



# 2014–2018



## The Emerging Fentanyl Threat

2014 saw an unprecedented increase in the production and distribution of illicit fentanyl, a dangerous synthetic opioid 100 times more potent than morphine and 50 times more potent than heroin. Fentanyl deaths surged in the United States during this period. The Sinaloa and Jalisco Cartels, along with local street gangs and criminal groups, were primarily responsible. DEA's challenge became to disrupt illicit fentanyl supplies and educate the public in hopes of curtailing this unprecedented threat. Just two milligrams of fentanyl can potentially be lethal. In 2015, both DEA and CDC issued nationwide alerts about fentanyl's corrosive impact on public health and safety.

By 2019 the flow of fentanyl into the United States had diversified, becoming more difficult to track and curtail. New source countries and new collaborating countries created changing trafficking patterns. DEA saw a multifaceted crisis with changes in the global supply chain for fentanyl, fentanyl-related substances, and precursor chemicals. Mexico and China were the primary countries trafficking these substances directly to the U.S., with India later emerging as a source for fentanyl precursors. Shipped by mail services and sold on social media, fentanyl presented new challenges to law enforcement.

Early on, DEA performed significant, impactful operations.

## DEA Rises to the Challenge

For decades, Arizona's southern border has been a key entry point for cartels trafficking drugs into the United States. In January 2014, Arizona encountered its first illicit fentanyl powder seizure. Several months later, in a Tempe hotel room, Arizona came face to face with its first fatal poisoning from illicit fentanyl powder. By February 2016, the Phoenix Field Division had its first illicit fentanyl-laced pill seizure. On August 16, 2017, the Phoenix Field Division's Strike Force 2 seized a record - breaking 30,000 fentanyl-laced fake pills.

## New York Tactical Diversion Squad Makes Fentanyl Arrests

In June of 2014, agents from the New York Division Office Tactical Diversion Squad (NYDO-TDS) and officers from the Dutchess County Drug Task Force (DCDTF) arrested Dennis Sica, 36, and John Rohman 25, in Poughkeepsie. Since 2013, Sica had distributed glassine bags labeled "Breaking Bad," which contained potent forms of fentanyl under the guise of being heroin or heroin that contained a quantity of fentanyl. In November 2013, NYDO-TDS in conjunction with DCDTF began investigating an alarming number of overdose deaths



A lethal dose of fentanyl can fit on the tip of a pencil.

resulting from this illicit drug mixture and made the arrest the following June. Sica was ultimately found guilty and sentenced to 35 years in prison for participating in a conspiracy to distribute heroin and fentanyl, the use of which resulted in three deaths.

### **Large Fentanyl Seizure in the San Diego Field Division**

In Lemon Grove, California, a long-term investigation by DEA led to one of the nation's largest seizures of fentanyl and a federal indictment against three traffickers, taking 44.14 kilograms of fentanyl out of circulation, enough for more than 44 million fake pills. Until the spring of 2016,

the San Francisco Field Division had not seen much illicit fentanyl, with seizures of 110 grams in 2015. That changed between March and April 2016 when there were more than 60 fentanyl poisonings in the greater Sacramento region, 14 resulting in death.

The source of the poisonings was determined to likely be fake prescription tablets containing fentanyl that appeared to be legitimate hydrocodone. Public health and law enforcement officials believed that the pills were likely sold under the guise of being legitimate medicine. DEA's Sacramento District Office issued a Public Safety Alert and established a tip line for information. Multiple spinoff investigations led to the seizures of pill presses, counterfeit

dies, binder used in the production of tablets, thousands of dollars in cash, several firearms, and the arrest of numerous individuals.

## New England Field Division Tenacity

The New England Field Division's Worcester Tactical Diversion Squad (WTDS) had been conducting a Regional Priority Target (RPOT) and OCDETF investigation into the Kevin Perry Jr. oxycodone and fentanyl drug trafficking organization, after the delivery of an illegal pill press to Perry was flagged in 2012. Working in conjunction with United States Postal Inspection Service and a host of other state and federal law enforcement agencies, a multi-prong approach targeted Perry's drug distribution, money laundering, mortgage fraud, and cash structuring activities. An ongoing investigation and legal actions ensued. On March 20, 2017, a federal warrant at Perry's residence was executed, resulting in the seizure of evidence linking him to money laundering and drug trafficking. On March 24, WTDS received information that Perry Jr. had stashed 14,000 fentanyl-laced fake pills in a public restroom at a local Worcester pizza shop/convenience store. Upon coordination with the U.S. Attorney's Office in Worcester members of the WTDS proceeded to the restroom and discovered the pills secreted in a drop ceiling. In 2020, Perry Jr. was arrested on federal drug charges for manufacturing and distributing MDMA. He was found guilty and sentenced to eight years in prison followed by six years of supervised release.

## From Pill Mill Epidemic to Fentanyl Epidemic

From 2016 to 2018, deaths associated with illicit drugs increased, with more attributed to opioids, specifically fentanyl. In 2016, synthetic opioids were involved in nearly 50 percent (19,413) of opioid-related deaths, up from 14 percent (3,007) in 2010. This increase was reflected in the types of cases investigated by DEA. On June 26, 2019, Phoenix Task Force Group 3 seized a record 109,000 fake fentanyl-laced pills. By 2022 the Phoenix Field Division held the records for both the single largest fentanyl seizure of 1.8 million fake pills, as well as the most fentanyl pills seized by a Field

Division in 2022, with 28,473,457 fake pills removed from the streets of Arizona.

In 2016, in collaboration with local partners, the Phoenix Field Division established the Heroin Enforcement Action Team (HEAT) which focused on drug traffickers responsible for overdose-related deaths. The HEAT team seized over 1,600 kilograms of heroin, 42 kilograms of fentanyl, and over 12,900 fentanyl pills, which resulted in fewer heroin overdoses, not only in Phoenix, but also in surrounding jurisdictions.

