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Research report

Forum: UNODC

Issue: Developing harm reduction strategies to combat synthetic drug trade leading to the rising fentanyl crisis

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Introduction

Over the duration of the past decade, many synthetic opioids such as fentanyl, have been the driving factors of the high rise of overdose deaths. More than 70% of all overdose deaths within the United States of America alone were linked to fentanyl consumption, displaying the gravity and why this is no longer “just a concern” and instead is labelled a crisis. Fentanyl is one of the deadliest substances in circulation, being produced primarily in Mexico and parts of Asia and then smuggled into Europe and North America.

Recently a trend of switching from natural to synthetic drugs has been shown to impact the global drug market a lot. Although one gram of fentanyl costs around \$150-\$200 and one gram of heroin costs around \$60-\$100, fentanyl is the preferred option for many. This might seem odd at first since fentanyl is a lot

cheaper to produce, but once you understand that fentanyl is about 50 times as potent as heroin, it becomes quite apparent why this opioid drug has consistently been flooding the market. Fentanyl is primarily being used within the production process of other drugs like cocaine to mimic their effects in a cheaper way. However, this poses a very great risk for the consumer due to the high potency and the addition of fentanyl to a drug purchased usually not being mentioned.

Through constant alterations in the composition of fentanyl, criminal organisations manage to exploit the gaps within international law enforcement and avoid detection. This results in the law enforcement needing to rapidly adapt to keep up to date with the newest versions of fentanyl. These criminals are primarily large organised groups like drug cartels, which have proven themselves to be incredibly difficult to tear down due to their organised internal network. Many compare these organisations to a hydra since cutting off their head usually results in two new ones growing in place.

More than 76,226 individuals have died in 2022 due to opioid-related overdoses, undermining the severity of this crisis once again. Therefore, it is absolutely essential to act now and create harm reduction strategies which can be implemented as soon as possible to prevent further deaths and support those struggling with addiction at this exact moment. Putting an end to the overdose crisis and reducing the persisting stigma around the topic of drugs and addiction.

Definitions of key terms

Fentanyl

Fentanyl is an opioid drug, comparable to morphine or heroin utilized as a pharmaceutical pain killer. The production of fentanyl doesn't require any natural ingredients and are solely created in laboratories. Since most of these laboratories are illegal, they are contributing to the ongoing overdose crisis. Fentanyl is extremely cheap to produce in contrast to other drugs since even tiny amounts such as 2 milligrams are enough to be classified a lethal dose. An additional factor making this drug even more dangerous than it is is the fact that it can be found in many other illegal street drugs through intentional adulteration or cross-contamination in the laboratory. However, it is not only illegal drugs that have high potential of being contaminated, a lot of medications like Tylenol or Ritalin can include this if not bought from a licensed pharmacy.

Opioids

Opioids are a class of natural, semi-synthetic, and synthetic drugs. These not only include the well known illicit drugs such as fentanyl, heroin and morphine, but also prescriptive medication which is utilized in treating pain. When consuming opioids, they trigger the release of endorphins in the human brain leading to them becoming highly addictive over longer periods of time and imposing a high risk of overdosing once the body has developed a tolerance for the drug.

Synthetic Drugs

Synthetic drugs are often referred to as “designer” or “club” drugs. These are created in labs to imitate the impact of illicit drugs such as cannabis, cocaine, and ecstasy. Since they are usually created in illegal labs, there are absolutely no manufacturing standards to ensure safety. This means the customer has absolutely no knowledge of what substances are contained within their purchase. Therefore it is extremely difficult to determine the short term and long term effect of these narcotics. Synthetic Drugs are categorized into two Categories: synthetic cannabinoids and synthetic cathinones. Synthetic Cannabinoids (known as “spice” or K2) are artificial chemicals which are sprayed on plant material which are then smoked. Synthetic cathinones (known as “bath salts”) are stimulants which can be compared more to amphetamines or cocaine.

Overdose Epidemic

The overdose epidemic is a global health crisis caused by the plethoric consumption of legal (prescription based) and illegal drugs. These are predominantly opioids which result in a very increased number of casualties and medical emergencies. Primarily the synthetic opioids such as fentanyl are at fault for this. However, the crisis gets further fueled by changes within the drug supply, increases in the potency, and increasing rates of substance abuse. This additionally has a considerable impact within other aspects like the economy and society.

