



U.S. Department of Justice
Drug Enforcement Administration



The Illegal Drug Threat in Illinois

DEA Intelligence Report

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Executive Summary

The most significant drug-related threat to Illinois is posed by Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTOs), particularly the Cartel de Sinaloa (CDS) and the Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG). Mexican DTOs dominate the wholesale supply of illicit opioids (fentanyl and heroin), cocaine, methamphetamine, and Mexico-grown marijuana in the state. The opioid threat remains dire and is of grave concern, particularly regarding the proliferation of fake oxycodone pills (see Figure 2). Reporting from the Drug Enforcement Administration’s (DEA) Chicago Division (CD), along with reporting from forensic laboratories and public health officials, confirms that fentanyl has almost completely replaced heroin in the illicit opioid marketplace throughout Illinois. The availability and use of both cocaine and methamphetamine are increasing, with seizures increasing and prices decreasing for both. The production of fake Adderall pills that contain methamphetamine adds to the overall fake pill threat. The diversion of legitimate controlled substances remains a serious threat, as does the distribution and use of marijuana in the wake of the drug’s legalization at the state level. Large volumes of illicit proceeds are laundered throughout the state, with Chicago serving as the primary collection point for U.S. currency generated through illegal drug sales. While the movement of bulk currency from Illinois to the U.S. Southwest Border (SWB) remains the primary method of returning drug proceeds to Mexico, DTOs increasingly are using money or value transfer applications and cryptocurrencies in the open internet and dark web to launder their illicit proceeds.

Figure 1: Chicago Division



Source: DEA

DEA Presence in Illinois

Illinois ranks 25th among the 50 states in area, covering approximately 57,914 square miles, and 12th in the nation in population, with more than 12.5 million residents. In terms of population, the Chicago area dominates the state, with four out of five largest Illinois cities being located within 50 miles of Chicago. The Chicago Division’s (CD) area of responsibility covers not only Illinois and its Federal Judicial Districts, but also the states of Indiana and Wisconsin. DEA offices in Illinois include the Division Office in Chicago, Resident Offices in Rockford and Springfield, a High-Intensity Drug Trafficking Area and the multi-agency Strike Force – the latter two based in Chicago – where CD enforcement and intelligence personnel are assigned.

Details

The most significant drug-related threat to Illinois is posed by Mexican DTOs, particularly the CDS and the CJNG. Mexican DTOs dominate the wholesale supply of illicit opioids, methamphetamine, cocaine, and Mexico-grown marijuana in the state. The vast majority of these drugs are smuggled across the U.S.–Mexico border and transshipped via a wide variety of transportation methods. The state’s extensive highway, rail, and air transportation systems, and mail and parcel delivery services, make it an ideal transportation hub to move drugs from the SWB to Chicago and throughout the Midwest, as well as to organize the subsequent consolidation of drug proceeds and movement of this currency in bulk form to the SWB. The most common transportation method remains by vehicle, typically tractor-trailer trucks or personal cars, minivans, or trucks.

Chicago is home to one of the nation’s largest trucking centers, with numerous trucking depots located throughout the metropolitan area. There is also easy access to numerous U.S. Interstates (Interstates (I) 55, 57, 80, 88, 90, and 94). In the southern part of the state, the primary thoroughfares are I-64, Federal Highway 50, and State Highway 159; these routes collectively provide ready access to DTOs for illicit drug transportation and distribution. Smaller volumes of drugs arrive via parcel delivery services and/or couriers aboard commercial airlines. Drugs purchased through the dark web are shipped via various commercial parcel services or the U.S. Postal Service (USPS).

Fentanyl/Heroin: Fentanyl has become the greatest drug threat in Illinois and the primary drug within the street-level opioid market. The availability of fentanyl and fentanyl-related substances (FRS) has increased significantly in recent years—as indicated by various measures, including seizures, naloxone administrations, overdoses/poisonings, hospital admissions, and deaths. Fentanyl and FRS continue to be the leading causes of drug-related overdose/poisoning deaths in the state. The availability of fentanyl is high, as is the level of use. In some instances, fentanyl has also been found in cocaine or methamphetamine, in addition to the more prevalent fake oxycodone pills. Fake pills containing fentanyl or FRS are contributing to the number of overdoses/poisonings in the region. Users of these pills are often unaware of the actual contents, as they appear identical to legitimate prescription pills. Some seizure and availability reports are inconsistent, due to the uncertainty of whether law enforcement is encountering heroin or fentanyl, or both. Law enforcement officers have reported that sellers and users may not necessarily distinguish heroin from synthetic opioids in their sales and purchases.