## DEA Snares International Trafficker Ylli Didani (2016–2018)

A tenacious Detroit Field Division followed a globe-spanning investigation with international intrigue, secret coded messages, a robot submarine, and at the center, a drug kingpin shipping hundreds of kilograms of cocaine around the world. The investigation kicked into high gear in 2016 when agents combed through evidence that suggested the metro-Detroit-based Ylli Didani's cocaine drug trafficking network had ties to 14 other countries: Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Canada, Chile, Albania, Turkey, Brazil, Germany, Dominican Republic, United Arab Emirates, Belgium, Spain and the Netherlands. The scale of the operation became more apparent after investigators intercepted text messages discussing the need to discreetly transfer \$111.5 million from Deutsche Bank in Frankfurt, Germany, to a bank in Dubai.

In 2017, it was discovered that Didani's organization was overseeing the design of an underwater drone to transport large quantities of cocaine to Europe. The drone, equipped with an underwater GPS antenna, would transport the cocaine while attached to the bottom of a commercial container ship, then would be remotely released off the shores of Europe. The drone and cocaine would then be picked up by the Didani organization. This investigation was directly responsible for the seizure of more than 9,000 kilograms of cocaine and in excess of \$17 million dollars. Agents from the Detroit Division arrested Didani at Charlotte Douglas Airport, March 31, 2021. In April, a federal grand jury charged him with conspiracy to distribute cocaine.

## Tunnel Uncovered

Political and societal attitudes toward marijuana continued to change from 2016 to 2018, however, the DEA's investigation and enforcement actions continued in accord with federal law. New technology and innovation have also improved marijuana cultivation. In May of 2017, the Wilmington (Delaware) Resident Office, following up on a cocaine smuggling operation that involved cocaine sealed into steel oxygen canisters, discovered a large tunnel under the residence of one of the recipients of the canisters in Bear, Delaware. The tunnel was more than 2,000 square feet with 20-foot ceilings and was accessed through a false fireplace in the residence of a Sinaloa Cartel associate. The tunnel, built in a style more typical of tunnels along the southern border, included sophisticated light and hydroponic systems capable of supporting hundreds of marijuana plants.

## DEA Adapts to Changing Communication Needs

In the 2010s DEA expanded its online presence by increasing its participation on multiple social media platforms. These

efforts helped build goodwill and foster public partnerships, as well as allowing DEA to more efficiently disseminate warnings and advisory information. The expansion included the establishment of a DEA headquarters X account (at the time named Twitter) in 2010, soon followed by DEA's field divisions obtaining individual websites in 2016. DEA launched a Facebook page in April 2017 and a YouTube channel and LinkedIn page in August 2017. These online media platforms proved to be vital means of communication during the pandemic and the ensuing recovery.

In addition to outward-bound communications, new technology also improved inbound responses. DEA established a new Tip Line Campaign in 2015, overseen by the Washington Field Division. In addition to the traditional tip line functionality, DEA incorporated web-based tip portals which allowed more comprehensive and strategic information gathering.

## DEA Forensic Laboratories Grow and Contribute to Science and Success

From 2012 to 2018, DEA's Forensic Laboratories welcomed new chemists, created new collaborations, and developed



Billboards were placed throughout Washington County, Maryland.

more effective techniques in newly organized labs around the country.

After the inaugural Basic Forensic Chemist Class (BFCC) graduation on June 7, 2013, the four newly hired forensic chemists from DEA Academy in Quantico, Virginia, moved on to a new consolidated DEA laboratory system's training program. New classroom space and lab offered them months of training as they became immersed in DEA's culture and learned about drug chemistry, instrumental and analysis techniques, courtroom testimony from seasoned field experts, and participated in demonstrations on teamwork with enforcement agents, diversion investigators, intelligence analysts, and forensic chemists. The BFCC model has been highly successful and graduated 173 forensic chemists through mid-2023.

Between 2012 and 2015, the Office of Forensic Sciences implemented a Laboratory Information Management System (LIMS) in each of the field laboratories, realizing a decades-long initiative to modernize data management. The LIMS project also promoted good environmental stewardship through the laboratory system by transitioning from paper to electronic casefile management and storage.

In March 2015, after nearly 20 years of being housed in the heart of San Francisco's financial district, the Western Laboratory moved to its current East Bay location. This facility is approximately 42,000 square feet and provides both increased capacity for laboratory staff and additional safety features, such as individual workspaces, equipped with fume hoods for all forensic chemist staff. Throughout the years, employees of the Western Laboratory and DEA's other forensic laboratories have exhibited uncompromising personal and professional integrity while furthering the field of forensic chemistry and countering the global drug threat.

In September 2015 renovation and construction of the Northeast Laboratory was initiated, with expansion beginning in September 2017. The resulting renovations allowed for the main vault expansion to over 4,461 sq. ft. with an additional vault space of nearly 400 sq. ft. for high hazard items. The renovations also added an additional area of

4,131 sq. ft. for secure files, offices, and a training room, as well as a 200 sq. ft. room for agent field testing.

New studies on opium in 2017/2018 netted informative data to address the heroin epidemic, which became a widespread domestic issue for the American people and showed no signs of slowing. In 2014 alone, the number of individuals using heroin approached one million by the end that year. Drug overdose deaths involving heroin rose from 1,960 in 1999 to 15,482 in 2017 before trending down.<sup>1</sup>

In 2017 DEA's Forensics Lab collaborated with Florida International University in Miami to conduct new profiling studies of opium and processing-related impurities found in heroin. 2018 research resulted in a method to extract opium poppy DNA from heroin samples. Research results were published on identifying the source of unknown heroin samples (forensic geosourcing), which became vital to informing domestic and foreign policy.

