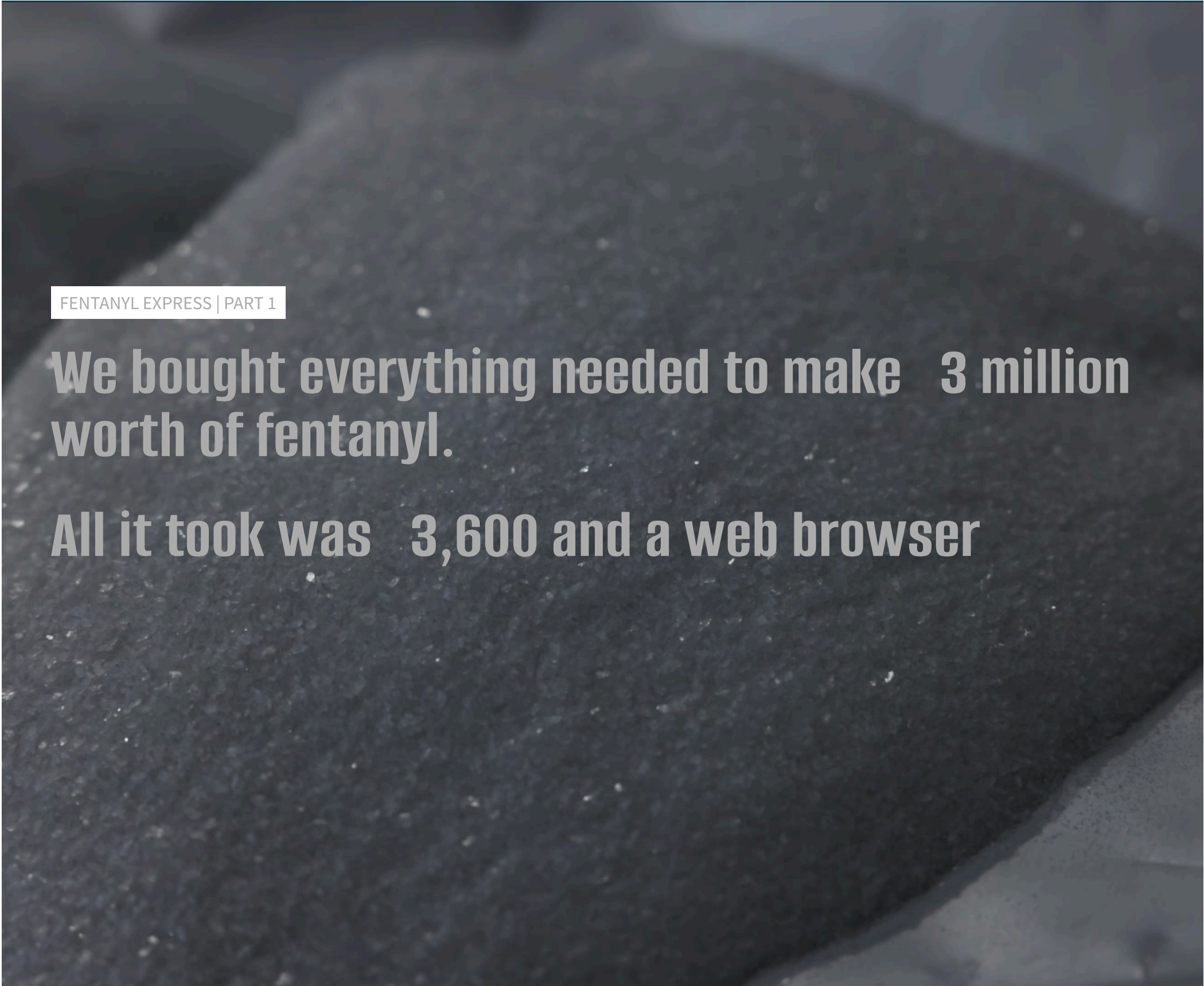




Series: <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/section/fentanyl-express/>

Fentanyl Express

The global chemical trade behind America's opioid crisis



FENTANYL EXPRESS | PART 1

We bought everything needed to make 3 million worth of fentanyl.

All it took was 3,600 and a web browser

This fentanyl-making chemical was shipped by air from China to the United States. Reuters purchased it as part of an investigation into the global chemical trade behind America's fentanyl crisis. REUTERS/Andrew Kelly

At the tap of a buyer’s smartphone, Chinese chemical sellers will air-ship fentanyl ingredients door-to-door to North America. Reuters purchased enough to make 3 million pills. Such deals are astonishingly easy – and reveal how drug traffickers are eluding efforts to halt the deadly trade behind the fentanyl crisis.

By [MAURICE TAMMAN](#), [LAURA GOTTESDIENER](#) and [STEPHEN EISENHAMMER](#) | Filed July 25, 2024, 9 a.m. GMT

A CARDBOARD BOX half the size of a loaf of bread bore a shipping label declaring its contents: “Adapter.” It was delivered in October to a Reuters reporter in Mexico City.

There was no adapter inside that package. Instead, sealed in a metallic Mylar bag was a plastic jar containing a kilogram of 1-boc-4-piperidone, a pale powder that’s a core ingredient of fentanyl. It was enough to produce 750,000 tablets of the deadly drug.

A Reuters reporter had ordered the chemical six weeks earlier from a seller in China. The sales assistant, “Jenny,” used a photo of a Chinese actress as her screen avatar. The price was \$440, payable in Bitcoin, delivery by air freight included.

“We can ship safely to Mexico,” Jenny had written in Spanish on the encrypted message platform Telegram in July 2023, when the reporter first inquired about the chemical. “No one knows what we ship.”

Transactions like this are part of the biggest upheaval in the global narcotics trade since the war on drugs began half a century ago. The manufacturing of fentanyl, the synthetic opioid that’s killing tens of thousands of Americans a year, has become an endlessly inventive and ruthlessly efficient global industry.

The trade hinges on chemicals known as “precursors,” which are the drug’s essential ingredients. Compounds called piperidines are the core of fentanyl’s structure. Other precursors provide the remaining building blocks. Combined through chemical reactions, these precursors create a drug 50 times stronger than heroin.

The problem for regulators: Many of the same chemicals used to make fentanyl are also crucial to legitimate industries, from perfumes and pharmaceuticals to rubber and dyes. Tightly restricting all of them would upend global commerce. And because of fentanyl’s potency, even small quantities of these precursors can produce vast numbers of tiny pills using a simple manufacturing process – rendering the ingredients, the final product and the supply chain easy to conceal from authorities.

Anyone with a mailbox, an internet connection and digital currency to pay the tab can source these chemicals, a Reuters investigation found.



U.S.



To learn how this global industry works, reporters made multiple buys of precursors over the past year. Though a few of the sales proved to be scams, the journalists succeeded in buying 12 chemicals that could be used to make fentanyl, according to independent chemists consulted by Reuters. Most of the goods arrived as seamlessly as any other mail-order package. The team also procured secondary ingredients used to process the essential precursors, as well as basic equipment – giving it everything needed to produce fentanyl.



The core precursors Reuters bought would have yielded enough fentanyl powder to make at least 3 million tablets, with a potential street value of \$3 million – a conservative estimate based on prices cited by U.S. law enforcement agencies in published reports over the past six months.

The total cost of the chemicals and equipment Reuters purchased, paid mainly in Bitcoin: \$3,607.18.

Turning these precursors into fentanyl would have required just modest lab skills and a basic grasp of chemistry. One Mexican fentanyl cook who dropped out of school at age 12 told Reuters he learned the trade as an apprentice at an illegal lab.

“It’s like making chicken soup,” said the cook, an independent producer based in the cartel stronghold of Sinaloa state. “It’s mega-easy making that drug.”

The Reuters reporters didn’t make fentanyl, had no intention to do so, and arranged for safe destruction of the chemicals and other materials they purchased. They also followed the guidance of lawyers before making the buys in an effort to ensure they complied with the law. Reuters is withholding detailed instructions and other information that could aid in synthesizing the drug.

The dominant players in the illicit opioid trade – the Mexican cartels that manufacture most of the drugs and smuggle them into America– have been the subject of detailed reporting over the years. Now, as the first news organization to buy and test fentanyl’s essential ingredients, Reuters has penetrated the hidden sub-industry that makes the cartel operations possible: the international supply chain of precursor chemicals.

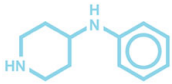
The fentanyl business is largely a three-nation trading system, with the United States, Mexico and China linked in a toxic triangle as the illicit drug’s biggest consumer, manufacturer and raw-materials supplier. The Reuters investigation has uncovered the names of Chinese sellers, the methods they use to ship their chemicals to North America, and how these packages evade customs inspections in Mexico and the United States. The ease with which the reporters bought the drug-making chemicals and gear exposes holes in the world regulatory framework, and shows how law enforcement is playing catch-up amid a profound transformation of the opioid market.

At the tap of a buyer’s smartphone, Chinese sellers will air-ship fentanyl precursors, sometimes falsely labeled as gadgets, cosmetics and other mundane goods. These packages are loaded onto planes stuffed with nearly identical-looking boxes of cheap exports that leave China by the billions every year.

From top: Journalists Maurice Tamman (left) and Stephen Eisenhammer (right) unbox fentanyl precursors in New York City and Mexico City. REUTERS/Andrew Kelly and Claudia Daut; Packages of chemicals and equipment needed to manufacture the deadly synthetic opioid were delivered much like any other merchandise. REUTERS/Andrew Kelly

Major destinations are airports in Mexico and the United States, where the precursor-filled packages typically sail through customs with other merchandise, authorities in both countries said. There’s no need to ship bulky barrels of chemicals and navigate the tricky logistics of getting them onshore, as is the case for drugs like methamphetamine.

“The game is different now,” said Christopher Landberg, deputy assistant secretary in the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of



“It’s whack-a-mole.”

Rahul Gupta, director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, on government attempts to regulate fentanyl ingredients

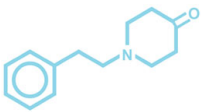
International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs. The supply chain is “more difficult to track, it’s more difficult to go after,” and fentanyl itself is “so much more deadly,” he said.

This flow is fueling alarming levels of fentanyl production, addiction and deaths. The street drug is the top killer of Americans aged 18 to 45, according to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). Last year nearly 75,000 people died from overdoses of synthetic opioids, mainly fentanyl. While that’s down about 2% from 2022, no other illicit drug comes close to fentanyl’s toll.

President Joe Biden has made cracking down on illicit fentanyl supply chains a priority of his administration. A key element of this effort has been prosecution. The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) has indicted at least a dozen Chinese chemical suppliers since mid-2023.

But at least three of those operators remained in business – and sold precursors to Reuters months after they were charged. One of these was Jenny’s company, which shipped Reuters the kilo of 1-boc-4-piperidone. In chats while arranging the sale, she scoffed at the U.S. crackdown.

“We are a powerful company,” Jenny wrote in July 2023. “This incident has no impact on us.”



75,000

U.S. death toll from overdoses of synthetic opioids in 2023

In a written statement, Justice Department spokesman Wyn Hornbuckle said the DOJ and the DEA “will continue to aggressively investigate and prosecute every link in the fentanyl supply chain, including the chemical companies and executives in the People’s Republic of China supplying the ingredients used to make this deadly drug.”

A senior White House official said the administration has vigorously attacked the fentanyl scourge at home and abroad. Those efforts include jump-starting bilateral cooperation with China on the issue, making record seizures of fentanyl entering the United States, and sanctioning hundreds of foreigners involved in the drug trade. The United States is saving lives through federal approval of an over-the-counter medication that rapidly reverses the effects of opioid overdoses, the official said.

The administration is also looking to work with Congress to strengthen the reporting requirements for small shipments arriving in the United States, the official said, “so that we can better track, identify and target those packages which may contain finished pills, precursor chemicals, machinery and parts.”

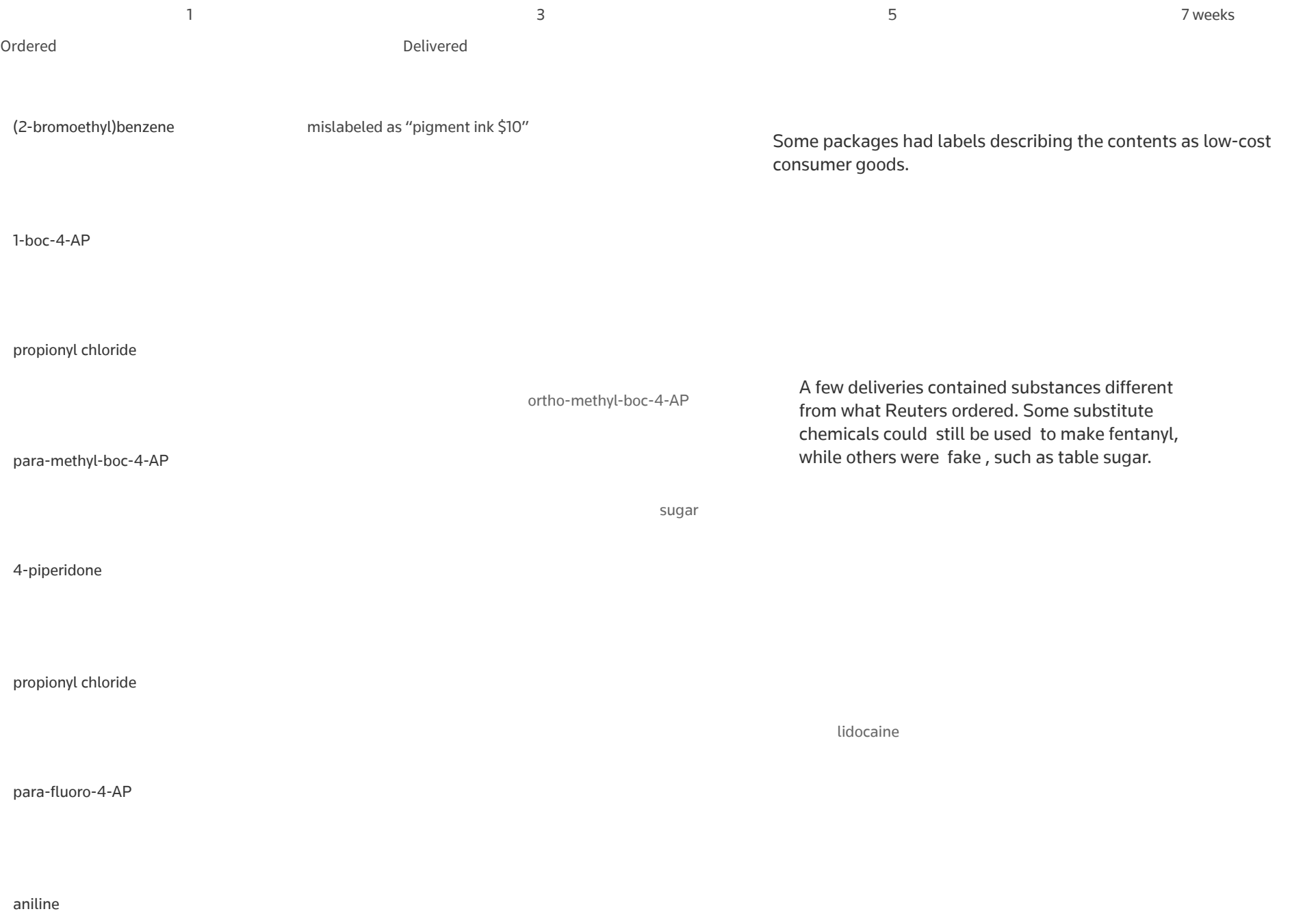
The chemicals Reuters purchased

Reuters received 12 packages containing a total of 14 chemical orders at addresses in Mexico and the United States. Independent chemists consulted by Reuters said 12 of the chemicals were fentanyl precursors. The remaining two were fakes: one sugar and the other lidocaine, a local anesthetic.

Core fentanyl precursors
(with piperidine ring)

Other precursor chemicals

Packages sent to the United States



Source: Reuters reporting | REUTERS/Sam Hart and Daisy Chung

The chemical Reuters bought from Jenny was one of 16 that reporters ordered from various precursor suppliers from August 2023 to May 2024.

Fourteen of those chemicals were delivered: six to Mexico City, seven to a rented mailbox in New Jersey, and one to an apartment in New York City. Some boxes arrived bearing fake labels, including “doorknob” and “hair accessories.” Two precursor chemicals came sealed in cat food bags.

Independent chemists consulted by Reuters said that 12 of the delivered chemicals, totaling 6.6 kilos, could be used to make fentanyl. Four of Reuters’ buys were rip-offs: One shipment contained sugar. Another was lidocaine, a local anesthetic. Two sellers failed to deliver anything.

The reporters also bought a pill press, two die molds and a binding agent that could be used to produce small, light-blue tablets stamped with an “M” on one side and the number “30” on the other. Those are the signature markings of a generic version of the prescription painkiller oxycodone. Use of illicit fentanyl soared as a substitute for that highly addictive drug, and the copycat look has stuck. Much of the illegal fentanyl sold in the United States still comes in the form of blue M30 pills, authorities say.

In all, eight suppliers delivered authentic fentanyl precursors. Seven of those were based in China, the world’s largest exporter of chemicals. Reporters traced the country of origin through phone numbers used by the sales agents, shipping records for the packages and other means.

Washington has been pushing China and Mexico to do more to keep fentanyl precursor chemicals from reaching illicit manufacturers. Those countries defend their efforts and say the U.S. needs to tackle its addiction problem.

A GRAPHIC EXPLAINER

Amid the finger-pointing, chemical suppliers have little trouble evading what regulations do exist, because hundreds of different chemicals can be used to make these synthetic opioids.

Many sellers have stopped offering “immediate” precursors: chemicals that are the easiest to turn into fentanyl and face the toughest controls. Instead, these suppliers sell the ingredients that are used to create the immediate precursors. These alternatives, or “pre-precursors,” require just minor extra steps to make fentanyl.

Another trick is to tweak the chemical structure of a precursor to circumvent regulations. Such “designer” precursors can still be used to make fentanyl or one of its analogs, which are often just as potent as fentanyl, or even more so.

The upshot: When authorities restrict one chemical, suppliers and traffickers just switch to another, said Rahul Gupta, director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy.

“It’s whack-a-mole,” Gupta said of government attempts to regulate fentanyl ingredients.

The Reuters purchases illuminate why. Most precursors the reporters bought were piperidines – a group of chemicals essential to making fentanyl, but which also are used to manufacture ordinary products, including insecticides and fragrances.

Fentanyl’s deadly chemistry

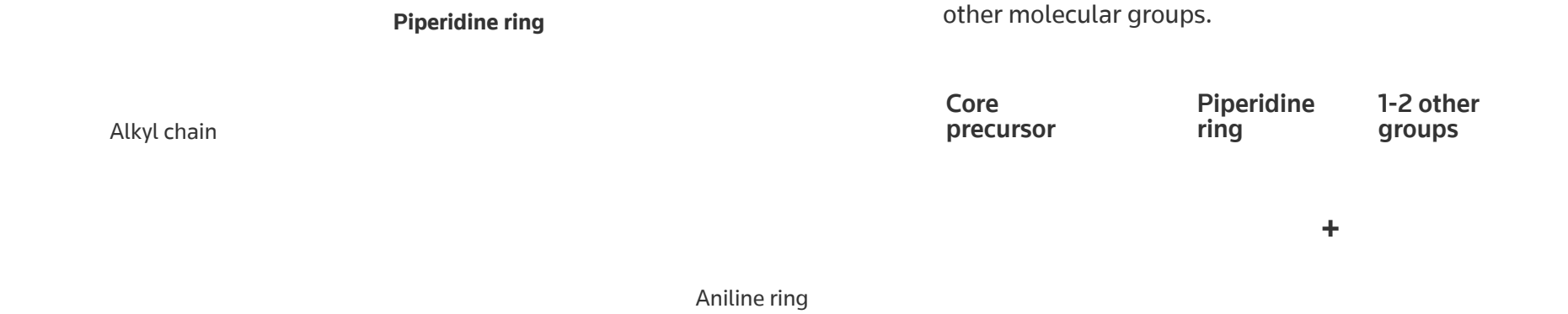


The science behind fentanyl

Fentanyl has a unique chemical structure made up of four different molecular groups.

Fentanyl's structure

The piperidine ring is the core, while three other molecular groups complete the structure.



Core ingredients

Precursors

Because precursors serve as shortcuts to making fentanyl, governments have clamped down on some of these chemical compounds.

'Designer' precursors

That’s why illicit fentanyl makers sometimes source slightly altered versions of precursors to get around these regulations, for instance replacing a hydrogen atom with a fluorine atom.

Pre-precursors

Another trick is to move one step back in the synthesis process and use so-called pre-precursors: chemicals that contain the piperidine ring and can be used to build the precursor. These pre-precursors are easier to get because they have many legitimate

Source: Reuters reporting | REUTERS/Daisy Chung

U.S. and international regulators have imposed some restrictions on these chemicals in recent years in an effort to keep them from illicit fentanyl manufacturers. But in America, and elsewhere, trade in most precursor materials is legal when they are purchased for legitimate business or research purposes.

The focus of many U.S. laws is on the *intent* of a transaction, making it a federal crime to buy or sell such otherwise legal chemicals with the aim of making fentanyl.

The Reuters reporters had no intention of making fentanyl with the precursors they purchased, and took no steps to do so. In China and Mexico, the chemicals they bought generally aren't banned or restricted. The journalists bought no immediate precursors.

Their ability to readily obtain fentanyl ingredients demonstrated the challenge of plugging the precursor pipeline, said Todd Robinson, head of the U.S. State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs.

He said authorities are balancing efforts to protect the public by stanching the flow to illicit producers without imperiling legitimate industries that rely on these chemicals.

"We continue to want to walk that fine line," he said. "It's not easy."

Many Chinese suppliers, by contrast, openly marketed their wares as ingredients for illicit drugs. Two sellers, for instance, provided molecular diagrams of fentanyl precursors – along with instructions on how to chemically tweak them to get them ready to be synthesized into fentanyl.

China has taken some steps to constrict the pipeline. In 2019, it placed fentanyl and its analogs under national control, effectively ending illicit exports of the finished product. Last year, China warned chemical exporters not to violate foreign drug laws. But it has yet to control three common fentanyl-making chemicals that the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs in 2022 added to a list of precursors that member states – including China – are required to regulate.

“What we sell is completely legal in China, but the United States always uses this matter to criticize us, and they even pose as buyers to get our information and slander our country”

“Jenny,” sales agent with Chinese chemical seller Amavel Biotech

Liu Pengyu, spokesperson for the Chinese Embassy in Washington, said in a statement that China is close to implementing controls on three fentanyl precursors. It's also “cracking

down on illegal activities involving smuggling, manufacturing, trafficking and abuse of fentanyl substances and their precursor chemicals” as part of a special campaign, Liu said.

He did not address questions about why Reuters was able to buy fentanyl-making chemicals and equipment from Chinese suppliers who were openly catering to the illicit drug trade. But Liu said China is targeting online advertising related to fentanyl and its precursors, and has shuttered 14 online platforms, closed 332 company accounts, terminated 1,016 online stores and erased more than 146,000 online posts. Beijing has tough anti-narcotics laws, he added.

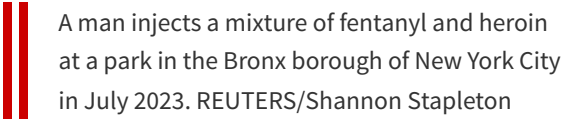
“Scapegoating others, especially China that has been trying to help, cannot resolve the U.S. problem of fentanyl,” Liu said. “What the U.S. needs to do is to reduce domestic demand, strengthen prescription control, (and) step up (its) drug awareness campaign.”

In Mexico, lawmakers last year increased reporting requirements for legal trade in precursor chemicals and stiffened criminal penalties for illicit use. But many fentanyl-making chemicals are still not included in this legislation. Unlike in the United States, where narcotics regulations can be updated by federal agencies, in Mexico, lawmakers must usually approve significant changes, making for a lengthier process.

The office of Mexico's attorney general, which investigates and prosecutes drug crimes, did not respond to requests for comment. Nor did the foreign ministry, the national customs agency or the office of the presidency.

U.S. controls, too, have gaps. Reuters obtained the final precursor it needed from a U.S. chemical wholesaler – using one of the world's most popular online shopping sites.





Fentanyl marked a breakthrough in pain management when it was introduced in the 1960s, after being developed by Belgian chemist Paul Janssen. At the time, it was the most potent synthetic opioid ever created and went on to become a mainstay in hospitals to ease surgical pain. It and other synthetic opioids are still legally produced and widely prescribed for sedation and pain relief.

Like heroin, fentanyl delivers a euphoric high. An overdose can cause fatal respiratory failure.

