

FORUM:	World Health Assembly
ISSUE:	Measures to Combat Illicit Opioid Trafficking in the Global Opioids Crisis
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Introduction

Opioids are a class of drugs derived from the opium poppy plant, which include legal prescription medications (commonly used for pain management) and illicit substances. Opioids: natural and synthetic. The natural opioids are those that are derived from the resin of the opium poppy plant while synthesized opioids are those that undergo laboratory production without any natural starting materials involved in making



The illegal usage of fentanyl shot

them. The synthetic opioids later refer to potent pain-relieving drugs made entirely in labs. The global opioid crisis has become an acute public health emergency because of widespread numbers misusing what turned out to be both prescription-and-street illegal opioids. At the center of this crisis is unauthorized trafficking, where powerful drugs like heroin and synthetic opioids such as fentanyl—which is 50-100 times more potent than morphine—are illegally manufactured, distributed, and sold cause severe harm worldwide suffering millions death toll lives lost each year alone due solely upon their use. This illegal trade fuels addiction, overdose deaths, and societal harm, making it a critical global challenge. In 2021, over 107,000 people in the United States alone died from drug overdoses, with opioids involved in nearly 75% of these deaths. Synthetic opioids like fentanyl were responsible for a significant portion of these fatalities.

Background

With an estimated 27 million people worldwide affected by opioid use disorders and over 500,000 deaths each year due to drug use including opioids, these numbers highlight the global reach of the crisis.



Hence efforts to fight the illicit trafficking of opioids are important components of a wider approach to the opioid crisis. Governments, international organizations and law enforcement agencies, are taking action to break up illegal supply chains with measures including stricter border controls, increased intelligence sharing and targeted law



Long-term opioid abuses suffer from crumbling bones

enforcement operations. In addition, initiatives related to public health that target reducing demand such as addiction treatment programs or public awareness campaigns play a large role in curbing ill-effects left by these illicit drugs. The importance of these issues cannot be overstressed: such actions contribute positively towards disrupting the illegal flow circulation obtained from those dangerous substances on streets as well as towards protecting public health generally, and thereby saving lives. However, the complexity of the crisis requires a coordinated and multi-faceted approach, combining law enforcement with prevention and treatment strategies to effectively combat the ongoing threat.

Problems Raised

The Rise of Synthetic Opioid Use

There is also concern in the EU regarding the use of synthetic opioids, a crisis that has dominated the United States over the past 10 years. Synthetic opioids are much more potent than those that occur naturally; for instance, fentanyl is 50 to 100 times stronger than morphine. Just a small amount can lead to an overdose that could be fatal, making them far more dangerous. Unfortunately, since then Fentanyl has become the primary cause of opioid-related overdose in North America. Over the last decade, Europe has seen a steady increase in prescription opioid consumption, with tramadol, fentanyl and oxycodone leading to increased numbers of prescriptions for these drugs. From 2009 to mid-2022 close to seventy-four new opioids emerged in European drug markets. In the last five years, there has been a noticeable shift in the types of opioids reported to the EU early warning system on new psychoactive substances. Fentanyl derivatives have been replaced by highly potent benzimidazole opioids, specifically netzines.

Increase in Overdose Death Rates

Opioids are highly addictive, largely because they trigger the release of endorphins. This highly attracts young adults to try such addictive drug. However, opioid drugs affect the part of the brain that



controls breathing, and when individuals take more opioids than their body can handle, their breathing slows. This can lead to unconsciousness and even death. In 2020, opioid overdose deaths increased 38 percent nationally and 44 percent in New York. According to provisional counts, these deaths rose by 17 percent nationally and in New York to 80,401 and 4,946, respectively, in 2021. The increase in opioid overdose deaths in New York between 2019 and 2021 was about 68 percent. According to the National Center for Health Statistics of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), between 2010 and 2017, deaths from drug overdoses grew 83 percent nationally and 152 percent in New York, peaking at almost 4,000 deaths in New York in 2017.

