

2018 National Drug Threat Assessment Key Findings



The National Drug Threat Assessment (NDTA) is DEA's annual strategic review of the threats posed by drugs and the traffickers who supply them to the United States.

The 2018 NDTA is a valuable resource for all Americans, but especially those elected officials, law enforcement personnel, prevention and treatment specialists, and others who develop counter-drug policies, oversee law enforcement operations, and allocate resources.

The information in the 2018 NDTA comes from many sources. These include, but are not limited to: drug investigations and seizures by law enforcement, data on drug purity and other analyses of drugs by DEA and other laboratories; drug cultivation and production estimates from DEA and other sources; treatment, use, and other survey data; and information on organized criminal groups by DEA and our intelligence and law enforcement partners.

The drug landscape in the United States has shifted; the opioid threat involving controlled prescription drugs (CPDs), fentanyl, and heroin, remains at epidemic levels and continues rising. The methamphetamine and rebounding cocaine threats remain prevalent; the marijuana threat continues to evolve; and New Psychoactive Substances (NPS) continue to be a challenge.

- In 2016, **deaths involving prescription opioids, heroin, and fentanyl represented nearly two-thirds of all drug poisoning deaths**, a record. Over 64,000 Americans died from drug poisoning in 2016.ⁱ
- **CPDs have been linked to the largest number of overdose deaths** of any illicit drug class since 2001. CPDs are the second most commonly abused substance. Traffickers are now disguising other opioids as CPDs to gain access to this market.
- **Heroin related drug-poisoning deaths almost doubled between 2013 and 2016.** This has been exacerbated by the increasing adulteration of heroin with fentanyl and other synthetic opioids.
- **Heroin available in U.S. markets is primarily sourced from Mexico**, where opium poppy cultivation and heroin production have both increased significantly in recent years.
- The **synthetic opioid threat**, consisting of fentanyl, fentanyl-related substances, and novel synthetic opioids, is primarily fueled by foreign drug trafficking organizations and multiple source countries. Most synthetic opioids available domestically are sourced to Mexico and China.
- **Illicit fentanyl and other synthetic opioids are now the most lethal category of opioids abused in the United States.** Fentanyl is increasingly available in the form of counterfeit prescription pills marketed for illicit street sales, and also sold by traffickers on its own, without the presence of other drugs.
- **Cocaine availability and use have rebounded**, partially due to increases in coca cultivation and cocaine production in Colombia, the primary source for the cocaine market in the United States, and has resulted in cocaine-involved overdose deaths exceeding 2007 benchmark levels.
- **The methamphetamine threat remains prevalent.** Mexico produced methamphetamine is widely available. Inbound seizures of methamphetamine from Mexico have increased every year since 2010, and domestic production continues to decline.
- **Marijuana remains the most commonly used illicit drug in the United States.** Domestic marijuana production is increasing, and demand for marijuana concentrates is growing. Individuals and criminal organizations are exploiting state marijuana laws to produce and traffic marijuana to the illicit market.
- **Mexican Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs) remain the greatest criminal drug threat in the United States.** The cartels are the principal wholesale drug sources for domestic gangs, which are responsible for street-level distribution.
- **The Sinaloa Cartel maintains the most expansive footprint in the United States.** The Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) has significantly expanded its presence the United States in recent years.
- **National and neighborhood-based street gangs and prison gangs continue to dominate the market for the street sales and distribution of illicit drugs in their respective territories throughout the country.** Drug trafficking remains the major income source for gangs.

ⁱ Preliminary data indicates at least 72,000 Americans died from drug poisoning in 2017.