Fentanyl found its way to U.S. streets in the 1970s as “China White,” a niche form of heroin flecked with fentanyl. But the real explosion came in the 2010s on the back of epidemic abuse of prescription painkillers such as Purdue Pharma’s OxyContin, a version of oxycodone.

After the U.S. made it tougher for doctors to prescribe these meds, some users turned to illicit fentanyl. At first, street fentanyl was made in China and sold through so-called dark web marketplaces.

When Chinese fentanyl exports dried up in 2019 after Beijing’s crackdown, Mexican cartels took over manufacturing the finished product. Chinese chemical producers supplied cartels with raw materials, according to law enforcement officials.

Some of these ingredients go straight to Mexico. But the U.S. has become an important transshipment hub. The sheer volume of merchandise arriving daily in America on flights from China makes it easy to sneak in small boxes of chemicals. Narcos then route the precursors to labs in Mexico and send finished fentanyl north to the United States. U.S. Customs and Border Protection data show an explosion of fentanyl seizures at the Mexican border in recent years.



The Mexican Navy seized a clandestine lab suspected of producing synthetic drugs in Mexico’s Sinaloa state in a photo released on March 7, 2024. Secretaría de Marina/Handout via REUTERS

Since 2015, the U.S. overdose death rate has doubled, reaching 32.6 per 100,000 people in 2022, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

One factor driving the deadly toll: Fentanyl is far more potent than oxycodone and other prescription opioids. Another: It is a cinch to make.

There’s no need for vast tracts of land to grow crops, as is the case with cocaine (made from coca leaves) or heroin (derived from opium poppies). Compared to the synthetic drug meth, fentanyl is safer and simpler to produce and requires smaller amounts of chemicals, chemists say.

That efficiency is due partly to an innovation by scientists with India’s Ministry of Defense. The team was tasked with finding a simplified method of producing the surgical analgesic to help treat battlefield injuries, and in 2005, it published a streamlined process for synthesizing fentanyl. The procedure is known as the “Gupta method,” after the main author of the paper, Pradeep

Kumar Gupta. Illicit fentanyl makers would embrace the technique and put their own spins on it. Descriptions of the process are now widely available online.

Gupta could not be reached for comment. India’s Ministry of Defense did not respond to a request for comment.



A Reuters journalist chats with a Chinese chemical seller about the availability of 1-boc-4-piperidone, a core fentanyl precursor, in December 2023. “Eva Luna” is the reporter’s username. REUTERS

In assembling a fentanyl shopping list, Reuters followed a version of the Gupta method popular with illicit manufacturers. The process requires a piperidine-based compound and three additional precursors – (2-bromoethyl)benzene, propionyl chloride and aniline – as well as a handful of secondary ingredients.

The reporters began by looking for supplies on the dark web, a corner of the internet rife with illicit commerce. Accessing it requires the use of an anonymizing web browser to keep everyone’s identity and location secret.

The team first scored at a drug marketplace called Breaking Bad. The name is a nod to the American television series about a meth-cooking antihero. The site’s moderator goes by “Heisenberg,” the nickname of the protagonist.

Dozens of sellers there offered various chemicals needed to manufacture illicit drugs. Many touted the phony packaging they used to disguise shipments, including engine oil containers and bags of coffee.

In response to questions submitted by Reuters, site administrator Heisenberg said Breaking Bad is a marketplace for some types of drugs, but that fentanyl and its precursors are “poisons” whose sale is prohibited on the site.

Reuters, however, purchased fentanyl precursors last year from two sellers who advertised such chemicals on the platform.

The Gupta method explained

Named after Indian scientist Pradeep Kumar Gupta, who published a streamlined recipe for synthesizing fentanyl in 2005, the original Gupta method calls for just three steps and no specialized lab equipment. Since then, illicit manufacturers have put their own spins on the process. Here’s one common modification. The aim is to piece the four molecular groups together like a puzzle to form the finished structure.

Chemicals added
in each step

3 Completion of the fentanyl structure

The final step uses propionyl chloride to add the **acyl group**, the last piece of the puzzle.

Acyl group

Piperidine ring

1 Forming the precursor

The **aniline ring** is added to the piperidine ring using aniline, an essential chemical used to make common products such as dyes and rubber.

Aniline ring

Alkyl chain

2 Creating the intermediate

The **alkyl chain** is added using (2-bromoethyl)benzene, a chemical commonly found in pharmaceuticals and fragrances. This forms **4-ANPP**, an immediate precursor that is tightly regulated.

Sources: Journal of Chemical Research and Reuters reporting | REUTERS/Daisy Chung

It turned out that prowling the dark web wasn’t necessary to find precursors: Vendors abound on the regular internet. Reuters located sellers via their company websites, on an international chemical marketplace, and through crude digital advertisements scattered across the Web.

Those ads all followed the same pattern. Almost every known chemical has been assigned a unique code that’s listed in an official chemical industry registry. Sellers create simple ads by superimposing a precursor’s code – CAS 40064-34-4, for example – over a photo of white powder, along with a phone number.

Such an ad would signify little to most shoppers. But fentanyl makers searching for chemicals by their registry numbers would find hundreds of these ads in what amounts to a handy digital directory of suppliers.

In total, three Reuters journalists interacted with nearly 50 different sellers. The sales agents insisted on communicating via secure message channels such as Telegram, Signal and WhatsApp. The chats were mostly in English, occasionally in Spanish. If a sale was agreed upon, the reporters paid for the goods, almost exclusively in crypto. The reporters conducted the deals using message-app usernames, as is standard on the sites, and weren’t asked to provide their full names.

Most sales agents used feminine Western names, including Mary, Phoebe, Daisy, Sara and Justine. Their profile pictures were mostly of young, attractive Asian women. A seller who gave her name as Xiao Tong admitted in a March 2024 chat that her photo wasn’t genuine. “But I look good myself, haha,” she wrote on WhatsApp.

Sales agent “Daisy” touts seamless shipping of a fentanyl precursor to Mexico in a February 2024 chat with Reuters.

“Lara” in May 2024 confirms that a precursor chemical that Reuters had ordered is wending its way from China to the United States.

Chemical seller “Stella” explains in April 2024 that her company ships by plane exclusively. Unlike methamphetamine chemicals, most fentanyl ingredients move by air, not sea.

Simon, a seller at another outlet, was eager to help a potential customer make the right selection. He confirmed that a chemical Reuters inquired about could be used to make fentanyl, but suggested an efficient alternative.

“Subsequent production steps are reduced, you can study it,” Simon wrote in an August 2023 Signal chat.

To vet that advice, Reuters consulted Alex J. Krotulski, a chemist who studies illicit drugs at the nonprofit Center for Forensic Science Research and Education near Philadelphia. He confirmed that Simon’s recommended precursor would, in fact, take fewer steps to transform into fentanyl.

A sales rep named Sunnee was even more explicit. During a chat in April on Telegram, Sunnee sent a molecular diagram of “the best piperidine product.” Sunnee followed up two days later with instructions on how to chemically change the compound so that it could easily be turned into fentanyl.

“Keep stirring until a large number of bubbles overflow from the mixing barrel,” one of the steps read.

Krotulski said Sunnee’s instructions were sound.

“Jenny” in August 2023 pushes Xylazine, an animal tranquilizer that’s increasingly being mixed into fentanyl by drug traffickers.

“Simon” in August 2023 confirms that a chemical Reuters inquired about can be used to make fentanyl.

“Xiao Tong,” who sold Reuters fentanyl precursors, talks about her working conditions in April 2024.

Seven Chinese suppliers accounted for 11 of the 12 authentic precursors Reuters bought. Reporters found two of these sellers on Breaking Bad, one through the online marketplace ChemicalBook, and one via the vendor’s website. Reporters located the other three Chinese suppliers via digital ads – one that appeared on the audio platform SoundCloud, and two that surfaced in Google Image searches.

ChemicalBook didn’t respond to requests for comment.

SoundCloud said that it, like other social media platforms, has been “targeted by bad actors for the purpose of advertising illegal drugs and dangerous substances.” The company said it’s boosting investment in content moderation to identify and remove such ads.

Google said it relies on local laws and court decisions to determine whether content is illegal and should be removed from its search results. It said Google Image queries for these ads were “very uncommon” and that it has received no official guidance with respect to culling them from search results.

While it was easy to source the goods, it proved far more difficult to identify exactly who sold them.

Reuters couldn’t determine whether any of the Chinese suppliers were the actual manufacturers of the chemicals received or simply middlemen. Nor could the news organization determine where the operations were located. Reporters could dig up nothing more than phone numbers for two of the sellers. For the others, corporate websites and Chinese business-registry documents yielded addresses. But when Reuters visited these locations, it found no visible presence of the companies there.

The address listed in a government database for a precursor seller known as Hubei Amarvel Biotech, for example, led to a Wuhan office tower. A visit to the listed room number showed another company occupying that space, while the building’s management told Reuters that the chemical supplier had never rented space there.

Amarvel is the operation that sales agent Jenny worked for. It is one of three Chinese suppliers that sold Reuters precursors after having been indicted last year by U.S. federal prosecutors. The Justice Department accused Amarvel of exporting “vast quantities” of chemicals used to make fentanyl and similar drugs. Two Amarvel suspects – Wang Qingzhou and Chen Yiyi – are in jail awaiting trial in New York. They have pleaded not guilty. A third, unidentified suspect remains at large.

Wang’s attorney, Leonardo Aldridge, and Chen’s attorney, Marlon Kirton, declined to comment.

REUTERS VIDEO



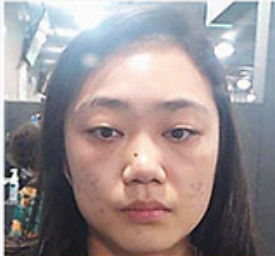
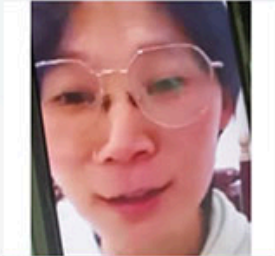
Inside the fentanyl pipeline



U.S. v. HUBEI AMARVEL BIOTECH CO., ET AL.

OPERATION KILLER CHEMICALS

AMARVEL BIOTECH

COMPANY	PRINCIPAL	MANAGER	SALES REPRESENTATIVE
 <div>AMARVEL BIOTECH</div>	 <div>QINGZHOU WANG a/k/a "Bruce" IN CUSTODY</div>	 <div>YIYI CHEN a/k/a "Chiron" IN CUSTODY</div>	 <div>FNU LNU a/k/a "Er Yang" a/k/a "Anita"</div>

Three Chinese nationals associated with Hubei Amarvel Biotech are shown in a 2023 presentation by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) about an undercover operation that led to indictments of these suspects on charges related to importing fentanyl precursors into the U.S. Wang Qingzhou and Chen Yiyi are in custody and have pleaded not guilty; their lawyers declined to comment. A third, unidentified suspect remains at large. (FNU LNU stands for "First Name Unknown, Last Name Unknown.") DEA/Screenshot

A Mexico-based Reuters reporter initially contacted Amarvel via Telegram in July 2023 to inquire about fentanyl precursors, a few weeks after the grand jury indictment was unsealed in New York. Sales agent Jenny denounced U.S. drug policy and the case against the company.

“What we sell is completely legal in China, but the United States always uses this matter to criticize us, and they even pose as buyers to get our information and slander our country,” Jenny wrote in Spanish. “I hate all Americans, they use it (fentanyl) themselves and blame us.”


Two other suppliers to Reuters have been indicted in separate cases by federal prosecutors in Florida.

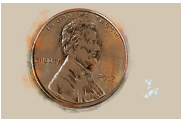
One is Anhui Ruihan Technology. It was charged with attempted importation of fentanyl precursors and attempted international money laundering, according to a grand jury indictment filed in September 2023. No one has been arrested in that case.


Anhui Ruihan’s website continues to offer chemicals that can be used to make illicit drugs. Reuters purchased one kilogram of the fentanyl precursor (2-bromoethyl)benzene for \$150 from the company in March 2024.

Anhui Ruihan did not respond to requests for comment.

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Also indicted was Jiangsu Bangdeya New Material, a pharmaceutical company in Jiangsu, China. It was charged along with its alleged owner and operator, Wang Jiantong, in September 2023. The charges included conspiracy to import and distribute protonitazene and metonitazene – synthetic opioids that traffickers mix with fentanyl to create even more powerful drugs.

Wang was declared a fugitive in October 2023 by a federal judge in Miami. Wang could not be reached for comment.

Jiangsu Bangdeya continued to sell synthetic opioid ingredients. In May 2024, Reuters purchased the fentanyl precursor propionyl chloride from a company sales agent named Lara.

In June, Reuters followed up with all the companies and sales agents from whom it had purchased chemicals and equipment to explain that these transactions were part of an investigation of the fentanyl supply chain. The news agency asked them a set of questions.

Lara of Jiangsu Bangdeya was among the few who responded. In a WhatsApp chat in June, she defended the May sale of propionyl chloride, saying the chemical is legal in China. She sent a list of its uses, including the manufacture of medicines and pesticides. Lara said her company follows Chinese law and that it wasn't her responsibility to know how foreign customers would use the products abroad.

"This product is legal in our country," Lara wrote. "But I don't know what you will do with it when exported to your country."

In online ads, the company listed a piperidine whose only known use is to manufacture fentanyl.

Jenny, the seller for Amarvel, denied selling fentanyl precursors to Reuters or any other buyers in a Telegram message in June. Asked whether Amarvel or Beijing shared some of the responsibility for the U.S. fentanyl crisis, she bristled.

"If you think the Chinese government is responsible to the United States, fuck you, Yankee," she wrote.

The Chinese Embassy in Washington and China's Ministry of Public Security didn't respond to questions about why Amarvel, Anhui Ruihan and Jiangsu Bangdeya were still operating after being indicted by American authorities. But the ministry said Chinese anti-narcotics agents have stepped up cooperation and intelligence-sharing with their U.S. counterparts. These steps are bearing fruit, it said, such as the recent arrest of a Chinese national accused of laundering drug money for Mexican drug cartels.



■ VIDEO: Reuters created pills resembling street fentanyl using equipment and a benign blue filler purchased online. The tablets contained no precursors or finished fentanyl powder. REUTERS/Andrew Kelly



The news agency purchased a metal mold to stamp its blue pills with “M” on one side and “30” on the other. Much of the illicit fentanyl sold in the United States bears these distinct markings, which mimic a generic version of the prescription painkiller oxycodone. REUTERS/Andrew Kelly

Reporters also obtained a pill press and a metal mold that could be used to make counterfeit M30 tablets from a Chinese supplier called Besttabletpress.com. The price was \$450.99.

Pill presses are illegal for individuals to buy or own in Mexico without government authorization. The U.S. generally allows such sales, as long as the equipment isn’t used for illicit purposes, among other requirements. Reuters had the pill press shipped to the United States.

Besttabletpress.com is candid about one potential use of its products. In a June 2023 post, the site’s unnamed administrator explained “how to make M30 tablets with a manual press die.”

Besttabletpress.com did not respond to requests for comment sent by Reuters in mid-June, and a man who answered the phone at the number listed on the company website said a reporter had the wrong number. The site was taken down soon afterwards.

The DOJ’s Hornbuckle said the DEA routinely investigates transactions involving pill-stamping machinery that can be diverted to the illicit fentanyl trade. He described U.S. regulatory requirements on fentanyl precursors and related equipment as “robust” and said violators face a host of penalties, including criminal prosecution.



In November, China’s National Narcotics Control Commission advised chemical manufacturers and brokers to be wary of selling precursors where they are controlled or illegal, such as Mexico and the United States, warning they could face charges in such countries. The guidance also cautioned companies to watch out for “long-arm jurisdiction” and “phishing law enforcement” — apparent references to U.S. anti-narcotics investigators who have been running sting operations against Chinese firms. The Chinese Embassy in Washington declined to elaborate.

To gauge the guidance’s impact, Reuters contacted Jenny at Amarnel in February. This time, a different reporter, using a new phone number, sought to buy more chemicals, for delivery to the United States instead of Mexico.

Jenny said the company no longer shipped fentanyl precursors anywhere in the Americas. “China police ask us be careful USA spy,” Jenny wrote in English. “They pretend buyer.”

Jenny offered to send fentanyl precursors to Germany or other places outside the Americas. Drug traffickers sometimes use Europe to transship Chinese chemicals to Mexico, according to security sources.

Reuters reporter Maurice Tamman totes a fentanyl precursor delivered to him in New Jersey in March 2024 from a seller in China. REUTERS/Maurice Tamman

Anhui Ruihan was also informed of the delay. It sent both FedEx and the reporter a completed form listing the contents as pigment ink worth \$10. The Anhui Ruihan agent said all the document needed was the journalist's signature so that U.S. Customs would release the package for delivery.

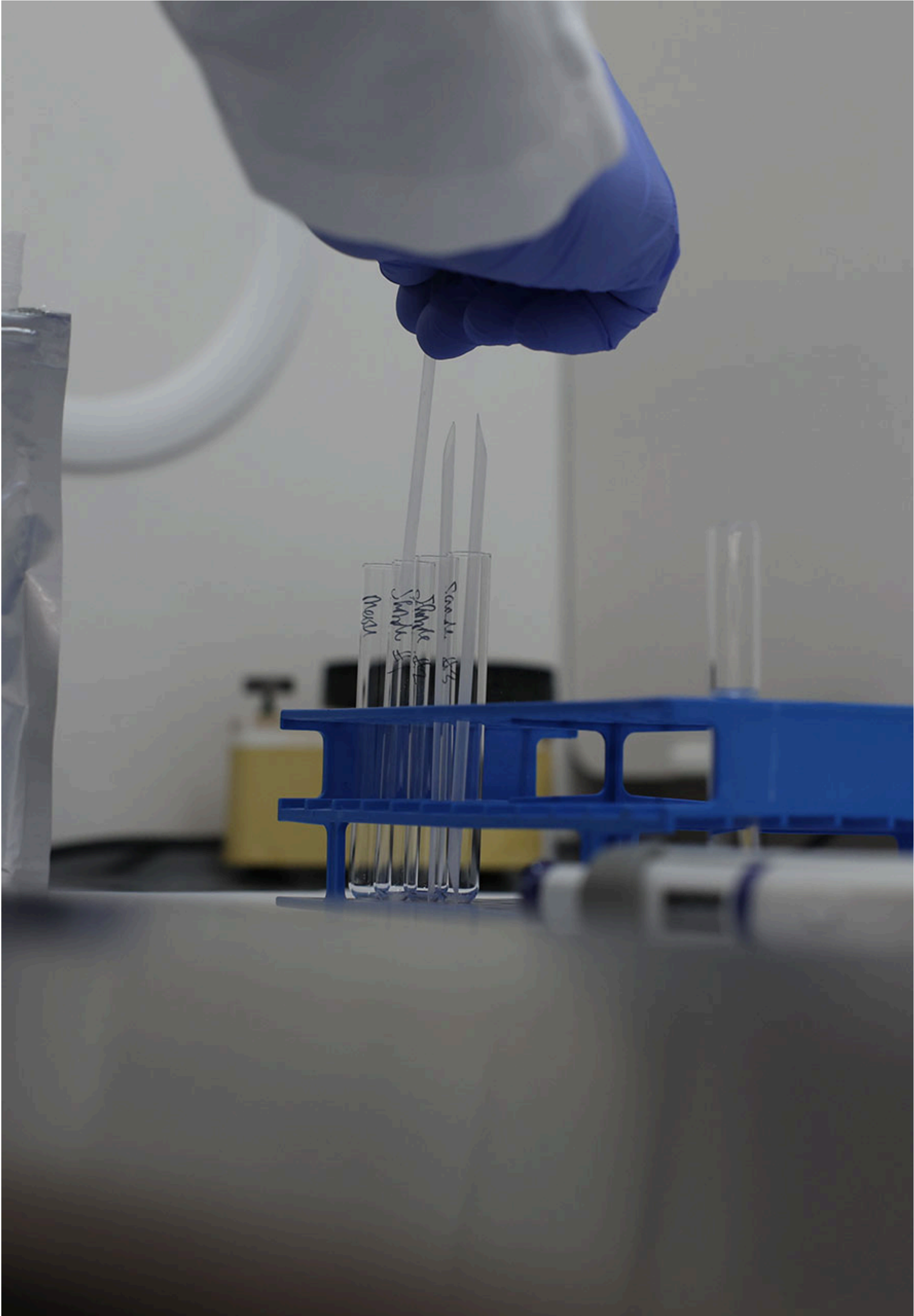
The reporter didn't sign that document. He submitted an accurate declaration to FedEx, listing the purchased chemical as (2-bromoethyl)benzene, valued at \$150.

That same day, U.S. Customs cleared the package, and FedEx delivered it to New Jersey less than 24 hours later.

Asked why the shipment was allowed in, FedEx said (2-bromoethyl)benzene is not on the DEA's controlled substances list and that its team members followed the correct procedures based on the information provided.

U.S. Customs declined to comment on specific purchases made by Reuters. But a senior agency official said the story highlighted the need for strengthening U.S. laws and regulations on small packages entering the country, and for improving intelligence and cooperation with China to stop fentanyl chemicals before they arrive on U.S. shores.

"We can't seize our way out of the fentanyl threat," she said. "We have to be working collaboratively across the U.S. government and with our foreign partners."



Two days later, three Reuters journalists met chemist Krotulski at his laboratory in leafy Horsham, Pennsylvania. They brought along a red duffle bag. Inside was the bottle of (2-bromoethyl)benzene and a pair of Mylar bags containing two powdered chemicals purchased from other suppliers.

Krotulski’s employer, the Center for Forensic Science Research and Education, tests drug samples for law enforcement agencies, addiction treatment centers and other clients.

Krotulski, the director for toxicology and chemistry, checked the Reuters buys to determine whether they were authentic. He placed small amounts of each chemical in test tubes, mixed the substances with an organic solvent and put them in three vials. Then he ran the vials through a mass spectrometer, a machine that detects the molecular makeup of chemicals.

Independent chemists consulted by Reuters said that a dozen chemicals the news agency purchased from various sellers could be used to make fentanyl. REUTERS/Shannon Stapleton



Chemist Alex J. Krotulski in his laboratory at the Center for Forensic Science Research and Education near Philadelphia. The facility tests drug samples for law enforcement agencies and other clients. REUTERS/Shannon Stapleton

The verdict: The clear liquid was the real deal: (2-bromoethyl)benzene.

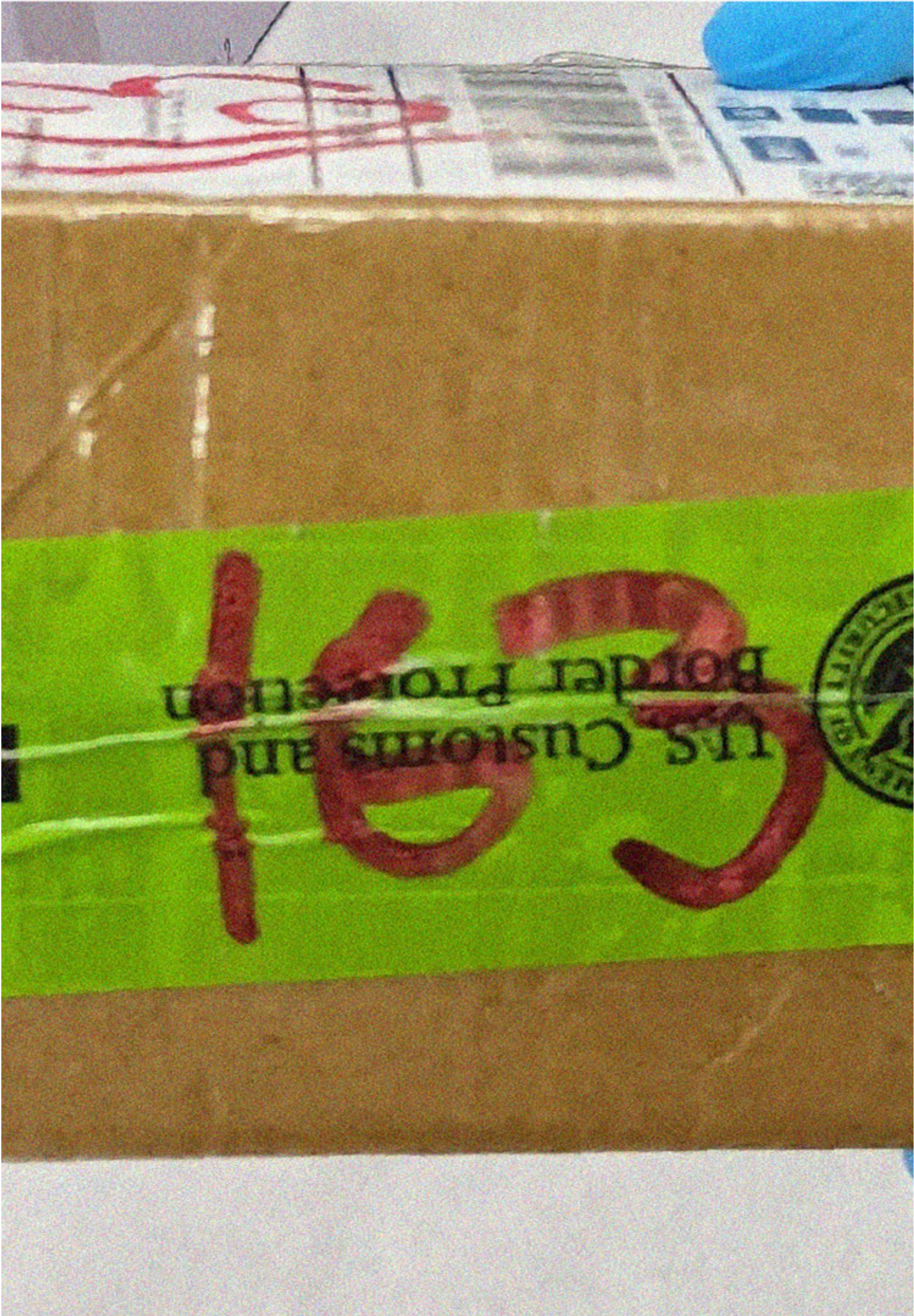
Next up was one of the powders. It was supposed to be para-fluoro-4-AP. The chemical turned out to be lidocaine, a topical analgesic commonly used to cut cocaine, but not as a fentanyl precursor. A fake. Reuters had bought it for \$380 in Bitcoin in March.

