

5 things to know about drug smuggling along the U.S.-Mexico border

Daniel Gonzalez

April 4, 2019

President Donald Trump has backed off a threat to imminently close the border with Mexico after he said Mexico had showed signs of stepping up efforts to stop migrants from reaching the U.S. border.

A wave of migrant families mostly from Guatemala and Honduras asking for asylum has overwhelmed the Border Patrol.

Instead, Trump is giving Mexico a one-year warning that he will close the border unless Mexico stops illegal drugs from entering the U.S.

Here are five things to know about drugs coming from Mexico.

1. Hard Drugs Seizures Are Up

Hard drugs entering the U.S. from Mexico have been rising steadily. In fiscal year 2018, a total of 133,885 pounds of hard drugs were seized along the southern border, including cocaine, heroin, meth and fentanyl.

That is a 63 percent increase over five years from the 82,003 pounds of hard drugs seized along the southern border in fiscal year 2014, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

The seizures include hard drugs seized by Customs and Border Protection officers at official border crossings and by the Border Patrol in between ports of entry.

2. Most Hard Drugs Are Seized At Ports

Most of the hard drugs seized along the southern border pass through official border crossings inside vehicles, instead of being smuggled illegally across the border between ports of entry.

In fiscal year 2018, 115,065 pounds of hard drugs were seized at official border crossings.

That represents nearly 86% of the total 133,885 pounds of drugs seized along the border at both official border crossings and in between ports of entry.

In fiscal year 2018, 80% of cocaine, 90% of heroin, 83% of meth and 82% of fentanyl was seized at official border crossings instead of being smuggled through the large swaths of open spaces between ports of entry, according to an analysis of U.S. Customs and Border Protection data.

Officers at border crossings seized 56,362 pounds of meth in fiscal year 2018, more than any other hard drug, followed by cocaine, at 51,713 pounds, heroin, at 5,205 pounds, and fentanyl, at 1,785 pounds.

The amount of fentanyl seized in 2018 at border crossings was up 2,450% compared to the 70 pounds seized in fiscal year 2015, the first year the drug was detected at ports of entry.

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid 50 to 100 times stronger than morphine, according to the Centers for Disease Control. The drug has helped fuel a sharp rise in opioid-related deaths, according to the CDC.

3. Marijuana Seizures Are Down

The amount of marijuana seized at both official border crossings and between ports is down significantly.

In fiscal 2018, a total of 761,319 pounds of marijuana was seized along the southern border. That is down nearly 68% from the 2.3 million pounds of marijuana seized in fiscal year 2014.

Most marijuana that enters the southern border illegally is smuggled between ports of entry, where seizures fell 76% in fiscal year 2015 compared to five years earlier.

The overall drop in illegal marijuana seizures along the southern border is the result of the partial or full legalization of marijuana in several states, according to numerous reports, including one by the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

4. Cartels Are Smuggling More Hard Drugs

The decrease in marijuana seizures and increase in hard-drug seizures reflects a shift by drug cartels.

Drug cartels are smuggling more hard drugs into the U.S. to offset the decrease in profits from marijuana smuggling, experts say.

"You don't have to deal with the issue of odor like is the case with marijuana," Vanda Felbab-Brown, senior fellow and narcotics expert at the Brookings Institution, told *The Arizona Republic* in February.

"Also, the quantity is much smaller (with hard drugs) so it's much more convenient to take it through legal ports of entry, and the costs of the product are much higher," she said.

5. Smugglers Are Using A Variety Of Methods

There were 70,000 drug overdose deaths in 2018.

Controlled prescription drugs are responsible for most drug-overdose deaths, according to the Drug Enforcement Administration's 2018 National Drug Treat Assessment report.

But drug traffickers are now disguising other opioids as controlled prescription drugs to gain new users, the DEA's report said.

Drug overdoses are the leading cause of injury death in the U.S., exceeding deaths from suicide, homicide firearms and motor vehicle crashes,

The availability of heroin in the U.S. is rising as is heroin mixed with fentanyl, according to the DEA. Mexico is the main source of heroin in the U.S.

Fentanyl and other synthetic opioids, primarily from China and Mexico, are now the most lethal category of opioids used in the U.S.

Mexican drug cartels, among them the Sinaloa Cartel, smuggle the majority of illegal drugs in to the U.S., according to the DEA's report.

The most common method is concealing drugs in hidden compartments in passenger vehicles, or commingled illegal drugs with legitimate goods on tractor trailers, the report said.