



**EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT  
OFFICE OF NATIONAL DRUG CONTROL POLICY**

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**“Leading the Strategic Response to Disrupt the  
Flow of Illicit Fentanyl Across Our Borders”**

Committee on Homeland Security

Subcommittee on Border Security and Enforcement

Subcommittee on Counterterrorism, Law Enforcement, and Intelligence

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Statement of Kemp L. Chester

Senior Advisor

Office of National Drug Control Policy

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Chairman Higgins, Chairman Pfluger, Ranking Member Correa, Ranking Member Magaziner and Members of the Subcommittees, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the very real challenge we confront from the production and trafficking of deadly synthetic opioids across our borders and into our communities. I am honored to join my colleagues from the Departments of Homeland Security and Justice, who are vital partners in implementing the *National Drug Control Strategy*, and in keeping our country and our communities safe.

***Introduction***

I am sure I do not need to remind anyone in this room that over a one-year period we have lost more than 109,000 Americans to a drug overdose or poisoning, more than 69 percent of which can be attributed to a synthetic opioid like illicit fentanyl and other substances that are structurally similar to fentanyl. That is someone in America dying from a drug overdose or poisoning about every five minutes, every hour, of every day.

Alongside those we have lost are those who have suffered a non-fatal overdose. It is estimated that for every fatal overdose there are 14 non-fatal overdoses – more than 1.5 million in 2022 alone. Additionally, 46 million people in America, almost 14 percent of the population, are currently suffering from substance use disorder. Too many Americans – those we have lost to overdoses, those who have overdosed but did not lose their lives, and those living with a substance use disorder – have either succumbed to drug use or carry the burden of it in some way.

This is why the President made ending the opioid and overdose epidemic a key pillar of his Unity Agenda, challenging us to reduce the number of drug overdose deaths, put quality public health services within reach for people with substance use disorder, and strengthen public safety by disrupting the drug production and trafficking pipeline that profits by harming Americans.

## *The Environment of Drug Production and Trafficking*

There was a time, not very long ago, that drug production was limited to processing poppy, or harvesting coca, or manipulating over-the-counter pharmaceuticals with crude chemicals to make methamphetamine. Those finished drugs were moved through a hierarchical drug trafficking organization to a street-level retailer, and eventually sold in a face-to-face cash transaction on a street corner somewhere in the United States. That was the dominant model of drug trafficking we saw for decades.

While that drug production and trafficking structure still exists, it has been joined by a synthetic opioid production and supply chain that is, in essence, a global business enterprise that demonstrates access to huge capital resources, conducts routine collaboration among raw material suppliers across international borders, uses advanced technology to fund and conduct business, and possesses the capacity for product innovation and strategies to expand markets.

These synthetic opioid producers and traffickers operate as free-riders on the back of the 21<sup>st</sup> century global economy that moves products, ideas, and money across borders with incredible speed, and they exploit that legitimate economic structure to sustain and enhance their illicit business. This includes key activities such as the provision of precursor chemicals, some of which are unregulated, and their finished products that can be shipped in plain sight around the world; physically dislocated payments that include the movement of funds across borders; and the internet-based sales of raw materials and finished drugs using both fiat and cryptocurrency.

And these synthetic opioids – principally fentanyl and its analogues, though there are others – that are killing Americans are manufactured outside of the United States and brought across our borders and into our communities by a variety of means. Today, an American teenager can find illicit drugs in the palm of their hand, and simply by opening a social media app.

We find ourselves in the midst of a strategic transition between two eras, where the cultivation and production of large volumes of plant-based drugs like heroin and cocaine has not ended, but the era of small volume, high-potency, synthetic drug production has clearly begun.

While we need to address the ongoing plant-based drug problem that continues to harm our citizens, we must simultaneously develop and implement the means necessary to confront the emerging synthetic opioid production and trafficking environment that is defined by complexity, dynamism, and resiliency. This requires increased effort, a more sophisticated approach, better use of the tools available to us, and the application of new tools we have not traditionally employed against the illicit drug problem. We cannot simply charge into the future by doing the exact same things we have been doing, but just trying to do them better, and we cannot address the most dynamic and complex drug production and trafficking environment in history with the same strategies that may have served us well in the past but are insufficient for the challenges we face today.