The third substance, too, wasn't as advertised. It was meant to be 1-boc-4-AP, a fentanyl precursor that's regulated in the United States, but unregulated in China. It turned out to be para-fluoro-boc-4-AP.

Krotulski said para-fluoro-boc-4-AP is a closely related chemical that fentanyl cooks can substitute into their usual process. The final product would be fluoro fentanyl, an analog indistinguishable from fentanyl in its effect.

"It'll still get people high," Krotulski said.

Reuters bought the para-fluoro-boc-4-AP in February 2024 from sales agent Sunnee at Shandong Xiju Biotechnology, for \$260 in Bitcoin. The company didn't respond to requests for comment.



There was another surprise in the deal with Sunnee: Her company sent just 100 milligrams of the precursor rather than the kilo Reuters had ordered. To make up for it, Sunnee offered the chance to purchase a new, and thus unregulated, chemical. Reuters accepted, paying \$150 in Bitcoin.

Sunnee sent a hand-drawn diagram of the compound via Telegram, along with instructions on how to chemically alter the substance so that it could easily be transformed into fentanyl. The instructions referred to the chemical as BOC-X.

An air cargo package from China containing a fentanyl precursor was inspected by U.S. Customs and Border Protection, then cleared for delivery to Reuters in New Jersey.
REUTERS/Maurice Tamman

In early May, a journalist returned to Krotulski’s lab with 300 grams of the mystery powder.

Krotulski’s colleague Joshua DeBord ran a sample of the khaki-colored substance through the spectrometer. The results stumped him. He didn’t recognize the compound’s “signature,” a pattern displayed as spikes on the monitor indicating the presence of particular chemical groups. It didn’t match anything in the lab’s database of hundreds of thousands of chemicals.

Krotulski followed up a day later. After comparing the signature with the nearest matches in the database, he had concluded that BOC-X was very close to what Sunnee had promised. It was not on the list of U.S.-regulated chemicals. It could be used to make a version of fentanyl. And while it wasn’t entirely novel, Krotulski said it was a little-known designer precursor. He dubbed it ortho-methyl-boc-4-AP, after its unique molecular structure.

His discovery highlights how chemical suppliers and fentanyl makers try to stay a step ahead of U.S. officials by cooking up ever more obscure piperidine compounds.

When Reuters received delivery of the BOC-X in New Jersey in May 2024, the box was sealed with a strip of green tape bearing the words: “U.S. Customs and Border Protection. EXAMINED.”

Translation: U.S. Customs stopped the package when it reached U.S. soil, took a look inside, and sent it on its way. The tracking information didn’t note where the inspection occurred.

An identical chemical from a different seller showed up a week later in Mexico City, in a box labeled “computer accessories.” Inside were two vacuum-sealed bags of “full price kittens food,” each concealing a powdered chemical.



Chinese sellers of fentanyl ingredients often ship chemicals with phony labels or deceptive packaging to evade customs authorities. This shipment to Reuters in Mexico City came sealed in cat food bags. REUTERS/Raquel Cunha

Testing at the Institute of Chemistry at the National Autonomous University of Mexico confirmed that the substance was an authentic piperidine precursor.

Reuters had bought these from Wuhan Hantian Biotechnology in April, paying a total of \$750 in Bitcoin. The sales rep, Xiao Tong, was the agent who had admitted that her avatar was fake.

Later, in June, Reuters followed up with Xiao Tong to seek her comment on the precursor sales. She said her boss had told her the company didn’t sell drugs and that she didn’t know that thousands of people die every year from fentanyl overdoses. She said she’d recently quit the job. As for the piperidine precursor she’d sent Reuters, “if it harms people, it’s a good thing that you are a reporter and haven’t circulated it,” she said.

RELATED



Podcast: Inside the fentanyl supply chain

Having obtained several packages of authentic piperidines and two other precursors, the reporters had three of the four essential ingredients on their shopping list. The Gupta method called for just one more: aniline. An unregulated fentanyl precursor, aniline is also widely used by makers of pharmaceuticals, rubber, explosives and textiles.

A quick search online turned up a source: Amazon.com.

A reporter ordered and received a 100-milliliter bottle of aniline through the e-commerce giant’s marketplace from Carolina Chemical, a North Carolina-based supplier of industrial chemicals.

Robert Smith, chief executive of Carolina Chemical, said his company doesn’t manufacture the aniline it sells and declined to disclose his source of supply. Carolina sells very little aniline, he said, and requires customers to state why they’re purchasing certain chemicals when stipulated by law.

Amazon noted that aniline is a legal and widely available product. The online retailer said it requires all the goods it offers to comply with applicable laws, regulations and company policies.

Reuters also placed orders for the remaining and highly common secondary ingredients of fentanyl, including ammonia and acetone, and for a protective suit, a full-face respirator, beakers and other gear.

All were purchased on Amazon.com and arrived within two weeks.

With that, the reporters had all it takes to produce one of the deadliest highs on earth. ■

The eight suppliers who sold precursors to Reuters

Reuters bought fentanyl precursor chemicals from seven Chinese sellers and one in the United States. Below, a look at the suppliers (as they identified themselves in ads or chats), the chemicals they sold to Reuters, and what they said about the transactions after learning the purchases were part of the news agency’s investigation of the fentanyl trade.

	RCLab	Hebei Xinsheng New Material Technology	Hubei A
<	para-fluoro-boc-4-AP	1-boc-4-piperidone	1-boc-4-p
	1-boc-4-piperidone		
	\$220	\$206	\$440
	The seller could not be reached for comment.	Contacted by Reuters via WhatsApp about the chemical sale, the sales agent said the company didn’t carry that product, then blocked the reporter.	Contacted by Reuters via WhatsApp about the chemical sale, the sales agent said the company didn’t carry that product, then blocked the reporter.

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FENTANYL EXPRESS

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Fentanyl Express: The Supply Chain

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Art direction: Catherine Tai
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FENTANYL EXPRESS | PART 2

How fentanyl traffickers are exploiting a U.S. trade law to kill Americans

Hundreds of millions of small packages pour into the U.S. each year from China – some with fentanyl ingredients stashed inside. Now, a fight is shaping up over whether and how to undo the rule change that helped set off this deadly import boom.

By [DRAZEN JORGIC](#), [LAURA GOTTESDIENER](#), [KRISTINA COOKE](#) and [STEPHEN EISENHAMMER](#) | Filed Oct. 1, 2024, 11 a.m. GMT

IN JANUARY 2023, U.S. federal agents raided the home of a Tucson maintenance worker who had a side hustle hauling packages across the border to Mexico.

They estimate that over the previous two years, the gray-bearded courier had ferried about 7,000 kilos of fentanyl-making chemicals to an operative of the Sinaloa Cartel. That’s 15,432 pounds, sufficient to produce 5.3 billion pills – enough to kill every living soul in the United States several times over. The chemicals had traveled by air from China to Los Angeles, were flown or ground-shipped to Tucson, then driven the last miles to Mexico by the freelance delivery driver.

Even more astonishing is what fed this circuitous route: a few paragraphs buried in a 2016 U.S. trade law supported by major parcel carriers and e-commerce platforms that made it easier for imported goods, including those fentanyl ingredients, to enter the United States.

This change to trade policy has upended the logistics of international drug trafficking. In the past few years, the United States has become a major transshipment point for Chinese-made chemicals used by Mexico’s cartels to manufacture the fentanyl that’s devastating U.S. communities, anti-narcotics agents say. Traffickers have pulled it off by riding a surge in e-commerce that’s flooding the U.S. with packages, helped by that trade provision.

In short, a regulatory tweak fueling America’s online shopping habit is also enabling the country’s crippling addiction to synthetic opioids.

So is an immutable aspect of international trade: Transporting goods is largely an honor system that’s easy for bad actors to exploit. Senders are supposed to tell the truth about what’s inside the boxes they export. But shipping documents are easy to falsify, and contraband fairly simple to camouflage. Authorities can’t inspect every box without bringing global commerce to a halt.

“It just makes it a monumental task to find that needle in a haystack,” said Patrick McElwain, a senior official with Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), an agency tasked with disrupting illicit fentanyl supply chains.

U.S. lawmakers inadvertently turbocharged this problem as part of the 2016 legislation by loosening a regulation known as *de minimis*. Individual parcels of clothing, gadgets and other merchandise valued at up to \$800 – one of the highest such limits in the world – now enter the country duty-free and with minimal paperwork and inspections. Fully 90% of all shipments now enter the country this way, and most arrive by air, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection. The liberalized trade rule has been a boon for retailers and e-commerce platforms such as China-founded Temu and Shein that ship merchandise directly to buyers’ doorsteps.



IN THIS SERIES

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Imported goods await inspection by U.S. Customs at a facility near Los Angeles International Airport in May. Some 684,000 shipments arrived daily at LAX in fiscal 2023. REUTERS/Mike Blake

America’s ports of entry are now so jammed with these packages, most of them from China, that just a tiny fraction of the nearly 4 million *de minimis* parcels arriving on U.S. shores daily are inspected by U.S. Customs. Security officials say that has made it easy for Mexican traffickers to sneak in small boxes of fentanyl ingredients from China disguised as mundane household items. Even modest amounts of these chemicals, known as precursors, can produce vast numbers of pills.

Traffickers then route these precursors south to Mexico, often using informal parcel handlers such as the Tucson maintenance man. There, powerful crime syndicates such as the Sinaloa Cartel and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel use the chemicals to manufacture industrial quantities of fentanyl. The finished product is smuggled back north to the United States, where it’s powering the biggest drug crisis in U.S. history. Overdoses from synthetic opioids killed nearly 75,000 people in the U.S. last year alone, government figures show. Recent data suggest the pace of deaths may be slackening, but overdose fatalities remain alarmingly high, with hundreds of people dying weekly.

Stopping inbound fentanyl chemicals from reaching narcos has become paramount for law enforcement. Close to 3.8 tons of precursors were seized by U.S. Customs in fiscal 2023, nearly quadruple the total in 2021, when the agency first began collecting this data.

But security officials say they’re overmatched. The U.S. received 1 billion *de minimis* packages in fiscal 2023 with a declared value of \$54.5 billion. That’s twice the number of parcels from four years earlier, government figures show. Mounds of sneakers, tools and toasters crowding customs warehouses are the perfect cover for random boxes of fentanyl ingredients to hide.

“We’ve lost control of what’s coming in,” said Rep. Earl Blumenauer, an Oregon Democrat who has proposed legislation to overhaul the system. “When you have a billion packages coming in, there’s no way you can keep track of illicit, unsafe, illegal products.”

A billion boxes

Back in fiscal 2015, before the *de minimis* limit was raised to \$800, some 134 million packages entered the U.S. via this streamlined entry system. In 2023, the total was just over 1 billion packages. In 2024, that figure is even higher: nearly 1.4 billion for the fiscal year. Various factors have driven this growth, including an explosion in online shopping.



Sources: U.S. Customs and Border Protection | REUTERS/Daisy Chung

Last month, President Joe Biden moved to strip *de minimis* eligibility from a host of Chinese imports to end what the White House described as Chinese companies’ “abuse” of the tariff-free exemption, a characterization that Beijing disputes.

Senior administration officials declined to estimate how much *de minimis* package volume might fall as a result of the proposal. In its announcement, the White House said that about 40% of U.S. imports, including 70% of Chinese textiles and apparel, would become ineligible for the tariff exemption.

But the rule-making process can take months, potentially leaving it to Biden’s successor to follow through once he steps down in January. The White House acknowledged its executive action is limited, and has asked federal lawmakers to pass comprehensive changes, including more resources for border officials.

“To really address the full scope of the issues with *de minimis* and bring down the overall volume of *de minimis* shipments, Congress will have to take action,” a senior administration official told Reuters.

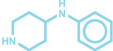
Still, the problem is bigger than this one trade law, U.S. Customs officials say. Small U.S.-bound parcels are packed together inside larger containers, known as “master cartons,” for easy transport. Imagine a set of Russian nesting dolls, but comprised of thousands of boxes tucked inside other boxes. Master cartons are an indispensable tool of global trade, one that allows carriers to whisk vast quantities of merchandise around the world in the era of e-commerce. But fentanyl precursor traffickers take advantage of this legitimate shipping practice to hide chemicals, regardless of whether the boxes enter through *de minimis* or another customs program.

Over the past year, Reuters learned first-hand how easy it is for fentanyl ingredients to gain entry. As part of its investigation into the global chemical trade behind America’s opioid crisis, reporters purchased multiple precursors from Chinese sellers for shipment to the United States that independent lab tests later confirmed could be used to produce fentanyl.

Those chemicals ranged in price from \$130 to \$260, falling well below the \$800 *de minimis* limit, and were delivered much like any other package. Some of these substances are not regulated under U.S. law, posing an additional challenge to law enforcement to stop them.

To understand how cartels have exploited America’s hyper-efficient import system to turn the U.S. into a key transit hub for precursors, Reuters spoke to more than 80 current and former law enforcement officials, diplomats, trade specialists, lawmakers, chemical suppliers and drug traffickers in the U.S., Mexico and China. The three nations are at the heart of the illicit fentanyl trade as the world’s largest consumer, manufacturer and raw materials supplier. The journalists also visited a package inspection facility near Los Angeles International Airport (LAX), one of the largest and most technologically sophisticated air cargo hubs in the United States. LAX received 684,000 air shipments daily in fiscal 2023.

Among Reuters’ findings: Some Chinese chemical suppliers are so confident the precursors they sell will evade detection that they offer a free replacement if authorities nab a shipment.



“It’s unfortunate and ironic how they’re using the U.S. trade system to come back full circle and then kill Americans”

Eddy Wang, Homeland Security Investigations special agent, on narcos smuggling fentanyl chemicals

With U.S.-China ties fraying under the strain of an intense geopolitical rivalry, the once-obscure issue of *de minimis* is gaining bipartisan attention on Capitol Hill. A handful of bills, including the Import Security and Fairness Act sponsored by Blumenauer, seek to go further than the White House proposal by excluding not just some, but all Chinese imports from streamlined, tariff-free entry. The aim is to protect U.S. industries from cheap imports and disrupt the flow of illicit goods, including fentanyl chemicals.

Pro-trade groups are lining up in opposition. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce says such measures would disrupt e-commerce, raise prices for shoppers, and overburden customs officials by forcing them to clear hundreds of millions more packages through traditional channels. The group favors more government funding for additional border-protection personnel and better sleuthing.

“The answer isn’t shutting off trade,” said John Drake, the chamber’s vice president for transportation, infrastructure and supply chain policy. “The answer is updating U.S. Customs’ tools comprehensively to reflect this reality.”

But the U.S. cannot escape the fact that *de minimis* rules that feed consumers’ desire for inexpensive goods have created a backdoor for fentanyl chemicals to enter the country virtually unchecked. That’s aiding the very traffickers Washington seeks to stop, said Eddy Wang, special agent in charge of the Los Angeles division of HSI.

“It’s unfortunate and ironic how they’re using the U.S. trade system to come back full circle and then kill Americans,” Wang said.

A GRAPHIC EXPLAINER

How narcos funnel fentanyl ingredients through the U.S.





eBay sells a rule change

U.S. *de minimis* rules began in 1938. The term comes from a Latin phrase meaning too small to bother about. Congress scrapped duties on low-value goods entering the country because the cost of collection exceeded the revenue gained. The ceiling for duty-free entry was set at \$1.

That climbed to \$5 in the 1970s, then \$200 in 1994.

By the late 2000s, the nation’s three biggest package delivery firms wanted more. In 2008, UPS, DHL and FedEx created their own trade group called the Express Association of America to press their issues in Washington. Top of the list was raising the *de minimis* ceiling to \$800, according to Mike Mullen, the association’s executive director.

Mullen said the aim was to cut delivery times and reduce the carriers’ costs, which included employing customs brokers to process government paperwork on low-value packages subject to duties.

Other industry groups backed the idea. But getting lawmakers to support a measure seen as delivering a windfall to big business was no sure thing.

Enter eBay. Tiny American shop owners were using the e-commerce platform to source products and reach customers around the world. With an omnibus trade bill taking shape in 2015, eBay was determined to make these small sellers the face of the movement to expand *de minimis*. A Washington state hardware store owner and a Wisconsin scrapbook-supplies retailer were among the online sellers who arrived on Capitol Hill to meet lawmakers in April 2015 as part of a visit organized by eBay.

“It addressed a lot of political concerns,” said Brian Bieron, an eBay policy executive at the time. “It’s a way to say: ‘Everything you’re hearing that says that trade is only good for the rich giant companies, the big elites, is not really true. It’s actually helping really small businesses right here.’”

Online marketplace Etsy, a magnet for handicrafts sellers, likewise lobbied in favor of loosening *de minimis* limits. “Etsy supports trade provisions like the *de minimis* exemption, which is tailored to support microbusinesses,” the company said in a statement.

Attorney Greta Milligan Peisch, international trade counsel for the powerful Senate Finance Committee from 2015 to 2021, recalled the weight of those small-business voices in swaying votes. “It was one of the main drivers behind the support for the provision at the time,” Milligan Peisch said.

The 160-page Trade Facilitation and Trade Enforcement Act was passed overwhelmingly by a Republican-controlled Congress in February 2016 and quickly signed into law by Democratic President Barack Obama. Tucked inside was a short clause quadrupling the *de minimis* limit to \$800.

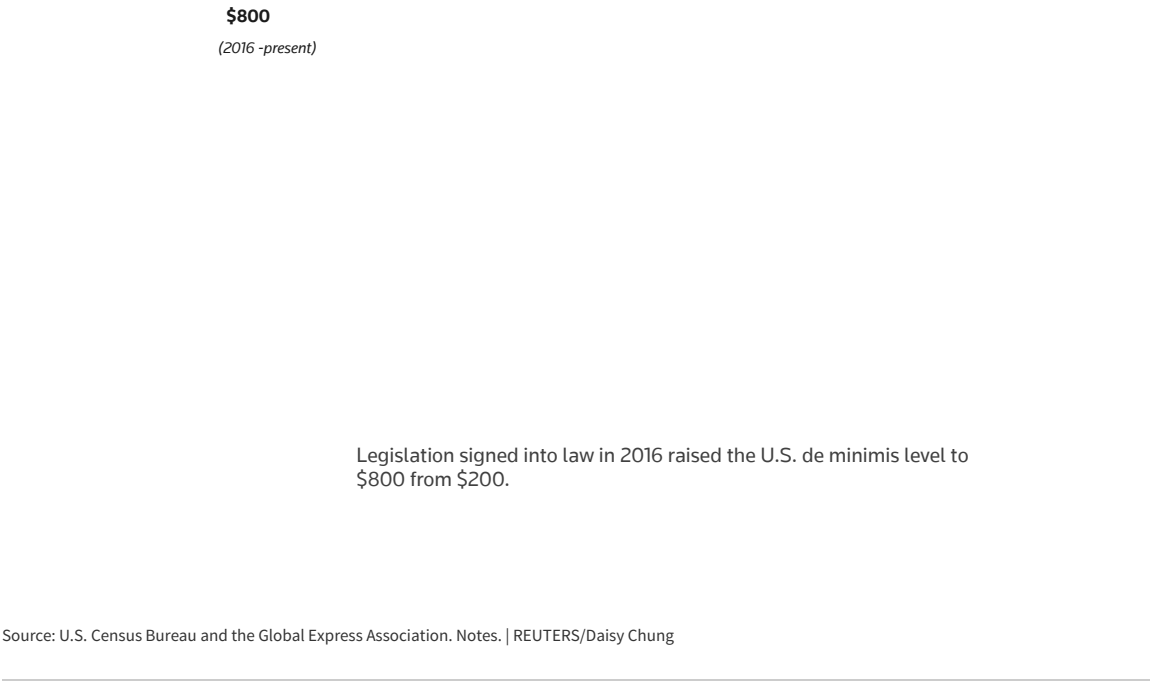
Blumenauer, the Oregon congressman, was among those who voted in favor, a decision he now regrets.

“There was no hint of what we were getting into,” he said. “It was marketed as an efficiency item, it was just a minor tweaking of the threshold – except it wasn’t.”

The impact was immediate. In fiscal 2016, *de minimis* packages entering the United States soared 90% over the previous year to nearly 255 million parcels, according to U.S. Customs. Then, as now, most of those shipments carried a declared value of well under \$800; the average was \$54 in fiscal 2023, the agency said.

Generous *de minimis* limits

Duty-free entry for merchandise is common worldwide, though rules and allowances vary by country. But in general, the U.S. limit ranks among the highest in the world and exceeds those of its five largest trading partners.



The true power of the change was that *de minimis* was now squarely on the radar of businesses looking to tap it, said Steve Story, an executive with California-based Apex Logistics International. Companies recognized the potential of direct-to-consumer shipping to eliminate the expense of maintaining warehouses and physical stores. And he said the legislation broadcast worldwide a way to speed foreign-made goods duty free to the planet’s biggest consumer market.

“When they changed it to \$800, boy, it exploded,” said Story, who owned his own customs advisory service at the time.

In another unforeseen twist, even more goods flooded in through *de minimis* after then-President Donald Trump’s decision in 2018 to impose steep tariffs on a host of Chinese merchandise, including cheap everyday items like baseball caps and shoes. Before the Trump tariffs, known as Section 301, suppliers mostly sent this low-cost merchandise in bulk through formal customs channels. Afterwards, to avoid the stepped-up duties, Chinese exporters and U.S. importers started shipping it directly to consumers via *de minimis* to dodge them altogether, according to former U.S. Customs officials and trade experts.

In early 2020, the pandemic hit, and a surge in online shopping pushed the number of *de minimis* packages even higher.

Trump is now running to retake the White House. Reuters asked his campaign to comment about the unintended consequences of his tariffs in driving more duty-free imports, including fentanyl chemicals, into the country. If elected, Trump “will use his executive power to stop the drug epidemic and protect Americans from dangerous drugs,” said Brian Hughes, a senior campaign adviser. He did not elaborate.

