Sinaloa, and Durango, Mexico, as well as farther south in Michoacán and Guerrero, Mexico. This type of marijuana contains parts of the marijuana plant such as stems and seeds that are not of high potency. Mexican marijuana is generally the least expensive type of marijuana because of its prevalence and lower potency; the THC (delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol) content typically ranges from only 4 to 6 percent.

Mexican black tar and brown powder heroin pose an increasing threat; many drug task forces throughout the Rocky Mountain HIDTA region are reporting increased availability and demand for heroin. For example, law enforcement authorities and public health professionals in Ogden, Orem/Provo, Salt Lake City, and St. George, Utah, and in Evanston, Green River, and Rocky Springs, Wyoming, have reported increased heroin distribution and abuse in their jurisdictions. This increase is partly due to the emergence of younger adolescent heroin abusers (approximately age 16) in the region. These younger abusers often start by using controlled prescription narcotics and later progressing to heroin because it is readily available and lower in cost. According to TEDS data, heroin-related treatment admissions to publicly funded facilities in the region increased 13 percent from 3,023 in 2003 to 3,423 in 2007.

CPD abuse is a significant and rapidly growing threat in the Rocky Mountain HIDTA region. According to TEDS data, the number of treatment admissions to publicly funded facilities for other opiates<sup>8</sup> increased 86 percent from 1,484 in 2003 to 2,753 in 2007. Overdose deaths from CPD abuse are a significant concern; the Utah Division of Substance Abuse and Mental Health reports that the state leads the nation in nonmedical painkiller abuse and that over 300 people in Utah died from CPD overdoses in 2007 (the latest year for which data are available). Abusers in the region, primarily Caucasians ranging from 16 to 40 years of age, and independent distributors of CPDs such as OxyContin, Percocet, Percodan, Valium, and Lortab obtain these drugs through forged prescriptions, copied or scanned prescriptions, doctor-shopping, unscrupulous physicians, theft from family and friends, and robberies of retail pharmacies and hospitals. Law enforcement officials in rural areas of

8. The TEDS category "other opiates" includes nonprescription use of methadone, codeine, morphine, oxycodone, hydromorphone, meperidine, opium, and other drugs with morphine-like effects.

Colorado report that the abuse of CPDs is more prevalent than the abuse of heroin because these drugs are more readily available.

MDMA availability and abuse have increased in the region, particularly in Colorado. Most of the MDMA available in the region is produced in Canada and is increasingly transported from Asian sources of supply in Canada and California. MDMA is most commonly abused by teenagers and college-age individuals and is readily available at music concerts and other venues popular with teens and college-age individuals.

## Illicit Finance

Bulk cash shipments and money services businesses (MSBs) are the primary methods used by DTOs to move illicit drug proceeds out of the Rocky Mountain HIDTA region to drug source locations in Mexico and Canada. Drug proceeds that remain in the Rocky Mountain HIDTA region are often laundered by traffickers through structured bank transactions, cash-intensive front businesses, and the purchase of tangible assets.

Bulk cash transportation is the most common method used by traffickers to move illicit proceeds from the Rocky Mountain HIDTA to drug source areas. Mexican DTOs use major drug markets in the Rocky Mountain HIDTA region as staging areas to consolidate large amounts of bulk currency that they derive from local wholesale drug transactions as well as wholesale transactions with other markets supplied from the region. Mexican DTOs generally transport illicit drug proceeds from secondary markets to consolidation points in and near Colorado Springs, Denver, and Salt Lake City prior to transporting the money in bulk to areas at or near the U.S.–Mexico border. Mexican DTOs compartmentalize their drug distribution and money laundering operations by limiting members' involvement to one specific responsibility and allocating tasks to specific cells. The use of compartmentalized

cells minimizes risk to the entire organization in the event that one or more members are arrested. In such an operation, one cell transports a particular drug, such as cocaine, from Mexico or the Southwest Border area to distribution centers in Denver, Colorado Springs, or Salt Lake City. A separate cell transports currency in bulk from those cities to Mexico through southwestern states. Asian DTOs and other traffickers who transport illicit drugs from Canada into the region also transport their illicit proceeds in bulk to source locations.

Mexican DTOs also use MSBs to electronically transfer illicit drug proceeds to areas along the U.S.–Mexico border and into Mexico. Some Mexican DTOs operate MSBs and hire Mexican nationals in groups of 15 to 30; these individuals receive as little as \$20 per day to transmit funds to locations in the Southwest Border area. Additionally, in some areas of the HIDTA region, law enforcement officials report that bulk currency shipments have decreased and that wire transfers to Mexico, primarily regular transfers in small amounts, have increased.

