

ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES (OAS)  
INTER-AMERICAN DRUG ABUSE CONTROL COMMISSION (CICAD)

# Fentanyl in the Americas: A Current Problem



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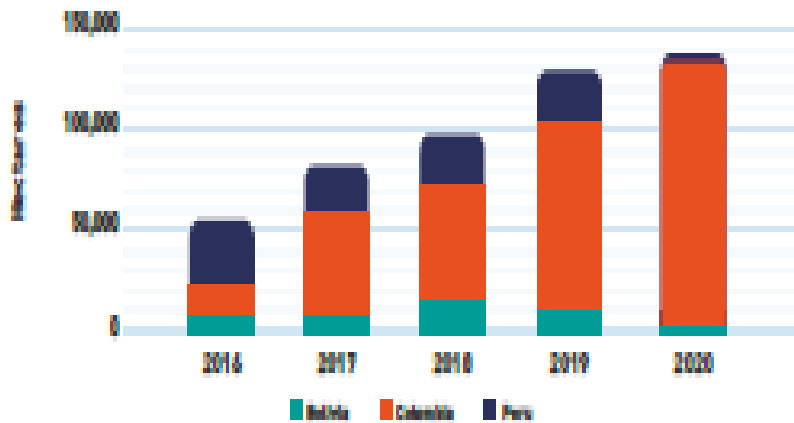


Inter-American Observatory on Drugs (OID)

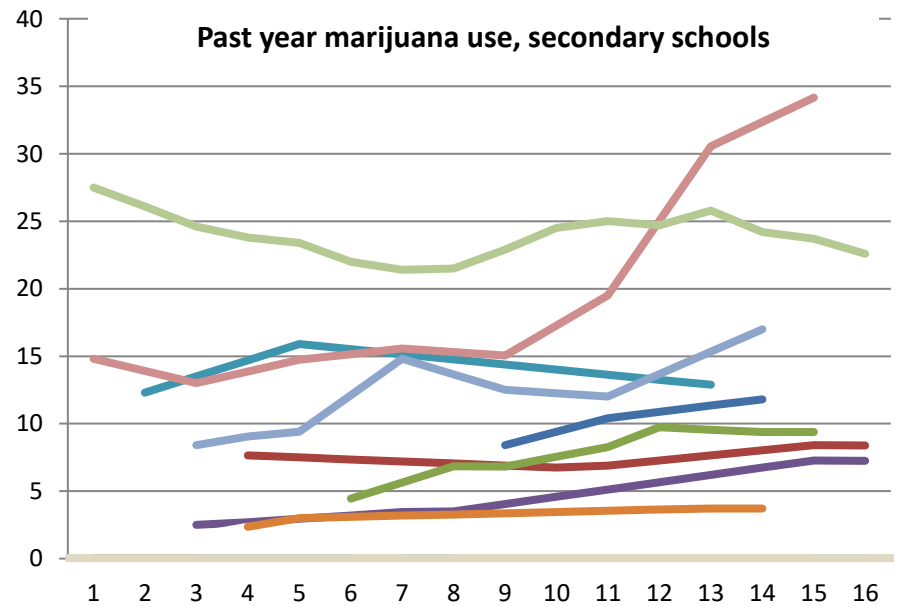
# The Inter-American Observatory on Drugs



Graph 12. Eradication of coca in Bolivia, Colombia, and Peru, by country and year



Note: Not shown in this graph, Guatemala reported the eradication of nearly all hectares in both 2018 and 2019.