While the Administration is aggressively pursuing investments in non-intrusive inspection equipment, artificial intelligence, machine learning, and more, to prevent these drugs from crossing our geographic borders, we must bear in mind that this problem does not start at our border and it will not end at our border. It starts with the illicit synthetic opioid production in another country and ends in an emergency department or morgue somewhere in America. For the United States, it is a national security and economic prosperity problem as much as it is a public safety and public health one, and we must face it head on with the bold, comprehensive, and determined strategic approach it deserves.

Doing so requires strong leadership from the White House providing unity of both purpose and effort across the federal government; strong bilateral relationships with key countries that share responsibility to address the problem and must be part of the solution; and perhaps, most importantly, the United States' global leadership.

### *The Administration's Strategic Approach*

The President has declared "that international drug trafficking, including the illicit production, global sale, and widespread distribution of illegal ... fentanyl and other synthetic opioids ... constitutes an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States." In April of this year, the Administration announced its *Strengthened Approach to Crack Down on Illicit Fentanyl Supply Chains*, a whole-of-

government approach to save lives by disrupting the trafficking of illicit fentanyl and its precursors into American communities. We call this approach Commercial Disruption, and it focuses and synchronizes our national security and public safety capabilities, including innovative approaches, against criminal facilitators and enablers, and attacks four key vulnerabilities in the illicit fentanyl supply chain to maximize our impact across the drug producers' and traffickers' spectrum of capabilities:

- The precursor chemicals, including unregulated chemicals that can be used to create immediate precursors.
- The pill presses, die molds, and encapsulating machines used to create the pills that are killing far too many Americans.
- The drug producers' ability to move raw materials like precursors and manufacturing machinery around the world via commercial shipping.
- The flow of financial benefits and operating capital to individuals and groups directly and indirectly involved in the illicit drug industry.

Targeting those four critical elements will allow us to remove the advantages fentanyl producers and traffickers currently enjoy, disrupt their production and supply chains, and reduce the availability of these dangerous substances in America's communities.

As part of this approach, we are also working much more closely with our private sector partners. The vast majority of the physical and virtual terrain on which drug traffickers operate such as the dark web, e-commerce sites, mail and express consignment shippers and freight forwarders, banks, cryptocurrency vendors, legitimate chemical suppliers, and pill press and die manufacturers, are private sector entities. And some of them likely have no idea they are a constituent part of an illicit business enterprise.

We must raise a sophisticated awareness of this environment with the commercial sector around the world, and engage with them in a full partnership, so we can sift out the unwitting from the knowing and intentional actors here in the United States and abroad, and then focus our efforts on the latter in a more precise way.

## *Bilateral Relationships with Key Countries*

A second significant aspect of addressing this challenge is maintaining close and mutually beneficial partnerships with key countries who not only play a role in preventing the global proliferation of these dangerous synthetic drugs, but will also play a role in advancing our global efforts to disrupt the global supply chain.

Mexico. We have redoubled our efforts with the government of Mexico, working alongside it as it does more to address fentanyl production and trafficking. President Biden has stressed the importance he places on this issue with President Lopez Obrador, and our two governments are working more closely than ever on the fentanyl problem to establish tangible goals, assess progress, and follow-through on mutual commitments.

Given the combination of our shared border, our two-hundred-year bilateral relationship, and the negative effects that drug producers and traffickers in Mexico have on both sides of the border, it is vitally important that our bilateral relationship be characterized by mutual respect, and a sense of the shared responsibility we have to address the shared threat of drug trafficking and its associated criminality. Further, we have strengthened all of North America in our work with Mexico and Canada through the trilateral North American Drug Dialogue.

Just as the United States does not have to lose 109,000 people to drug overdoses or poisonings every year, the people of Mexico can have a future free from an expectation of unaccountable criminality and the scourge of drug production that corrupts their towns, victimizes their families, and pollutes their natural spaces.