Drug proceeds that remain in the Rocky Mountain HIDTA region are often laundered by traffickers through cash-intensive front businesses and the purchase of tangible assets. As the Hispanic population has increased, businesses that cater to this segment of the population have emerged. Most of these businesses are legitimate; however, the primary purpose of some is to launder illicit drug money. These businesses concentrate primarily on cash-intensive transactions and include clothing and dry goods stores, music stores, restaurants, auto body detail shops, and stereo installation shops.

Retail-level drug distributors, including African American, Asian, and Hispanic street gang members, rarely engage in the bulk transport of illicit drug proceeds from the HIDTA region. Instead, they typically use proceeds generated

from retail-level drug distribution to operate cash-intensive retail businesses through which they commingle drug proceeds, or they purchase expensive personal items such as jewelry, luxury vehicles, and real estate.

## Outlook

The trafficking and abuse of ice methamphetamine will not diminish in the near term and will remain the most significant drug threat to the Rocky Mountain HIDTA region. Methamphetamine trafficking and abuse will continue to strain local law enforcement, public health, and social services programs throughout the region; however, the threat to rural communities will be more problematic, since these areas have limited law enforcement and social services resources to counteract the threat.

Methamphetamine production appears to be increasing in some areas of the Rocky Mountain HIDTA region. Local methamphetamine production, which had declined significantly over the past few years with the introduction of precursor chemical control restrictions, has increased moderately in southern Colorado, where there has been a shortage of Mexican methamphetamine. Methamphetamine shortages appear to be confined to southern Colorado; however, other areas of the HIDTA region could be susceptible to methamphetamine shortages and small increases in local methamphetamine production in the near term.

The demand for high-potency marijuana in the region is increasing, and there are no indications that this will change in the short term. Asian DTOs and criminal groups will establish larger indoor cannabis cultivation operations to capitalize on greater profit margins associated with high-potency marijuana. Additionally, criminal groups and local independent dealers will continue to support local market demands by supplying high-potency marijuana produced in Canada and the West Coast of the United States.

The availability and abuse of CPDs will most likely increase in the region as a result of the growing popularity of these drugs, primarily OxyContin, Percocet, Percodan, Valium, and Lortab. Young adults and teenagers can obtain CPDs with relative ease, primarily from family and friends and by doctor-shopping. Once addicted to controlled prescription opioids, some adolescents and young adults will most likely progress to the abuse of heroin, which is often more readily available.



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## Sources

### Local, State, and Regional

#### Colorado

16th Judicial Drug Task Force  
22nd Judicial District Drug Task Force  
Adams County Sheriff's Department  
    North Metro Task Force  
All Crimes Enforcement Team (ACET)  
Arapahoe County Sheriff's Department  
    South Metro Drug Task Force  
Arvada Police Department  
    West Metro Drug Task Force  
Aurora Police Department  
    Crime Laboratory  
    Narcotics Unit  
Boulder County Drug Task Force  
Boulder County Police Department  
Boulder County Sheriff's Office  
Broomfield Police Department  
    North Metro Task Force  
Colorado Bureau of Investigation  
Colorado Department of Corrections  
Colorado Department of Human Services  
    Alcohol and Drug Abuse Division  
Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment  
Colorado Department of Public Safety  
    Colorado Bureau of Investigation  
        Pueblo Region Laboratory  
Colorado Front Range Task Force  
Colorado Springs Police Department  
    Gang Unit  
    Metro Vice, Narcotics and Intelligence  
    Sand Creek Division  
Colorado State Patrol  
    Interdiction Unit  
Commerce City Police Department  
    North Metro Task Force  
Delta/Montrose Drug Task Force  
Denver Police Department  
    Crime Laboratory  
    Gang Bureau  
    Vice and Drug Control Bureau  
Douglas County Sheriff's Office  
    South Metro Drug Task Force  
Eagle County Drug Task Force  
Eastern Colorado Plains Drug Task Force

Edgewater Police Department  
El Paso County Sheriff's Department  
    Southern Colorado Drug Task Force  
Englewood Department of Safety Services  
Estes Park Police Department  
Federal Heights Police Department  
Fort Collins Police Services  
    Larimer County Drug Task Force  
Front Range Task Force  
Fruita Police Department  
Golden Police Department  
    West Metro Drug Task Force  
Grand Junction Police Department  
    Western Colorado Task Force  
Greeley Police Department  
    Weld County Drug Task Force  
Jefferson County Sheriff's Department  
    West Metro Drug Task Force  
Lakewood Police Department  
    West Metro Drug Task Force  
La Plata County Sheriff's Department  
Larimer County Sheriff's Office  
    Larimer County Drug Task Force  
Littleton Police Department  
    South Metro Drug Task Force  
Longmont Police Department Drug Unit  
Mesa County Sheriff's Office  
    Western Colorado Drug Task Force-VM  
Metro Gang Task Force  
North Metro Drug Task Force  
Pueblo Police Department  
Rifle Police Department  
    Two Rivers Drug Enforcement Team  
Teller County Sheriff's Department  
    Southern Colorado Drug Task Force  
Vail Police Department  
Weld County Sheriff's Office  
    Weld County Drug Task Force  
Westminster Police Department  
    North Metro Task Force  
San Luis Valley Drug Task Force  
Summit County Drug Task Force