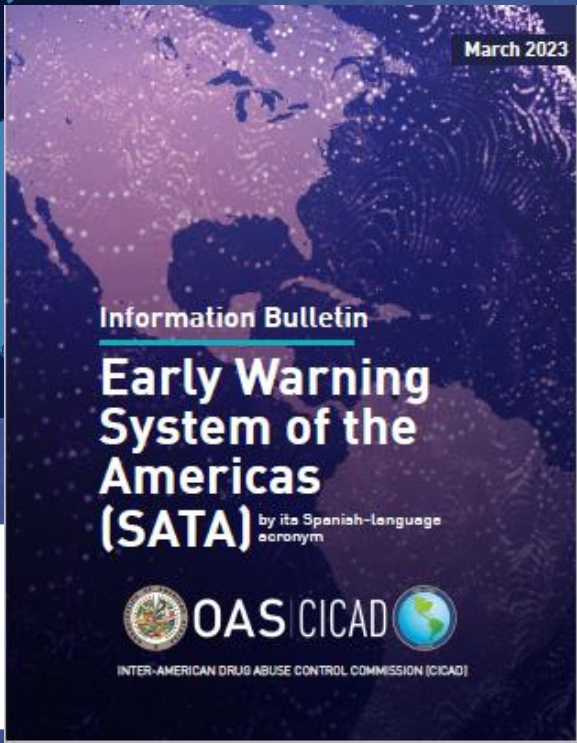
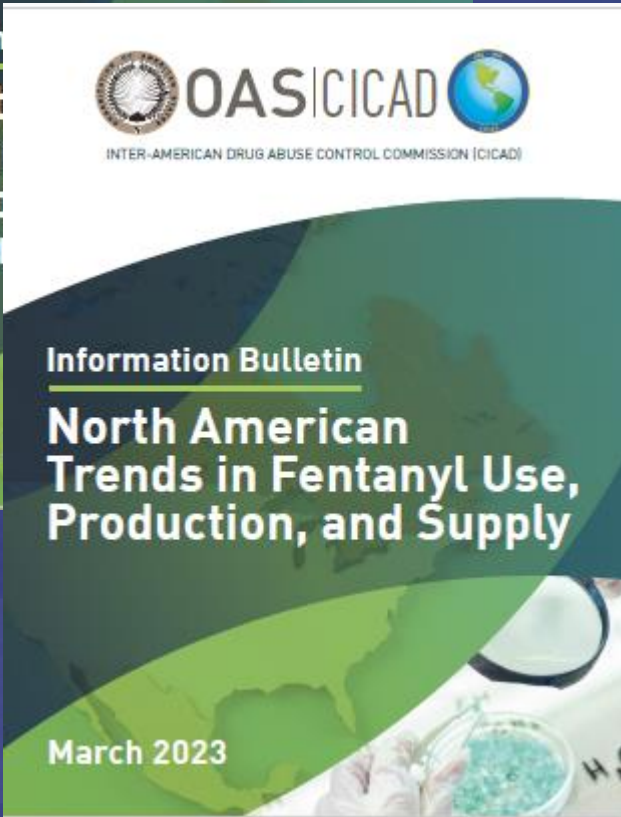


# Data sources for this presentation

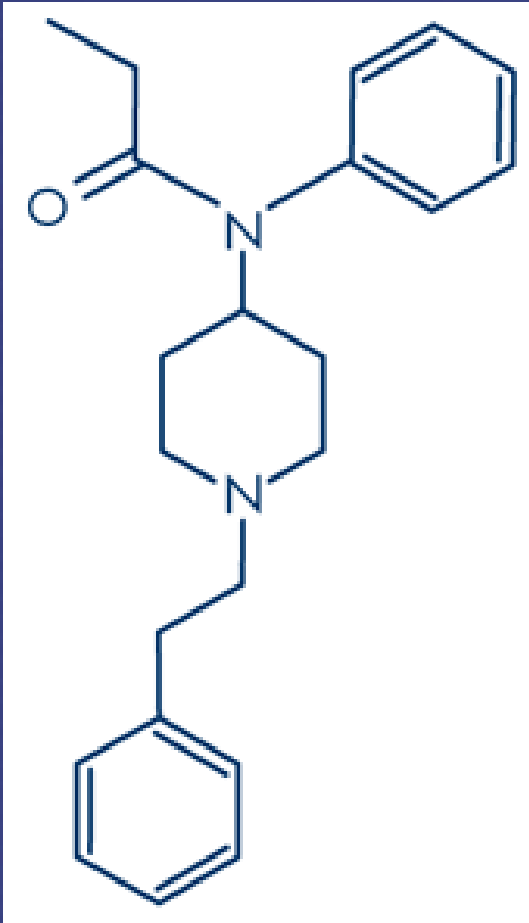


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# What is fentanyl?



