
COMBATING THE INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION OF THE OPIOID CRISIS

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THE GROWING CRISIS

The horrific facts of opioid addiction and overdose deaths in the U.S. require a dramatic response:

- Since 1999, overdose deaths in the U.S. involving opioids have increased by over 500%.
- Every county in the U.S. has seen an increase in drug-related mortality. In 2017, more than 70,000 Americans died from drug overdoses.
- Deaths involving illicit synthetic opioids – likely trafficked from overseas – spiked sharply, constituting nearly 70% of all drug overdose deaths in 2017.
- The number of drug overdose deaths involving fentanyl increased by more than 1000 percent from 1,663 in 2011 to 18,335 in 2016.
- Experts predict nearly 500,000 Americans could lose their lives to opioids over the next decade.

UNDERSTANDING THE INTERNATIONAL LINK

While the priority is focused on the domestic response, we must also recognize the international nature of the crisis and strengthen U.S. diplomatic efforts to curtail the supply of deadly opioids entering our country.

- While the number of opioids prescribed in the U.S. has declined since 2010 after a campaign to curb their use, most illicit synthetic opioids – like fentanyl – are produced in China and trafficked from overseas.
- Most fentanyl produced in China is either sold online by Chinese distributors and shipped directly to the U.S. by postal mail, or delivered to Mexico and then smuggled into the U.S.
- President Trump reinforced this point when he called on the international community to address the world drug problem saying, “if we take these steps together, we can save the lives of countless people in all corners of the world. All of us must work together to dismantle drug production and defeat drug addiction.”

HOW OUR NATION’S INTERNATIONAL AND DIPLOMATIC TOOLS ARE HELPING COMBAT THE EPIDEMIC

The State Department has made combating the opioid epidemic a priority, with Assistant Secretary Kirsten Madison of the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs telling Congress, “We understand that the work we do to forge partnerships and consensus, to secure international cooperation, and to use foreign assistance to build the capacity of our partners to help disrupt the flow of opioids and other illicit narcotics to our country is about one thing: contributing to a larger effort in our country to save America lives, American families, and American communities.”

Leveraging Diplomatic Tools to Curb the Production of Synthetic Opioids

- Recognizing the threat, the State Department is working with other countries to curb the production of synthetic opioids. After diplomatic pressure from the United States to cut Chinese production, Beijing banned all fentanyl-related drugs in April 2019. This has enabled Chinese and U.S. officials to carry out joint investigations and prosecute producers and distributors in China.
- Through concerted international engagement, U.S. diplomats successfully advocated for the UN Commission on Narcotics Control to strictly regulate the leading chemicals used to produce fentanyl, making the creation of the drug in other nations increasingly difficult.