## **Sinaloa Cartel Lieutenant "El Chino Antrax" Extradited to U.S. (2014)**

On December 30, 2013, at the request of the United States, Jose Arechiga-Gamboa, AKA "El Chino Antrax," was arrested by Dutch authorities as he exited a flight from Mexico City at Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam. Arechiga-Gamboa was traveling under a fraudulent name, with a fraudulent Mexican passport, using the name of a deceased individual. He was detained pursuant to an INTERPOL Red Notice and a provisional arrest warrant filed with the Netherlands, issued by the Southern District of California on charges of conspiracy and distribution of cocaine, methamphetamine, and marijuana. Arechiga-Gamboa had undergone extensive plastic surgery and attempted to alter his fingerprints to avoid capture. A grand jury in the Southern District of California indicted him on December 20. Intercepts indicated that he would possibly travel to Europe during the Christmas holiday. On December 29, San Diego agents learned of possible flight plans. The following day, after coordination and

<sup>1</sup> Drug Overdose Death Rates | National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) (nih.gov)

excellent assistance by multiple foreign offices and the INTERPOL liaison, Arechiga-Gamboa was arrested by Dutch authorities.

Arechiga-Gamboa, a lieutenant in the Sinaloa Cartel, reported directly to CPOT Ismael Zambada-Garcia, AKA “Mayo.” Arechiga-Gamboa supervised Los Antrax, the enforcement arm of the cartel, and coordinated the transportation of shipments of multi-hundred-kilogram quantities of cocaine and ton quantities of marijuana from Mexico into the United States. The cartel, headed by CPOTs Joaquin Guzman-Loera (AKA “Chapo”), Juan José Esparragoza-Moreno (AKA “El Azul”), and Zambada-Garcia, was at that time responsible for transporting multi-ton quantities of cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine, and marijuana from Mexico into the United States for distribution and for laundering millions of dollars in criminal proceeds.

This Special Operations Division-supported OCDETF PTO investigation, dubbed Operation Narco Polo, resulted in the arrest of 83 individuals and the seizure of 379 kilograms of cocaine, 320 pounds of methamphetamine, 13 kilograms of heroin, 3.3 tons of marijuana, \$5 million in U.S. currency, and 10 firearms. This joint investigation was conducted by DEA’s San Diego, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, and Phoenix Field Divisions; Manila, Mexico City, and The Hague Country Offices; Oakland, Tijuana (Mexico), Tucson, and Ventura Resident Offices with assistance from the U.S. Border Patrol, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, IRS, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement/Homeland Security Investigations, San Bernardino County Sheriff’s Department, and Beverly Hills Police Department.

On July 9, 2014, Arechiga-Gamboa was extradited from the Netherlands and transported to Curaçao where special agents from the San Diego Field Division and the Curaçao Country Office took custody of him. Agents from the San Diego Field Division and member of the U.S. Marshals Service (USMS) transported him on a DEA aircraft to San Diego, where he was booked on drug-related charges.

On July 10, 2014, DEA special agents from the San Diego Field Division along with members of the USMS arrived back in San Diego, California, with defendant José Rodrigo Arechiga-Gamboa. He pled guilty in March 2015

and admitted he participated in cocaine and marijuana shipments from Mexico to the U.S. and facilitated violent activities for the Sinaloa Cartel.

After many court appearances and incarceration, Arechiga-Gamboa was released on March 3, 2020, and placed on house arrest. On May 9, he was identified as missing and was killed a few days later, allegedly by members of the Sinaloa Cartel.

## Shutting Down Major TCOs and Crimes

In April 2014, DEA’s Laredo District Office OCDETF Operation Prophecy resulted in a 43-count indictment against 36 defendants and members of the Los Zetas and their leader Ivan Velasquez-Caballero, AKA “Z-50” or “El Talivan.” This operation shut down major drug routes in the United States from Mexico, as well as crimes including kidnapping, money laundering, using juveniles to commit violent crimes, and other felony charges.

## “Legalizing Recreational Drugs is a Very, Very Bad Idea”–Pope Francis

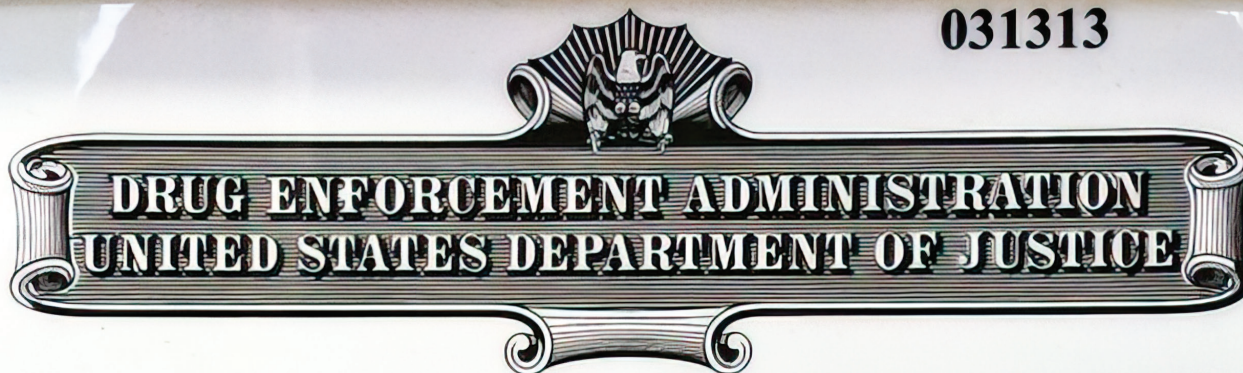
At the conclusion of the 31<sup>st</sup> International Drug Law Enforcement Conference (IDEC 31) in Rome, more than 100 top drug law enforcement officers from around the world made a special trip to another influential leader in the fight against drugs: Pope Francis.

On Friday, June 20, 2014, at 11:30 a.m. in a grand reception room of the Vatican, Andrea DeGennaro, the Director of the Italian Central Directorate for Anti-Drug Services and co-president and host of IDEC 31, introduced the delegation to the Pope. The Pope then spoke to the assembled group and warmly greeted DeGennaro, who then presented the Pope with a silver plate from IDEC as a joint gift from the Italian Directorate for Anti-Drug Services and DEA.