- Potent synthetic opioid
  - Estimated to be 50-100x more powerful than morphine
  - Considered a legitimate pain medication; however, diversion and misuse are long running concerns



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# Why is fentanyl a problem?

- Due to its high potency, fentanyl is frequently used as an additive to strengthen other substances cheaply
  - Opioids and non-opioid drugs
  - Cocaine, methamphetamine, & MDMA, among others
  - Ignorance of the substances increases the risk of overdose or other toxic effects for the user
  - Unintentional fentanyl use presents public health challenges



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# Challenges to measuring fentanyl use

- Frequently consumed unintentionally or unknowingly and in combination with other substances
  - Challenges for self-report survey
    - Result: Canada, Mexico, and USA do not have measures of national use.
  - Proxy measures are required: law enforcement drug seizures, small sample survey data, urine screenings, wastewater surveys, drug checking data, emergency department visits, and fatal overdoses.
  - Proxy metrics have limitations *but are useful in combination*



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# Challenges to measuring fentanyl use

- Law enforcement data
  - Indirect information on the supply available in the illicit market.
  - Unclear what percent of the total fentanyl supply seizures represent.
  - Major increases (or decreases) could suggest changes in supply.
  - Unlikely for supply to increase and be sustained if there is not a demand to meet it.



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# Fentanyl Supply and Production

- Fentanyl and analogues increasing in Canada and United States
- In Canada – law enforcement data shows around 70% of opioids seized had fentanyl or analogues present.
- Chemical precursors for fentanyl increasing in Canada and United States



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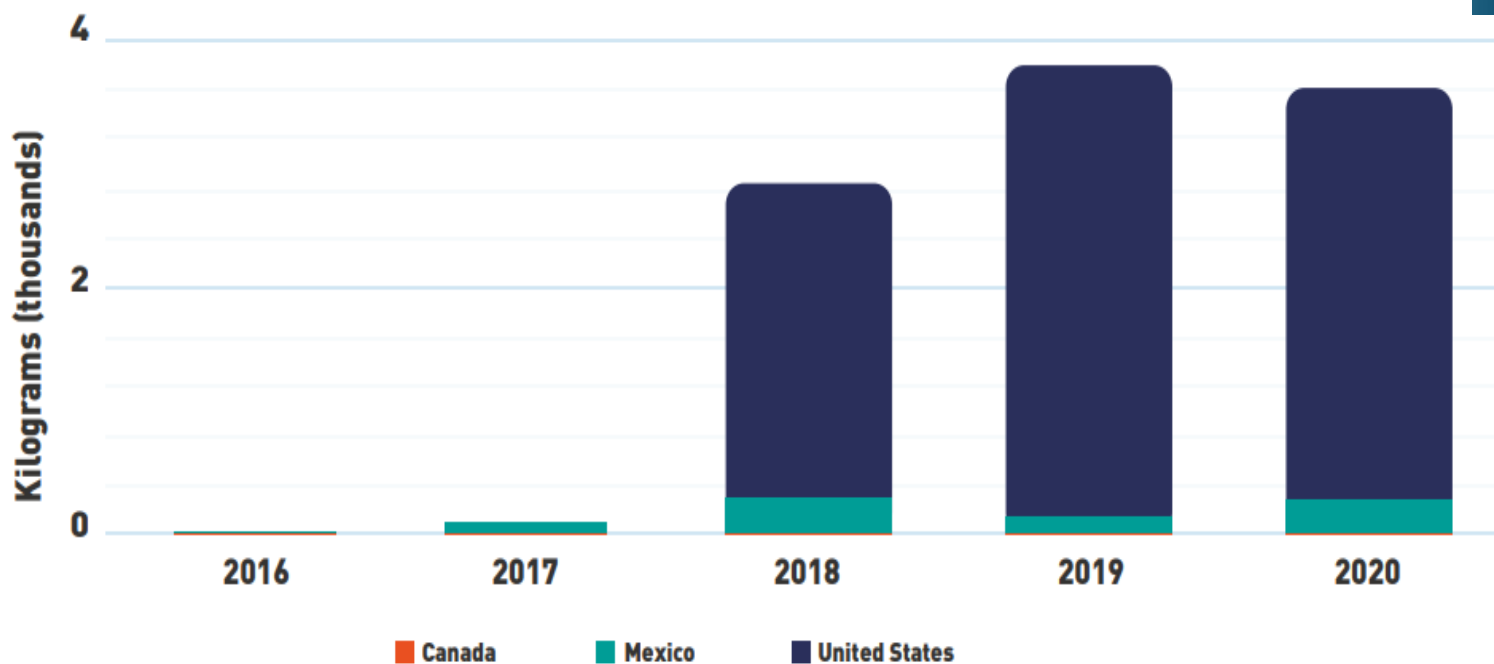