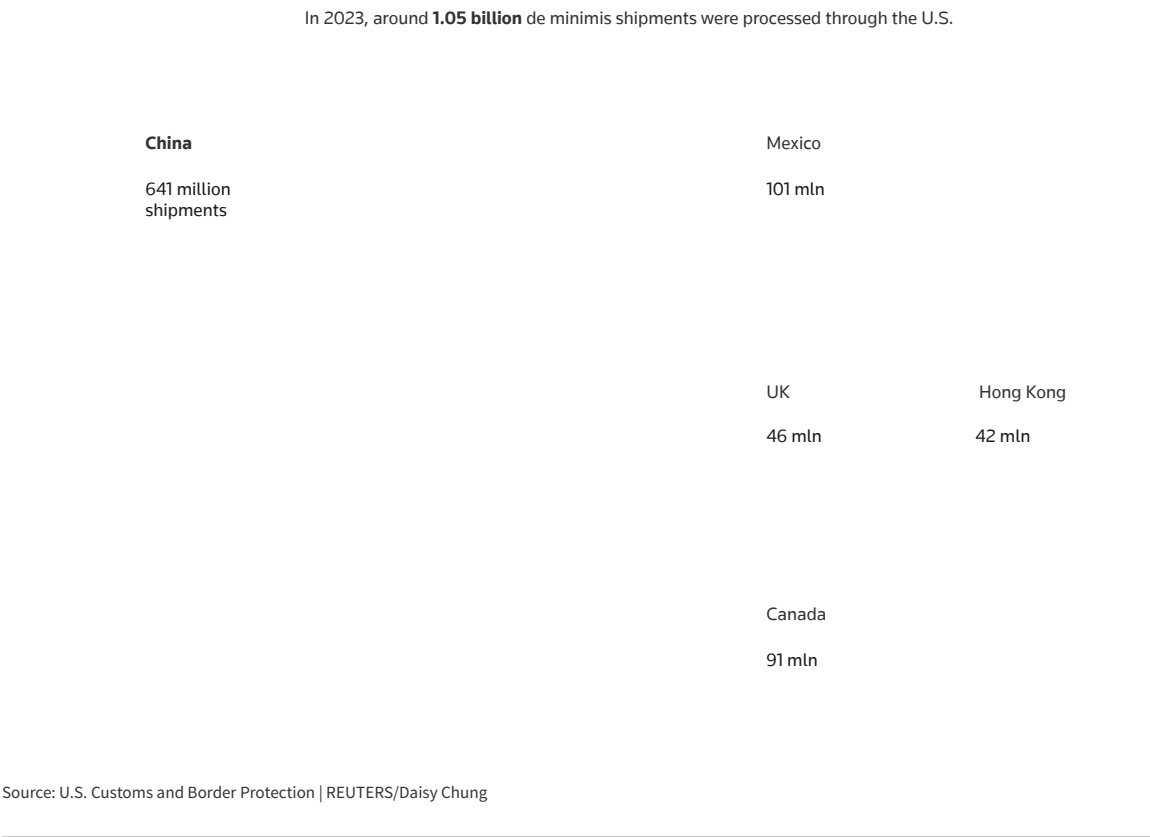
The campaign of Kamala Harris, Trump’s Democratic rival, didn’t respond to questions about her views on *de minimis* imports. On a visit to the U.S.-Mexico border in Arizona on Friday, Harris vowed to target the "entire global fentanyl supply chain."

Some 640 million shipments – about 60% of all *de minimis* packages entering the U.S. – came from China in fiscal 2023, customs data show. Temu and Shein alone account for nearly half of those, according to a U.S. congressional select committee on competition with China.

In separate statements, Shein and Temu credited their success to the efficiency of their business models, not *de minimis*. Shein Executive Chairman Donald Tang last year said publicly that he supports changes to the system if “the rules are applied evenly and equally, regardless of where a company is based or ships from.”

Made in China

The majority of *de minimis* packages come from China — some 60% last year. China-founded e-commerce platforms Shein and Temu have driven much of this flow, accounting for nearly half of all Chinese shipments, according to a U.S. congressional committee.



Initially, the U.S. government forecast that public coffers would forgo \$176 million in duties and fees over the first decade of the law’s existence due to the raising of the *de minimis* limit. Instead, that loss has ballooned to \$735 million annually, based on current package volume, according to an estimate by Christine McDaniel, a trade expert at George Mason University in Virginia.

McDaniel nevertheless supports the *de minimis* measure, saying it’s a boon to shoppers and small businesses who’ve gained access to a wider variety of goods at lower prices. She estimates scrapping it would saddle U.S consumers and businesses with about \$47 billion a year in extra import and shipping costs. Other estimates have put the figure lower. A study published by the National Bureau of Economic Research suggests consumers would pay \$12 billion to \$14 billion in higher prices and fees, an increase that would hit the poorest Americans hardest.

The research backs the idea that *de minimis* has made globalization work for the little guy.

Drug traffickers, too, spotted opportunity.



‘I don’t ask questions’

Mexico emerged as an illicit fentanyl manufacturing hub in the mid-2010s, U.S. anti-narcotics officials say. In those days, China, the world’s largest chemical producer, dominated production of finished fentanyl as well as precursor sales to Mexican cartels.

But in 2019, amid U.S. pressure, China placed fentanyl and its analogs under national control, effectively ending illicit exports of the finished product. Mexico’s crime gangs stepped in to take over production.

Those syndicates now needed more chemicals from China than ever before – and more avenues to get them into Mexico. Cartels had been arranging bulk deliveries by sea and air, U.S. officials said, but barrels of this material are harder to hide from law enforcement than small boxes are.

That’s when *de minimis* smuggling in small packages through U.S. airports really took off, U.S. Customs officers and anti-narcotics agents told Reuters.

To be sure, fentanyl ingredients also enter Mexico via small air shipments. For its supply-chain investigation, Reuters purchased several precursors flown directly to Mexico City from China that independent chemists determined could be used to make the drug. But the speed, reliability and sheer volume of packages moving through the U.S. entry system make it particularly attractive to traffickers, U.S. law enforcement officials said.

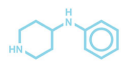
The case of the part-time package hauler from Tucson who helped the Sinaloa Cartel is emblematic of this shift.

Details about the man, Wadih Daahir, are reported here for the first time. He likely ferried thousands of kilos of precursors from the U.S. to Mexico between 2021 and 2023, according to two current and one former U.S. federal agents familiar with the situation. A 2024 Mexican government document seen by Reuters confirmed key details of the U.S. investigation into Daahir’s activities.

Most of these Chinese chemicals had entered the U.S. at Los Angeles International Airport and cleared customs through the *de minimis* exemption, two of the agents said. The precursors were then shipped to Daahir’s address in Arizona.



Wadih Daahir, a freelance delivery driver based in Tucson, unwittingly transported an estimated 7 metric tons of fentanyl chemicals to Mexico for the Sinaloa Cartel over a two-year period. He died on July 1, 2024. VIA EVERLOVED.COM



“I see people in the street, drugged up and talking to themselves. It’s really bad”

Wadih Daahir, on his remorse for unknowingly contributing to America’s fentanyl crisis

Daahir was questioned, but not charged. Investigators concluded he didn’t know what was inside the boxes and wasn’t aware the contents were intended for the manufacture of fentanyl, as required for a criminal prosecution. He died of a heart attack on July 1, 2024.

Days earlier, the burly 63-year-old told Reuters in an interview at his home how he had become an unwitting link in the global fentanyl supply chain.

Over four decades, the maintenance man had built a side business transporting packages to his native Mexico, where he had been born to Lebanese immigrant parents. Mexican clients who needed goods they couldn’t get easily at home had mail-order purchases shipped to Daahir’s red brick bungalow.

When enough parcels had accumulated, he’d load up his truck and head for the U.S.-Mexico border, where he said Mexican agents always waved him through. Daahir would slap a forwarding address on the packages and typically leave them with a local courier in the Sonoran border town of Nogales for transport to their final destinations. He said he charged 25% of a parcel’s value, and most customers paid him via deposits to a bank account he maintained in Mexico.

Daahir said he often hauled pesticides, seeds and tractor parts. So he wasn’t suspicious when a man calling himself “Engineer Jonathan” got in touch in late 2020 or early 2021 saying he needed regular deliveries of agrochemicals to Sinaloa, and that he would pay 5,000 pesos (about \$250) for each pair of boxes brought across the border. Engineer Jonathan’s shipments began arriving about twice a week at Daahir’s home starting around early 2021.

Daahir said he never met this customer or learned his last name. Engineer Jonathan instructed Daahir to list someone else on the shipping label to take delivery in Sinaloa, a name that U.S. agents said turned out to be fake. The agents declined to reveal that name to Reuters.

“People in Mexico order things online. They arrive here, I grab them and send them to Mexico,” Daahir said in Spanish, pointing to a stack of packages on his porch. “I don’t ask questions.”

When dozens of federal agents raided Daahir’s home in January 2023, they expected to find a fentanyl lab. Instead, they found about 40 kilos of a powdered substance inside several boxes intended for the Sinaloa mystery client. Two federal agents familiar with the situation told Reuters the powder turned out to be 4-AP, a key chemical used in the synthesis of fentanyl.



VIDEO: Federal agents on Jan. 19, 2023, raided a Tucson home where they found 40 kilos of fentanyl precursors meant for the Sinaloa Cartel. The Chinese chemicals had entered the U.S. much like any other imported merchandise. Homeland Security Investigations via Reuters

In the three months leading up to the bust, HSI agents had traced some 900 kilos (1,984 pounds) of fentanyl precursors, mostly 4-AP, arriving from China to Daahir’s doorstep, the two federal agents said. Daahir said orders of similar weight for Engineer Jonathan had been coming like clockwork for at least two years, leading investigators to extrapolate that about 7,000 kilos (15,432 pounds) had arrived.

Independent chemists consulted by Reuters said that quantity of 4-AP would produce some 5.3 billion fentanyl pills.

Mexican and U.S. authorities tracked several of Daahir’s packages to a Sinaloa warehouse controlled by a fentanyl trafficker with family ties to Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzman, the former Sinaloa Cartel kingpin now serving a life sentence in the United States.

No arrests have been made in the case.

HSI declined to respond to questions about Daahir, the fentanyl chemicals found in his home, or the investigation of the alleged Sinaloa Cartel operative for whom those packages were purportedly destined.

The agency did say it’s combating the fentanyl epidemic and targeting all aspects of transnational criminal organizations. HSI “takes the threat posed to our nation from the smuggling of illicit narcotics such as fentanyl and its precursor chemicals very seriously,” Executive Associate Director Katrina W. Berger said in a statement.

Mexico’s customs agency and its federal attorney general’s office, which investigates organized crime, did not respond to requests for comment about the case.

Before his death, Daahir told Reuters he felt remorse about his inadvertent role in contributing to America’s fentanyl crisis.

“I see people in the street, drugged up and talking to themselves. It’s really bad,” Daahir said.

U.S. authorities say there are likely hundreds, possibly thousands, of casual delivery drivers in the American southwest hauling goods to Mexico – as one former senior official put it, an “army of ants” to be harnessed by drug traffickers.



What’s in the box?

The fentanyl chemicals that crossed the Pacific Ocean to Daahir’s front stoop were a textbook example of what U.S. Customs officials call the master carton smuggling scheme. This ruse is when criminals take advantage of the global shipping industry’s reliance on master cartons – big boxes used to contain many small parcels. Delivery companies worldwide use such cartons all the

time. But this legal shipping practice is also vulnerable to abuse, because it’s easy for small parcels of contraband concealed inside the larger boxes to sneak past customs authorities.

In the case of fentanyl ingredients, this smuggling scheme begins in China, where precursor sellers lie about the contents of their shipments when handing them off to delivery companies. These firms aren’t required to, nor would they have time to, open every box to make sure its contents match the sender’s description.

The delivery companies bundle the individual parcels into master cartons alongside other legitimate goods, stack these cartons high on pallets, and bind them tightly together with plastic wrap or netting for easy loading onto planes.

These towers of master cartons can stand eight feet high and contain thousands of individual parcels, making them time-consuming to disassemble and search after they arrive in the U.S., customs officers said.

If they qualify for *de minimis*, the master cartons skip formal entry procedures. By law, U.S. Customs is required to collect detailed information about shipments that enter through traditional channels. This data includes specific product codes necessary to determine duties and taxes owed on the merchandise.

De minimis master cartons, in contrast, simply need an accurate description of the goods. But even those looser requirements frequently get short shrift. Some shipments arrive with little more than vague descriptions of what’s inside the individual boxes, such as “gifts,” “stuff,” and “goods of all kinds,” according to former U.S. Customs officials. They often get through anyway.



FedEx cargo planes are seen near Los Angeles International Airport on Sept. 9, 2024. The delivery giant lobbied successfully to liberalize a U.S. trade rule to make it easier for cheap imported merchandise to enter the United States. That change benefitted FedEx and other carriers that transport those packages. REUTERS/Mike Blake

From there, the master cartons typically move quickly to freight forwarders for unpacking. The boxes inside, some of which come with pre-affixed shipping labels from FedEx, UPS, the U.S. Postal Service, and other carriers, are turned over to these firms for “last mile” delivery.

The return addresses on these labels often list the site of the U.S. freight forwarder or other U.S. locations, not those of the foreign senders. That was the case for the majority of the precursor chemicals that Reuters purchased from Chinese sellers for delivery to New Jersey.

All this can make it impossible to figure out who is sending these precursors and where exactly in China they’re coming from, further hampering efforts to crack down on this supply chain, anti-narcotics and shipping experts say.

U.S. Customs declined to disclose what percentage of *de minimis* parcels are inspected, saying such information would assist smugglers. But the agency acknowledged that officers usually wave things through unless tipped off about a suspicious shipment. Random sweeps occasionally turn up fentanyl chemicals amid all those boxes, said Andrew Chavez, watch commander of U.S. Customs’ tactical division at LAX.

“The bad guys are not giving us good information, clearly. So it comes down to that manpower,” Chavez said.

U.S. officials have been pressing China to prosecute precursor sellers who openly cater to the illicit fentanyl trade, and to require the country’s vast chemical industry to strengthen its know-your-customer practices.



Workers prepare packages for screening at a U.S. Customs facility near Los Angeles International Airport in May. REUTERS/Mike Blake



U.S. Customs employs sophisticated scanners to check packages for contraband. But with nearly 4 million packages arriving daily nationwide, only a fraction can be screened. REUTERS/Mike Blake

Liu Pengyu, a spokesperson for the Chinese embassy in Washington, said China has some of the toughest drug controls in the world and has “always strictly controlled the chemical precursors in accordance with international conventions and domestic laws.”

Chinese freight forwarders often pack the boxes into master cartons and send them across the Pacific. But Reuters’ purchases of precursors revealed that U.S. delivery companies with operations in China have likewise transported mislabeled packages containing fentanyl ingredients.

For example, one such chemical that Reuters bought from a Chinese seller for \$150 arrived in the United States in March 2024 with an invoice declaring that the box contained \$10 worth of “pigment ink.” The tracking record showed FedEx had received the package in Nanjing, China; flew it out of Shanghai to its logistics megahub in Memphis; then took it to its final destination, a rented mailbox in New Jersey.

Other Chinese precursor chemicals purchased by Reuters were delivered to that same mailbox by UPS and the U.S. Postal Service.

FedEx said that it goes “above and beyond” what is required by law in its cooperation with law enforcement. “Illegal substances have no place in our network,” the company said.

A UPS spokesperson said the company “prohibits shipments of illegal products in our network,” but that stemming the flow of such products “requires a coordinated public-private effort.”

The U.S. Postal Inspection Service, the law enforcement arm of the postal service, said that it works tirelessly with U.S. Customs and other partners “to combat illicit drugs entering the mail,” and that removing illegal drugs from the mail stream is a “top priority.”

In early May, U.S. Customs officials, including Los Angeles watch commander Chavez, assembled in a warehouse near LAX to screen master cartons for contraband. A visiting reporter was in tow. Some of the cartons were stacked on floor-to-ceiling shelving units. Others remained on pallets on the floor.

Cartons were placed on a conveyor belt leading to a large scanner, while a dog trained to sniff out agricultural products ran up and down a line of boxes.

Customs officers are piloting new approaches, including using dogs trained to detect fentanyl precursors, and harnessing artificial intelligence to scrutinize shipping addresses and other information to identify suspicious shipments.

But with hundreds of thousands of parcels arriving daily at LAX, the sheer volume has “put us on our heels,” Chavez said.

Meanwhile, the big delivery companies that pushed to loosen *de minimis* rules bear little liability for the proliferation of contraband they're hauling. Daahir, the informal package hauler who spoke with Reuters, said FedEx and UPS brought most of the fentanyl chemicals delivered to him in Tucson.

Delivery companies must exercise “reasonable care” in establishing that what’s inside a box is what a sender says it is, said Lars-Erik Hjelm, a lawyer specializing in international trade law who used to work for U.S. Customs. Odd descriptions, weights, box sizes and declared values that don’t add up, all might trigger an investigation, he said.

But the reality, Hjelm said, is that if the size and weight of the box check out with the declared contents, “it would be difficult to hold the carrier responsible.”



Rethinking *de minimis*

On Capitol Hill, a growing chorus of U.S. lawmakers, both Democrats and Republicans, say they want to rein in *de minimis*. But bipartisan cooperation has been elusive in a tense and chaotic election year.

Legislators have presented at least six separate bills since 2023 that would significantly alter the framework. All but one would go further than the White House proposals. Some would ban all, not just a portion, of Chinese merchandise from the *de minimis* channel. Others would exclude entire classes of goods coming from anywhere in the world.

Like his fellow Oregon legislator Blumenauer, Senator Ron Wyden voted to liberalize *de minimis* in 2016, but is now pushing his own trade bill to revamp the system. Dubbed the FIGHTING for America Act, Wyden’s proposal, which has not been formally introduced in the Senate, would slash Chinese shipments eligible for *de minimis*. And it would ban entire categories of imports from anywhere in the world from entering tariff-free, including textiles, apparel and leather goods.

“I don’t think anyone foresaw the explosion in retailers offering industrial-scale” direct-to-consumer shipping from China, “or the rise of the fentanyl crisis,” Wyden said in a statement to Reuters.

Chinese embassy spokesperson Liu said Beijing opposes proposed *de minimis* changes that would “discriminate against products from China.” He said U.S. tariff measures should adhere to international trade rules and provide “a fair, just, and non-discriminatory business environment for companies from all countries.”

A number of unions and the U.S. textile industry’s trade association back an overhaul. “*De minimis* has been a job destroyer,” said Kim Glas, president of the National Council of Textile Organizations.

Even some big retailers whose shelves are packed with Chinese merchandise want changes. That’s because the direct-to-consumer model employed by Chinese competitors threatens to undercut them.

The Retail Industry Leaders Association, a trade group of 200 large companies including Gap, Target and Kohl’s, has lobbied this year in support of a Republican bill that largely mirrors the White House proposal. That bill, End China’s *De Minimis Abuse Act*, would exclude large swaths of Chinese goods from the channel.



Andrea Thomas founded an organization to bring awareness to the fentanyl crisis after her daughter died of an overdose in 2018. She supports legislation that would tighten *de minimis* rules. REUTERS/Kevin Mohatt

Amid all the talk about fair competition and jobs, families who have lost loved ones to fentanyl overdoses are calling for action, too. Andrea Thomas is executive director of Voices for Awareness, a Colorado nonprofit that promotes education about synthetic opioids. The group has begun stumping to tighten *de minimis* rules in the hopes of slowing the flow of precursors.

“If it stops one package from killing somebody, to me that’s change,” said Thomas, whose organization backs both the Wyden and Blumenauer bills. Her 32-year-old daughter, Ashley Romero, died in 2018 after taking a fentanyl-laced pill that she thought was a painkiller.

But big businesses are pushing back. The rollback would snarl supply chains and raise consumer prices while doing little to fix the fentanyl crisis, said John Pickel, a former U.S. Customs official and now senior director of international supply chain policy at the National Foreign Trade Council, a pro-trade lobbying group.

Pickel said smuggling techniques like the master carton scheme can be effective on their own, regardless of *de minimis* rules. That’s because this consolidated shipping method is used in various customs entry programs, not just this streamlined system. Even if *de minimis* were scrapped, he argues, traffickers would continue to sneak boxes into the U.S.

“It’s tilting at the wrong windmill,” Pickel said. “This is not a *de minimis* problem. This is an illicit activity problem.”

Delivery companies also oppose an overhaul.


DHL said in a statement that it has invested in technology and screening to detect contraband such as fentanyl chemicals. But it said “the idea that eliminating *de minimis* would halt the flow of fentanyl is misguided, as it would not reduce this threat at other entry points.”

Mullen, the head of the Express Association of America, the lobbying group for FedEx, UPS and DHL, said the firms do support more robust reporting requirements for *de minimis* shipments. But they want to keep the channel open for as many goods as possible because streamlined entry saves them money.


When asked about drug traffickers exploiting *de minimis* to import fentanyl chemicals, Mullen said the rise of online shopping was a much bigger factor in driving the surge in packages than was the 2016 legislative change he helped promote.

Similarly, Bieron, the former eBay executive, said his company’s successful lobbying to loosen the trade rule wasn’t to blame for opening the precursor pipeline. “Illegal smuggling has been big business forever,” he said. “Well before e-commerce or a *de minimis* ever existed.”

REUTERS INVESTIGATES



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EBay did not respond to questions about narcos leveraging the *de minimis* rules it championed. The company did say that it supports “common sense customs policy reforms that address the emergence of new, unscrupulous Chinese e-commerce players.”

The packages keep coming. The United States received nearly 1.4 billion *de minimis* shipments in fiscal 2024, up 40% from the previous year, U.S. Customs data show.

Overdose deaths from the fentanyl crisis, which began about a decade ago, also keep climbing. By the end of this year, the synthetic opioid epidemic is expected to have claimed nearly half a million American lives, according to the latest government forecast.

That death toll already exceeds the number of U.S. soldiers killed in the Second World War.

Bills to overhaul *de minimis*

Lawmakers presented at least six bills during the 118th Congress that aim to rein in the number of low-value packages that enter the U.S. through the streamlined *de minimis* entry system. Here’s how each bill would reshape the *de minimis* framework.

<p>Import Security and Fairness Act (H.R.4148; S.2004)</p> <p>House sponsor: Rep. Earl Blumenauer (D-OR) Senate sponsor: Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-OH)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Bans all Chinese goods from entering through <i>de minimis</i>Requires U.S. Customs to collect more information on <i>de minimis</i> packagesImposes civil penalties on parties that knowingly submit or transmit false customs information	<p>FIGHTING for America Act *</p> <p>Sponsor: Sen. Ron Wyden (D-OR)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Bans some goods from China and other countries from entering through <i>de minimis</i>Bans textiles and apparel from anywhere in world from entering through <i>de minimis</i>Requires U.S. Customs to collect more information on <i>de minimis</i> packagesImposes civil penalties on parties that knowingly submit or transmit false customs informationEstablishes a \$2 fee per <i>de minimis</i> shipment, paid by carriers or customs brokers <p><i>*Bill has not been formally introduced in the Senate</i></p>	<p>End China’s <i>De Minimis</i> Abuse Act (H.R.7979)</p> <p>Sponsor: Rep. Gregory Murphy (R-NC)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Bans some Chinese goods from entering through <i>de minimis</i>Requires U.S. Customs to collect more information on <i>de minimis</i> packages from ChinaImposes civil penalties on parties that violate <i>de minimis</i> law	<p><i>De Minimis</i> Reciprocity Act</p> <p>Sponsor: Sen. Bill Lisch (R-Ore.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Bans all Chinese goods from entering through <i>de minimis</i>Mandates <i>de minimis</i> information collection (Example: If Country imposes a \$50, the U.S. will impose a \$50)Excludes the U.S. <i>de minimis</i> goods from entering through <i>de minimis</i> sector carriers to the U.S.Requires U.S. Customs to collect more information on <i>de minimis</i> packages
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A REUTERS INVESTIGATION

FENTANYL EXPRESS

Part 1: [With \\$3,600 and Wi-Fi, we bought everything needed to make fentanyl.](#)

Graphic: [Fentanyl’s deadly chemistry: How rogue labs make opioids](#)

Part 2: [How fentanyl traffickers are exploiting a U.S. trade law to kill Americans](#)

Graphic: [The fentanyl funnel: How narcos sneak deadly chemicals through the U.S.](#)

Part 3: [Trump camp says China is ‘attacking’ U.S. with fentanyl. They aim to fight back](#)

Part 4: [The shadowy ‘brokers’ helping Mexico’s cartels smuggle fentanyl chemicals from China](#)

Part 5: [A fentanyl antidote is saving lives. But it isn’t ending the fentanyl crisis](#)

Editor’s note: This story has been updated to correct a figure. The number of de minimis packages entering the U.S. in fiscal 2016 rose 90%, not 95%.

Fentanyl Express: The U.S. ‘Loophole’

By Drazen Jorgic, Laura Gottesdiener, Kristina Cooke and Stephen Eisenhammer
Additional reporting: Maurice Tamman in New York; Daisy Chung in San Francisco; Michael Martina, David Lawder and Graham Slattery in Washington
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Design: John Emerson
Edited by Marla Dickerson

REUTERS/Photo illustration/Staff

President Joe Biden’s fentanyl diplomacy with China is under scrutiny as President-elect Donald Trump’s team seeks a harder line to stop the flow of Chinese-made chemicals powering America’s epidemic. Tariffs are just part of the discussion.

By [MICHAEL MARTINA](#) and [ANTONI SLODKOWSKI](#) | Filed Nov. 26, 2024, noon GMT

DONALD TRUMP’S return to power portends a shakeup in the U.S. approach to addressing America’s fentanyl crisis and what counternarcotics officials say is the biggest obstacle to solving it: China.

Advisors to the Republican president-elect’s transition team are advocating a much more aggressive posture towards Beijing over fentanyl than the one adopted by Democratic incumbent Joe Biden.

Already, Trump is signaling that to stem the flow of narcotics he will resort to his weapon of choice: tariffs.

In posts on Monday on Truth Social, his social network, he promised additional 10% tariffs on goods from China, and 25% duties on merchandise from Mexico and Canada. Trump claimed these nations have not taken strong enough action to stop illicit drugs, particularly fentanyl, from entering the United States. He said his many talks with China about stopping the flow of drugs were “to no avail.”