Figure 2: Fake pills

7 out of 10
fake fentanyl pills contain a potentially lethal amount of the drug (2 milligrams).

CFD investigators seized 1.9 million fake pills in 2023—twice the amount seized in 2022. The expansion of fake pill pressing operations domestically and the illicit sale of these pills via the internet represent a growing threat to the public, who may not be aware that prescription pills cannot be purchased legitimately via social media and that all of these fake pills likely contain fentanyl, methamphetamine, or some other clandestinely produced substance.

Source: DEA

Fentanyl and FRS continue to be the leading causes of drug-related overdose/poisoning deaths in the state



Fentanyl and heroin are manufactured primarily in Mexico and smuggled through the SWB to Illinois by Mexican DTOs. Traffickers are using encrypted communication applications to avoid law enforcement interception. Payment for drugs continues to be primarily a cash business; however, cash or value transfer applications and cryptocurrencies are becoming more prevalent. Traffickers have also inserted global positioning system devices inside drug packages to monitor and track drug shipments. Once opioids are smuggled into the Chicago area, local distribution is handled primarily by mid-level DTOs and gangs. Street-level distribution networks are primarily street gangs, with Chicago being the primary distribution hub in the region; opioids distribution in Chicago is centered around the West Side, within which is the city's most prolific opioid market. The main highway running through this area, I-290, has been dubbed "The Heroin Highway," due to its propensity for use in trafficking heroin/synthetic opioids and easy access to numerous open-air drug markets. Chicago street gangs are continuously competing for control of these open-air drug markets, which is a major factor in the violence plaguing this community. Law enforcement agencies outside Chicago report that many illicit opioid users in their areas travel to the West Side to obtain opioids.

Methamphetamine: Methamphetamine availability historically was most prominent in rural areas of Illinois. However, the volume of methamphetamine available in urban areas across the state, including in Chicago, is increasing. This increase in availability is attributable to the influx of high-purity, low-cost methamphetamine, originating in Mexico, into the U.S. market. Methamphetamine most commonly is encountered in crystal form; it also can appear in powder form that is usually white in color or, less frequently, other colors, such as pink or blue. Methamphetamine increasingly is being pressed into fake pills, made to appear like Adderall. In the Chicago area, larger seizures of methamphetamine have become more common, following the national trend. Although much of the methamphetamine flowing through the Chicago area is destined for other locations, traffickers continue in their attempts to establish a consumer base locally. The increased supply—and the limited but rising instances of it being mixed with fentanyl in the past few years—has led to an increase in the number of drug deaths in Illinois involving methamphetamine.

Cocaine: Cocaine availability and use across the United States and in Illinois are increasing, due in part to record-level production of the drug in Colombia; this is reflected in increased seizures and decreased prices for the drug at the wholesale level. As they do for other drugs, Mexican DTOs transport wholesale volumes of cocaine from the SWB into Illinois—primarily to the Chicago area—on a regular basis. Once cocaine reaches the Chicago area, it is either distributed as powder cocaine or "cooked" into crack cocaine and then distributed in that form. The production and distribution of crack cocaine are controlled primarily by area DTOs and street gangs who obtain powder cocaine from Mexican DTOs and other street gangs.

Pharmaceutical Diversion: DEA CD reporting indicates that the diversion of pharmaceutical drugs, particularly prescription opioids, continues to be a significant problem in Illinois. Primary methods of diversion being reported are theft, usually from a family member; employee theft; illegal sale and distribution by health care workers; and "doctor shopping" (going to several doctors to obtain prescriptions for a controlled pharmaceutical). Misuse of prescription drugs—such as Valium, Xanax, Adderall, Vicodin, and oxycodone—remains a problem in many communities across Illinois. In addition to prescription opioids, other commonly abused and diverted pharmaceuticals in Illinois include benzodiazepines (such as alprazolam), methylphenidate, and methadone; these drugs typically are purchased from dealers, either in person or over the internet or dark web.



Pharmacies not following proper recordkeeping requirements have contributed to an increase in the diversion of controlled prescription drugs. Seizures of pharmaceuticals from delivery services (e.g., FedEx, UPS, USPS) are becoming more common.