# Fentanyl seizures rising in North America



**Graph 19.** Fentanyl seizures in North America, by country and year



**Note:** Mexico reported seizures of 13 kg in 2016. Canada reported seizures of 17 kg in 2017 and 2020.



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# Challenges to measuring fentanyl use

- Drug Demand Data

- No national-level surveys exist in the Americas that provide reliable measures of fentanyl use.
  - Most do not ask about fentanyl
- Unintentional use, unknowing use, or drug combinations make self report studies difficult.
- Intentional use data is more reliable (when available).



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# Challenges to measuring fentanyl use

- Some (more) reliable fentanyl demand metrics
  - Wastewater studies.
  - Urine screenings
  - Drug checking data
- Limitations
  - Wastewater studies and urine screenings do not represent the general population or national populations.
  - Drugs submitted for checking may not be representative of overall supply.



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# Some possible solutions to improve measures

- Targeted studies
  - Hospital emergency rooms
  - Toxicology
  - Overdoses
  - Forensic medicine
- *Applied through epidemiological windows*



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# Fentanyl in North America



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# Fentanyl in Canada

- The opioid epidemic has been an ongoing and growing issue in Canada over the last two decades
- Increasing rates of use hospitalizations, and overdose deaths
- Initially driven by prescription opioid misuse,
- In the last 10 years, epidemic has shifted more to the intentional and unintentional use of fentanyl
  - More coming from illicit sources
  - Other opioids, such as heroin, have not played a significant role in the epidemic.
- fentanyl is involved in the vast majority of Canadian opioid-related overdose fatalities and a sizeable portion of opioid- and stimulant-related hospitalizations



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# Fentanyl in Canada: Demand

- No direct measures
  - majority of use is unintentional
- Data from limited local surveys, wastewater studies, drug checking studies, & law enforcement.
- Local studies indicate ranges of unintentional use /exposure between 14% and 90%
- City-level wastewater indicators increase (vary by region)
- 2021, fentanyl was present in 86% of opioid-related overdose deaths



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# Fentanyl in Canada: Policy response

- Focus on the opioid epidemic as a public health crisis
- Harm reduction
- Safer drug supply
- Good Samaritan Overdose Act
- Naloxone access w/o prescription
- Supervised consumption sites
- Substance Use and Addictions Program, Health Canada.
- BC decriminalizing small amounts of opioids, cocaine meth, and MDMA



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# Fentanyl in Mexico

- Low rates of use
- History of opioid traffic (mostly heroin)
- Recent indicators of fentanyl production increase



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# Fentanyl in Mexico: Demand

- No historical rates of opioid use.
- Existing measures of use are mostly proxies
- Fentanyl consumption low, and mostly unintentional
- Limited indicators suggest increases
  - study in Mexicali, Mexico (June 2019 to May 2021)



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## Limited indicators suggest increases



14% of the increase in overdoses attributed to fentanyl;

- Study in Mexicali, Mexico (Goodman-Meza, D et al. (2022))
- 30% increase in reported overdoses (period pre to post COVID-19 pandemic).
- Local study, not representative of the entire country.