Trump’s advisors are likewise pushing for U.S. sanctions on Chinese financial institutions allegedly linked to the fentanyl trade. Trump will be the ultimate decider.

China is the dominant source of chemical precursors used by Mexican cartels to produce fentanyl, while Chinese money launderers have become key players in the international drug trade, U.S. authorities say. The Biden administration has been negotiating with Beijing for the past year to crack down on both. Diplomacy has yielded promising but modest results so far. That has frustrated some U.S. security officials and China hawks who say the U.S. must ratchet up the pressure to get Beijing’s leadership to act.

“When you don’t do those things, then you’re a doormat,” said Steve Yates, a China expert and former national security official in the George W. Bush administration. Yates, who is not formally involved with the president-elect’s transition team, has advised Trump’s circle on fentanyl policy. Over the past decade, more than 400,000 Americans have died of synthetic opioid overdoses, including Yates’ daughter, who died last year.



IN THIS SERIES

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Yates and others counseling the Trump team say one of the quickest and surest ways for Washington to get Beijing's attention is to sanction Chinese banks doing business with money launderers and corrupt chemical sellers.

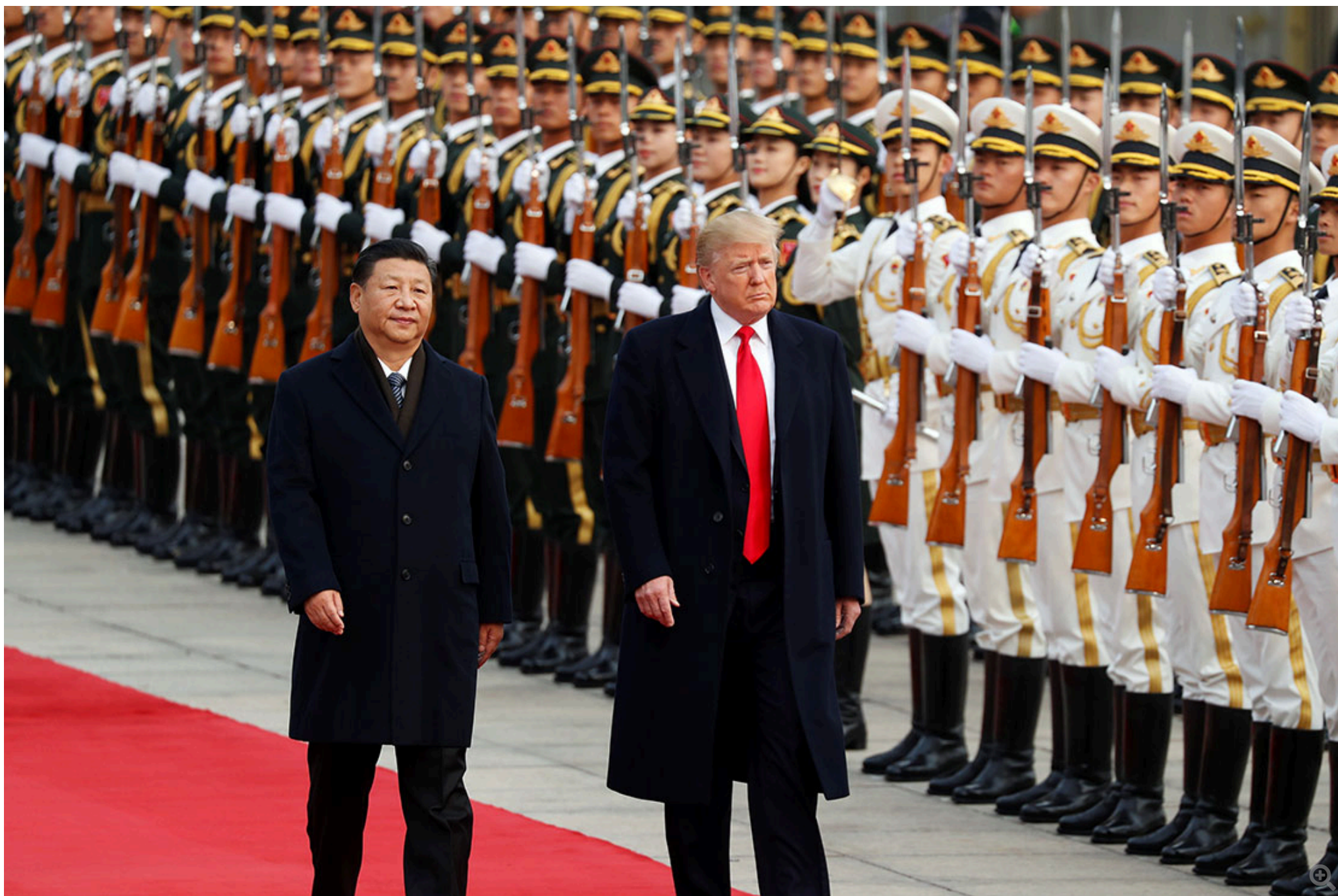
Foreign banks hit with U.S. sanctions can't engage with American financial institutions or access the U.S. dollar, severely curtailing their ability to transact business internationally, according to Edward Fishman, a sanctions expert at Columbia University. He said Washington can also freeze U.S. assets held in sanctioned banks.

It's a powerful weapon that has been wielded against financial institutions in countries of some U.S. adversaries such as Iran and Russia, but never against banks in Mexico and China tied to drug trafficking, according to David Asher, a top former U.S. anti-money laundering official who helped target the finances of the Islamic State terrorist group.

"You need to hit all the bankers. It's sort of basic," said Asher, now a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, a conservative think tank in Washington.

Asher formulated a preliminary plan circulating in Trump transition circles that calls for a whole-of-government task force incorporating all aspects of U.S. diplomatic, law enforcement and financial power to address the fentanyl crisis.

Parts of the plan, shared with Reuters, call for criminal indictments of major Chinese and Mexican financial institutions allegedly laundering money for the cartels; mass sanctions on Chinese companies and people implicated in the fentanyl trade; beefed-up bounties on most-wanted traffickers; cyber warfare against Mexican cartels; and a U.S. intelligence agency focus on fentanyl that's commensurate with the war on terrorist organizations.



U.S. President Donald Trump takes part in a welcoming ceremony with China's President Xi Jinping in Beijing on Nov. 9, 2017. Trump's second term could test the relationship. REUTERS/Damir Sagolj

A spokesperson for the Chinese Embassy in Washington cited numerous steps that China has taken to prevent illegal production, trafficking and abuse of fentanyl since talks with the Biden administration resumed. The embassy warned that China would respond if the U.S. takes a more combative posture.

[**Graphic:** The fentanyl funnel: How narcos sneak deadly chemicals through U.S.](#)

[**Part 4:** The shadowy 'brokers' helping Mexico's cartels smuggle fentanyl chemicals from China](#)

[**Part 5:** A fentanyl antidote is saving lives. But it isn't ending the fentanyl crisis](#)

“Sanctions, smears and slander against China will only undermine the foundation of China-U.S. counternarcotics cooperation,” the embassy said in a statement. “China firmly opposes the U.S.’s arbitrary use of unilateral sanctions and will resolutely safeguard its legitimate rights and interests.”

Hostility toward China’s government has taken root on Capitol Hill, with both Democrats and Republicans urging [trade actions to punish Beijing](#) for what some believe is a deliberate effort to destabilize the United States with fentanyl.

Trump’s promised 10% tariffs on China over narcotics might just be an opening volley. Howard Lutnick, Trump’s pick to run the Commerce Department and oversee the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, said [in a podcast interview](#) in October that “China is attacking America” with fentanyl and suggested that Trump might levy tariffs as high as 200% on China.

On the campaign trail, Trump vowed to designate Mexico’s drug cartels as terrorist groups and harness the U.S. military to destroy them.

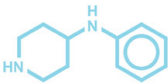
But it’s not clear if Trump is willing to move beyond tariffs on Chinese goods and take stronger actions such as hitting Chinese banks with sanctions over fentanyl.

Trump’s past disputes with Beijing have centered mostly on China’s huge trade surplus, not synthetic opioids. Trump [expressed admiration, even love](#), for Chinese President Xi Jinping throughout much of his first term, even as U.S. overdose fatalities soared.

Trump transition team spokeswoman Karoline Leavitt, asked by Reuters if his administration's increased pressure on China over fentanyl might include bank sanctions, said Americans re-elected Trump “to lead our country and restore peace through strength around the world.” She said Trump would “take the necessary action to do just that” when he returns to the White House.

A Reuters investigation into the global fentanyl supply chain has shown how easy it is [to purchase precursors online](#) from Chinese sellers, who ship them by air to the U.S. disguised as gadgets and other low-cost merchandise. These boxes typically [sail through customs duty-free](#) amid a sea of other Chinese imports, and are routed by traffickers to Mexican drug labs. Bipartisan sentiment is growing in Washington to [end China’s use of this streamlined entry channel](#).

There is growing consensus in Republican circles close to Trump that Beijing has exploited, even engineered, the synthetic opioid epidemic to harm Americans. They point to a [bipartisan report issued in April](#) by the House of Representatives’ select committee on China that calls that nation the “ultimate geographic source” of the fentanyl crisis. The report alleges that Beijing provides tax rebates to Chinese companies that export fentanyl chemicals, and that it allows groups linked to drug trafficking to operate as long as their efforts are focused abroad.



“The root cause of the drug epidemic in the U.S. lies in the U.S. itself.”

Mao Ning,
spokeswoman for China’s foreign ministry

senior administration official told Reuters.

“We’ve simply been unable to corroborate those claims,” the official said. “And in fact, to the contrary, we have looked closely at it and we think that they are faulty.” The official said their Chinese counterparts were cooperating in good faith in counternarcotics talks.

China has some of the world’s toughest domestic drug laws – a byproduct of the 19th century Opium Wars, when China was forced to legalize opium use under duress from the militarily superior West, which was profiting from the trade. Mass addiction and political upheaval ensued, leading to what is known as the “Century of Humiliation.” Lifting the country from that nadir was one of the Chinese Communist Party’s proudest achievements, and China has portrayed itself globally as an anti-drugs crusader.

Beijing has repeatedly dismissed the claims in that report. The Chinese Embassy in its statement said “the idea of China using fentanyl as a means to strategically weaken the U.S. runs completely counter to facts and reality.”

The Biden White House agrees with China on the rebate issue. Beijing does provide tax breaks for chemicals sold abroad. But there’s no evidence that China is subsidizing large-scale exports of illicit fentanyl precursors as alleged in the congressional report, a

The Opium Wars

Western powers profiting from the opium trade forced China to legalize use of the narcotic in the 19th century. Mass addiction and political upheaval followed. The episode would help shape modern China’s tough drug laws and its drive for military, economic and technological strength.



Opium smokers in China, circa 1890. Unknown photographer



The British East India Company's iron steamship Nemesis fires on China Jan. 7, 1841, during the first Opium War. Courtesy of the National Army

Chinese officials note they have tightened controls over many types of precursor chemicals. They have said repeatedly that the fentanyl epidemic is a catastrophe of America's own making, and that the U.S. should focus on curbing demand at home instead of blaming outsiders.

"The root cause of the drug epidemic in the U.S. lies in the U.S. itself," Mao Ning, a Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokeswoman, said in Beijing last month.

What's clear is that Biden's measured approach to engagement with Beijing on counternarcotics is out of favor not only with those advising Trump, but also among some current and former U.S. officials familiar with the U.S.-China discussions.

Those officials say China, while helpful in some areas, has slow-walked Washington's biggest anti-narcotics priorities and signaled it's looking to extract strategic concessions in return for doing more. Responding to a Chinese demand, President Joe Biden lifted trade sanctions on a Chinese government institute in November 2023 to lure Beijing back to the table for fentanyl talks during a particularly rocky stretch in the bilateral relationship.

"China sees everything through the lens of leverage. Fentanyl is no different," one senior U.S. official told Reuters.

For this report, Reuters spoke with nearly four dozen sources from the United States, China and international bodies such as the United Nations. They include people directly involved in the U.S.-China fentanyl talks, diplomats, law enforcement officials, drug policy experts, lawmakers and government aides.

The reporting provides the first window into the U.S.-China fentanyl negotiations. It also reveals the chasm separating the two sides; the limitations of Biden's strategy; and the potential risks the U.S. faces under Trump if he pursues a harder line.



A U.S. Customs and Border Protection officer trains a drug-sniffing dog in Front Royal, Virginia on June 18, 2024. Fentanyl chemicals from China are shipped to U.S. airports disguised as cheap merchandise. REUTERS/Evelyn Hockstein

FRAYING TIES

Fentanyl was developed decades ago as an anesthetic and is still widely used in hospitals to ease surgical pain. It first showed up on U.S. streets in the 1970s as “China White,” the nickname for heroin mixed with fentanyl.

The explosion came in the 2010s after the U.S. restricted access to the prescription painkiller oxycodone due to widespread abuse. Traffickers filled the void with counterfeit pain pills containing fentanyl, most of them made in China, according to U.S. authorities.

China’s role in that illicit business shifted abruptly in May 2019 when Beijing began tightly controlling all fentanyl-related substances, effectively ending exports of the finished product. It looked like a diplomatic breakthrough for Trump, who had criticized these shipments in his first term.

Yet China remained a key player in the fentanyl trade despite the 2019 crackdown. Its chemical makers simply pivoted to exporting fentanyl ingredients to Mexico’s cartels, who took over the manufacturing of the synthetic opioid, Mexican and U.S. authorities say. Mexico, not China, became the face of the scourge, even as Chinese chemicals remained its heart.

“That’s when the big paradigm shift occurred,” said Mike Brown, a former special agent with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) who now hosts “The Opioid Matrix” podcast focusing on the illegal drug supply chain.

Trump’s successor, Biden, clashed with China over a host of issues, including [U.S. microchip export controls](#) aimed at slowing China’s military, and the February 2023 [shutdown of a suspected Chinese spy balloon](#) that drifted across the continental United States.

China [froze vital lines of communications](#) in a variety of areas, including counternarcotics, in August 2022 after then-U.S. House Speaker [Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan](#). By early 2023, China’s Xi accused Washington of “all-round containment to suppress China.”

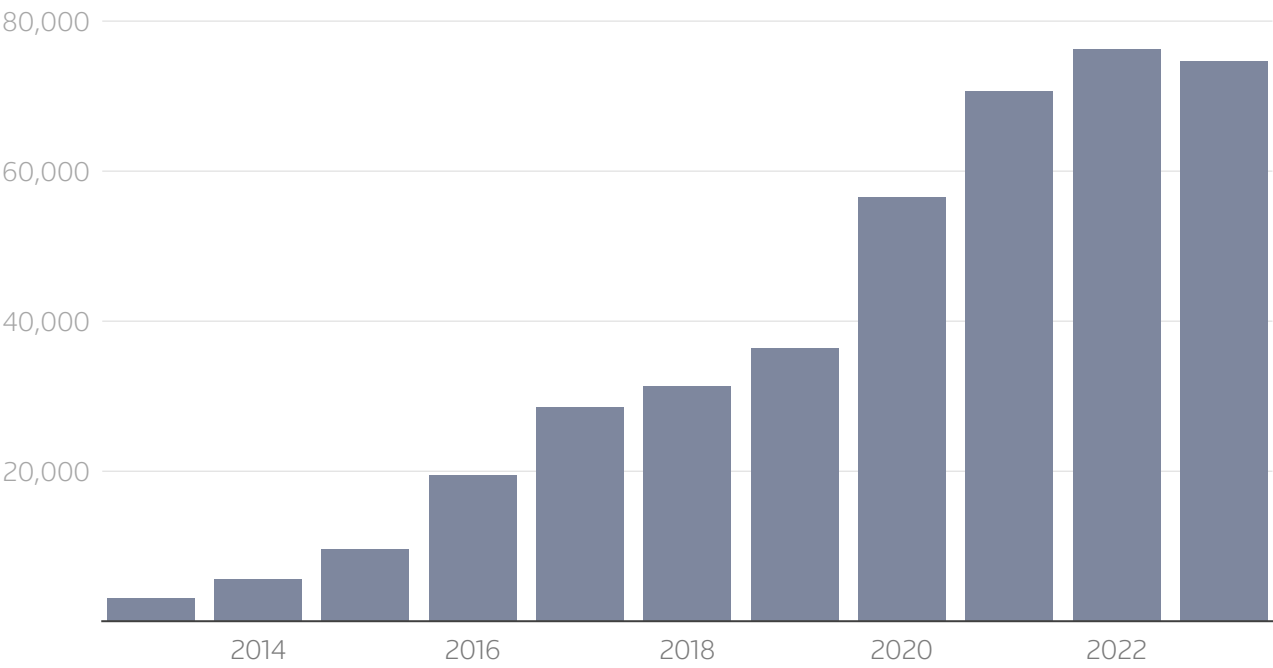
Later that year, the White House added China to a list of nations it considers major drug-producing or transit countries. The move rankled China’s leaders, who viewed it as a stain on the country’s global reputation. They’ve been pressing for removal ever since.

But away from the spotlight, both sides had reasons to seek rapprochement. For Xi, legitimacy at home depends on delivering prosperity. China’s economy was, and still is, struggling, and the U.S is the single-largest buyer of its exports.

For the Biden administration, the balloon episode underscored the potential risk for a black swan event to trigger conflict between two nuclear superpowers. In addition, Biden at the time still harbored aspirations to run for a second term. The alarming number of U.S. fentanyl overdose deaths on his watch, more than 76,000 in 2022 alone, was a liability.

Synthetic opioid death toll

Since 2013, more than 400,000 Americans have died from overdoses of synthetic opioids, mainly fentanyl.



Source: CDC

A reset with China was in order. Arrangements were set for Xi and Biden to meet in November 2023 near San Francisco.

As part of the thaw, Xi invited a bipartisan group of six U.S. senators to meet with him the month before the presidential confab. Fentanyl was one of the main topics of discussion in that 80-minute gathering in Beijing, recalled Senator Bill Cassidy, a Republican from Louisiana who attended.

Xi brought up Trump-era U.S. sanctions against a Chinese forensics institute as a stumbling block to resuming counternarcotics talks. While Xi did not explicitly say so, Cassidy said the subtext was clear: “Remove the sanctions if you want to collaborate.”

Biden did just that a day after his Nov. 15, 2023, meeting with Xi in California, paving the way for anti-drug cooperation to restart.



Travis Hayes, 65, displays a bag of what he said was fentanyl in San Francisco on Feb. 27, 2020. The synthetic opioid crisis has ravaged U.S. communities nationwide. REUTERS/Shannon Stapleton

SMALL STEPS

Counternarcotics discussions resumed in late January 2024, when a U.S. team of officials from the White House and the departments of Justice, State, Treasury and Homeland Security visited Beijing.

China brought senior money laundering experts and representatives of financial institutions, including the People’s Bank of China, according to Todd Robinson, the State Department’s point man on international anti-narcotics issues, who attended.

Five months later, Chinese authorities, acting on U.S. intelligence, arrested in China a suspected member of a Chinese syndicate that allegedly laundered drug money for Mexico’s Sinaloa Cartel. It was a rare example of legal cooperation between the two nations.

Law enforcement officials from both countries now meet regularly to discuss cases. American officials involved in those talks say they enjoy access to Chinese officials that’s the envy of most Western missions.



Chinese President Xi Jinping and U.S. President Joe Biden at a bilateral meeting in Woodside, California near San Francisco on Nov. 15, 2023. The reunion helped jumpstart stalled counternarcotics talks between the U.S. and China. REUTERS/Kevin Lamarque

The U.S. and China have also initiated quarterly online meetings between scientists to share information on emerging drug threats, a development both U.S. and Chinese officials said was significant.

Beijing this year also made good on a pledge to regulate three major fentanyl-making chemicals – 4-AP, 1-boc-4-AP and norfentanyl – as required under its obligations as a member of a United Nations commission engaging countries to battle narcotics collectively.

Even before the U.S. task force landed in Beijing, China made some goodwill offerings: Shortly after the Xi-Biden meeting in California, China's government sent a [notice to domestic chemical makers](#) warning them that exporting chemicals that could be used to make illicit drugs carried risks of surveillance and prosecution abroad.

Chinese police also carried out a sweep of about 5,000 chemical brokers and other companies peddling precursors, shutting down the worst offenders and “educating” others. According to state media, China also closed down 14 chemical websites and over 1,000 online shops.

No one was arrested in that crackdown, however. Shuttered online sellers of fentanyl ingredients can quickly get back up and running under different names, previous Reuters reporting showed.

Still, some U.S. officials saw all those gestures as a good start, including the senior Biden administration official who said there's no evidence that Beijing's tax rebates on chemical exports amount to state policy to weaponize fentanyl.

“The end goal is to stop the flow of precursor chemicals,” the official said. “We're not close to being there yet. But we have made important steps, and each one of those steps will build on each other.”



Workers prepare packages for screening at a U.S. Customs facility near Los Angeles International Airport on May 2, 2024. Drug traffickers exploit global shipping practices to smuggle Chinese fentanyl precursors into the U.S. by air. REUTERS/Mike Blake

BIG DIVIDE

Other U.S. officials described U.S.-China progress on fentanyl as halting at best and said China’s cooperation is largely performative. They said a few small wins can’t paper over the chasm that exists between the two sides.

China rejects Washington’s assertion that it’s the world’s No. 1 source of fentanyl precursors. This despite at least a dozen U.S. [indictments of Chinese suppliers](#) since mid-2023, and Reuters interviews with Mexican producers, who said key chemicals they need come almost exclusively from China. Beijing’s steadfast denial is “absurd” and “an attempt to bend reality,” said Cassidy, the Louisiana senator.

The U.S. has pressed China to require its chemical sector to vet customers and better monitor where their exports are going.

“We really want them to have their industries know who they’re selling to, and do a better job of telling the world who’s getting these chemicals on the other end,” said the State Department’s Robinson, who is assistant secretary for the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs.

China has resisted. Tsang Wai-hung, an official with the Chinese Narcotics Control Commission, said it’s the responsibility of importing countries – not Chinese chemical companies – to suss out suspect buyers.

In addition, many chemicals used to make synthetic opioids also have an array of legal uses. Beijing is wary that banning or regulating too many of these products could hamper the growth of China’s massive chemical industry.

“There has to be a balanced approach,” Tsang told Reuters in March at a United Nations anti-narcotics conference in Vienna, warning that “excessive” action “will damage the national economy.”



Tsang Wai-hung, vice commissioner of China's National Narcotics Control Commission, speaks at a United Nations conference on narcotics in Vienna on March 15, 2024. REUTERS/Laura Gottesdiener

Law enforcement collaboration is another hurdle.

U.S. law enforcement officials working with the Chinese on fentanyl described their gatherings in recent months as cordial, but said the urgency is all from the American side. A Homeland Security official who has attended meetings with China's Ministry of Public Security said information flows largely one way. He said U.S. authorities have provided China's security apparatus with solid leads and evidence on criminal suspects to pursue in China, while receiving "table scraps" in return to help with U.S investigations.

Another American law enforcement official said "it's like feeding info into a black box."

A Chinese official said China's authorities appreciate the tips, but complained that U.S. material was often thin and stale. "Some intelligence happened two or three years ago – it's of no value to start this kind of investigation," the official said.

Above all, China cannot appear to be taking orders from Washington, particularly in the area of narcotics. Some historians say the Opium Wars helped shape draconian drug laws in today's China, where convicted dealers face capital punishment.

This period has also influenced the nation's quest for military, economic and technological superiority over the West, so as never again to be humiliated by foreign powers, said Hang Xing, an associate professor in the Department of Chinese History and Culture at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

"Being forced to legalize opium use at gunpoint, I think that's pretty traumatic," Hang said. "It's left a very bitter memory, especially, it's been taken up as a message of present day Chinese nationalism."

TALKING TOUGH

In Peru this month at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, Xi met with the outgoing Biden one last time.

Xi said the pair had gotten bilateral relations back on track, resulting in "positive achievements," including on counternarcotics and law enforcement. Still, he warned that "containing China is unwise, unacceptable and bound to fail," according to a Chinese readout of the meeting.

Biden in his own remarks said that dialogue with China is what it takes to prevent "miscalculations" that could lead to conflict.

Supporters of Biden's approach to engagement note that synthetic opioid deaths dropped by nearly 19% in the 12 months ending June 30, 2024, from the same period a year earlier, according to CDC data. Public health experts believe some of that drop is due to the administration making overdose-reversal medication widely accessible for street use.

Biden administration officials say the U.S. should continue expanding such treatments at home, while patiently engaging China diplomatically abroad. The new administration should anticipate that an aggressive approach might push China to curtail some or all of the exchanges currently in place, a State Department official said. “If you try something else, the cooperation we have right now will probably disappear,” the official said.