International Actions

Reducing the International Supply of Illicit Opioids



illegal shipment of drug caught in the Spain border

The illicit opioids behind the unprecedented number of overdose deaths experienced in many nations recent history are primarily produced abroad through supply chains that do not traverse the United States until synthesized opioids are smuggled across the border. Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) takes a forward-

leaning approach to identifying and mitigating threats before they reach the country. To disrupt illicit synthesis, HSI will increase its capacity to conduct supply chain-focused investigations and reinforce the ongoing development of innovative approaches, such as partnering with the Department of Justice (DOJ) Consumer Protection Branch to pursue novel charges against the companies supplying precursor chemicals. This allows HSI to effectively dismantle the networks responsible for illicit opioid production. In addition, the proactive approach will help to cut off the flow of synthetic opioids at the source, reducing their availability and impact.

Enhancing International Cooperation and Intelligence Sharing Platforms

To combat illicit trafficking internationally, countries are working together to share intelligence on drug trafficking networks. Organizations like INTERPOL and Europol provide platforms for intelligence sharing among member countries. INTERPOL's I-24/7 network allows law enforcement agencies worldwide to share real-time information on drug trafficking activities. Similarly, Europol's



Secure Information Exchange Network Application (SIENA) facilitates the exchange of operational and strategic information, helping to coordinate cross-border investigations. These networks have allowed law enforcement agencies across different nations to share critical intelligence on drug trafficking activities, including the movement of opioids, precursor chemicals, and known traffickers. Also, enhanced intelligence-sharing platforms have led to a significant increase in the seizure of illicit opioids. For example, through the use of SIENA by Europol, coordinated operations across Europe resulted in the seizure of over 1.5 tons of illicit drugs, including opioids, in a single operation in 2020. This operation involved 25 countries and demonstrated the effectiveness of shared intelligence in intercepting large drug consignments.

Key Players

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) is a global leader in the fight against illicit drugs and international crime, in addition to being responsible for implementing the United Nations lead programme on terrorism. UNODC works to educate people throughout the world about the dangers of drug abuse and to strengthen international action against illicit drug production and



UNODC and National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) collaborate to combat drug use disorder on World Drug Day 2023

trafficking and drug-related crime. To achieve those aims, UNODC oversees drug crop cultivation, monitors illicit crops, and implement of projects against money laundering. In addition, UNODC combats illicit opioid trafficking internationally through various targeted initiatives such as Operation Lionfish, Global SMART Programme, and Container Control Programme (CCP). For example, Operation Lionfish is a global operation coordinated by the UNODC in partnership with INTERPOL, targeting maritime and air routes used by drug traffickers. In 2019, Operation Lionfish resulted in the seizure of over 55 tons of illicit drugs, including heroin and synthetic opioids. This operation involved more than 90 countries and led to the arrest of 1,300 individuals involved in drug trafficking.



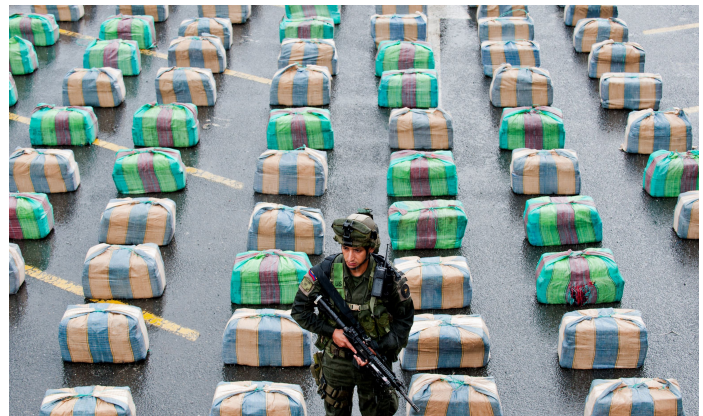
International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL)

INTERPOL is an international police organization that facilitates cooperation between law enforcement agencies worldwide and plays a pivotal role in coordinating international efforts to combat illicit opioid trafficking. INTERPOL provides a critical platform for the sharing of intelligence related to opioid trafficking. This includes information on trafficking routes, key suspects, and emerging trends in drug production. INTERPOL's intelligence sharing has been pivotal in multiple coordinated operations that have led to the seizure of hundreds of kilograms of fentanyl and other synthetic opioids. For example, in 2020, intelligence shared through INTERPOL's network led to the interception of over 500 kg of heroin in a single operation in Asia.