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# Fentanyl in Mexico: Supply

- Fentanyl has been present in Mexico for roughly the last decade, mainly in the Sinaloa region in the northwest.
- Fentanyl production has increased
- Mexico seized 961 kilograms of fentanyl between 2016-2020. (OAS-CICAD, 2022)
  - July 2022, the Mexican military seized a record 542 kg of fentanyl in Sinaloa state
- Most fentanyl produced in Mexico is trafficked north
- Fentanyl gets pressed into pills or mixed with other drugs before being trafficked north across the border with the United States.



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# Fentanyl in Mexico: Policy Response

- Focused on law enforcement measures
- Bilateral approaches between Mexico and USA
  - Merida Initiative
  - Focus on detecting synthetics by laboratories,
  - Strengthening national systems for drug testing
  - Increasing cross-border interdiction capacity



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# Fentanyl in the USA

- The opioid epidemic roots in 1990s
- The epidemic can be characterized by three waves
  - Rise in prescription opioid misuse and overdoses in the 1990s,
  - Rise in heroin use and overdoses beginning in 2010
  - Rise in fentanyl use and overdoses began in 2014.
- Prescription opioid and heroin use continue; however, fentanyl is now a major driver of the opioid epidemic.



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# Fentanyl in the USA: Demand

- No direct measures of use at the national level
- Data are available from :
  - Urine screenings
  - Hospital emergency department visits, and
  - Fatal overdoses
  - Law enforcement drug seizures



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# Fentanyl and opioid related deaths

## Opioid related deaths in the USA

- 333 % increase in urine samples testing positive for fentanyl (1.1% to 4.7% tested) between 2013-2019. (Twillman, R. et al 2020)
- 122,884 fentanyl-related Emergency Department visits in 2021 (Drug Abuse Warning Network - DAWN),

Year	Fentanyl Deaths	Total Opioid Deaths*	Percent Involving Fentanyl
2014	5,544	28,647	19.4%
2015	9,580	33,091	29.0%
2016	19,413	42,249	45.9%
2017	28,466	47,600	59.8%
2018	31,335	46,802	67.0%
2019	36,359	49,860	72.9%
2020	56,516	68,630	82.3%
2021**	70,404	80,200	87.8%

OAS-CICAD 2023

\*fentanyl and opioid deaths are not yet available for 2021 and 2022, (CDC, May 2023)



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# Fentanyl in the USA: Supply

- Fentanyl seizures have been increasing rapidly since 2014
- Prior to 2019, main source was China
- Since 2019, the Sinaloa Cartel and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel have become the dominant fentanyl sources, along with other Mexican transnational organized crime syndicates (TOCs).
- TOCs produce fentanyl themselves, using precursor chemicals obtained from a variety of sources—including Chinese TOCs and legitimate companies



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# Fentanyl in the USA: Policy Responses

- Increasing support for harm reduction at the state level
  - E.g. expanded access to naloxone
  - Federal approval for fentanyl testing strips
- Increases in funding for opioid prevention, treatment, and recovery support services
- Federal level expansion of treatment access and especially medication for opioid use disorder treatment
  - E.g., easing requirements for health care providers to prescribe buprenorphine and take-home methadone to be issued during the COVID-19 pandemic