Then-DEA Administrator Michelle Leonhart, co-president of IDEC, spoke privately with the Pope. She then presented him with honorary DEA Special Agent credentials and a badge in an ornamental presentation case.

The inscription on the plaque inside the box contains a quote from Pope Francis: “The scourge of drug

031313



THIS IS TO  
 CERTIFY THAT  
 WHOSE SIGNATURE AND PHOTOGRAPH APPEAR BELOW, IS DULY  
 APPOINTED AS  
**POPE FRANCIS**  
**SPECIAL AGENT**  
 IN THE  
 DRUG ENFORCEMENT ADMINISTRATION, UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT

OF JUSTICE, AND AS SUCH IS CHARGED WITH THE DUTY OF ENFORCING THE CONTROLLED SUBSTANCES ACT. THE BEARER OF THIS CREDENTIAL IS AUTHORIZED UNDER TITLE 21 UNITED STATES CODE SECTION 878, TO CARRY FIREARMS, EXECUTE WARRANTS, MAKE ARRESTS FOR OFFENSES AGAINST THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, AND TO PERFORM OTHER LAW ENFORCEMENT DUTIES AS AUTHORIZED BY LAW.

**Office of the Administrator**  
**Drug Enforcement Administration**



Expires  
**ETERNITY**



BY ORDER OF:  
**The Attorney General**  
**of the United States**

*Francis*

SIGNATURE

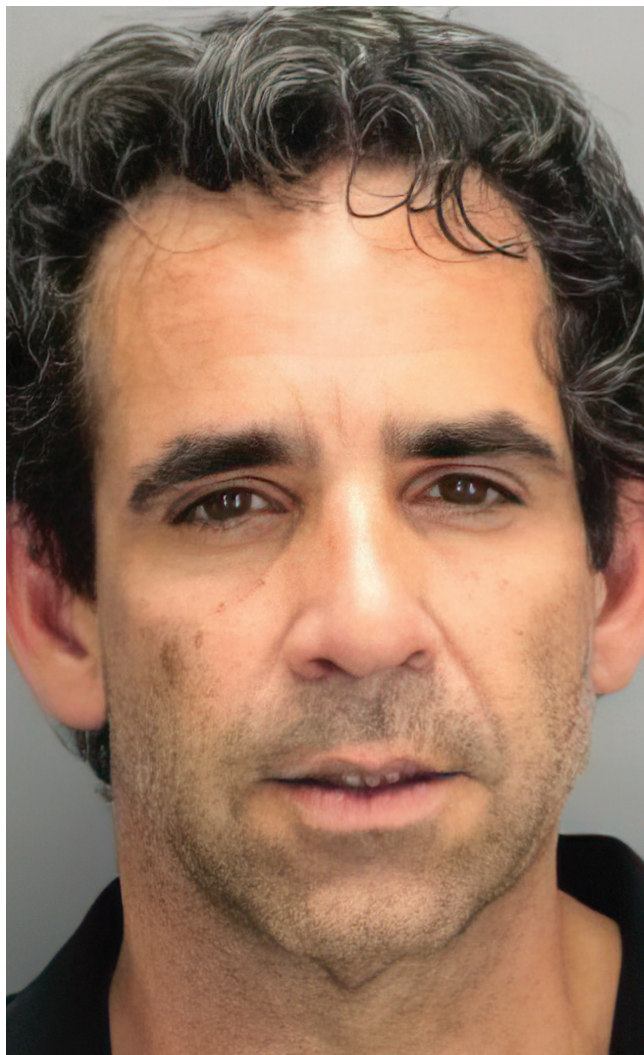
Credentials presented to Pope Francis by Administrator Leonhart.

trafficking that favors violence and sows the seeds of suffering and death requires of society as a whole an act of courage. A reduction in the spread and influence of drug addiction will not be achieved by a liberalization of drug use. Rather, it is necessary to confront the problems underlying the use of these drugs by promoting greater justice and educating young people in the values that build up life in society.”

The Pope, who grew up in Argentina and later served as Archbishop and Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio before being elevated to Pope, had seen firsthand the devastation of drugs in large cities throughout Latin America, from his native Buenos Aires to Rio de Janeiro and elsewhere, frequently visiting the addicted and recovering. During the event, the Pope redoubled his commitment to being an ally in the work of IDEC participants, saying “the trend towards legalizing recreational drugs is a very, very bad idea.” He also stated “the scourge of drug use continues to spread inexorably, fed by a deplorable commerce which transcends national and continental borders.”

### **Miami Field Division and Biogenesis**

Biogenesis of America anti-aging clinics were founded by Anthony Bosch and advertised anti-aging and weight loss services. However, a DEA investigation found that these southern Florida clinics were involved in illegally selling and distributing controlled substances, specifically performance enhancing drugs to professional athletes and the general public, including minors. Since January 2013, there had been media attention on Bosch, AKA “Dr. T,” who admitted he was a black-market distributor of Nyktuoke testosterone and human growth hormone. Countless hours were dedicated to this complex, high-profile investigation that included surveillances, interviews, and the review of thousands of pharmacy records, prescriptions, and lab reports. Arrested on August 4, 2014, Bosch and six other defendants were charged with conspiracy to distribute testosterone. All defendants pled guilty. The defendants were also sued separately by Major League Baseball in civil court.



Anthony Bosch arrested August 5, 2014, on federal drug charges.

### **Working at the Intersection of Technology and Trafficking**

The New York Field Division arrested Joanna De Alba, a dark web trafficker who used the Wall Street Market to sell an array of illegal drugs—including fentanyl, heroin, MDMA, cocaine, methamphetamine, oxycodone, and methadone—over the dark web in exchange for cryptocurrency. The case resulted in a sentence of 96 months in prison for over 600 transactions on the Wall Street Market dark web site in which she sold more than 840 grams of heroin, 190 grams of methamphetamine, 1,250 MDMA pills, and 280 oxycodone pills.

