



Immigrants Are Not Responsible for Surge in Fentanyl

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A key talking point in recent conservative, anti-immigrant rhetoric is that people crossing the southern border illegally are responsible for the surge in fentanyl deaths. There is no evidence that this is true.

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that can be over 50 times as powerful as morphine. While legally made and prescribed in the United States, illicitly made versions have been making their way into the country thanks to Mexican drug cartels. These products lack obvious safety controls and, **according to the Centers for Disease Control**, deaths from these drugs have skyrocketed. In 2020, the death toll from illegal fentanyl was more than 56,000, 18 times higher than it was in 2013. There is no argument that illegally made fentanyl is a clear and present danger to Americans.

However, conservatives have used those deaths to further empower an anti-immigrant culture war. In September, **Governor Greg Abbott ordered** state agencies to ramp up stoppage of illegal border crossers based on the fentanyl crisis, equating refugee seekers and other immigrants with the cartels. In his press release, the governor claimed that his deployment of the Texas National Guard to the southern border, Operation Lone Star, had seized “over 336.3 million lethal doses of fentanyl.”

That is a big, scary number, but it’s also a weird way to count the amount of a drug seized. **The Drug Enforcement Administration describes** a lethal dose as 2 milligrams, but this can vary widely from person to person and, because of the manufacturing method, even from pill to pill. In 2019, **Customs and Border Patrol seized 1,208 kilograms of illegal fentanyl**, which would be millions of lethal doses if those pills were just randomly given out to people unknowingly, which is not something drug cartels tend to do since they want to make money.

The fact that this is a drug trade and not some weird form of pharmaceutical terrorism seems lost on people like Abbott who use the fentanyl crisis to justify stopping border. Either that, or a deliberate misdirection. While fentanyl is definitely being smuggled into the United States, it’s not generally through people crossing the border seeking asylum or new places to work and live.

According to the right wing think tank The Cato Institute, U.S. Citizens made up 86.3 percent of fentanyl smugglers in 2021. More than 90 percent of fentanyl seized was done at legal crossings, not along “the wall.” Just 0.02 percent of border crossers had fentanyl on them. The Cato Institute concludes that the harsh anti-immigration policies put in place by the Trump Administration actually made fentanyl smuggling worse.

It makes sense. Drug cartels are not sending fentanyl north to destroy Americans. They are doing it for profit. To that end, they use American sources of cash and shipping to ensure smooth transfer at legal crossings, which are far less likely to be searched than random people crossing the line illegally. To quote The Cato Institute, it’s a crisis “for U.S. citizens by U.S. citizens,” not a thing being snuck into the country by the asylum seekers Abbott is targeting (**and possibly entrapping in violation of protected civil rights**).

Fentanyl is the latest battle in the ongoing opioid crisis, a situation brought about by unethical pushing of highly addictive pain drugs from pharmaceutical companies. The customers for this new addictive trade in fentanyl are addicts who lack the resources to counter substance abuse. Texas in particular, **has more than 400,000 people who can’t get substance use care** because the state refuses to expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act.

By focusing on the transfer of fentanyl from drug cartels in Mexico to the United States, conservatives continue to demonize and blame border crossers who have little to do with the spike in deaths. The culprit continues to be the way the country handles the drug trade, making America a lucrative market for dangerously manufactured drugs and creating a culture of people who use them in the shadows without oversight. Immigrants simply are not the reason we have this problem.