Sanctioning major Chinese financial institutions could also disrupt the global economy, given China’s central role in international commerce.

“You have to think about what the impact would be on the financial system of sanctioning a super-large bank, one that’s very connected to global trade,” another State Department official said.

But people advising the Trump transition team, including some under consideration for posts in his administration, told Reuters the moment is ripe for a new approach to China over the fentanyl crisis, one involving more stick and less carrot.

Several said Beijing’s 2019 ban on exports of finished fentanyl shows that it’s capable of cracking down when it wants to. They said it defies belief that China, an authoritarian state with extensive police surveillance, can’t rein in Chinese money launderers and chemical sellers fueling an illicit trade that has wreaked havoc on U.S. communities nationwide.



Images of overdose victims displayed in New York City’s Times Square on National Fentanyl Prevention and Awareness Day on August 21, 2023. REUTERS/Shannon Stapleton

“It’s blatantly obvious that it’s drug warfare, and it is intentional,” said a former Department of Justice official familiar with conversations in Trump’s policy circles. “This moment is the breakpoint. Americans are fed up.”

Derek Maltz, a former senior DEA official who is close to Tom Homan, Trump’s pick to carry out mass deportations as the new “border czar,” said he’s confident the new administration intends to pursue a similarly aggressive strategy for fentanyl.

Both China and Mexico will be targeted, Maltz said, though by different means. With China, “it’ll be much more with finesse, with diplomacy, with sanctions, with really focused task force actions,” he said. “But with Mexican cartels, ‘shock and awe’ is the best way to describe it. They have no idea what’s coming their way.”

It’s not clear if the U.S. under Trump would launch such an offensive inside Mexico, a neighbor and ally, without cooperation from President Claudia Sheinbaum’s government. Several U.S. sources in Trump circles told Reuters they want to work with Mexico, but hinted at unilateral action if Mexico City is reluctant. Previous U.S.-backed efforts by Mexico to wage all-out war on its drug gangs convulsed that country in violence, while doing little to stop the northward flow of narcotics.

Mexico’s Foreign Ministry said the country’s government would work with Washington on security issues. But it dismissed as “absurd” the notion of labeling drug cartels as terrorist groups, saying they’re motivated by profits rather than politics or ideology.

The ministry also pushed back hard on the prospect of the U.S. taking unilateral action against criminal gangs on Mexican soil. Mexico “will not accept intrusion on its sovereignty or into its territory,” the statement said. “There will be cooperation but not subordination.”

Yates, the former White House official under Bush, said “decisive and provocative” action against the cartels would be noticed by Chinese organized crime groups, who might curb their own behavior.

But even fans of the get-tough approach say there’s no guarantee that Trump will follow through. Trump signaled on the campaign trail that tariffs and border security are his top priorities.

Asher, the money laundering expert, said ultimately making a dent in the crisis would require Washington to get serious about a coordinated, top-down strategy to hold both the cartels and the Chinese government to account. That’s something he said successive administrations have failed to do, including during Trump’s first term.

“The Chinese always got a pass,” Asher said. “And they still get a pass.”

A REUTERS INVESTIGATION

FENTANYL EXPRESS

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Part 2: [How fentanyl traffickers are exploiting a U.S. trade law to kill Americans](#)


Graphic: [The fentanyl funnel: How narcos sneak deadly chemicals through the U.S.](#)

Part 3: [Trump camp says China is ‘attacking’ U.S. with fentanyl. They aim to fight back](#)


Part 4: [The shadowy ‘brokers’ helping Mexico’s cartels smuggle fentanyl chemicals from China](#)

Part 5: [A fentanyl antidote is saving lives. But it isn’t ending the fentanyl crisis](#)

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Design: John Emerson
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REUTERS/Illustration/Catherine Tai

Chemical brokers are the supply chiefs of the illicit fentanyl trade, funneling Chinese ingredients to Mexico's producers. Industry insiders tell Reuters how they use bribery, tricks and violence to feed the pipeline.

By [DRAZEN JORGIC](#), [LAURA GOTTESDIENER](#) and [STEPHEN EISENHAMMER](#) | Filed Dec. 18, 2024, noon GMT

CULIACÁN, MEXICO

AS A KID growing up poor in the mountains of Mexico's Sinaloa state, Javier dreamed of becoming a player with the notorious Sinaloa Cartel.

Now in his late 30s, he occupies a critical role in the syndicate, albeit one with little glamour: Javier purchases Chinese-made fentanyl ingredients and smuggles them to drug labs in Mexico, where cartel cooks turn them into the synthetic opioid that is ravaging U.S. communities.

Chemical brokers such as Javier, known as *intermediarios*, don't garner the headlines of Mexico's fabled narcotics kingpins. Yet they are the indispensable link between East and West. Any given day might find them arranging payoffs to corrupt Mexican officials; ginning up a dummy company to import chemical precursors; hauling cash to local currency exchanges to close an offshore deal; or ferrying fentanyl-making ingredients to a remote manufacturing operation.

It's not the stuff of narco ballads, but Javier is satisfied with his station. "An enormous amount of money can be made," said the broker, who spoke to Reuters via phone from Sinaloa. He agreed to be interviewed on the condition that his full name not be used.

Javier and other nimble brokers have helped elevate Mexico into the world's leading illicit fentanyl producer. A senior U.S. official likened them to "attachés" for drug cartels. Their work has contributed to the misery on America's streets, where more than 400,000 people have died from synthetic opioid overdoses over the past decade.

The impact has forced U.S. authorities to broaden their anti-narcotics strategy. Instead of focusing mainly on intercepting finished fentanyl powder entering the country from Mexico, they're increasingly looking to stop it from ever being manufactured. That means starving Mexican traffickers of vital components needed to produce the drug by disrupting the chemical supply chain.

Washington has had little success on that score with China, whose mammoth chemical industry dominates production of ingredients used to manufacture synthetic opioids, U.S. authorities say. Recent U.S.-China counternarcotics talks to slow the flow have yielded only modest results.

Disrupting the receiving end in Mexico is proving just as difficult, particularly when it comes to brokers. There may be hundreds of players in Mexico feeding the fentanyl pipeline. U.S. and Mexican anti-narcotics officials said it's impossible to know the exact number. Some of these brokers are specialists within their own cartels, others are independent, but most operate below the radar of authorities.

That's because the global chemical industry is vast, and many compounds that can be used to manufacture fentanyl have legal industrial uses. These dual-use chemicals are often unregulated or only lightly controlled by the U.S., Mexico and China. That allows brokers to slip easily between the underworld and the mainstream chemical trade to garner what they need.



FENTANYL EXPRESS

The global chemical
trade behind America's
opioid crisis

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Mexico's Port of Manzanillo is a magnet for chemical brokers looking to smuggle Chinese fentanyl precursors into the country. REUTERS/Daniel Becerril

“It’s really hard for us as law enforcement to determine where they’re at, who they are, who they’re working for,” a senior official at the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) said.

Reuters reporting on the global fentanyl supply chain has shown how easy it is to [purchase precursors online from Chinese sellers](#). These suppliers ship the chemicals by air to Mexico and the U.S. disguised as low-cost consumer goods to fool customs authorities, who lack the resources to inspect every box. Logistics crooks then arrange the [last-mile transport of these packages](#) to drug labs in Mexico. It’s a low-risk, piecemeal process that involves shipping small quantities at a time.

Bigger volumes require different tactics, traffickers and anti-narcotics officials said. Some brokers pay off Mexico’s air and sea port officials to get their fentanyl chemicals onshore. Others bribe crew members on ships leaving China to dump barrels of precursors overboard near the Mexican coast, where fishermen are paid to pick them up.

Still others source chemicals from established Mexican chemical companies, either by colluding with crooked insiders or by capitalizing on a lack of due diligence by these firms, said Douglas Miller, a Houston-based anti-narcotics agent who tracks illicit chemical flows for Homeland Security Investigations (HSI).

“There is willful blindness by certain companies all the way up the chain of command,” said Miller, who did not name any businesses because of ongoing investigations.

To understand the world of Mexican brokers, the linchpins of the global fentanyl trade, Reuters interviewed eight current and former Sinaloa Cartel figures, including Javier and one other intermediary who sources chemicals for the crime syndicate, as well as three independent fentanyl makers who explained how they obtained precursors. Reporters visited Mexico’s busiest container port, Manzanillo, and they spoke to more than 50 U.S. and Mexican anti-narcotics agents, diplomats, trade specialists, port officials and chemical industry figures.

The news agency also examined hundreds of pages of legal documents detailing the exploits of the Algreto brothers, two imprisoned brokers at the center of a sprawling criminal investigation into their chemical smuggling activities by U.S. and Mexican authorities. In Mexico, investigators have vastly expanded their probe. Reuters is the first to disclose the scale and international reach of their efforts.



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U.S. officials have pressured Mexico to better monitor its chemical industry and crack down on corruption at its ports. In 2021, then-President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said Mexican seaports were being used to import synthetic drugs and precursors. He placed Mexico’s navy, considered the country’s most incorruptible security agency, fully in charge of them.

Mexico’s current president, Claudia Sheinbaum, told U.S. President-elect Donald Trump in a Nov. 26 letter that “international collaboration was urgently needed” to curb the smuggling of fentanyl precursors, which she noted were coming into the U.S. and Canada, as well as Mexico.



Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum at the National Palace in Mexico City last month with a letter destined for Donald Trump. The U.S. president-elect has threatened steep tariffs if Mexico fails to stem a tide of drugs and migrants flowing north. Carlos Ramos Mamahua/Presidencia de Mexico/Handout via REUTERS

The letter, which Sheinbaum made public, was in response to Trump’s threat to impose 25% tariffs on Mexican goods unless her government stopped the flow of illicit fentanyl and migrants to the United States. Sheinbaum said Mexico was toughening laws, seizing drugs and going after traffickers.

Mexico’s government on Dec. 3 announced the country’s largest-ever fentanyl seizure: 1,100 kilograms (2,425 pounds) of the synthetic drug in Sinaloa state.

Sinaloa Cartel figures who spoke with Reuters acknowledged the government’s efforts in recent years had made it tougher to get fentanyl chemicals into the country, but said they’re managing to do it all the same.





Mexico's government on Dec. 3 announced the largest-ever seizure of fentanyl in Sinaloa state. The Sinaloa Cartel has been split by warring factions, but production continues. Omar H. Garcia Harfuch/Handout via REUTERS

FROM METH TO SYNTHETIC OPIOIDS

The business of procuring chemicals for drug cartels stretches back decades in Mexico. In the 1990s, the brothers Adán, Luis and José de Jesús Amezcua — popularly known as the “Kings of Methamphetamine” — pioneered the smuggling of meth precursors from Asia and Europe to illicit labs in Mexico.

Raised in the Pacific coastal state of Colima before migrating to the U.S., the Amezcua siblings often imported chemicals to Mexico via companies that appeared legitimate. “They even paid taxes,” said a former trafficker who knew the Amezcuas well.

All three were eventually captured in Mexico, and in the 2000s they received lengthy jail sentences.

The brothers are now free and living “relaxed lives outside the drug business,” their friend, the ex-trafficker, said. Reuters was unable to reach the Amezcuas for comment.



U.S. Department of Justice
United States Marshals Service

WANTED

By U.S. MARSHALS

Name: FLORES, MARGARITO

Alias: FLORES JR, MARGARITO;
FLORES, JUNIOR

Sex..... MALE

Race..... WHITE

Date of Birth.....

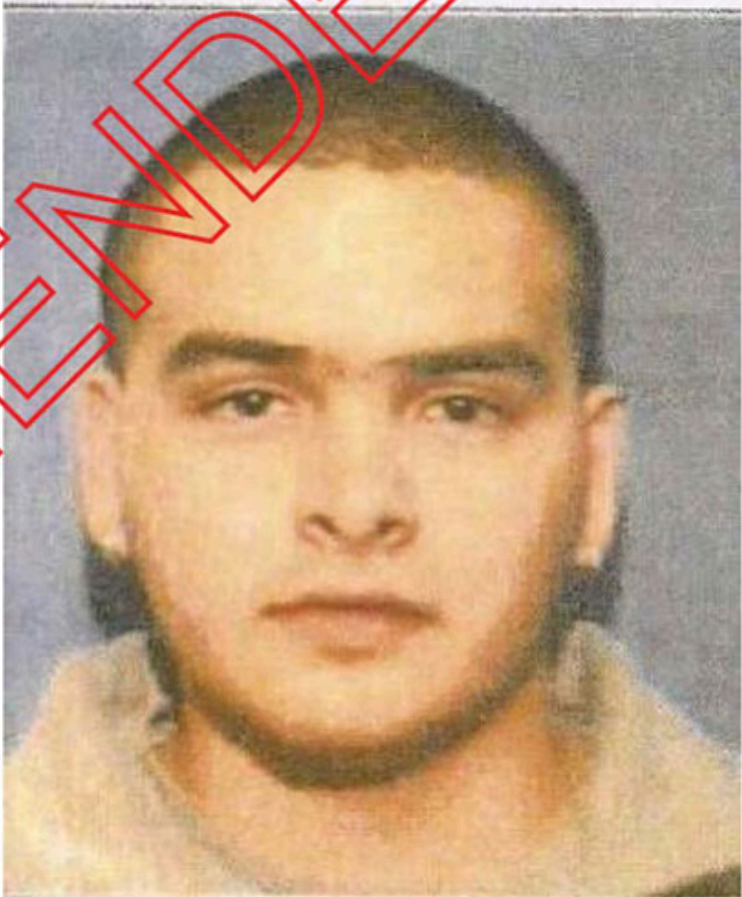
Place of Birth..... ILLINOIS

Height..... 5'05"

Weight..... 155 pounds

Eyes..... BROWN

Hair..... BROWN



Wanted For..... DRUGS

Date of Warrant..... 02/18/2004

Convicted drug trafficker Margarito Flores got a front-row seat to the rise of synthetic drugs, helping to broker methamphetamine chemical deals for the Sinaloa Cartel in Mexico. U.S. Department of Justice/Handout via REUTERS

Margarito Flores, a U.S.-born convicted drug trafficker, says the importance of brokers in an industrial-scale synthetic drug operation can't be overstated.

"They're the gateway for chemicals to enter Mexico," said Flores, who is now a consultant to law enforcement agencies on how drug cartels operate.

He once struck deals to bring meth chemicals to Mexico from Asia. He also moved tons of cocaine with now-jailed Sinaloa Cartel chief Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán before surrendering himself to U.S. authorities in 2008 and serving 12 years in prison.

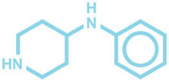
Jeffrey Lichtman, a lawyer for Guzmán, did not respond to requests for comment.

When Mexican crime syndicates moved into fentanyl manufacturing in the mid-2010s, chemical brokers pivoted to procuring synthetic opioid precursors.

One of them was Javier, the Sinaloa native.

Reuters was not able to verify most of the claims made by Javier about his work or the methods he employs to smuggle chemicals into Mexico. But his story is consistent with industry details uncovered in the investigation of the Algreto brothers, as well as accounts of the trade from other narcos interviewed by Reuters, including one other broker, a lab operator who purchases his own chemicals directly from China, and two other Sinaloa Cartel associates. Two anti-narcotics agents tracking illicit chemical flows also told Reuters that Javier’s story sounded credible.

Javier said he got his start in the Sinaloa Cartel as a



mandadero, or errand boy, gradually working his way up in the syndicate,

“We spring the chemicals out without problems.”

Javier, a Sinaloa Cartel chemical broker on his crew’s success in getting fentanyl precursors through the Port of Manzanillo with bribery

which is a loose confederation of criminal factions. He’s now part of a ring of traffickers and brokers who work under the cartel umbrella, helping the network source fentanyl chemicals and running some of their own fentanyl labs.

At one point, the crew’s cooks were churning out some 100 kilograms (220 pounds) of fentanyl powder per week, Javier said. That’s enough to produce about 50 million counterfeit fentanyl pills per week, or 2.6 billion tablets per year, according to an independent chemist.

Javier said his team initially imported fentanyl precursors from Europe.

That changed around 2017, when Javier and his partners, who had struggled to raise the purity of their fentanyl, spent \$50,000 for a different recipe. The Colombian trafficker who sold it introduced them to a contact in China with access to precursors. It was the start of a fruitful business relationship that endures to this day.

As consumption of synthetic opioids surged in the U.S., Javier said enterprising Sinaloans, many of them independent mom-and-pop operators, rushed to open rustic labs to supply the lucrative new market.

“The number of people doing this mushroomed,” he said.

Demand for his chemicals boomed.

Javier said the Chinese supplier sends some precursors by air in small packages to Mexico City’s international airport. Many are piperidines, compounds at the core of fentanyl’s structure. A little goes a long way. Javier declined to go into details about where the packages go immediately after clearing customs. He did say they’re often flown out of the capital on small planes to Sinaloa.

Chemicals needed in greater volumes, such as propionyl chloride, often come via cargo ship. Javier said his group moves “tons” of precursors through the Port of Manzanillo each year. In addition, he says his team pays millions of dollars in bribes annually to officials at the port — including to customs agents and, more recently, naval officers — to ensure the goods exit the port smoothly.

“We spring the chemicals out without problems,” Javier said.

Mexico’s National Customs Agency did not respond to requests for comment about Javier’s claims. The navy declined to comment on the bribery allegation.



A member of the Mexican navy tests a shipment of imported dual-use chemicals at the Port of Manzanillo in December 2023. The navy was put in charge of the Pacific port to combat rampant smuggling of fentanyl precursors and the corruption that has accompanied it. REUTERS/Daniel Becerril

There have been only five seizures of fentanyl precursor chemicals at the Port of Manzanillo, according to data going back to 2018 provided to Reuters by naval authorities. The small number of busts is a sign of the navy's effectiveness, according to Captain José Barradas, head of the navy's port protection unit there. "The seizures are not so frequent, but this is due to the fact that we are denying organized crime the room to operate," he told a visiting Reuters reporter.

For extra security, Javier said his gang pays kickbacks to contacts at a legitimate chemical company to collect precursor shipments and whisk them out of the port complex in vehicles bearing the company logo. Drivers head northeast to small runways near the city of Guadalajara, about 300 kilometers (186 miles) away. From there, cartel-contracted pilots fly the cargo north in small Cessna planes to clandestine airstrips in Sinaloa, where it's retrieved by some of Javier's colleagues.

In Sinaloa, the chemicals are stored in makeshift warehouses, small ranches and basements. Javier said his team bribes state and municipal law enforcement to ignore their activities.

Sinaloa police did not respond to requests for comment.

Javier said buyers of his crew's precursors are carefully vetted: He and his partners meet prospective clients in person, and a trusted cartel member must vouch for them. The crew takes orders through encrypted mobile phone applications. Payment is cash only and includes delivery.

BRIBES, BOATS, BALACLAVAS

Javier's story is similar in many respects to that of another Sinaloa-based broker who spoke with Reuters. He goes by the nickname "El 23." The details of his account could not be fully corroborated by the news agency.

Now in his 40s, El 23 said he started working as a hitman for the cartel at age 16. He climbed the syndicate career ladder over the years and became a broker, at first focusing on meth chemicals. Around 2016, as fentanyl manufacturing was taking off in Mexico, El 23 said he and his associates found a Chinese pharmaceutical company on the internet willing to sell them 4-ANPP. That chemical is gold to fentanyl cooks. It's a so-called "immediate" precursor that's easy to synthesize into the synthetic opioid.

Immediate precursors are now tightly controlled internationally. But in 2016, 4-ANPP was still legal in Mexico because few illicit fentanyl labs operated there; at the time, Chinese producers still dominated manufacturing of the finished street drug. The Chinese seller even offered guidance on how to cook fentanyl.

“They would send us a recipe in English and Chinese,” El 23 told Reuters in an interview in Sinaloa earlier this year.

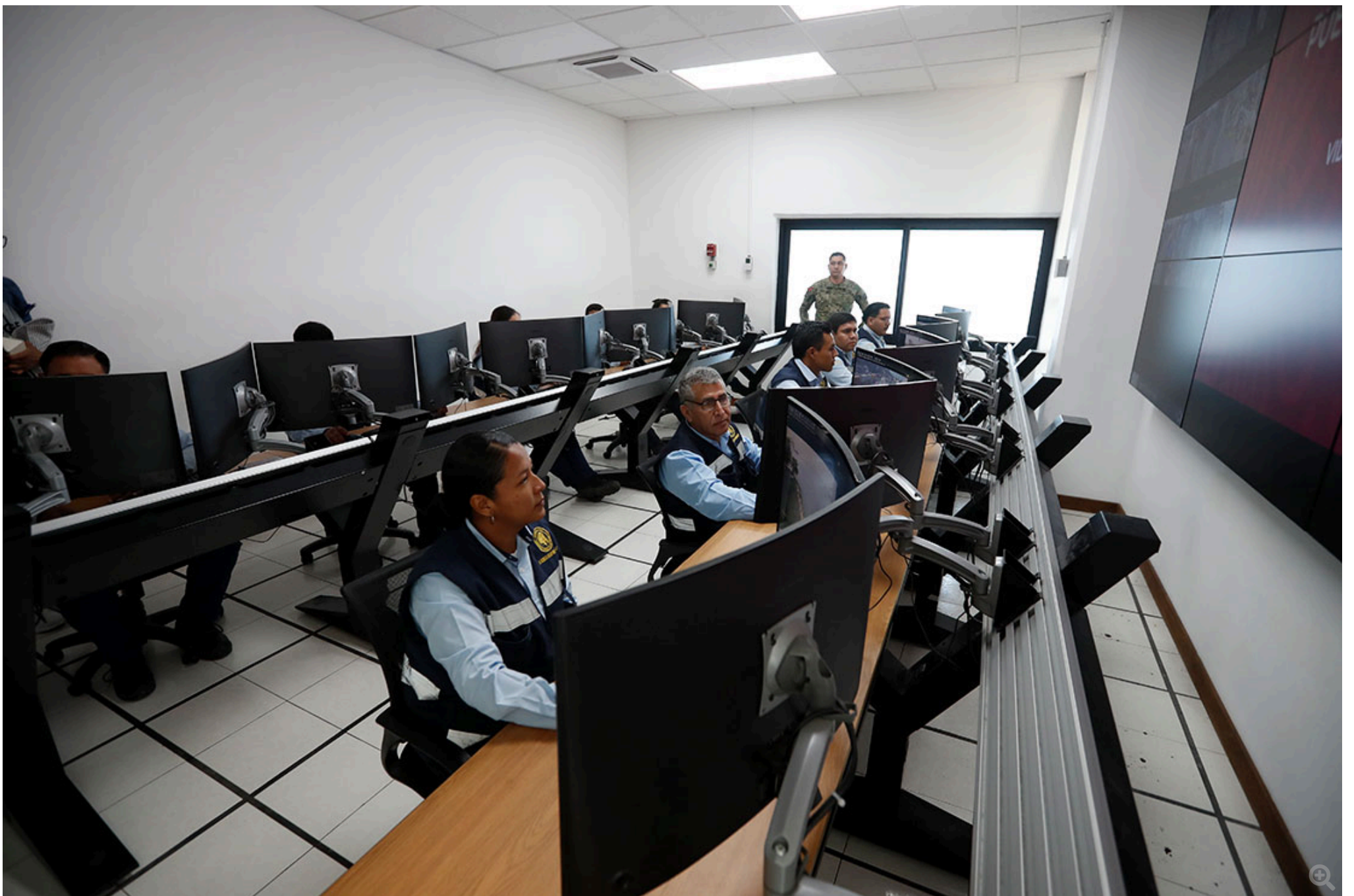
Mexico and China tightened regulations on 4-ANPP in 2017, forcing the cartel to use different chemicals. Sometimes referred to as “pre-precursors,” these are the ingredients needed to make immediate precursors.

El 23 recounted how cartel bigwigs arranged a training session on producing fentanyl using the new chemicals and a modified recipe. Their teachers were two scientists: one American, one Chinese, both in their late 40s or early 50s. The chemists were flown in specially to a mountainous region of the so-called *Triángulo Dorado*, or Golden Triangle, rural cartel heartlands in northwest Mexico long famed for their marijuana and poppy fields.

The instructors, their faces covered with balaclavas and speaking through translators, sketched instructions on a chalkboard. Cartel cooks — hardened men with no formal chemistry education — scribbled furiously in their notebooks. Phones and recording devices were prohibited.

“They gave us a step-by-step guide, a bit like being told to throw in a bit of pepper, a bit of cumin, a bit of coriander,” El 23 recalled.

He said his crew used Manzanillo and the Port of Lázaro Cárdenas on the Pacific coast of Michoacán state, paying customs and port officials in both places about \$30,000 per monthly shipment.



Officials at Mexico's Port of Manzanillo monitor security cameras at the complex. REUTERS/Daniel Becerril

Mexico's navy, which is in charge of those ports, declined to answer questions about El 23's account.