## 2015 Sentencing of the Flores Brothers

On January 27, 2015, twin brothers Pedro and Margarito Flores were each sentenced to 14 years in federal prison. The Flores brothers were regarded as Chicago's most significant drug traffickers, rising from street-level dealers to the highest echelons of the Sinaloa Cartel and a rival cartel before they began providing unparalleled cooperation to DEA. The brothers were ordered to forfeit more than \$3.66 million and a sport utility vehicle. In addition, more than \$400,000 worth of assorted jewelry, several luxury automobiles, cash, and electronic equipment were seized and forfeited in administrative proceedings by DEA.

The Special Operations Division-supported OCDETF PTO investigation, dubbed Operation Buzz Kill, established that between 2005 and 2008, the Flores brothers and their crew operated a Chicago-based wholesale drug distribution cell worth hundreds of millions of dollars for the Sinaloa Cartel and a rival DTO controlled by Arturo Beltran Leyva, receiving an average 1,500 to 2,000 kilograms of cocaine per month. In total, the brothers admitted to facilitating the transfer of approximately \$1.8 billion of drug proceeds from the United States to Mexico, primarily through bulk cash smuggling.

The Flores brothers began cooperating with the Government in October 2008 and recorded conversations, including two directly with Chapo Guzman. Their cooperation resulted in indictments against leaders of the Sinaloa Cartel and the Beltran Leyva organization, as well as the complete dismantling of the brothers' own Chicago-based criminal enterprise.

## Fentanyl Pill Operation Uncovered in San Francisco Apartment

In December 2015 the San Francisco Field Division received information regarding a possible fake oxycodone manufacturing operation and distribution ring located in San Francisco. Agents conducted controlled purchases from a broker, which led them to the source of the pills, identified as Kia Zolfaghari, who operated a fake oxycodone business via the dark web. Zolfaghari manufactured the tablets in his

San Francisco apartment and shipped them to customers via USPS. Payment was then made to Zolfaghari through Bitcoin and bank deposits. Zolfaghari's wife, Candelaria Vazquez, assisted by mailing pills, purchasing packaging supplies, and accepting payments for the narcotics via her bank account.

In June 2016, Zolfaghari, Vazquez, and accomplice King Edward Harris were arrested on federal drug conspiracy charges. Vazquez pleaded guilty in November 2016 to conspiracy to distribute fentanyl and conspiracy to launder drug proceeds. In April 2017, Zolfaghari and Vazquez jumped bail and failed to appear at scheduled court hearings. In February 2018, Vazquez was sentenced in absentia to over 12 years in prison. One year later, the USMS and Mexican Federal Police located both of them in Mexico and returned them to the United States. Zolfaghari was ultimately sentenced to more than 16 years in prison on the fentanyl conspiracy charge, as well as money laundering and weapons charges. Harris was sentenced to five years for brokering the sale of the fentanyl-laced fake pills.

## Pilot of DEA 360 Strategy

On November 10, 2015, DEA announced Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, as the pilot city for a comprehensive law enforcement and prevention "360 Strategy" to help cities dealing with a heroin and prescription drug misuse epidemic, and its associated violent crime. DEA 360 involved coordinated law enforcement operations targeting all levels of DTOs and violent gangs supplying drugs to neighborhoods; engaging drug manufacturers, wholesalers, practitioners, and pharmacists to increase awareness of the opioid epidemic and encourage responsible prescribing practices; and community outreach and partnerships with local organizations following enforcement operations, equipping and empowering communities to fight the opioid epidemic. "DEA's 360 Strategy recognizes that we need to utilize every community resource possible to reach young people and attack the heroin and prescription drug epidemic at multiple levels. This three-sided strategy brings together everyone who has a stake in the successful outcome of this pilot program," said Gary Tuggle, DEA Special Agent in Charge of the Philadelphia Division.



DEA 360 Strategy logo.

### Operation Chump Change

In May 2015, Colorado Attorney General Cynthia Coffman announced the largest and most complex heroin bust in the history of the Rocky Mountain region as part of Phase Two of Operation Chump Change, a two-year investigation into a heroin trafficking organization and related money

laundering operation. The Denver OCDETF Strike Force, led by DEA, headed the investigation that resulted in the state-level indictment of 54 individuals. The operation resulted in three federal indictments charging 34 individuals with complex money laundering and violations of the drug kingpin statute. During Phase Two of Chump



Heroin seized during Operation Chump Change.

Change, the task force executed 15 search warrants within Colorado, as well as arrest warrants in Arizona, Nevada, Utah, and California. Agents seized 52.5 pounds of brown heroin, 5.5 pounds of methamphetamine, three ounces of cocaine, two weapons, seven vehicles, and approximately \$179,000 in cash.

## Operation Pilluted

In May 2015, the U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Arkansas, the Assistant Special Agent in Charge of DEA's Little Rock District Office, and the New Orleans Field Division's Special Agent in Charge, announced the charging and arrests of multiple individuals in several federal indictments presented as part of a DEA national initiative. The effort, dubbed Operation Pilluted, involved the investigation of rogue medical practitioners,

pharmacists, and other DEA registrants, as well as the aggressive pursuit of more traditional criminal organizations involved in the distribution of pharmaceuticals. Under the auspices of Operation Pilluted, concerted efforts were initiated to heighten community awareness concerning the perils of prescription drug diversion and the strategic implementation and strengthening of pharmaceutical drug laws. Nearly 1,000 law enforcement officers across Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama took part in the operation.

Operation Pilluted involved 99 criminal investigations, which led to 313 arrests, including 25 DEA registrants, 46 vehicles seized, 204 weapons seized, and 62 DEA registrations surrendered. In addition, the operation resulted in the seizure of \$615,428 cash, approximately \$11,300,000 in bank accounts, and \$6,745,800 in real property.