Possible Solutions

Strengthening International Law Enforcement Operations to Disrupt Trafficking

One of the most effective ways to combat illicit opioid trafficking is by strengthening international law enforcement operations to disrupt trafficking networks and target the entire supply chain of synthetic opioids and traditional opiates. This comprehensive strategy involves developing and enhancing operational activities through key initiatives like the UNODC's Organized Crime Branch and flagship projects such as the Container Control Programme (CCP) and AIRCOP. These programs are designed to intercept illicit drug shipments, particularly those transported via air cargo, which is a common method used by traffickers to move large quantities of drugs across borders undetected.



Belgium and UN boost collaboration on drug trafficking and organized crime

By focusing on these critical points in the supply chain, law enforcement agencies can disrupt the flow of opioids before they reach the streets. Collaborating with global organizations like the World Customs Organization (WCO) and INTERPOL further amplifies these efforts. These partnerships enable the tracking and interception of shipments containing pill-pressing equipment, which is crucial for producing counterfeit opioid pills. This equipment, often smuggled across borders, allows traffickers to create millions of fake pills laced with dangerous substances like fentanyl, significantly contributing to the opioid crisis. By cutting off access to these tools and intercepting shipments at key points in the



supply chain, international law enforcement can severely weaken the operational capacity of opioid traffickers, making a significant impact on global public health and safety.

Investing in Scanning Technologies at All Ports of Entry

Investing in scanning technologies at all ports of entry is a crucial strategy to combat illicit opioid trafficking internationally. Evidence shows that the majority of fentanyl seized at the U.S. southern border is trafficked by U.S. citizens or legal residents through legal ports of entry, concealed within vehicles. To address this, the 2021 Securing America’s Ports Act mandates the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to develop a plan to scan 100% of passenger and freight traffic entering the United States within six years.

By implementing advanced Non-Intrusive Inspection (NII) technologies, such as vehicle and cargo scanners, law enforcement can more effectively detect and intercept hidden shipments of fentanyl and other synthetic opioids. These technologies enable thorough examination of large volumes of traffic without disrupting the flow of legitimate trade, making it harder for traffickers to smuggle drugs into the country undetected.



AI will assist customs officers in expediting the processes at border

Additionally, deploying these scanning technologies on southbound lanes can help curb the illegal trafficking of firearms from the U.S. to Mexico, which often fuels drug trafficking organizations. By intercepting these weapons, the capacity of these organizations to operate and traffic opioids is further weakened. Overall, this investment strengthens international efforts to disrupt the global supply chain of illicit opioids.

Glossary

Non-Intrusive Inspection (NII) system

Non-Intrusive Inspection is a thorough and comprehensive inspection strategy, through which MISTRAS performs non-destructive testing (NDT) inspection on pressure equipment completely externally, eliminating the need for vessel entry during any phase of the inspection process.



Homeland Security Investigations (HSI)

Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) is the principal investigative arm of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, responsible for investigating transnational crime and threats, specifically those criminal organizations that exploit the global infrastructure through which international trade, travel, and finance move. HSI's workforce of over 10,400 employees consists of more than 7,100 Special Agents assigned to 220 cities throughout the United States, and 80 overseas locations in 53 countries. HSI's international presence represents DHS's largest investigative law enforcement presence abroad and one of the largest international footprints in U.S. law enforcement.

Airport Communication Project (AIRCOP)

Airport Communication Project is a multi-agency initiative, based on cooperation between UNODC, INTERPOL and the World Customs Organization (WCO) that aims to create operational groups to strengthen the capacities of participating international airports in Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean and the Middle East to detect and seize drugs, other illicit goods and high-risk passengers, including foreign terrorist combatants, in countries of origin, transit and destination, with the main objective of dismantling illicit criminal networks. Therefore, AIRCOP is a key component for an integrated approach to border control administration.



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