Drug Cartel

Drug Cartels are groups of illegal independent organizations which are working together to gain full control over the illegal drug market. This enables them to gain authority over the production and distribution whilst eliminating as much competition as possible to dominate the global market. Drug Cartels originated back in the 1970s due to the increasing cocaine demand within the USA and have been dominating the international trade of narcotics ever since.

PWID

People Who Injected Drugs

PWUD

People Who Use Drugs

General overview

Within recent years the international drug market changed drastically. Synthetic drugs have been on the rise and taking the position of natural drugs. This is due to the ease of manufacturing them as well as constantly being able to shift in the recipe to bypass international drug controls.

Natural drugs such as cocaine require up to hundreds of workers who invest harsh physical labour over the duration of many months into the production of coca shrubs. Additionally, there are strict requirements i.e. a moist climate and high altitude (usually found in the Andes mountain range in Bolivia, Colombia and Peru, a moist climate and high altitude) which are required to grow these plants whilst also keeping in mind to remain in remote areas to avoid anti-narcotic troops. Throughout the years this process has proven itself to be a tough, labour- and cost-intensive process which synthetic drugs can conveniently replace.

When comparing synthetic drugs to natural drugs, it is important to remember the process behind the production and why this strong tendency to synthetic drug production persists. However, the effects it has on the consumers are a lot grander. Fentanyl especially poses a very high risk to consumers since it is at least 50 times more potent than heroin. With only 2 milligrams being able to kill the average human adult, overdosing is far easier than with almost any other drug available to the average consumer. The great issue causing the fentanyl crisis is the fact that most consumers unknowingly consume fentanyl. New York City conducted a study between 2021 and 2022 in which 313 PWID were tested on using fentanyl. Over 80% of the participants tested positive, with only 18% of the individuals having intentionally used it.

The opioid drug fentanyl has entered the drug system by tainting the drug supplies. Since most drugs are sold illegally, there is never a definite list of exact ingredients utilised for the concoction, which means that the consumer never has the full certainty that fentanyl has not been added in. Heroin is a good example of this since in the US alone an estimated 40-50% of heroin samples included fentanyl (PMC 2024). Due to fentanyl being such a potent drug, the unknown consumption results in a high number of overdoses and deaths. Many prescription-based medications, such as Ritalin or Tylenol which are not purchased in a certified pharmacy have a high chance of including fentanyl as well. Consumers experiencing an overdose encounter symptoms such as decreases in breathing, loss of consciousness and might turn a blue or very pale skin colour. In this state there is a possibility of dying within just a few minutes.

The popularity of fentanyl is primarily located within the United States of America. In recent years Canada has also experienced a steep incline in fentanyl consumption. Within the year 2019, the USA had 47,337 deaths related to fentanyl, which was more than the entire rest of the world combined. That is around 14.43 deaths per 100,000 individuals experiencing an opioid addiction. The chemicals utilised to

produce fentanyl are imported from China to Mexico, where the drug then gets created in laboratories. After this the illicit drug is smuggled across the southwestern border of the United States of America, where it then spreads into the different states or continues its journey up to Canada.

Looking at the age groups which are most affected by the fentanyl crisis, it becomes apparent that the younger generations of people are below the age of 45. For the ages 15-24 alone there were 15.1 deaths per 100,000 individuals experiencing an opioid addiction. These are absolutely terrifying numbers considering that most of these individuals didn't survive long enough for their prefrontal cortex to develop. An important aspect to consider is that most of these individuals were most likely not aware of them taking fentanyl due to the fact that it was mixed into a different drug like cocaine or heroin. This proves how vital it is to make a change and put a stop to the ongoing crisis.