Operation Pilluted was a cooperative effort with the Diversion Control Division and other federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies.

## Cast of *Narcos* visits DEA Headquarters and Quantico

In August 2015, *Narcos*, a crime drama television series set and filmed in Colombia and based on the story of drug kingpin Pablo Escobar, premiered on Netflix. Retired DEA Special Agents in Charge Steve Murphy and Javier Peña were portrayed in the series by actors Boyd Holbrook and Pedro Pascal. The actors were briefed at DEA Headquarters and received training at Quantico in preparation for their roles.

## 2016 Operation Thin Ice

In March 2016, DEA's New England Field Division's Boston Financial Investigations Team and Boston IRS Criminal Investigations initiated Operation Thin Ice, targeting an international money laundering organization based in Colombia. In partnership with DEA Bogotá Country Office Group 5 and the Colombian National Police Sensitive Investigation Unit, as well as units in Jamaica, Canada, Australia, Spain, the Dominican Republic, Bermuda, and others, the group investigated an MLO responsible

for laundering millions of dollars of drug proceeds from around the world. At that time 21 key members of the organization were indicted in Massachusetts for conspiracy to commit money laundering along with other money laundering violations; 14 were arrested in Colombia; three were arrested in Jamaica and were extradited to Boston; and four were arrested in Florida.

Those arrested included "money brokers" whose job was to coordinate the laundering of drug proceeds from outside of Colombia so they could be used in the black-market peso exchange and other trade-based money laundering schemes. Two were members of a DTO that exported multi-hundred-kilogram quantities of cocaine from Colombia. Others were responsible for the collection of drug proceeds in the U.S. and Jamaica and delivery to money launderers who would facilitate the placement into financial institutions on behalf of Colombian DTOs. Targeted enforcement actions resulted in the seizure of \$22,778,133.33 in bulk currency and assets; 6,063 kilograms of cocaine; six kilograms of heroin; 14.5 kilograms of fentanyl; 381 kilograms of methamphetamine; 2,500 pounds of marijuana; and 15 firearms.

## Discovery of Longest Cross-Border Tunnel and the Early Start of Chinese Precursor Chemicals

In April 2016, DEA along with other federal agencies, discovered what was believed at the time to be the longest cross-border tunnel ever discovered along the California-Mexico border. The tunnel was estimated to be more than 800 yards in length, and probably longer due to its zig-zagging route. It stretched from a house in Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico, to an outdoor fenced-in commercial lot in an Otay Mesa industrial park, about 500 yards north of the international border. The tunnel was equipped with rail and ventilation systems, lights, and a sophisticated large elevator leading from a tunnel into a closet inside the Tijuana residence.

Six people were arrested and charged with various drug trafficking and tunnel-related crimes, including conspiracy to import and distribute cocaine and conspiracy to use a border tunnel. Officials also confiscated more than

a ton of cocaine, making it the single-largest cocaine seizure ever associated with a Southern California tunnel. Typical seizures from tunnels are in small amounts, so the 2,000-pound seizure resulted in a very large blow to an established drug organization.

In October of 2016, Mexican-Chinese pharmaceutical supplier Zhenli Ye Gon was extradited from the U.S. to Mexico at the request of Mexican authorities. The Mexican authorities had raided Zhenli Ye Gon's mansion in Mexico City and recovered 207 million U.S. dollars, 18 million Mexican pesos, 200,000 euros, 113,000 Hong Kong dollars, 11 centenarios (Mexican gold bullion coins made of pure gold), jewels, a war chest of automatic guns, and 7 vehicles. Zhenli Ye Gon was accused of importing 19,497 kilos of amphetamine precursors after his pharmaceutical company, Unimed Pharm Chem, had an expired license to import. Allegations were made that the additional kilos were imported for the U.S. black market methamphetamine trade.



The tunnel was estimated to be more than 800 yards in length, and probably longer due to its zig-zagging route.

## Launch of Operation Prevention (2016)

In 2016, DEA and Discovery Education, a leading provider of digital content and professional development for K-12 classrooms, launched Operation Prevention, a joint nationwide program with the goal of educating students about the impacts of opioids and to initiate lifesaving conversations. On October 25, 2016, the Operation Prevention virtual field trip explored the science of addiction in an effort to help middle and high school students understand how prescription drugs and heroin affect the brain and body. During a live town-hall event that was broadcast from Virginia's McLean High School and streamed into classrooms nationwide, students got unfiltered facts about drugs and addiction and had their questions answered by leading experts, including DEA agents and pharmacologists. The program included a public service announcement video challenge, open to teens throughout the United States, to create an original 30- to 60-second video on prescription opioid misuse that would make peers think twice about misusing opioids.

## DEA Africa Region Established

DEA's Africa Region was officially established in 2016 when the first Regional Director (RD), Andre W. Kellum, was selected to report to the Rabat, Morocco, Regional Office. Before RD Kellum's appointment, the established country offices in Africa fell under the area of responsibility of the Europe Regional Director. Under RD Kellum's leadership, the Africa Region underwent transformative changes in many areas, notably the creation of an Africa Multilateral Drug Enforcement Coordination (AMDEC) targeting meeting, a focus on diversity and women in leadership, the implementation of the *I Choose My Future* program, the opening of offices in Maputo, Mozambique, and Cape Town, South Africa, as well as record-breaking seizures and extraditions.

Collaboration with counterparts was key to the Africa Region's success. One of the most significant initiatives was at the AMDEC targeting meeting. AMDEC delivered measurable success by providing country attachés with the ability to engage with counterparts from their AOR

and enabling law enforcement members from all over the continent to share target information. The meeting served as an opportunity to establish trust and build partnerships. AMDEC member participation grew from 11 countries in 2017 to 31 countries in 2020. As a result of the successful investigations resulting from AMDEC meetings, the U.S. State Department, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, committed to supplementing DEA's participation budget to maximize the successful information sharing.