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# Latin America

## Fentanyl, analogues and other opioids

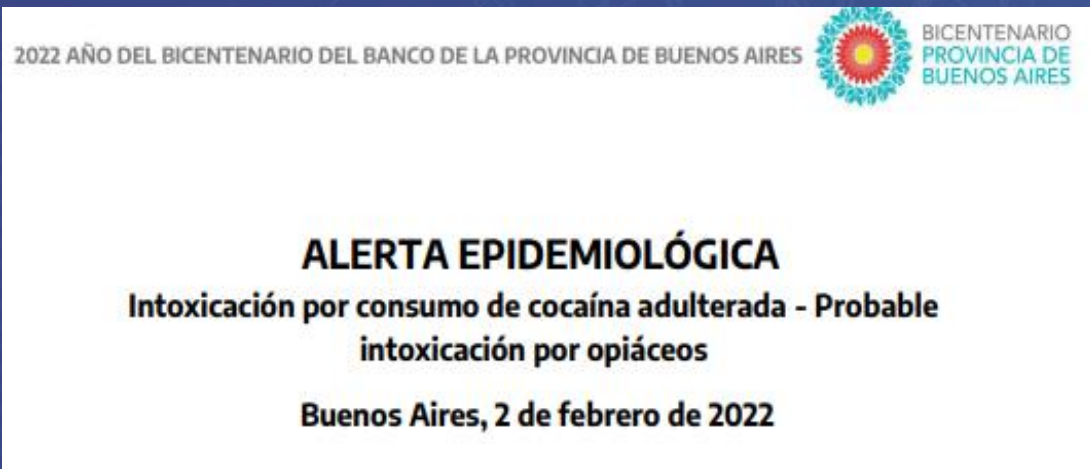


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# Argentina

- Buenos Aires, Argentina, February 2022
- Cocaine adulterated with a fentanyl-type opioid
- Caused 24 overdose deaths



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# Chile

- Chile, National Advisory Board on Novel Substances
- “Three of the NPS evaluated (butyrfentanyl, carfentanil and U-47700) correspond to opioids, a classification that has been proposed as the most harmful among all known drugs.” (December 2017)
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# Colombia

**Tabla 1. Intoxication and deaths, by exposure, SIVIGILA 2016-2019**

Tipo de sustancias*	Intoxicaciones				Muertes Atribuibles			
	2016	2017	2018	2019*	2016	2017	2018	2019*
<b>Sustancias psicoactivas opioides (incluye heroína y medicamentos opioides)</b>	88	101	95	32	2	3	1	0
<b>Medicamentos opioides</b>	384	512	348	120	2	2	2	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>472</b>	<b>613</b>	<b>443</b>	<b>152</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>

Nota: \*Reporte hasta 24-abril-2019.

Fuente, SUICAD, Colombia, 2018

**Tabla 2. Number of requests for treatment due to opioids**

Tipo de sustancia	Número de solicitudes de tratamiento motivadas por el consumo de la sustancia 2012-abril 2018	
Medicamentos opioides	Morfina	23
	Codeína	22
	Tramadol	19
	Metadona	18
	Oxicodona	10
	Hidrocodona	7
Opioides ilegales	Heroína	2316

# Uruguay

- The Forensic Technical Institute (ITF) of Uruguay
- Detected Fentanyl in the chemical composition of 575 LSD stamps seized by the police,
- Uruguayan Drug Early Warning System (SATDrogas)

Adulterated LSD stamps



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# Why this is important?