Major parties involved

Consumers

Without a doubt, the consumers suffer the most from the fentanyl crisis! Especially the younger generations, with people ages 18-29, seem to be affected by this due to a lack of awareness, whilst the older generations of people ages 45 and up thought fentanyl poses a very high danger. According to a study Statista conducted in 2023, around 76% of all those above 45-year-olds believed that it was a very dangerous drug, whilst only 30% of the 18-29-year-olds agreed with them. This just undermines the importance of teaching young individuals about the dangers drugs pose by reducing the stigma around them. Therefore, it is absolutely essential to offer harm reduction strategies which will prevent these mortalities as well as support the currently addicted. But for this to succeed, these harm reduction strategies must first be developed.

Illicit Drug Trafficking Organisations

When looking at the party benefiting most financially from the fentanyl crisis, it is very obvious that the retailers illegally producing and selling these drugs are the ones earning the big money, by pulling the strings. These are primarily drug cartels, street distributors and chemical suppliers. Their main goal is to earn more money which means that the priority is to produce cheaply and sell a lot. Consumer safety or following the law are the least of their priorities. Confronting these organisations consistently proves to be very difficult since they are extremely violent and have a well organised system in which the people operating in the background rarely ever get caught. Despite the US and Mexico achieving over 50 high-profile arrests in 2025 alone, new leaders are quickly found since drug cartels are very adaptive, making these arrests not have the desired long-term impact.

United States of America and Canada

Governments all over the world are currently taking action on preventing illicit drug usage. Especially Canada and the US are struggling with the opioid crisis due to opioids like fentanyl gaining popularity within the production of the drugs. Both are taking measures against this by focusing on the prevention, treatment, and harm reduction. Canada has additionally created the “Youth Substance Use Prevention Program” based on the Icelandic Model, which engaged over 198,200 teens and adults. Border control and law enforcement are also working on preventing the illicit drug trade, with the US confiscating around 742 pounds of fentanyl at the borders in June, which is 3% more than in the month of May.

Non-Governmental Organisations

Many NGOs have been keeping their focus on advocating for reducing the stigma around fentanyl and offering support to those struggling with an addiction. A few years ago a group of mothers who had all lost their kids through unintentional fentanyl poisoning came together to create the Guardians Against Fentanyl organisation with which they regularly spread advocacy on the crisis and have goals to provide life-saving addiction treatments for those struggling. Their main goal: “Sparing another mother from this unbearable pain” (Martinez 2025), and they are not alone with their goal in supporting young teenagers in the fight against fentanyl. Other NGOs like the Voices for Awareness are taking part in fighting at the frontlines of this crisis, as many of them lost family, have been addicted, or fight for what they believe deserves more recognition and importance. They fund their goals through fundraisers with which they support the treatments of those struggling with addiction and have saved many through their informative campaigns and active support.

Timeline of Key Events

Year	Event
1990-2000	Wave 1, OxyContin and similar drugs were prescribed by doctors way too often, paving the way for the synthetic opioid demand.
2010	Wave 2, New restrictions on prescription drugs were implemented which indirectly helped heroin gain popularity.
2013-2014	Fentanyl begins appearing on the market, illegally produced fentanyl begins surfacing within the heroin supplies of the United States of America.
2013-2019	Wave 3, Fentanyl overtakes heroin as the leading cause of opioid related deaths and begins to be mixed with heroin.

2019-Present	Wave 4, Crisis shifts from regular opioid consumers to greater groups such as the occasional or casual drug consumers which unknowingly ingest fentanyl.
2021	Record High Mortality, More than 70,600 overdose deaths related to fentanyl.
2022	Highest Mortality Rate, Around 76,226 deaths caused by synthetic opioids within the United States of America broke the records and ended up being the highest ever recorded.
2023-2024	Small Decrease, harm reduction measures and awareness campaigns received large credit for contributing to the first decline in death rates.

Previous attempts to solve the issue

In order for the United States of America to fight against this crisis, they have asked for China to issue a ban on all fentanyl-class substances. This was back in 2019 and targeted precursor shipments to prevent the chemicals and substances essential to produce fentanyl. This was back in 2019, and it targeted precursor shipments to prevent the chemicals and substances essential to producing fentanyl. Additionally, they showed great efforts in capturing cartel leaders, i.e. El Chapo or Ovidio Guzmán, to weaken the cartel network. The latter unfortunately didn't prove itself as effective over the long run since every individual within a cartel is replaceable. However, this means the drug cartel is temporarily handicapped and might lead to mistakes during the switchover period, which can prove to be practical when trying to arrest more accomplices.