Commitment to building a team of highly skilled and diverse personnel was critical to the success of the Africa Region. The number of women in GS-14 positions increased on the African continent from none in twenty-five years to three; the number of women in core series positions increased from three to six; and approximately 50 percent of the region's staff were people of color. Embracing diversity in law enforcement, particularly in the Africa Region, fostered an inclusive and dynamic workforce, strengthened intelligence gathering, and built stronger partnerships that contributed to successful operations.

## Northeast Lab Investigates Green Plantains

DEA's Northeast Laboratory, due to its centralized East Coast location, typically encounters a wide variety of unique and dangerous drug combinations before they are seen in other locations. In 2016, the lab examined 24 boxes containing what superficially appeared to be 600 green plantains. Upon further investigation though, the fake plantains were found to be made of a hard plastic-like material, each containing white powder. Further analysis of the lab exhibits confirmed the powder was cocaine with a net weight of 149.7 kg.

## 2017 OCDETF Operation Pacific Pipeline and High-Level Colombian Investors

Beginning in January of 2017, DEA's San Diego Field Division's OCDETF Strike Force Group 3, the Bogotá Country Office Group 2, the Cartagena Resident Office

Group 3, the Guatemala City Country Office, the Bogotá Country Office Group 5, the San Jose Country Office in conjunction with the DIJIN SIU/Cali, the Colombian CTI North Coast SIU Cali Unit, and the Guatemala SIU carried out a joint investigation against high-volume cocaine traffickers out of Nariño, Colombia. The group identified the DTO was producing cocaine and transporting the drug to Central America via go-fast and low-profile vessels. Jhon Ferney Rodriguez-Sanchez, William Fernando Perea-Rios, and Oscar Orobio-Guerrero were arrested in Colombia. This had a substantial effect of reducing the exportation of cocaine from Nariño to destinations in Central America.

### **New Compliance Division Formed**

2017 saw DEA launch the Compliance Division. Independent of the Inspection Division, the Compliance Division ensures that legal requirements are maintained,

which includes managing policies to update standards, consulting with subject matter experts, and creating simple-to-use forms and documentation. Within the Division, the Policy Administration Section drafts and improves DEA policy, ensuring that employees have the most current information, training, and job aids.

### **New Nationwide Drug Prevention Initiative**

In 2017 DEA launched a new nationwide initiative and website called Campus Drug Prevention. Planned by the Congressional and Public Affairs' Community Outreach and Prevention Support Section, the program provided information to professionals working to prevent drug misuse among college students. Packed with statistical data and research, articles on prevention, information about paraphernalia and drug types, as well as events, the website



This vessel was seized in October 2017 and was filled with over 1,800 kilograms of cocaine.

and program provide tools for preventing drug use and misuse among college students.

### Investigations and Cases

Spanning 2013 to 2016, with a conviction in 2017, Operation Excessive Pain was a complex, multiagency OCDETF case involving the combined efforts of DEA, FBI, and the U.S. Attorney’s Office in Southern Alabama. The defendants were Dr. Xiulu Ruan and Dr. John Patrick Couch, who jointly owned and operated two pain management clinics, Physicians Pain Specialists of Alabama and the C&R Pharmacy. It was determined that both doctors were pre-signing controlled substance prescriptions while traveling out of the county. They were convicted on Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organization (RICO), conspiracy, and mail and wire fraud, and forfeited several houses, beach condos, and bank accounts, as well as 23 luxury cars, a \$5 million judgment, and extensive prison sentences. The case garnered significant national media attention,

## Campus Drug Prevention

[www.campusdrugprevention.gov](http://www.campusdrugprevention.gov)

### A Resource To Prevent Drug Abuse Among College Students

Campus Drug Prevention focuses on preventing drug use and misuse among college students.

including from The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, CNN, and Reuters. The hit CNBC series “American Greed” also filmed an hour-long episode on the Couch/Ruan case, which aired on March 5, 2018, and a book was written by Evan Hughes on the case, titled *The Hard Sell*.

### Unlawful Distribution Caused Deaths in Pennsylvania

In December 2017, Dr. Raymond Kraynak was arrested by the Scranton, Pennsylvania, Resident Office pursuant to a federal grand jury indictment charging him with the unlawful distribution and dispensing of controlled



This Porsche was one of 23 luxury cars seized from Dr. John Couch.

substances, causing the death of five of his patients through this same distribution, and maintaining two drug-involved premises in Northumberland County, Pennsylvania. Dr. Kraynak, who prescribed approximately 2.7 million doses of oxycodone, hydrocodone, OxyContin, and fentanyl to approximately 2,838 patients between January 2016 and July 2017, was the top prescriber during that time period in the state of Pennsylvania. In 2021, Dr. Kraynak pleaded guilty after a three-week jury trial and was sentenced the following year to 15 years in federal prison.

### Convictions for Pill Mill Doctor and Fentanyl and Cocaine DTO

In 2017, the New York Field Division investigated a large pill mill on Staten Island. Over a 5-year period, the internal medicine practice and Dr. David Taylor were accused of writing prescriptions for \$2 million dollars' worth of oxycodone that was funneled by two associates directly to street dealers. The doctor was convicted of conspiring to distribute and possession with intent to distribute oxycodone.

DEA's St. Louis Field Division conducted a long-term investigation of a fentanyl and cocaine distribution organization in St. Louis. Agents identified Gerald Hunter of Los Angeles as an out-of-state source of supply for the St. Louis organization. On April 27, 2017, DEA agents seized approximately 27 kilograms of fentanyl in Florissant, Missouri. Hunter was in possession of fentanyl, and his fingerprints were recovered from packaging material. However, Hunter ran from investigators, temporarily escaping, before USMS arrested him three years later in 2020.