Marijuana: The State of Illinois Cannabis Regulation and Tax Act, passed in 2019, legalized marijuana for recreational use in Illinois, effective January 1, 2020. Despite the legalization of marijuana in Illinois, there remains a thriving and lucrative illicit market for this drug in communities throughout the Chicago area. Law enforcement officials have observed an increase in the amount of illegal marijuana available in the state since 2019. Mexico-based DTOs transport bulk marijuana shipments concealed within legitimate goods in tractor-trailers into the Chicago area from the SWB. The primary wholesalers of marijuana in Chicago are the same Mexico-based DTOs that supply most of the opioids, methamphetamine, and cocaine in Illinois. Local marijuana production in both outdoor and indoor cultivation sites is increasing in many areas. The legalization of marijuana in Illinois has resulted in many out-of-state marijuana users traveling to Illinois to purchase the drug.

Money Laundering: Chicago's status as a major financial center presents opportunities for laundering the vast sums of money that are generated from drug trafficking. Drug proceeds often are transferred to money laundering organizations (MLOs) separate from the DTOs. This compartmentalization protects illicit funds from being commingled with drugs and makes seizures by law enforcement more difficult. MLOs invest profits from illegal drug sales into legal businesses such as restaurants, nightclubs, trucking companies, and grocery stores. Mexican drug traffickers typically also transport cash in bulk via commercial vehicles or tractor-trailers to the SWB and then into Mexico. Bulk currency is also commonly smuggled by individuals traveling on commercial flights from Chicago to cities across the United States. MLOs use cryptocurrencies to launder drug proceeds as well. As the major Mexican DTOs' leadership becomes younger and more tech savvy, the expectation is that there will be less reliance on traditional bulk cash smuggling out of the United States. Asian MLOs have become more prevalent in Chicago and tend to not have allegiances to any specific cartel or DTO.

With the presence of cryptocurrency automated teller machines (ATMs) growing rapidly (with approximately 1,626 in Illinois and 1,167 in Chicago alone), virtual currency continues to be a popular and growing method used to launder illicit proceeds derived from drug sales. Illinois is home to 58 blockchain and cryptocurrency companies and this industry is expanding quickly. Law enforcement reporting indicates that individuals are traveling from other states to Chicago to use these ATMs. Drug traffickers advertise on social media platforms using known code words and emojis. Prospective buyers will typically respond using encrypted communication applications. After the deal is agreed upon, the buyer will pay using one-click money transfer applications. By their very nature, digital currencies are more difficult for law enforcement to detect and seize.

Outlook

The opioid crisis in Illinois will continue to be a public health and public safety challenge. The presence of fentanyl or FRS combined with other drugs, such as heroin, cocaine, and methamphetamine, adds another layer of complexity to the opioid crisis. This will further contribute to the devastating number of fatal opioid overdoses/poisonings in the state. Key factors in the opioid epidemic include drug traffickers seeking to maximize profit through either intentional compounding or unintentional contamination of other drugs with fentanyl, and opioid users seeking a more potent high by using fentanyl in combination with other drugs.

The region's drug market will remain one of the most active in the country, as Mexican DTOs continue supplying the region with a steady flow of illicit drugs and consolidating drug proceeds for transportation to Mexico. The partnership between Mexican DTOs as sources of supply and street gangs as distributors is also expected to continue. Mexican DTOs will remain reliant on established transportation routes and their distribution networks with Chicago-area gangs, and Chicago-based organized street gangs will retain control over the mid-level and retail-level distribution of drugs in the Chicago area. As a result, gang conflicts, many with a nexus to the illegal drug sales, will still drive much of the violence in the city. It is projected that, in addition to Chicago gangs' long-standing drug-related criminal activities, they will look to expand their involvement in an array of other revenue-producing and violent crimes, including credit card fraud, identity theft, robberies, carjackings, extortion, mortgage fraud, and firearms trafficking.

Fake pills manufactured in clandestine laboratories outside of the United States will be a growing threat in Illinois. Local drug distributors will likely establish pill pressing operations to produce fake pills consisting of fentanyl, FRS, methamphetamine, or other dangerous drugs. The abuse of controlled prescription drugs will not diminish in Illinois.

DTOs' increasing use of both open and encrypted technologies will hamper law enforcement activities. As encrypted applications and cryptocurrencies evolve and grow in popularity, DTOs will use these technologies to communicate with their networks and launder drug proceeds. Social media will be an ongoing concern, as gang members use it as a platform to fuel conflicts and promote criminal activities. Dark web vendors doing business in Illinois could expand their position in the illicit marketplace to distribute locally sourced drugs, both nationally and internationally. The deep-rooted drug and money laundering organizations established decades ago by Mexican DTOs ensure that Chicago will continue to be a national money laundering hub.

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(U) This product was prepared by the DEA Intelligence Program – Chicago Division. Comments and questions may be addressed to the DEA Indicator Programs Section at: DEA.IntelligenceProducts@dea.gov. For media/press inquiries call (571) 776 2508.