#### Montana

Billings Police Department  
    City-County Special Investigations Unit  
    Eastern Montana HIDTA Drug Task Force  
Cascade County Sheriff's Office  
    Central Montana Drug Task Force

Flathead County Sheriff's Office  
Northwest Drug Task Force  
Great Falls City Police Department  
Central Montana Drug Task Force  
Helena Police Department  
Missouri River HIDTA Drug Task Force  
Kalispell Police Department  
Northwest Drug Task Force  
Laurel Police Department  
City-County Special Investigations Unit  
Lewis and Clark County Sheriff's Office  
Missouri River HIDTA Drug Task Force  
Missoula County Sheriff's Office  
Missoula HIDTA  
Missoula Police Department  
Montana Division of Criminal Investigation  
Montana Highway Patrol  
Whitefish Police Department  
Northwest Drug Task Force  
Yellowstone County Sheriff's Office  
City-County Special Investigations Unit

## Utah

American Fork Police Department  
Bountiful Police Department  
Cache/Rich Drug Task Force  
Carbon County Narcotics Task Force  
Central Utah Drug Task Force  
Clearfield Police Department  
Davis County Sheriff's Office  
Davis Metro Narcotics Strike Force  
Emery County Drug Task Force  
Farmington Police Department  
Hurricane Police Department  
Kaysville Police Department  
Layton Police Department  
Lehi Police Department  
Midvale Police Department  
Morgan County Sheriff's Office  
Murray City Police Department  
North Ogden Police Department  
North Salt Lake City Police Department  
Ogden Police Department  
Weber Gang Task Force  
Orem Police Department  
Pleasant Grove Police Department  
Provo Police Department  
Riverdale Police Department  
Salt Lake City Police Department  
Narcotics Unit

Fusion Center  
Salt Lake County Sheriff's Office  
Metro Drug Task Force  
Sandy City Police Department  
South Jordan Police Department  
South Ogden Police Department  
South Salt Lake Police Department  
Springville Police Department  
Summit County Sheriff's Office  
Narcotics Task Force  
Taylorsville Police Department  
Tooele Drug Task Force  
Utah County Major Crimes Task Force  
Utah County Sheriff's Office  
Utah Department of Health and Human Services  
Utah Department of Public Safety  
Highway Patrol  
Utah Division of Substance Abuse and Mental Health  
Utah Highway Patrol  
Wasatch Back Narcotics Enforcement Team  
Washington County Sheriff's Office  
Washington County Gang Task Force  
Weber-Morgan Narcotics Strike Force  
West Jordan Police Department  
West Valley Police Department  
Metro Narcotics Task Force

## Wyoming

Albany County Sheriff's Office  
Campbell County Sheriff's Department  
Cheyenne Police Department  
Evanston Police Department  
Gillette Police Department  
Green River Police Department  
Laramie County Sheriff's Department  
Laramie Police Department  
Natrona County Sheriff's Department  
Sweetwater County Sheriff's Office  
Uinta County Sheriff's Department  
Wheatland Police Department  
Wyoming Department of Health  
Substance Abuse Division  
Wyoming Division of Criminal Investigation  
Central Enforcement Team  
Northeast Enforcement Team  
Northwest Enforcement Team  
Southeast Enforcement Team  
Southwest Enforcement Team  
Wyoming Highway Patrol



**Federal**

Executive Office of the President  
Office of National Drug Control Policy  
Rocky Mountain High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area  
Southern Colorado Drug Task Force  
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  
Treatment Episode Data Set  
U.S. Department of Homeland Security  
U.S. Customs and Border Protection  
Havre Sector  
Spokane Sector  
Sweetgrass Port of Entry  
U.S. Department of Justice  
Criminal Division  
Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force  
Drug Enforcement Administration  
Denver Field Division  
Colorado Springs Resident Office  
Grand Junction District Office  
Salt Lake City District Office  
Metro Narcotics Task Force  
El Paso Intelligence Center  
National Seizure System  
Federal Bureau of Investigation  
Blackfeet Safe Trails Task Force, Montana  
Denver Field Office  
Missoula Resident Agency, Montana  
U.S. Attorneys Office  
District of Colorado  
District of Wyoming  
U.S. Marshals Service  
District of Montana

**Other**

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