Evidence at trial established the fentanyl was the equivalent of 270,000 usage units before being diluted, with a street value over \$1 million. One package from the 27.5 kilograms tested positive for fentanyl, with a purity of 95 percent. Ten other defendants of Hunter's DTO were also found guilty and sentenced.

### Transcontinental Investigation leads to Meth Seizure in Santa Rosa

In April 2017, the Australian Federal Police and DEA's Canberra, Australia, Country Office, provided information

to DEA's Santa Rosa office regarding Hugh Gorman, 72, an Australian citizen and pilot, who purchased an airplane in Santa Rosa, California, for the purpose of transporting drugs to Australia. In June 2017, agents obtained a federal search warrant for a Santa Rosa storage unit associated to Gorman. Inside, agents discovered 560 pounds of methamphetamine stashed inside suitcases. Gorman and two other co-conspirators, were subsequently arrested by Australian authorities.

### DEA Teams Help After Hurricane Harvey

2017 was marked with several severe storms, which not only affected DEA operations, but also provided opportunities to connect with the community. Emergency Support Function-13 teams from DEA's Miami Field Division headed to Texas to assist with the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey in the brief interim period before racing home to help with Hurricane Irma. The team helped rescue stranded people, secure danger zones, clear debris, and make repairs.

### Records Management Assist with Hurricane Damage

Hurricane Maria had a devastating impact on Puerto Rico, causing widespread damage due to heavy rains. This damage included flooding in the records rooms of the Puerto Rico field office. DEA Headquarters' Records Management Team made an emergency trip to retrieve and remediate the damage to ensure important information was not lost. The efforts required creative drying techniques to reduce the damage on site, as well as later mold remediation work in the Mid-Atlantic lab with protective gear and equipment.

### New Louisville Field Division Established

On Wednesday, November 29, 2017, at a press conference, Acting Attorney General Jeff Sessions, joined by DEA Acting Administrator Rob Patterson, announced the creation of DEA's Louisville Field Division, effective January 1, 2018. The new field division would be DEA's 22<sup>nd</sup> domestic division, the first time in nearly


**DEA LOUISVILLE DIVISION**


The Louisville Field Division was created to better serve Kentucky, West Virginia, and Tennessee.

20 years that DEA restructured its field divisions. This converted the existing Louisville District Office into a field division in an effort to enhance enforcement efforts within the Appalachian mountain region and unify drug trafficking investigations under a single special agent in charge.

At the time, DEA anticipated this change would produce more effective investigations on heroin, fentanyl, and prescription opioid trafficking, all of which were having significant impacts on the region. The field division enabled DEA to better align with the U.S. Attorney's Office districts in those areas and the Appalachia High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area Program. Since the Louisville Field Division's creation, it has grown to add two posts of duty and a District Office, for a total of 15 offices, serving 7 judicial districts across three states.

## 2018 Omaha Field Division Formed - DEA's 23<sup>rd</sup> Field Division

DEA's 23<sup>rd</sup> field division was opened in 2018. The Omaha Field Division covers Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and four counties in Illinois and Wisconsin. The new field division made a big opening splash including several methamphetamine investigations resulting in multi-decade sentences, as well as focusing on halting Sinaloa Cartel expansion throughout the region. By the end of their first six months of operation, agents across the field division seized or collected 5,064 pounds of marijuana, 578 pounds of methamphetamine, 145 pounds of cocaine, 64 pounds of heroin, and more than 6,000 opioid and pharmaceutical pills.



## DEA OMAHA DIVISION

★ **DIVISION OFFICE**  
 ● District Office  
 ○ Resident Office  
 △ Post of Duty



DEA reorganized its field divisions to create the Louisville and Omaha Field Divisions to enhance investigations in these regions.

### Disney-Like Character Figurines Stuffed with Crystal Methamphetamine

In April of 2018, agents from DEA's Atlanta Strike Force Group 1 initiated a wiretap investigation into an Atlanta-based drug source of supply and intercepted communication between the Atlanta-based target and his brother-in-law, located in Mexico. In the following days, agents from HSI Laredo, Texas, seized a "cover load" of ceramic and wax Disney-like figurines. Each wax figurine contained one pound of crystal methamphetamine, also known as "ice" and the full load contained 605 pounds.

### Operation Unintended Minors

2018 was a big year in combating the criminal efforts of Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) gang along the eastern seaboard.



DEA's Atlanta Field Division seized approximately 605 pounds of methamphetamine concealed in wax Disney figurines.

Spearheaded by DEA's Long Island District Office, but in coordination with the San Salvador Country Office, New Jersey Field Division, Washington, DC Field Division, Baltimore District Office, and the Houston Field Division, the operation traced the superstructure of the gang operations from the individual regional "cliques" to the MS-13 senior leadership.

Work began with the investigation of several gruesome murders on Long Island, and in Maryland and Virginia, resulting in arrests of the perpetrators in each of these crimes. The investigation also uncovered evidence of intended crime including kidnappings, commissioned murder, and drug trafficking. Regional director Miguel Angel Corea-Diaz, AKA "Reaper," and four other high-ranking MS-13 members were arrested and the accompanying search resulted in the seizure of 779.4 grams of heroin, 55.4 grams of suspected MDMA tablets, 115.3 grams of

marijuana, and \$5,000. Internationally the investigation resulted in coordination with Salvadoran law enforcement and the arrest of 36 senior members of the gang.

### **Four Takedowns in Four Months**

DEA's Seattle Field Division led four major DTO takedowns in four months in 2018. The takedowns were part of a violent crime initiative in coordination with federal, state, and local law enforcement officers in King, Pierce, Snohomish, Skagit, and Thurston counties and resulted in 36 arrests. Searches after the takedowns resulted in the seizure of 75 guns, more than 95 pounds of methamphetamine, more than 32 pounds of heroin, more than 7 pounds of cocaine (both crack and powder), as well as ecstasy and fentanyl. More than \$327,000 in cash and 22 vehicles also were seized and resulted in a major disruption in gang activity and violent crime in the entire region.