The People's Republic of China. As we are leading the global effort to disrupt the production and trafficking of these drugs, we look forward to the People's Republic of China (PRC) joining us in that effort.

However, no one should mistake our willingness to engage for an acceptance of the status quo, especially on an issue felt so acutely in the United States and when so many lives have been impacted. Years of seizure and law enforcement data show that unscrupulous elements within the PRC have been a major source for precursor chemical shipments, pill presses, and die molds entering the Western Hemisphere.

This is also an issue in which the interests of the United States and China align, and our past engagement on the counternarcotics issue has brought some impressive results, including the domestic scheduling of fentanyl as a class, which had an immediate impact on reducing the flow of fentanyl and its analogues directly from the PRC. The United States will work with the PRC whenever possible to fully address the grave and growing problem of illicit synthetic drug production and trafficking at the global level.

Given the gravity of this issue, it is disappointing that the PRC has chosen to not take substantive steps to counter illicit synthetic drug production and trafficking for more than a year. With leadership comes accountability, and while the PRC plays a major role in this global problem, it has thus far declined to play a constructive role in helping to solve it. Last week, as nearly 100 countries and international organizations gathered in a demonstration of deep concern and a desire for tangible solutions to the grave and growing problem of illicit synthetic drug production and trafficking, the PRC declined its invitation to participate in the virtual ministerial meeting to launch the Global Coalition to Address Synthetic Drugs. We sincerely hope that the PRC can find the political will to address this problem commensurate with its capability to do so.

India. The United States and India have been growing our counternarcotics relationship since 2020 through a bilateral counternarcotics Working Group, addressing the law enforcement, multilateral, regulatory, and drug demand reduction dimensions of this problem with a focus on tangible results and mutually beneficial outcomes.

During Prime Minister Modi's recent visit to the White House, the two leaders committed to work toward a broader and deeper bilateral *Drug Policy Framework for the 21st Century*. Under this new framework, we will look to expand cooperation and collaboration to disrupt the illicit production and international trafficking of illicit drugs, including synthetic drugs, such as fentanyl and amphetamine type stimulants, and the illicit diversion of their precursors within India's chemical industry. They also committed to a holistic public health partnership to prevent and treat illicit drug use, address workforce shortages and skilling requirements across both countries, and showcase a secure, resilient, reliable, and growing pharmaceutical supply chain as a model for the world.

The world's oldest democracy, working in close partnership with the world's largest, can not only achieve tangible and positive results, but will model for the rest of the world how great

nations can work together to counter threats, seize opportunities, and demonstrate sincere partnership in addressing one of the most significant global issues we face.

### ***Strong United States Global Leadership***

Finally, as important as our bilateral relationships are, this is a global problem, and global problems require global solutions. The United States has learned a great deal from its opioid epidemic, and no other country has the depth of experience, expertise, or political wherewithal to lead on this issue. And that leadership involves not only sharing every single lesson we have learned the hard way over the past several years with our partners, but also serving as an example of how we are navigating this complex problem with care for those suffering from the disease of addiction, while systematically dismantling the global infrastructure of those who continue to reap obscene profits through the suffering and death of Americans.

The international community has successfully scheduled nearly a dozen precursor chemicals with global partners through the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs, including five fentanyl precursors at the request of the United States.

We have led in raising global awareness of the nature of the global illicit synthetic drug supply chain, and are working to make commonsense and responsible measures to disrupt the exploitation of legitimate commerce a global norm.

And we have led by example, by committing billions of dollars, more than half our federal drug control budget, to public health measures to prevent our youth from falling into the cycle of drug use and addiction, reduce the harms caused by these drugs and save lives, extend treatment services to everyone who needs and wants them, and making our communities and workplaces recovery-ready.

It is an unfortunate fact that there are three kinds of countries in the world: those who have a synthetic opioid problem and are dealing with it; those who have the problem but do not yet know it; and those who will have a problem with fentanyl or another synthetic opioid in the coming years. Too much illicit fentanyl production occurs, generating too much money, and absent decisive action this illicit market will expand exponentially around the world. It is

important for all nations to put into place, now, the protective measures that will prevent this expansion and protect their people.

