A Much Heralded Fix to Prevent Opioid Trafficking Through the Mail Is Already At Risk

## USPS is falling behind on statutory deadlines and failing to pull aside flagged packages.

By

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The U.S. Postal Service is failing to fully take advantage of the advanced data it receives about incoming international mail, according to a new report, putting in jeopardy a new reform heralded by Congress and the White House as a major step in addressing the opioid crisis.

“Advanced electronic data,” or AED, provide USPS and Customs and Border Protection with information about the contents of international packages before they reach the United States. A requirement for the data is already imposed on international packages coming into the country through private carriers like FedEx and UPS, but the mandate will apply across the board to international packages arriving through USPS starting in 2021 thanks to [a measure](https://www.govexec.com/management/2018/09/senate-joins-house-passing-bill-limit-postal-service-role-opioid-crisis/151324/) President Trump signed into law last year.

Supporters of the measure were hopeful it would help stem the flow of illicit, synthetic opioids from foreign manufacturers through the mail system. The USPS inspector general, however, [found](https://www.uspsoig.gov/sites/default/files/filefield_paths/MS-AR-19-002.pdf) the mailing agency does not always actually take action after CBP flags a shipment for additional review due to information included in its advanced electronic data. As of 2018, the Postal Service received AED on 57% of foreign packages.

USPS failed to place holds for further inspection on 12% of packages flagged by CBP in 2018. That marked an improvement over previous years—the agency missed one-third of flagged packages just two years prior—but could still hurt implementation of the 2018 Synthetic Trafficking and Overdose Prevention (STOP) Act, the IG said.

The auditors noted the Postal Service has already made some improvements by enhancing operational screening capabilities, training staff and creating facility-specific action plans. In April, USPS had increased its successful hold rate to 93%. Still, the IG said USPS should always record the reasons for missed holds as it currently often has no explanation. The current process “limits management’s ability to understand the reasons for missed holds and develop corrective actions,” the IG said.

The information included in the AED is not always reliable, the IG also found. Over a 15-month period ending in January, the watchdog identified 171 million data fields on international packages that failed reliability tests (the failure rate was redacted). Over a one-week period last year, the IG found the recipient address contained in AED only matched the Postal Service’s database of addresses 57% of the time. This could also put STOP Act implementation at risk, the IG said, depending on the details of forthcoming Homeland Security Department guidance.

STOP Act implementation has already raised red flags, as USPS failed to meet its initial AED requirements. While the Postal Service will not have to reject international packages without advanced data until 2021, the law required the mailing agency to receive the information on 70% of all international shipments by the end of 2018. USPS increased its AED collection from 40% of packages before the STOP Act to 57% last year, but still fell short of the law’s requirements. The Postal Service was supposed to already receive the early information on all packages from China, disproportionately the country of origin for synthetic opioids, but did so only 76% of the time.

Sens. Rob Portman, R-Ohio, who shepherded the bill through Congress last year, and Tom Carper, D-Del., [wrote](https://www.portman.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/portman-carper-letter-outlines-failure-federal-agencies-comply-stop-act) to USPS and CBP in April to voice their concerns over the lack of progress and to request regular briefings for how the agencies will come in compliance with the law.

“We know how opioids are getting into this country and we know where the drugs are coming from,” the senators wrote. “Efficient, effective, and secure operations at the major mail facilities that process inbound international mail are critical in stemming the flow of this poison.”

Portman called the results of IG report "outrageous."

“We’re seeing small improvement but it’s not coming fast enough," the senator said. "People are dying every day because this poison is entering our communities from our own mail system. It’s outrageous. We will continue to hold the Postal Service accountable for doing its job under the law.”

President Trump personally [pressured](https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1031590431379865600?lang=en) lawmakers to pass the STOP Act last year.

CBP is responsible for inspecting the packages at USPS’ international mail facilities, though investigations can involve Immigration and Customs Enforcement’s Homeland Security Investigations, the Drug Enforcement Agency, USPS’ Postal Inspection Service and other federal offices. The STOP Act required the State Department to negotiate international agreements that require foreign countries to provide AED before sending packages. USPS, CBP and other agencies are [collaborating to develop](https://www.govexec.com/management/2019/02/interagency-competition-seeks-thwart-opioid-trafficking-through-mail/155161/) new technology to help customs officers better detect illicit drugs in the mail.

CBP currently relies primarily on canine teams to find packages containing illicit drugs. Agency officials have said front-line personnel rely on analytics based on synthesized information gathered throughout the government’s law enforcement community to better identify what to look for when searching for illegal materials. That is coupled with and updated by CBP’s own observations in the field, as officers adjust to the ever-changing practices adopted by drug traffickers.

AED give customs officers insight into who is sending the packages and allows them to flag questionable content lists based on their knowledge of how the traffickers operate. CBP’s National Targeting Center combs through the data on a daily basis and provides reports back to “advanced targeting teams” in the field, which then further analyze the information and filter it through the trends they see locally to help screeners identify packages for additional scrutiny.

Private carriers shipped just 50 million international packages as of 2016, compared to 600 million shipped via the Postal Service.

Until recently, USPS was not providing any advanced data at all. At international mail facilities, therefore, CBP officers operate on a more manual basis. The agency asks the Postal Service to segregate mail originating from “countries of interest” and then begins what officials have described as a “manpower-intensive” process, including hand-selecting questionable packages and putting them through x-rays and other technologies frontline personnel employ.

The DHS inspector general released a [management alert](https://www.oig.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/assets/Mga/2019/oig-19-53-jul19-mgmtalert.pdf) last week raising concerns about CBP employees’ potential exposure to fentanyl. The agency does not protect workers from potentially lethal doses of the drug and did not consistently keep naloxone—a treatment for opioid overdoses—available, the IG said. CBP agreed to improve its standards and training on fentanyl storage and ensure naloxone is available and easily accessible at all appropriate locations.