El 23 said the cartel also created fake companies, including a pharmaceutical business and a soap manufacturer, to import the goods and ferry them out of the ports.

Another smuggling method involved bribing ship workers to toss barrels of chemicals fitted with GPS trackers into the sea near Mexico's coast. Fishermen were paid to locate the barrels and bring them ashore, El 23 said.

Smaller shipments totaling 200 to 300 kilograms a month arrived at the Mexico City airport, El 23 said. Packages were flown from China via major delivery firms, their contents disguised as coffee, protein powder and other everyday items. A cartel lawyer with contacts in the airport distributed \$20,000 per batch to customs officials to ensure no packages were detained, El 23 added.



A plane taxis at Benito Juárez International Airport in Mexico City last year. Mexican chemical brokers who spoke with Reuters said some of their fentanyl precursors are flown from China to this airport. REUTERS/Henry Romero

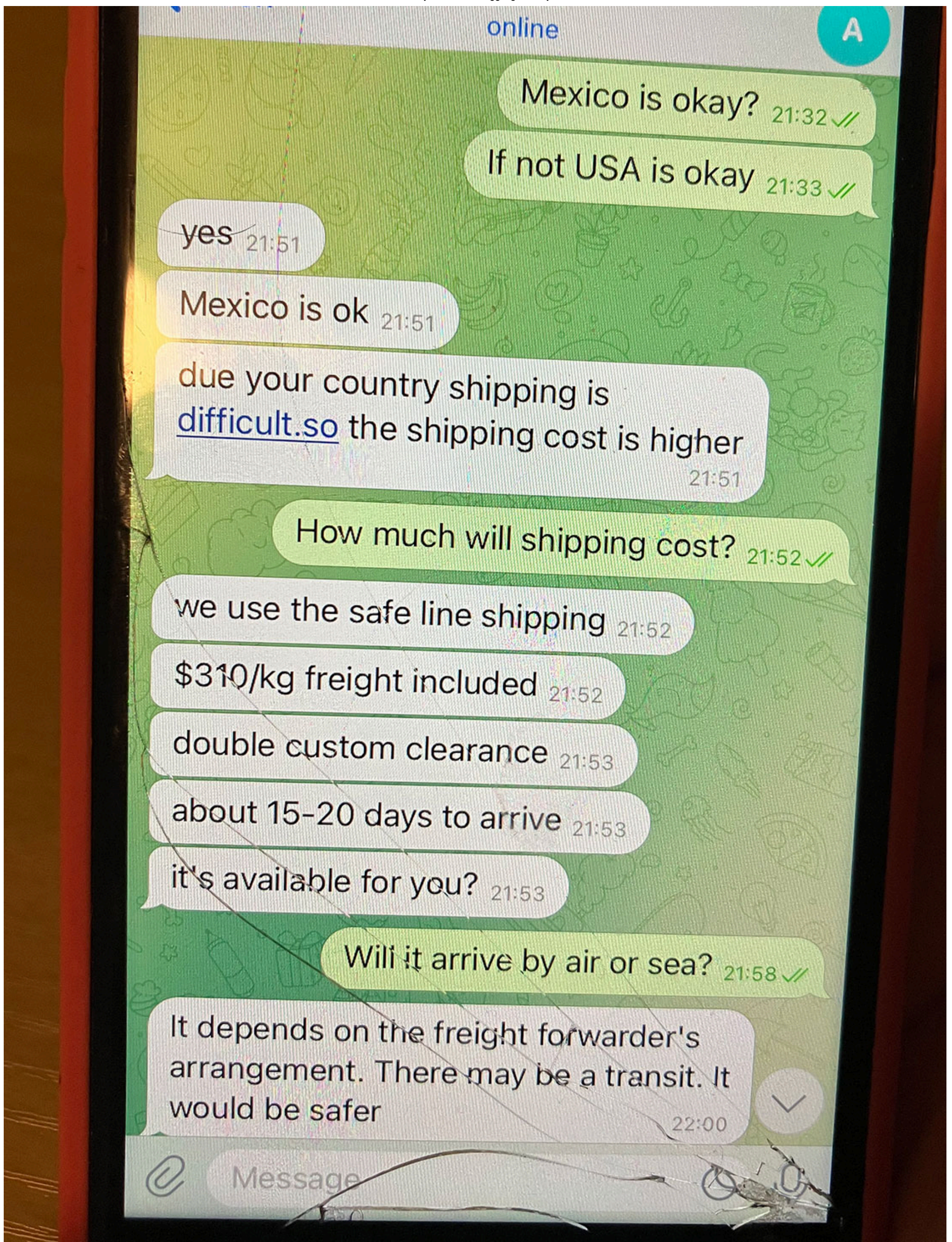
Mexico's National Customs Agency did not respond to requests for comment on El 23's allegations.

To pay the Chinese supplier, El 23 said his outfit would haul cash to currency exchange outlets in Culiacán that run off-the-books money transfer services. Such arrangements are commonly employed by money launderers operating in Mexico. El 23 said they also paid off Mexican officials in other cities this way.

The chemicals shipped from China were primarily used to supply about 10 fentanyl labs that his crew operated in Sinaloa, El 23 said. But the Chinese connection was abruptly severed more than a year ago when word came that the seller had been detained by authorities in China.

El 23 said his group now buys its precursors from a big-time broker in Mexico City who sells to multiple cartels. The price is 30% higher than what he spent securing chemicals directly from China, El 23 said, but the service has proved convenient and reliable.

He said he places orders via encrypted messaging apps and has the goods delivered to various locations in Sinaloa and southern Mexico through mainstream delivery firms. "They send it to wherever you want," he said.



A cell phone chat between a Reuters reporter and a Chinese supplier of fentanyl precursors. Many sellers will ship these chemicals by air to the U.S. or Mexico. Mexican chemical brokers told the news agency they get some deliveries this way. REUTERS/Laura Gottesdiener

For more ubiquitous dual-use chemicals, El 23 said he and his gang simply head to MercadoLibre, a popular online marketplace.

The Latin American e-commerce giant said “there is no place for illegality” on its platform and that it complies with law enforcement and all applicable laws wherever it operates.

A chief executive of a large Mexican chemicals business told Reuters that in cartel-ridden Sinaloa and Guerrero states, his company has stopped selling dual-use chemicals that can be repurposed for manufacturing drugs.

“We just couldn’t make sure we were selling to the right people,” he said.

Some Mexican chemical companies have little choice. Cartels have been known to threaten insiders who don’t cooperate, according to security officials and industry sources.

Meanwhile, prices for some raw materials have collapsed in recent years; for example, 4-AP, a key fentanyl precursor, is down almost 90% to about \$100 per kilogram, U.S. officials say.

"It goes to show there are more producers (in China) and more supply," said Miller, the HSI anti-narcotics agent.

The U.S. has pressed chemical companies at home and in Mexico to vet customers carefully and report sketchy buyers to authorities, U.S. officials said. But the sheer size and complexity of the global chemical industry means the sector is teeming with middlemen and resellers, whose due diligence varies.

Trade routes can be multifarious, too. Merchandise shipped from Asia to Mexico often passes through other countries en route, including the United States.

Fentanyl chemicals with legitimate industrial uses that transit through the U.S. can be difficult for authorities to stop, said Arthur Wyatt, a top anti-narcotics prosecutor with the U.S. Department of Justice.

“If it's not a regulated chemical, you can't necessarily seize it at the border, you have to be able to tie it to an investigation,” Wyatt said.

Laws and regulations in Mexico related to precursor chemicals are seen as robust by U.S. and United Nations officials. The problem lies in enforcement, say U.S. officials, who often cite corruption as a major hindrance.

Mexico’s ministry of public security said in a statement that the country is working to dismantle the entire chain of production of illicit fentanyl under a policy of “zero impunity.”

China's embassy in Washington said in a statement that Chinese officials have worked closely with Mexican investigators on drug cases and that the two sides have "smooth and frequent interactions." It added that the "Chinese government has always adhered to a strict anti-drug policy" and continues to support global drug control efforts.



A member of the Mexican navy and a canine sentry patrol Mexico's Port of Manzanillo last year. REUTERS/Daniel Becerril

THE MEGA INVESTIGATION

The busts of big-time Mexican chemical brokers Carlos and Javier Algreto were the highest-profile apprehensions of *intermediarios* in recent years.

Their case would trigger what is now the largest ongoing criminal investigation inside the federal Attorney General's Office, said a Mexican government official familiar with the probe.

The brothers, both now in their late 50s and in prison, for decades brokered chemicals through businesses in Mexico and the United States. Many of their sales were to lawful buyers.

But beneath that veil of respectability they operated a vast covert enterprise smuggling heavily regulated chemicals used to manufacture meth and fentanyl, according to U.S. and Mexican officials, indictments against the men, and transcripts of U.S. court proceedings reviewed by Reuters.

Javier worked mainly in the United States. Carlos ran the business in Mexico. Their biggest illicit client was the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, U.S. and Mexican prosecutors said.

Reuters was unable to reach representatives for that cartel.

The probe gained traction in 2021. U.S. anti-narcotics agents, working with Mexican authorities, traced multiple shipping containers that had arrived in the Port of Manzanillo from China to a company owned by Carlos Algreto. One contained 750 kilograms (1,653 pounds) of the fentanyl precursor 4-piperidone hydrochloride monohydrate, according to a Mexican government document detailing the interception.



■ Video: Cargo ships idle at Mexico's Port of Manzanillo. A major seizure of fentanyl precursors there in 2021 launched a sprawling investigation into a chemical smuggling operation that continues to this day. REUTERS/Daniel Becerril

That was enough to create about 550 million fentanyl pills, according to an independent chemist consulted by Reuters. It was the biggest seizure of a core fentanyl ingredient in Mexico's history, two sources familiar with the case said.

Among the chemicals seized from various containers over nearly two weeks, investigators discovered a government permit clearing some precursors for entry into Mexico. It had been issued by COFEPRIS, the Mexican health regulator that oversees licenses for chemical imports and sales. Mexico's Naval Intelligence Unit was enlisted to dig into suspected collusion between the Algreto brothers and COFEPRIS insiders.

In 2022, COFEPRIS announced the sacking of 32 workers, an event that prompted the regulator's then-chief, Alejandro Svarch, to say the agency had become a "basement of corruption." As the investigation widened, some Mexican customs agency workers were likewise terminated. So were employees at the economy and health ministries, and even a federal prosecutor, the Mexican government official said.

The ministries and the Attorney General's Office did not respond to requests for comment about the probe and its fallout.

U.S. anti-narcotics agents in September 2021 arrested Javier Algreto in Washington. The U.S. alleged that between 2018 and 2021 the Algredos supplied Mexico's cartels with about 44 metric tons of fentanyl-making chemicals and 1,453 metric tons of meth precursors.

Javier was sentenced to nearly 19 years in prison in February 2024 for his role in distributing chemicals used to manufacture meth and for money laundering. His attorney, Sandi S. Rhee, did not comment on the allegations.

In February 2023, the U.S. Department of Justice unsealed a grand jury indictment against Carlos Algreto. The charges included distributing chemicals for the purpose of making meth for importation into the United States. He was captured nine months later in Mexico, where he remains jailed and faces extradition. His attorney did not respond to a request for comment.

The Mexican probe continues.

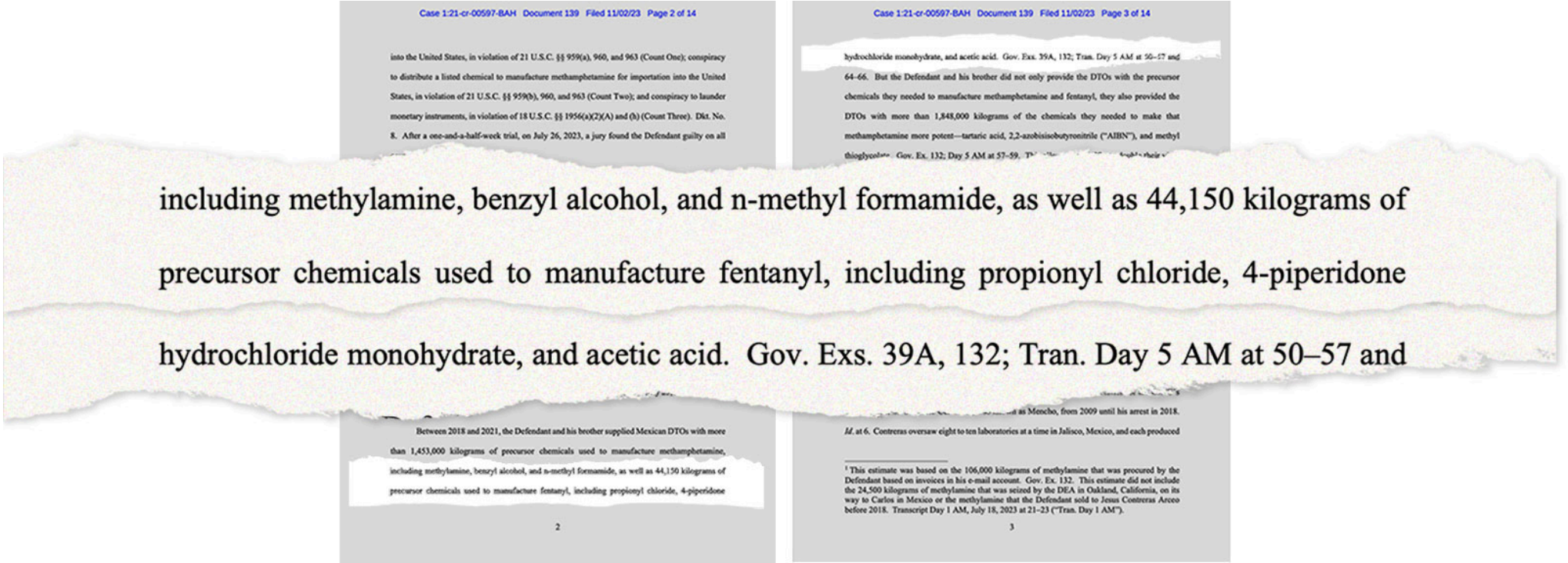


Methamphetamine precursors seized in 2021 by U.S. authorities investigating Mexican-born chemical brokers Javier and Carlos Algreto are shown in a government warehouse in Texas. Authorities allege they also supplied fentanyl chemicals to Mexican cartels. Javier is serving a nearly 19-year sentence in a U.S. prison, while Carlos is jailed in Mexico. U.S. Department of Justice/Handout via REUTERS

Investigators have followed the money trail to South America, Asia, Europe and Africa, the Mexican government official said. In Mexico, the source said, authorities have identified nearly 150 companies involved. The vast majority are allegedly linked to the brothers, including firms engaged in pharmaceuticals, agriculture, paints and solvents.

The common denominator: All those firms import chemicals. At some point, that "product goes missing" and into the hands of the cartel, the official said.

The brothers' network was so expansive that Mexican authorities have shuttered nearly 1,000 bank accounts containing 400 million pesos (\$20 million) and issued 33 arrest warrants as a result of the probe, according to the official.



An excerpt from the U.S. government sentencing memorandum for Javier Algreto. The document cited trial evidence produced by prosecutors that he supplied chemicals to Mexican drug cartels for the manufacture of methamphetamine and fentanyl. U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia/Handout via Reuters

SINALOA WAR SHAKEUP

While authorities try to combat the trade, a shakeup in the Sinaloa Cartel has hit the business of the Mexican brokers and independent cooks who spoke with Reuters.

In the summer of 2023, following U.S. indictments of key Sinaloa Cartel chiefs and amid a fentanyl glut that depressed prices, the crime group’s leadership announced it was curbing the number of producers in Sinaloa state. Only manufacturers who had express permission from the syndicate’s top brass could cook, five cartel figures told Reuters.

The bosses circulated their edict via WhatsApp and sent bands of *sicarios*, or hitmen, after those who disobeyed, two independent fentanyl producers and a cartel enforcer said.

That hitman, who goes by the nickname “M6,” told Reuters how he hunted outlaw operators with his squad. After observing one clandestine lab for three days, the gunmen, armed with high-velocity AR-15 rifles, broke down the door, kidnapped four cooks found inside, then spirited them elsewhere for interrogation.

When the cooks refused to give up the names of their bosses, the hitmen began removing “their nails with pliers, cutting off their fingers, punching them and electrocuting them,” M6 said. “Some talked. Others preferred to die because they knew they’d be dead anyway.”

Most freelancers called it quits once the bodies of rogue lab cooks, fentanyl pills sprinkled like confetti on their corpses, were found dumped around Culiacán, according to cartel *sicarios*, cooks and brokers who spoke with Reuters.



Sinaloa Cartel hitman “M6” poses with a Bible in Sinaloa state. He said a cartel ban on rogue fentanyl producers kept him busy. REUTERS/Drazen Jorgic

An even bigger disruption came this summer after a split between the two leading Sinaloa Cartel families — the Guzmáns and the Zambadas. Their bloody intra-cartel war has seen hundreds of people killed and kidnapped since early September, Sinaloa authorities said.

U.S. officials say it’s hard to draw broad conclusions about how much overall Mexican production of fentanyl has been hit by one cartel’s ban on freelance producers and now the war. Fentanyl seizures at the U.S. border fell 20% in fiscal 2024 from the previous year, but are still far higher than in 2022, at the peak of U.S. synthetic overdose deaths.

In the United States, health experts are studying a 22% drop in U.S. synthetic opioid fatalities in the 12 months ending July 31, 2024, from the same period a year earlier, according to data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

A variety of possible reasons have been cited for the decline. Some public health experts credit the Biden administration for making the overdose-reversal medication naloxone widely available. The White House says anti-drug education and increased spending on counternarcotics operations have helped, too. Some analysts surmise that the ranks of American addicts who can be felled by fentanyl have simply peaked.

U.S. overdose deaths barely register with Sinaloa Cartel members desensitized to violence. Javier, the chemical broker, said Americans should stay away from fentanyl, but it’s not his responsibility if they don’t.

“No one puts a gun to their head to take drugs,” Javier said. “Every person chooses their own path.”

A REUTERS INVESTIGATION

FENTANYL EXPRESS

Part 1: [With \\$3,600 and Wi-Fi, we bought everything needed to make fentanyl.](#)

Graphic: [Fentanyl’s deadly chemistry: How rogue labs make opioids](#)

James "Sleaze" Morgan smokes fentanyl in an alleyway in Columbus, Ohio. Sleaze is one of 10 Ohio users who described being saved from an overdose multiple times by naloxone. REUTERS/Shannon Stapleton

The U.S. death toll from illicit fentanyl is falling as communities douse the streets with naloxone, a potent overdose-reversal drug. But behind the good news, deadly opioids remain rife – and users report harrowing effects from the antidote.

By [MAURICE TAMMAN](#) and [SHANNON STAPLETON](#) | Filed Dec. 17, 2024, 10:48 a.m. GMT

COLUMBUS, Ohio

THE DEATH TOLL from fentanyl and other synthetic opioids is falling for the first time since the drugs began flooding America's streets a decade ago. Users and police in this city's beaten-down Hilltop neighborhood credit another drug flooding the United States: the overdose antidote naloxone.

James "Sleaze" Morgan says naloxone has saved him after overdosing – as many as 20 times in the last several years.

The lifesaving nasal-spray medicine is everywhere in the 10 or more Hilltop "trap" houses where users come to buy and take fentanyl. Distributed free by local officials, supplies are abundant at the house where Sleaze smokes fentanyl and works security in exchange for drugs.

On a recent day, a customer heated up a dose of white fentanyl powder, sucked in the smoke through a short straw, and stopped breathing almost instantly. Sleaze says he grabbed several naloxone canisters and sprayed three doses up the comatose man's nose, snapping him back to life.

"It's second nature to me," says Sleaze, whose nickname is tattooed just above his left eye. "I hit him with three canisters, and he came to."

Many narcotics researchers say the widespread availability of naloxone appears to be the main factor in the sharp drop in synthetic overdose deaths this past year. In the 12 months through July 2024, deaths fell 22% percent in the U.S. and 34% in Ohio from the same period a year earlier, according to the most recent data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Nationwide, about 17,500 fewer people died than in the prior year.

The drop coincides with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's move in March 2023 to allow the sale of naloxone without a prescription. Several brands are available at pharmacies and online for between \$30 and \$45 per kit. Today, Ohio and other states have giveaway programs for the drug. The Columbus Police Department cites naloxone as a prime factor behind a decline in 911 calls for overdose emergencies here.

Dr. Rahul Gupta, director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, says a federal effort to get naloxone and other addiction treatments into communities is driving the steady decline in overdose deaths. Prosecutions of fentanyl suppliers and the drug's ingredient makers have disrupted the entire supply chain, he adds, resulting in less potent fentanyl on the streets.

The death tally remains high, though. As Reuters has documented, illicit fentanyl – synthesized from Chinese-made chemical ingredients smuggled into the U.S. and Mexico – remains cheap and plentiful. In Columbus, it's \$10 a fix.



FENTANYL EXPRESS

The global chemical
trade behind America's
opioid crisis

IN THIS SERIES

Part 1: [With \\$3,600 and Wi-Fi, we bought everything needed to make fentanyl](#)

Graphic: [Fentanyl's deadly chemistry: How rogue labs make opioids](#)

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Part 3: [Trump camp says China is 'attacking' U.S. with fentanyl. They aim to fight back](#)

Part 4: [The shadowy 'brokers' helping Mexico's cartels smuggle fentanyl chemicals from China](#)



“I love getting high,” says James “Sleaze” Morgan. But the antidote to fentanyl is a different story. Naloxone abruptly plunges an overdosed user into excruciating withdrawal symptoms, he says. REUTERS/Shannon Stapleton

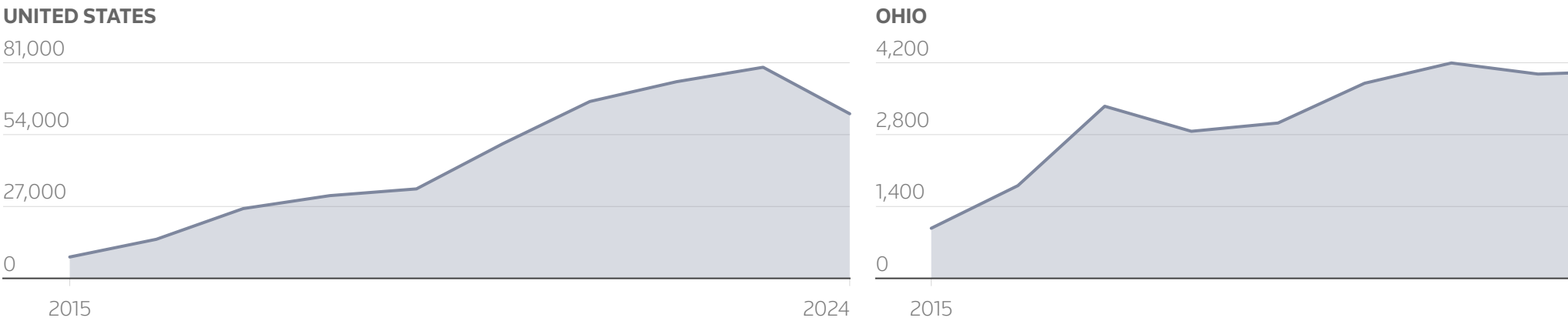
To explore what the drug’s intricate global supply chain means for the ultimate consumers, journalists visited Ohio. The state was one of the first overwhelmed by fentanyl fatalities – no one can say why for sure – and is now among the first seeing the wave of deaths ebb. But the stories of Sleaze and other users in Columbus show how even with a powerful antidote on the streets, it’s proving difficult to break fentanyl’s grip on America.

Between 50,000 and 60,000 Americans are projected to die from synthetic opioid overdoses this year, most from taking fentanyl or closely related drugs. That would be a roughly sixfold increase over 2015, the year before the fentanyl crisis began. The U.S. is approaching some 450,000 deaths from synthetic opioids since then.

Scott Sanders is executive director of the Hope Resource Center, a haven and support provider for Sleaze and other users in the Hilltop area of Columbus. He hands out roughly 1,000 naloxone kits a month, each with two nasal-spray canisters. But while naloxone is saving lives, Sanders says, the number of substance abusers on Hilltop’s streets is growing.

The Toll: Synthetic-Opioid Overdose Deaths

Ohio was one of the first states in the U.S. to be ravaged by fentanyl. In the past year, it is among the states seeing the largest falls in deaths from synthetic-opioid overdoses.



Note: Annual tallies are for the 12-month periods from Aug 1 to July 31
Sources: U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Provisional Drug Overdose Death Counts | REUTERS/Maurice Tamman

Visits to Hope’s drop-in center have risen about a third this year, to about 18,300 in the 12 months through November 2024, up from about 13,400 in the prior 12 months.

“And that scares me to death,” Sanders says. “Because all the powers that be are going to be throwing parties. Like, wow, look, it's not a problem anymore,” he says of the fatality trendline. “But we’re busier than ever.”