On July 7, Director Gupta joined Secretary of State Blinken for the first meeting of the Global Coalition to Address Synthetic Drug Threats. This ministerial-level meeting, hosted by the United States, brought together nearly 100 countries and international organizations to accelerate efforts against illicit synthetic drugs by 1) preventing the illicit manufacture and trafficking of synthetic drugs, 2) detecting emerging drug threats and drug use patterns, and 3) promoting public health interventions and services to prevent and reduce drug use, overdose, and other related harms. This first-of-its-kind global coalition will develop concrete solutions, drive national actions, and leverage the collective effort of like-minded countries who agree that countering illicit synthetic drugs must be a global policy priority.

### ***Complementing Our Public Safety Efforts with a Strong Public Health Response***

Because there is a complex interplay between the availability of drugs in the United States and their use, our public safety efforts to reduce their presence in our communities must be closely linked with our equally strong public health efforts to reduce their use. Traffickers are not going to import products no one wants, and individuals cannot overdose on drugs that are not available for them to purchase.

Therefore, disrupting the flow of drugs into the United States is not only vital to keep drugs from harming our citizens, but is especially important as the means to relieve the pressure of the steady flow of drugs into our communities and to allow our historic investments in public health interventions to take hold. The simple truth is that if it is easier to get illicit drugs in America than it is to get treatment, we will never bend the curve.

The Administration has been working to greatly expand access to addiction treatment, harm reduction interventions, youth substance use prevention programs, and recovery support services. Much of this work is being done in partnership with Congress, and I want to thank the Members of this Committee and the Congress at large for your support of numerous pieces of legislation in helping to address this crisis. These include the bipartisan omnibus government funding bill, which included key provisions to help lower barriers to treatment and deliver

necessary tools and resources to our communities to address the overdose crisis, such as the bipartisan Mainstreaming Addiction Treatment Act and the Medication Access and Training Expansion Act. Thanks to these provisions, prescribers across the country will be able to treat their patients who have opioid use disorder with buprenorphine, a medication proven to help people achieve recovery, without obtaining additional federal licensing.

The Office of National Drug Control Policy has also funded the development of a number of model state laws to help local jurisdictions across the country expand access to naloxone, improve treatment in jails and prisons, and deploy settlement funds from the various opioid lawsuits effectively, among others. Similarly, ONDCP has worked with its partners across the government to make permanent the COVID-19-related flexibilities that expanded access to treatment, and support people in recovery.

We are seeing signs of progress. The latest report on 12-month rolling data shows the number of drug poisoning deaths in the United States flattened in 2022 after a period of sharp increase from 2019 to 2021, and the number of fatal drug overdoses has decreased from its peak of 110,378 projected for the 12-month period ending March 2022.

But that is not enough. Now is the time to redouble our efforts, accelerate our work, and move this Nation, and the world, beyond a crisis that has vexed us for the better part of a decade. People in the throes of addiction are in a fight every day, and they should expect nothing less from us as well.

### ***Conclusion***

The Administration's leadership on this critical issue, the close collaboration among partners within the United States and around the world, and the work of the Members of this Committee and your colleagues in Congress have kept this issue at the forefront of our national consciousness and are changing the trajectory of this particularly complex national security, public safety, and public health challenge. We have much work ahead of us, and your partnership will be as critical in the months ahead as it has been thus far.

On behalf of Dr. Gupta and the hard-working people at the Office of National Drug Control Policy, I would like to thank the Committee and your Congressional colleagues for your foresight and leadership on this incredibly difficult issue. Ending the opioid and overdose epidemic demands the best efforts of us all: the entirety of the federal government; states, tribes, and local communities; private sector partners and stakeholders; and the Congress, which has time and again demonstrated a strong spirit of bipartisanship on this issue.

The Office of National Drug Control Policy looks forward to continuing its work with this Committee, the Congress, and our other partners to disrupt the production and trafficking of these dangerous drugs, prevent drug overdoses and poisonings, and save American lives.