

## Efforts in Washington and Mexico are apparently deflating the opioid epidemic

After a record production of opium poppies in Mexico and overdose deaths in the US the problem has stopped growing

° *Less amount of heroin is reaching the US market: Mexican authorities eradicated 29,207 hectares of poppy crops in 2017, and 17,288 hectares in the first half of 2018*

° *US President Trump signed in October 2018 the Opioid Crisis Response Act; a National Drug Control Strategy was published in January 2019*

° *Mexico is the main transit route into the US for fentanyl originating from China; Mexican anti-narcotics operations try to exert more control over this trade*

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The severe opioid crisis experienced by the United States in recent years, with a record number of deaths by drug overdoses in 2017, apparently began to remit in 2018, according to the first available data. Both the efforts of the United States to confront the epidemic and of Mexico in eradicating opium poppy crops seem to be bearing fruit.

The dramatic increase in opium cultivation and heroin production in Mexico in the last years triggered drug consumption in the US. Besides, Mexico is the main route into the US for fentanyl, an opioid narcotic which is behind the US opioid epidemic as well.

After four years of sharp increase, [the number of deaths in the United States](#) due to opioid overdose rose in 2017 to 47,600, twice as many as in 2010. The main part of those deaths was due to the consumption of prescription opioids (17,029), followed by overdose deaths involving heroin (15,482). In both cases, the increase was mainly due to the use of synthetic narcotics, basically fentanyl, as prescription drug or mixed with heroin.

The first data referring to 2018 provided by the US health authorities [seem to reflect a stabilization](#) in the number of deaths due to opioid overdoses, which would at least indicate

that the problem has stopped growing. Along with the efforts of the US administration to put in place a stricter regulation for the prescription of certain medicines, especially affecting synthetic opiates, there is a greater eradication of illicit crops in Mexico, with special emphasis on the cultivation of opioid poppies.

In 2017 the Mexican authorities proceeded to eradicate 29,207 hectares of this crop, thus limiting the heroin that in 2018 could reach the US domestic market. In 2018 eradication accelerated: in the first half of the year, the crop of 17,288 hectares was eliminated. This is a progress highlighted by the latest [International Narcotics Control Strategy Report](#) (INCSR), published in March 2019 by the US Department of State.

### Heroin production

Illicit heroin and fentanyl have been infecting US neighborhoods for years. Initially, the source for almost all heroin found in the US was from Southern Asia. Over the past few decades, however, the trade for heroin has changed drastically. Most of the heroin found in US communities comes from South America, and namely Mexico. This has been fueled by a number of factors, including increased production and trafficking by criminal

organizations. These current tendencies in drug trafficking lead to opioid abuse, and represent a considerable shift in outcomes. This has obliged the governments in both countries to instill and coordinate new law enforcement responses.

The United States is home to the largest heroin market in the Americas. Created from the milky sap scraped from the seedpod of an opium poppy, heroin can be transformed into multiple forms. These include powder, viscous tar, pills, a rock-like black substance and more. In addition to this, the substance has different degrees of purity, with white powder heroin being the purest and black tar-like heroin being the most impure. Heroin can also be administered through a number of means, but most commonly is smoked, injected or snorted.

According to the [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime](#) (UNODC), most of the heroin trafficked into the US comes from Mexico. Along with this, Mexican poppy cultivation and heroin production have been on the rise, especially over the past decade, contributing to the ever-increasing threat to the United States. In fact, 2017 was the year Mexican poppy cultivation and heroin production reached a record high, as the [Office of National Drug Control Policy](#) of the White House reaffirmed in August 2018: poppy cultivation in Mexico rose 38 percent, from 32,000 hectares in 2016 to 44,100 hectares in 2017; it went from 685 tons to 944 tons of potential opium production, and from 81 tons to 111 tons of potential pure heroin elaboration, almost five times 2012 levels.

Evaluations carried out by the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) in its October 2018 report [National Drug Threat Assessment](#) (NDTA) stated that Mexico accounts for 91 percent (by weight) of heroin found in the US. A similar figure is given by the [World Drug Report](#) (WDR) published by the UNODC in June 2018:

“Analysis of heroin samples in the United States over the past decade shows the increasing predominance of Mexico (90 percent of samples analysed in 2015) as a source country of the drug.” According to the INCSR, the Department of State report already mentioned, Mexico is especially focused on producing heroin, marijuana, and methamphetamine that is destined for the US; it is also a main transit route—originating from China—for other important trigger of the opioid crisis in the US: fentanyl.

### Fentanyl

Fentanyl’s availability is widespread and surging. While there are licit forms of the opioid, such as painkillers and anaesthetics, illicit production and trafficking of it are on the rise. The new trend is rooted toward mixing synthetic opiate fentanyl in Mexico’s tarry black heroin, without the consumer’s knowledge. Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that is approximately 50 times more potent than heroin and 100 times stronger than morphine. The opioid is much cheaper when it comes to production, mainly because rather than being grown on a farm it is manufactured in a laboratory. The decreased cost for the traffickers and increased high for users signifies that drug producers have begun to cut their heroin with fentanyl.

The DEA warns that Mexican cartels present an intense threat to US neighborhoods mainly given their dominance in heroin and fentanyl exports). It also noted that a majority of the samples that were seized and analyzed involved fentanyl in its powder form. The concern arising from this is that fentanyl could be pressed into counterfeit pills, mainly because most drug heroin. This means that the creation of such counterfeit pills could ultimately affect a larger population of individuals.

Mexico Poppy/Heroin	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Hectares under cultivation	12,000	10,500	11,000	17,000	28,000	32,000	44,100
Tons of potencial opium production	250	220	225	360	600	685	944
Tons of potencial pure heroin	30	26	26	42	70	81	111

Source US Department of State

The increase in heroin related deaths has been primarily linked to heroin being combined with fentanyl. The counterfeit pills could increase deaths due to fentanyl and white powder heroin looking alike. Consequently, users are unaware that the heroin they have purchased contains fentanyl, thus removing the user's ability to know the potency of the drug and preventing them from correctly dosing in respect to their tolerance level.

### **Solving the problem**

The opioid epidemic suffered by the US in the last years was confronted in 2018 by the Trump administration with some special measures. In October 2018 President Trump signed the Opioid Crisis Response Act, which gave more powers to the US health authorities to monitor the situation and extended the controls on patient access to some specific drugs. In January 2019 a [National Drug Control Strategy](#) was published by the White House in order to take extra steps to

protecting the public through effective drug abuse prevention, addiction treatment and use of law enforcement actions.

Apart from these new tools, the US relies on a long-standing relationship with Mexico regarding anti-narcotic matters. Both countries set up in 2008 the Merida Initiative, which allows the US to assist the Mexican authorities in different fields. It includes several measures in order to improve law enforcement operations: training and equipment to dismantle covert drug labs, cutting-edge airport security training, advanced inspection tools equipped along border crossings and checkpoints, and so forth in order to improve law enforcement operations, among others. Results have already been seen, as Mexican units trained by US officials have seized more than 300 illicit laboratories since 2015. In addition to this, canines donated by the initiative have helped detect a significant amount of illicit drugs attempting to pass the border. ●