The aspect of prescribing opioid drugs has now also become important in combating the opioid crisis. The State Prescription Drug Monitoring Programs (PDMPs) within the United States of America are now tracking exactly which amounts of opioids have been prescribed to which patients. This makes it nearly impossible to receive prescription-based opioids from respectable pharmacies without being marked within the data-base of the prescription control programmes. This completely stops the possibility of receiving opioid drugs in a semi-legal way. However, this means that more people will result in purchasing their opioid drugs on the black market. This will have a large impact on the supply and demand chain within the opioid market and will result in higher risks due to the lacking safety parameters during production as well as not stopping those currently facing addiction.

Many measures within the United States of America regarding reducing the harm of fentanyl and other opioid drugs have been implemented within the framework of safety. To ensure safe consumption, multiple places, such as the pilots in NYC and Rhode Island, have created supervised sites in which the doses of consumption get supervised to prevent overdoses. In case any individuals encounter a person experiencing an overdose, they additionally now have access to Naloxone. This is an overdose reversal drug which has been made available for first responders, many communities, and occasionally over the counter. Additionally, fentanyl test strips are becoming more popular since they are cheap and allow consumers to test their drugs for fentanyl contamination. This is very practical and important for PWUD but doesn't seem to display enough effect on the high-risk population.

To ensure a safe recovery after an overdose or an ongoing addiction, many community outreach programmes have increased their effort within peer support, housing, and mental-health integration to ensure a stable environment for a successful recovery. Additionally, medication-assisted treatment (MAT) has expanded on their use of buprenorphine and methadone within the process of treating opioid addictions. Both medications are very practical in reducing cravings and withdrawal symptoms, making them ideal in treating addictions and making withdrawal bearable for the patient. Unfortunately, many treatments remain inaccessible due to the cost, stigma, or geographical location.

Possible solutions

To combat the fentanyl crisis, it is important to focus on four main aspects: weakening the supply networks, implementing regulatory measures, reducing the stigma, and supporting recovery.

When wanting to fight the fentanyl crisis, it is very important for governments to collaborate and directly target the drug cartels. They are the reason fentanyl is becoming such a substantial part of the drug market and constantly contribute to new opioids being produced or smuggled over the border. By weakening the cartels through capturing important figures or increasing law enforcement, it becomes easier to slowly take apart these cartels to at least temporarily weaken them. This increases the difficulty for them to continue drug production and distribution. Although this won't be a permanent solution, it is very important to apply constant pressure to these cartels to reduce the amount of power they have over the drug market and limit their influence.

Implementing regulatory measures for opioid prescriptions covers a small yet important aspect of the fentanyl crisis. The PDMPs are already tracking opioid prescriptions within the United States of America, which has proven itself to be very effective. An additional regulatory measure the United States of America implemented was added fentanyl analogues to the schedule to prevent loopholes which drug cartels can utilise for formula tweaking when trying to escape the law. Although this hasn't been one of the biggest aspects when combating the street fentanyl, it creates further boundaries which are essential to create a foundation on which new harm-reduction strategies can be implemented.

The lack of education on illicit drugs is still one of the greatest factors contributing to individuals unknowingly overdosing. Many consumers of drugs aren't aware of the high chance of fentanyl being included within their drugs and are therefore at high risk for overdosing. Therefore, it is vital to educate and reduce the stigma to spread awareness and prevent unknowing consumption. Especially teenagers lack education on this topic, meaning that school facilities should be the main target of organised campaigns on educating on opioid drugs.

Ensuring an effective recovery for PWUD is vital to ensure the safety of those who suffer from addiction or have experienced overdoses. Since many treatments are too expensive to finance for many, it is extremely important to support them. Many NGOs have taken on this task however, they can't financially support each and every one. Therefore, it is necessary to build a framework which supports the vulnerable financially. This could be anything ranging from microloans to fully funded programmes.

Further reading

[https://voicesforawareness.com./](https://voicesforawareness.com/)

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