## Deaths in the United States: fentanyl-laced stimulant deaths

Year	Total Stimulant Deaths	Stimulant Deaths with Fentanyl Present	Percent Involving Fentanyl
2014	9,395	869	9.2%
2015	12,122	1,969	16.2%
2016	17,258	5,029	29.1%
2017	23,139	9,262	40.0%
2018	25,877	11,516	44.5%
2019	30,231	14,627	48.4%
2020	40,643	23,782	58.5%
2021	70,404	80,200	87.8%

Source: OAS-CICAD, Information from the Early Warning System of the Americas 2023



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# A Supply Driven Dynamic

- Unknowing or unintentional use indicates that demand is not driving use
- Fentanyl is inserted into drugs at the point of origin or retail
- *Interventions that reduce the likelihood of harms to users have shown to be effective in reducing overdose risk*
  - Pill testing, naloxone access, safe injection, public information

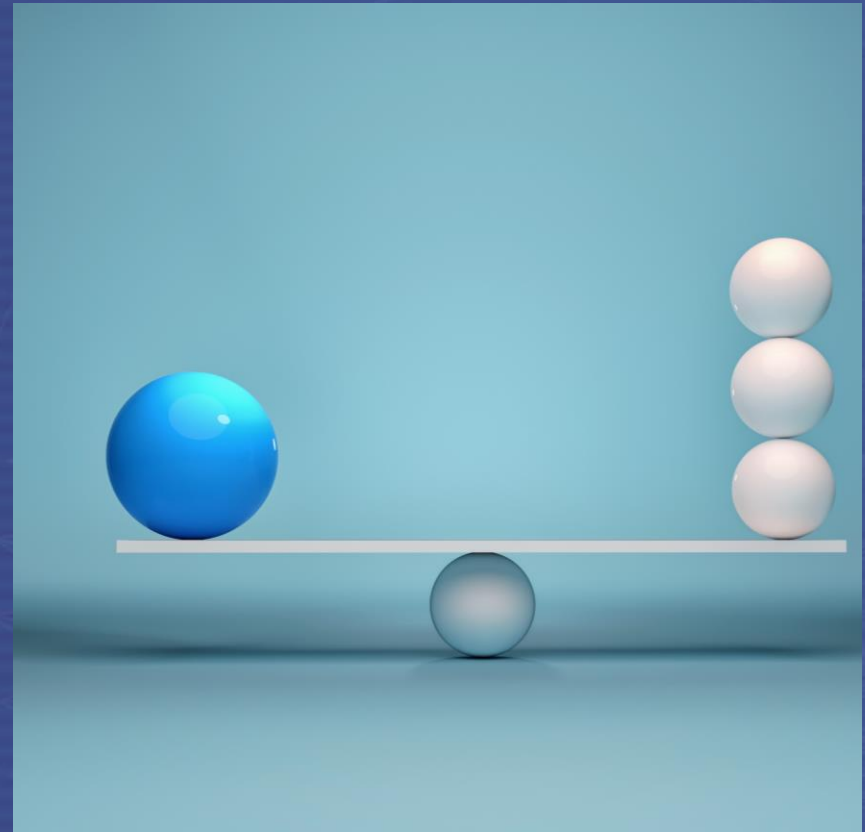


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# A Complex Balance

- Access to pain relief is a human right.
- Access to opioid medications for legitimate health concerns, especially pain mitigation are a major issue in Latin America and the Caribbean.
- International law
  - UDHR, ICESCR, CSPR, CAT, Inter-American Convention on Human Rights of Older Persons
- Political declarations
  - UNGASS 2016, Montevideo 2017, WHA67/19, Astana Declaration 2018
  - CICAD Hemispheric Plan of Action 2016-2020



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# Summary

- The overall picture indicates increases in the production and flow of illicit fentanyl and its precursors
- Unknowing and unintentional pose unique challenges for monitoring and surveillance, interventions, and pose additional risks for users
- Fentanyl-laced substances appearing in Latin America
  - Presence with the potential to spread
- Need to strengthen national laboratories and EWS
  - We cannot respond to a problem that we cannot detect
- Supply side dynamics
- Policies to prevent a fentanyl crisis in LAC countries should balance medical needs with the prevention of misuse



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# Marya Hynes

- Chief of the Inter-American Observatory on Drugs
  - [mhynes@oas.org](mailto:mhynes@oas.org)
  - [CICAD.OAS.ORG](http://CICAD.OAS.ORG)
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