Beyond naloxone, researchers cite two other possible factors behind the falling toll. Illicit narcotics distributors are increasingly adding “tranq” – veterinary tranquilizers – to the fentanyl they sell. Why they’re doing so is unclear. But tranq is less deadly than fentanyl. It also provides a longer-lasting high, potentially delaying the onset of fentanyl withdrawal and the desire for another fix. The fewer times users take fentanyl, the fewer chances they have of overdosing. Some researchers believe tranq may be as big a factor as naloxone in the falling toll.



A weekly addiction-recovery meeting at the Hope Resource Center, a haven for users in Columbus, Ohio, in November. Overdose deaths are falling, but fentanyl use is still high. The center has seen a rise in visitors in the past year. REUTERS/Shannon Stapleton



Outside the Hope Resource Center. The center says it hands out about 1,000 naloxone kits a month. Police credit the medication for a fall in emergency-overdose calls. REUTERS/Shannon Stapleton

Others are examining the drop in the number of “susceptibles” – the possibility that the huge number of overdose deaths in recent years, about 280,000 since 2021, has so sharply culled the population of potential fentanyl abusers that the number of overdoses was bound to fall.

But on a November visit by Reuters to Ohio, it’s naloxone that most everyone is talking about. Users here refer to the overdose-reversal drug as Narcan, the first brand to hit the market with a nasal spray.

Sleaze is one of 10 Ohio users who told Reuters they have been revived numerous times by naloxone. Their individual stories couldn’t be confirmed, but Sanders of the Hope center says he knows of a number of people who’ve been revived multiple times.

Sleaze and others repeatedly saved by naloxone also describe a dark side to the miracle drug. It immediately plunges them into a harrowing withdrawal from fentanyl, a drug 50 times more potent than heroin – spurring an instant need for another fix.



Fentanyl use is high across the United States, including in New York City. A naloxone pamphlet and an empty dispenser lie on the ground in a park last year in the city’s Bronx borough. REUTERS/Shannon Stapleton

THE CASE FOR NALOXONE

Ohio has been at the forefront of the fentanyl crisis since the drug appeared on the streets of nearby Dayton in 2017. State and local authorities distributed nearly 320,000 two-dose naloxone kits in the first 10 months of this year. That’s 20,000 more than in all of 2023 and 110,000 more than in 2022. Synthetic overdose deaths in Ohio dropped about a third to 2,676 in the year ending in July, CDC figures show, the fewest since 2016.

In Columbus, Sanders encourages visitors to the Hope center to take as many free naloxone kits as they want. On a damp and chilly day in mid-November, Ryan Hall pokes his nose into Sanders’ office to say hello. Hall, who says he has 13 kids by “six baby mamas,” has come by to celebrate his 41st birthday. He has gone in and out of addiction treatment repeatedly in recent years and has been “Narcanned” numerous times, Sanders says.

Hall says he’s clean; Sanders is dubious. Sanders – who kicked his own crack addiction in 2017 – encourages Hall to call him later, promising to get him back into treatment when he’s ready. (On Dec. 9, Sanders would take Hall to a rehab center.) Much of what Sanders does is arrange for people to get into treatment and sober housing.

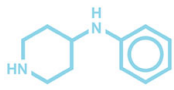


Scott Sanders runs the Hope Resource Center in Columbus, Ohio. He worries that the good news about falling deaths will mislead “the powers that be” into believing the fentanyl epidemic is “not a problem anymore.” REUTERS/Shannon Stapleton



Sanders spends much of his time helping people to get into treatment and sober housing. He overcame a crack addiction himself in 2017. REUTERS/Shannon Stapleton

A few minutes later, Sleaze, 40 years old, walks into Sanders' office and sits down. Across Sleaze's forehead, in three-quarter-inch-high letters, is tattooed "FUCK COPS."



"We're busier than ever."
Scott Sanders, executive director of the Hope Resource Center

"I love getting high," he says.

But he doesn't love being Narcan-ed. A fentanyl overdose kills by causing respiratory failure. Naloxone works by pushing the fentanyl molecules off the brain's opioid receptors and then blocking any further fentanyl from attaching to the receptors.

The result is immediate: The user starts breathing and comes to. But the downside kicks in, too: For those addicted to opioids, the craving begins anew. Police say revived overdose victims sometimes react by violently flailing their arms and legs. Others vomit uncontrollably.

Sleaze says he finds himself in agony when he's dosed with naloxone, and often sprints away from the spot in a panic. Someone Narcan-ed him just a few weeks ago, he says.

His first brush with naloxone came in 2022, which was also the first time he took fentanyl. He had just been released from prison after serving seven years on a burglary conviction for stealing TVs from a Walmart. Even behind bars, he says he managed to continue taking opioids, an addiction acquired in early adulthood.



Sleaze, though a veteran opioid user, long avoided fentanyl; he knew too many people killed by it. He finally tried "fetty" at a weak moment in 2022, and overdosed instantly. REUTERS/Shannon Stapleton



Sleaze prepares a dose of fentanyl for smoking. Some users buy and take fentanyl in pill form. Many buy powder, mix it with water and inject it. Others smoke the powder. REUTERS/Shannon Stapleton



Sleaze estimates he's been revived with naloxone up to 20 times. The first time, the withdrawal was so bad, he recalls thinking: "Why didn't you just let me die?" REUTERS/Shannon Stapleton

But he’d never taken “fetty”: Too many of his own friends had died of overdoses. He was homeless and sleeping in his girlfriend's car. His mother had just been sent to prison for dealing cocaine.

“My whole fucking world just crumbled,” he says. That day, someone had given Sleaze a small bag that once contained fentanyl powder. Sleaze injected residue from the bag and passed out immediately. “I didn't even get the needle out of my arm.”

He was brought back when his girlfriend sprayed naloxone up his nose. Withdrawal kicked in. He’d never experienced such intense “dope sickness.”

“I hurt so bad, I was like, bitch, why didn't you just let me die?” he says.

Sleaze’s now-former girlfriend and his mother couldn’t be reached to talk. His mother is serving a minimum nine years at the Dayton Correctional Institution on the drug charges.

Five minutes after talking with Reuters, Sleaze is outside in an alleyway near the Hope center, looking over his shoulder. This past summer, after his latest release from prison, he cut off his ankle monitor and stopped reporting to his probation officer. He pulls his knit cap down over his forehead, covering the “FUCK COPS” tattoo, and smokes a dose of powder.

Fifty yards behind him, a man on a red bicycle watches. Sleaze glances his way. The guy isn’t a cop.

Two weeks after that hit in the alleyway, two Columbus police officers would pick up Sleaze on felony probation violations. Arrest records show the cops recognized him from his facial tattoos.



A billboard advertising drug treatment in Columbus. Increasingly, fentanyl sold in the U.S. is mixed with veterinary tranquilizers, or “tranq.” Some researchers think tranq is helping cut the death toll, as it may blunt withdrawal symptoms, delaying the need for the next fix. REUTERS/Shannon Stapleton

IS FENTANYL CHANGING?

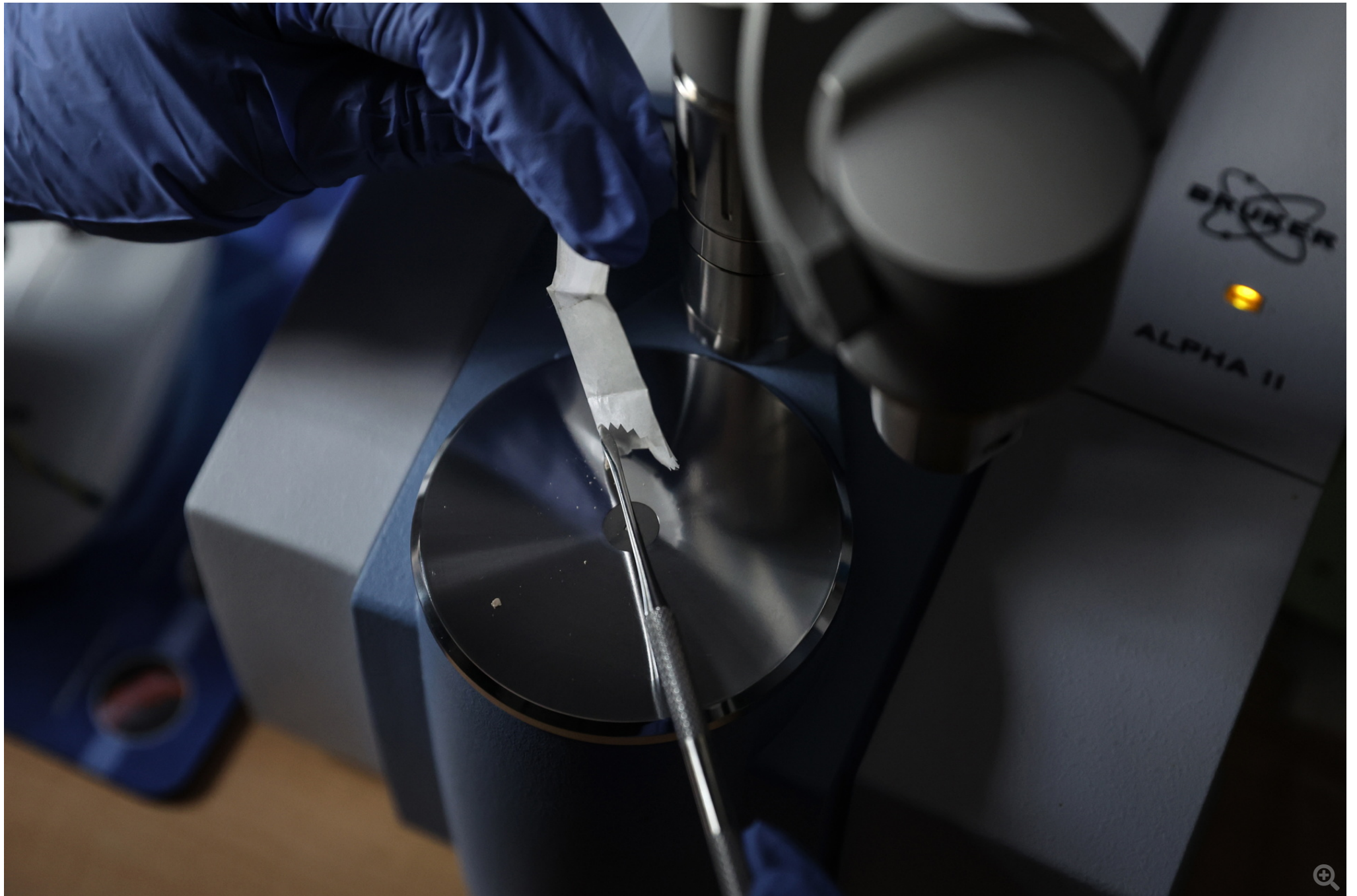
Scott Oulton, head of forensic sciences at the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, says DEA testing of seized fentanyl powder and pills since late summer of 2023 has shown a consistent drop in purity.

Over the last two fiscal years, the DEA tested about 9,200 samples from across the U.S. The average purity in fentanyl powder dropped from 19.5% in 2023 to 15.2% in 2024. In that time, he says, the average amount of the drug in each fentanyl tablet has dropped from 2.3 milligrams to 2 milligrams. Oulton says the drop in purity is closely correlated to the fall in synthetic opioid deaths.

Some scientists familiar with the DEA study are skeptical that its results reflect the drugs on the streets. Different samples they've tested at their own labs show that drugs being sold to users contain as much fentanyl as ever.

Alex J. Krotulski, who runs the toxicology and chemistry lab at the Center for Forensic Science Research & Education in Horsham, Pennsylvania, analyzes samples for police and other clients. He says the purity of the fentanyl and closely related drugs he's measuring in samples has remained around 10% for the last three years. Nabarun Dasgupta, a senior scientist at the University of North Carolina's Injury Prevention Research Center, says his lab also hasn't detected a drop in fentanyl potency.

But there is another significant change, Krotulski and Dasgupta say.



This sample of narcotics from New York's Harlem neighborhood was tested last year for purity and strength. Private researchers say their recent tests show that fentanyl powder is as potent as ever. They also see rising amounts of tranq in it. REUTERS/Shannon Stapleton

They've found an increase in a key class of adulterant drugs mixed in with the fentanyl: veterinary tranquilizers, or tranq, used to anesthetize dogs, horses and other animals. These include the best-known tranq, xylazine, and, more recently, a longer-lasting one called medetomidine, which is used on both animals and humans. In the third quarter of this year, medetomidine became more common than xylazine in samples from Philadelphia, Krotulski says.

Xylazine horrified health officials when it started showing up in fentanyl in 2021 in Philadelphia and other cities. Users reported grotesque necrotic wounds that eat away at their skin and even the underlying flesh – a side effect of the veterinary drug. If untreated, the wounds can require amputation.

Today, some health researchers theorize there's a silver lining in the presence of these dangerous tranquilizers. They appear to have the potential to reduce opioid overdoses.

Fentanyl is extremely addictive. Users need more fixes a day than with heroin or other opioids. It delivers a fleeting high, often only an hour or two for experienced takers, so users soon crave another hit. Xylazine and sister drugs are longer-lasting anesthetics that delay opioid withdrawal, so users need fewer fixes – and thus take fewer rolls of the dice with death.

Xylazine and medetomidine also don't cause respiratory arrest – the usual cause of death from a fentanyl overdose. They aren't nearly as addictive, either. And when added to street fentanyl, tranqs can reduce withdrawal sickness as the opioid wears off. Some experts now believe they play a contributing role to the drop in overdose deaths.

New York City, like Ohio and Philadelphia, is another place that was slammed early by fentanyl. In June, medetomidine was detected in the local drug supply for the first time.



A pedestrian passes by OnPoint NYC's facility in East Harlem last year. The support center's chief says narcotics users long have tried to stave off drug sickness by “speedballing” – extending an opioid high with stimulants. REUTERS/Shannon Stapleton



An OnPoint team, wearing yellow vests, offers people help in the Bronx last year. Some researchers see an upside in the rising amounts of xylazine and other tranquilizers mixed in with illicit fentanyl: Users need fewer fentanyl fixes. REUTERS/Shannon Stapleton



New York was among the places hit early by the fentanyl crisis. Many local governments make naloxone kits available free, including online. This package hung from a tree in a Bronx park last year. REUTERS/Shannon Stapleton



A man in a park in the Bronx last year, where users take fentanyl, heroin and other narcotics. The photo was taken moments after he injected himself with a fix. Injections deliver an almost instant high. REUTERS/Shannon Stapleton



Debris left by users in the Bronx park. Though the death toll is down, 50,000 to 60,000 Americans are expected to die this year from synthetic opioid overdoses. REUTERS/Shannon Stapleton

Sam Rivera, executive director of OnPoint NYC, a support center for substance abusers and other vulnerable people, says opioid users have long had strategies for keeping dope sickness away. In what's commonly called speedballing, users will take a stimulant such as methamphetamine or cocaine to "balance" an opioid high and delay the desire for another fix.

Sleaze, for example, says he likes to inject meth and then coke after smoking fentanyl.

Dasgupta of the University of North Carolina says it isn't yet clear precisely how xylazine and similar drugs might reduce overdoses. But if they translate into more time between each hit for users, that would cut the opportunities to die.

Some doubt tranq is a factor in the falling toll.

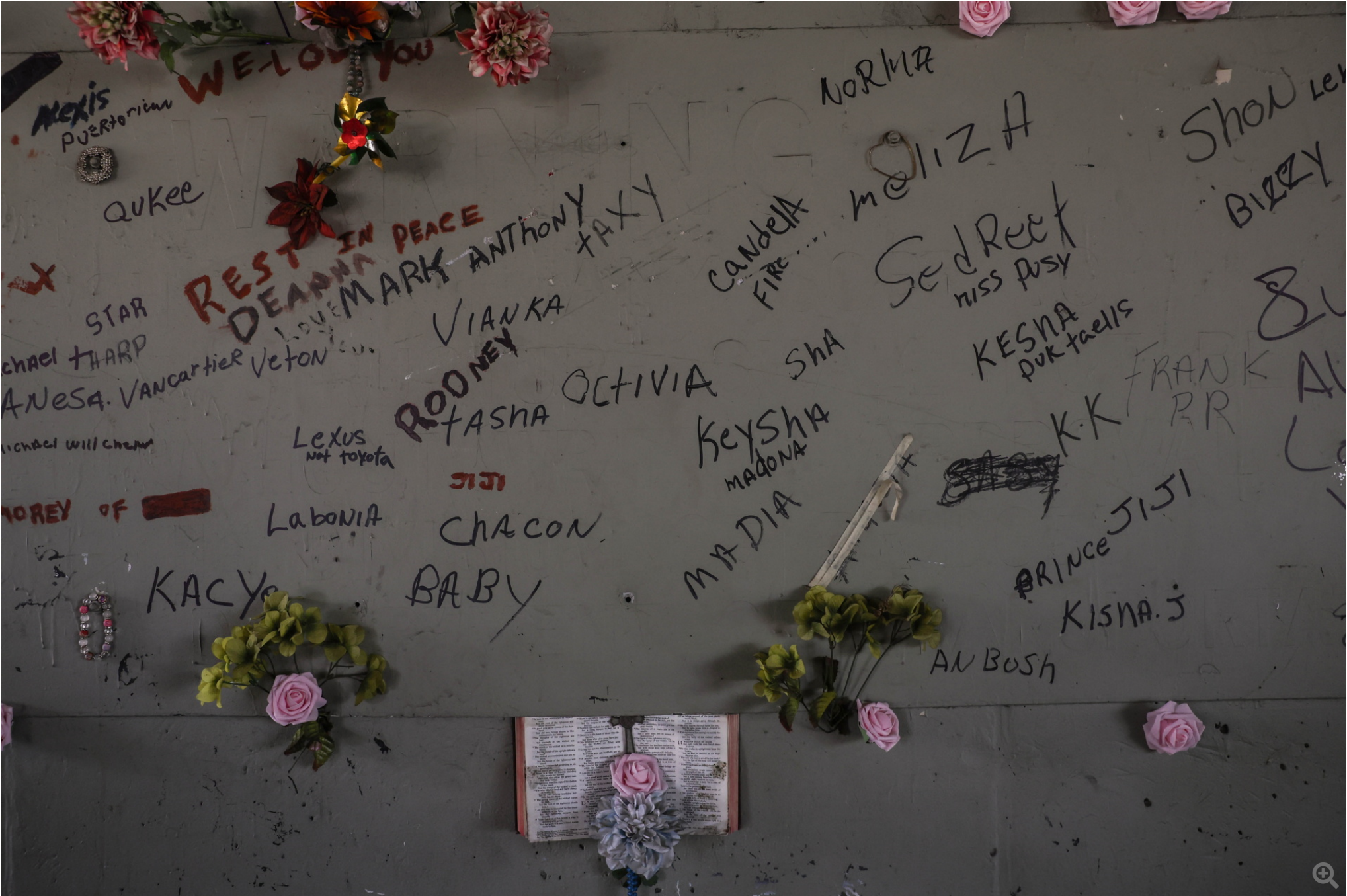
Dr. Bonnie Milas, an intensive care anesthesiologist at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, uses fentanyl in combination with a drug similar to medetomidine on heart and lung surgical patients. She says it's unlikely that similar combinations on the streets are helping keep users alive, because the dosages of the active ingredients in the illicit narcotics aren't precisely controlled. She says the drug combo may be more dangerous than fentanyl alone.

Milas cites an alert the Philadelphia health department issued on Dec. 10 about the fentanyl-medetomidine mix: It causes some users to wake with severe withdrawal that requires emergency medical treatment.

"I know about this in the clinical setting," Milas says. "From the personal side, I know what it looks like to see somebody overdosing."

Milas lost her two sons to fentanyl. Twice, she pulled the younger son back from an overdose by giving him naloxone. She wasn't there the last time.

Since then, she has advocated that naloxone be handed out as widely as possible and be part of every home's first-aid kit. She says it is the best way to keep people alive until they are ready for treatment.



People use this wall on a bridge in Harlem to memorialize friends and family, including victims of fentanyl. Nearly 450,000 Americans have died of synthetic opioid overdoses in the last decade. REUTERS/Shannon Stapleton

THE ‘SUSCEPTIBLES’

Charles Fain Lehman, a fellow specializing in policing and public safety at the Manhattan Institute think tank, offers another explanation for the fatality trend: the “depletion of susceptibles.”

Lehman cites surveys that show young Americans are shying away from hard drugs, with consumption of narcotics by high school seniors now at one-fourth its peak in the 2000s. He also points to the vast number of synthetic opioid overdose deaths in recent years as reason to believe the population of at-risk people is way down.

Only so many people ever use narcotics, leaving “a fixed population of people who are at risk for overdose death,” Lehman says. “To be a little morbid, if you die early, you can't die later.” Because of the high “burn rate” of people dying in recent years, he argues the U.S. toll has begun trending down as the susceptible population has shrunk.

The Hilltop section of Columbus remains overrun by fentanyl. And it still has plenty of susceptibles. Strung-out women sell sex at most intersections along Sullivant Avenue, the area’s main street. The homeless and drug users camp out in wooded areas along nearby railroad tracks, in abandoned houses and in doorways.

Many of the visitors to the Hope center trace their addiction back to drug-abusing parents and relatives, Sanders says. Their arc often follows a common trajectory, from abusing prescription painkillers to heroin to fentanyl.

Angel Mccallister walks into the office wearing a black sweatshirt and black stockings with large holes in the legs. Her auburn curls hang over her shoulder. She hasn’t smoked fentanyl yet this day, leaving her edgy from dope sickness. It’s lunchtime, but food isn’t on her mind.



Angel Mccallister, of Columbus, says she started injecting opioids when she was 12. “Like, that's all I wanted,” she says, recalling her first needle fix. “It was always by my side and was always there when I needed it.” REUTERS/Shannon Stapleton

Angel, 32, says she has been addicted to drugs for two decades. Her mother used prescription pills such as oxycodone. By the time Angel was 12, she was addicted herself, taking illicit prescription pills and snorting powdered heroin. One day she went to babysit for a couple she knew. Angel was dope sick and needed a fix. At some point that day, the wife offered to help: She injected Angel with heroin.

It was the first time she'd taken opioids intravenously. The needle was way better than snorting the stuff. Everything changed.

“Like, that's all I wanted,” she says. “It was like my boyfriend, you know? It was always by my side and was always there when I needed it.”

Eleven years ago, she had a son. When fentanyl appeared on the streets a few years after he was born, Angel started injecting that instead of heroin. These days, she smokes the drug.

The boy lives with Angel's grandmother. Angel says her mother is still addicted. An aunt died of a fentanyl overdose. Angel's mother and grandmother couldn't be reached.

Angel says she turns tricks several times a week to pay for drugs. She says she has been raped more times than she wants to count.

She turns away and hides her eyes behind her hair. Tears drip from her nose. Sanders reaches over and touches Angel on her shoulder.

She draws a deep breath and brushes the hair from her face. She has been Narcan-ed dozens of times, she figures. At least once, she says, she was revived after trying to kill herself with an intentional overdose.

HOW TO SAVE A LIFE

Key facts on the overdose-reversal antidote naloxone

Naloxone is an over-the-counter nasal-spray medication that can save an overdose victim by rapidly reversing the effects of fentanyl, heroin and other opioids.

Doctors urge all people – especially those with prescription opioids at home or a substance abuser in the household – to keep naloxone in their first aid kits or even in their bags. Anyone can experience an opioid emergency, including small children who accidentally ingest the drugs.

Naloxone is sold under brand names such as Narcan and RiVive. It can be bought online or at major pharmacies for between \$30 and \$45 a kit. Each kit contains two nasal spray applicators. Sometimes, multiple doses must be administered.



An overdose-reversal canister, left for those in need, hangs from a fence in a park in the Bronx. REUTERS/Shannon Stapleton

Many health departments and community groups give kits away, no questions asked. A web search for “free naloxone” returned hundreds of results.

Dr. Bonnie Milas, an intensive care anesthesiologist at the University of Pennsylvania, uses fentanyl in combination with other drugs to treat critical patients. She also lost two sons to accidental fentanyl overdose. She’s the face of the American Society of Anesthesiologists’ [REVIVEme.com](#) program, which offers an instructional video and other guidance on how to use naloxone to revive an overdose victim.

Milas often talks about her experience with groups of people who have lost loved ones to fentanyl. “I tell them that you should not have a sense of guilt or responsibility,” she says. “They tried. You tried. And ultimately, the outcome was out of your control ... But you did your best. And I think you should really take comfort in knowing that you did what you could.”

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FENTANYL EXPRESS

Part 1: [With \\$3,600 and Wi-Fi, we bought everything needed to make fentanyl.](#)

Graphic: [Fentanyl’s deadly chemistry: How rogue labs make opioids](#)