# US Mailing System Key to Future Fentanyl Trafficking Prevention

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Authorities in the United States and Mexico are working together to combat criminal groups capitalizing on growing demand for the deadly and highly lucrative synthetic opioid fentanyl, but the US mailing system is quickly emerging as the key ingredient in that fight.

Ports of entry along the southwest border of the United States and the US mailing system are two of the most significant fentanyl trafficking routes, according to Special Agent in Charge (SAC) Brian McKnight of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in Chicago.

“With fentanyl, they’re [traffickers] getting it from China down into Mexico, and then converting and packaging it up into the United States,” SAC McKnight told InSight Crime. “They [Mexican drug trafficking groups] had the [methamphetamine] labs already set up, and now they’re in the fentanyl business.”

[But if pure powdered fentanyl, fentanyl pills or fentanyl precursors are not sent to Mexico for criminal groups there to then traffic into the United States, the drugs are mailed directly to the North American country often using the United States Postal Service (USPS).](https://www.insightcrime.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Fentanyl-Flows-Mexico.jpg)

[Drug seizures by USPS’ Postal Inspection Service (USPIS) have been on the rise since 2014. The service’s narcotics program seized more than 18 metric tons of illicit drugs during 2017, according to a September 2018 [Inspector General report](https://www.oversight.gov/sites/default/files/oig-reports/SAT-AR-18-002.pdf) on the use of USPS for drug distribution.](https://www.insightcrime.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Fentanyl-Flows-Mexico.jpg)

[Between 2017 and 2018, USPS saw a 1,000 percent increase in international parcel seizures and a 750 percent increase in domestic parcel seizures related to opioids, including fentanyl, in part due to increased collaboration between state and federal law enforcement agencies and better investigative techniques, according to comments from USPS Spokeswoman Kim Frum reported by the [Washington Post](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2018/10/16/postal-service-preferred-shipper-drug-dealers/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.f49efb40c0bd).](https://www.insightcrime.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Fentanyl-Flows-Mexico.jpg)

[The uptick in seizures coincides with criminal groups in Latin America [adapting to meet](https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/latam-crime-groups-adapting-growing-us-drug-demand/) the [growing demand](https://www.insightcrime.org/news/brief/massive-mexico-methamphetamine-seizure-reflects-market-shifts/) in the United States for synthetic drugs and opioids like fentanyl. Opioids — including prescription drugs like oxycodone, synthetic opioids like fentanyl, and the illegal drug heroin — were largely responsible for the record 70,237 overdose deaths\* recorded in the country in 2017 — a nearly 10 percent increase from 2016, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([CDC](https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/data/statedeaths.html)).](https://www.insightcrime.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Fentanyl-Flows-Mexico.jpg)

### [In Sight Crime Analysis](https://www.insightcrime.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Fentanyl-Flows-Mexico.jpg)

[As authorities work to combat the opioid crisis that is ravaging American cities across the United States, addressing security flaws in the US mailing system is going to be critical if they are to prevent the growing number of drug overdose deaths caused by powerful synthetic opioids like fentanyl.](https://www.insightcrime.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Fentanyl-Flows-Mexico.jpg)

[“One of the most significant challenges in combating fentanyl trafficking into the United States is the lack of data that authorities have on what’s coming in,” according to Mario Moreno, a former press secretary for the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy under the Obama and Trump administrations and a researcher at the University of Chicago.](https://www.insightcrime.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Fentanyl-Flows-Mexico.jpg)

[There are a variety of reasons as to why traffickers choose USPS over express consignment handlers like the United Parcel Service (UPS) and FedEx. Unlike USPS, these handlers require advanced electronic data (AED), such as the name and location of the sender, as well as information on what’s inside the package. What’s more, USPS handles far more packages than express consignment handlers do, making it extremely difficult to screen for drugs and other contraband. This also creates logistical challenges regarding how USPS coordinates with US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to interdict.](https://www.insightcrime.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Fentanyl-Flows-Mexico.jpg)

[That said, US officials are working to improve some of these issues. The Synthetics Trafficking and Overdose Prevention [(STOP) Act](https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/1057/text) of 2017 aims to increase the amount of advanced electronic data collected by USPS, primarily from large volume foreign posts, such as in China. The USPS in the last three years has gone from receiving “almost no AED on inbound shipments” to [receiving about 40 percent](https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2018/01/07/postal-service-fighting-opioid-crisis-editorials-debates/109251764/" \t "_blank), according to USPS Chief Inspector Guy Cottrell.](https://www.insightcrime.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Fentanyl-Flows-Mexico.jpg)

[“This merits more thought and action in partnership with countries like China, but not at the exception of maintaining a relationship with Mexico,” according to Moreno, who says Mexico will continue to be a “critical player” in fentanyl trafficking prevention for the foreseeable future.](https://www.insightcrime.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Fentanyl-Flows-Mexico.jpg)

[In addition, CBP agents are turning to technology to better identify illicit drugs hidden in parcels. In March 2018, for example, CBP [deployed](https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/local-media-release/cbp-deploys-new-technology-help-identify-dangerous-drugs) a new “handheld elemental isotope analysis tool” known as the Gemini, which is able to “sample and identify over 14,000 chemical substances.”](https://www.insightcrime.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Fentanyl-Flows-Mexico.jpg)

[“We’ve certainly been focused on interdicting opioids,” US Customs Chicago Port Director Matthew Davies [told Fox News](https://www.foxnews.com/us/mind-boggling-new-tech-instantly-identifies-opioids-and-drugs-hidden-in-usps-packages) in June of this year. “We’ve increased staffing, we have new technology in place, we’ve trained our K9s to detect fentanyl, so we’re certainly on the frontlines of it here.”](https://www.insightcrime.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Fentanyl-Flows-Mexico.jpg)

[However, fentanyl and synthetic opioids have a very low bar of entry, and represent a shift in drug trafficking that’s making the trade more democratic, according to Moreno. This specific drug trade is now open to more players who can participate using the Internet and mailing system, posing new challenges for authorities. Mexican drug trafficking organizations soon may no longer have the same sway that they’ve had in the past over the movement, distribution and trafficking of such drugs.](https://www.insightcrime.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Fentanyl-Flows-Mexico.jpg)

[Indeed, in February of this year US authorities [convicted](https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/dark-web-trafficker-convicted-drug-importation-conspiracy) a lone trafficker who for nearly a year used his apartment outfitted with a pill press, cutting agents and packing materials to ship fentanyl and other synthetic opioids using the US and Canadian mailing systems to customers that purchased the drugs through an encrypted and anonymous part of the Internet known as the dark web.](https://www.insightcrime.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Fentanyl-Flows-Mexico.jpg)

[*\*This article was updated to reflect more current figures on US drug overdose deaths.*](https://www.insightcrime.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Fentanyl-Flows-Mexico.jpg)

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