

Ahead of the midterms, Fox News blames migrants for the fentanyl crisis

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October 4, 2022

As the Republican Party fields unhinged and even self-described unqualified candidates ahead of the midterm, Fox News is helping steer the GOP to a familiar strategy: fearmonger about immigration and the southern border.

The 2022 iteration of this plan involves suggesting migrants and those seeking asylum at the border are responsible for the United States' fentanyl crisis, even though most drug traffickers are U.S. citizens and there is no evidence that increased migration has impacted opioid smuggling.

This election playbook is nothing new to the network that manufactured the threat of caravans from Latin America or feigned concern over migrants acting as COVID-19 disease vectors. And while there's no question that the United States is facing a fentanyl crisis — according to the National Institutes of Health, synthetic opioids, primarily fentanyl, were the “main driver of drug overdose deaths with a 6-fold increase from 2015 to 2020” — Fox has the perpetrators wrong.

Drug seizure numbers have often been used as political cudgel, and Fox has used a recent increase in fentanyl seizures to imply that those seeking asylum at the border or crossing illegally have contributed to the severity of the opioid crisis either by carrying the drugs themselves or diverting limited resources away from drug smuggling identification due to unprecedented border apprehensions. (Seizures of fentanyl at the southern border have steadily increased since 2016 and experts suggest pandemic and legal travel restrictions at the border have increased smuggling and accelerated users' transition to fentanyl.)

In reality, most drug traffickers bringing opiates into the U.S. are already legal citizens. According to the U.S. Sentencing Commission, 86.2% of convicted fentanyl drug traffickers in 2021 were citizens. U.S. citizen traffickers also bring fentanyl through legal crossing points hidden in large trucks and passenger vehicles — not on foot through illegal routes across the border. A relatively small amount is actually smuggled by cartels across the border between official ports: According to CBP, Border Patrol agents who were not at vehicle checkpoints have accounted for just 9% of fentanyl seizures near the border so far in 2022.

Contrary to right-wing media narratives, the vast majority of migrants at the border also do not aid in fentanyl smuggling. The Cato Institute reported in 2021 that just 0.02% of arrests at the border resulted in fentanyl seizure. The organization also explained there is no evidence to suggest that asylum-seekers distract border agents from drug seizures, as trafficking arrest trends do not deviate measurably with greater numbers of asylum-seekers. In April, the American Immigration Council testified to Congress that “Title 42 [pandemic border restrictions] and increased migration has no impact on the flow of opiates into the United States.”

These facts have not stopped Fox from implementing this false “open border” framing in its coverage, as an NPR/Ipsos poll from last month found that 39% of Americans, and 60% of Republicans, believed that “most of the fentanyl entering the U.S. is smuggled in by unauthorized migrants crossing the border illegally.” By repeatedly running segments that conflate increased border apprehension numbers, undocumented immigration, and fentanyl smuggling, Fox is portraying the arrival of migrants and asylum-seekers as a public health crisis or even a “national security” threat, all as a ploy to galvanize Republican voters.

Here is a noncomprehensive list of the network pushing the false narrative that migrants are driving the severity of the opioid crisis:

- **Fox claims migrants are perpetrators of drug trafficking**
- - In June, Tucker Carlson hosted Republican congressional candidate Scott Baugh to claim that migrants arriving on the beaches of California include “gang members, and some are human traffickers, and some are drug runners that are bringing the scourge of fentanyl” to the country. [Fox News, *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, 6/03/22]
 - Co-host Jeanine Pirro claimed in July that the cartels are “bringing in people” to traffic fentanyl: “They have arteries all over this country.” [Fox News, *The Five*, 7/5/22]
 - Citing seizures of methamphetamines and fentanyl at the border, Pirro also complained that the Mexican president believes “dirtbag drug dealers deserve homes” in the United States and President Joe Biden is “signaling that it’s OK.” [Fox News, *The Five*, 7/12/22]
 - Host Jesse Watters implied that Biden is allowing criminals to reenter the United States from Mexico, giving families worry that their children “have to step over fentanyl when they go to school.” [Fox News, *Jesse Watters Primetime*, 7/12/22]
 - Host Laura Ingraham warned that Biden’s “dereliction of immigration enforcement” is bringing a “sea of humanity” across the border and “changing our entire country,” adding that it also “allows deadly fentanyl to pour in” to the U.S. [Fox News, *The Ingraham Angle*, 7/13/22]

- Kilmeade called the situation at the southern border a “slow-moving car wreck” after claiming that there have been “4 million people who have come across our border illegally since the president has taken over” and there is an “unbelievable amount of fentanyl and other drugs ... coming across our border.” [Fox News, *Fox & Friends*, [7/19/22](#)]
- Co-anchors Bill Hemmer and Sandra Smith interviewed a California sheriff about the threat of fentanyl toward children over footage of drug bust at the border, cartel members in Mexico, and migrants in Eagle Pass, Texas. The sheriff warned Fox’s audience that “these pills that are coming across our open border is absolutely one of the biggest issues that we are facing as a country.” [Fox News, *America’s Newsroom*, [7/21/22](#)]
- In a segment on drugs found in a car in Arizona, correspondent Steve Harrigan reported that “in some ways, for smugglers fentanyl is almost a perfect drug” and noted, “You can force migrants to carry it over on foot or in vehicles. And it is spreading — not just here on the border, but across the entire U.S.” (He failed to mention that most fentanyl traffickers are U.S. citizens.) [Fox News, *America Reports*, [7/27/22](#)]
- Co-host Kayleigh McEnany implied that “states like New York and New Jersey” are facing a fentanyl crisis because they ignored security at the southern border, but the issue is finally being taken seriously now that “these illegal immigrants are in your backyard.” [Fox News, *Outnumbered*, [8/5/22](#)]
- Co-host Ainsley Earhardt fearmongered about potential threats from migrants arriving in New York City: “We don't know who these people are. They haven't been vetted. We don't know if they're safe or not and we worry about the fentanyl that's coming across.” [Fox News, *Fox & Friends*, [8/18/22](#)]
- McEnany suggested that the rollback of the Trump-era “Remain in Mexico” policy, which allows asylum-seekers to be processed “here on U.S. soil,” has enabled dozens of people on the terror watch list and “13,000 pounds of fentanyl” to enter the country, “enough to kill every American in this country probably multiple times over.” [Fox News, *Outnumbered*, [8/18/22](#)]
- Carlson emphasized “the fact that our border is open to the world and that millions of them have come in illegally. How can you take the country seriously when it doesn’t even have a border?” He later added that migrants seen in coverage are “turning themselves in so they can be bused to your town” but warned there are “a lot of people who don’t want to be caught, and those people are bringing in fentanyl, which is killing thousands of Americans every month.” [Fox News, *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, [8/18/22](#)]
- Fox contributor Katie Pavlich warned that “illegal immigrants from Mexico, who are trafficking these pills that look like candy for children into the country,” are

not being imprisoned in the United States so they can “go back to Mexico, get another load, bring it back into the country.” [Fox News, *The Five*, [8/19/22](#)]

- Contributor Johnny “Joey” Jones said, “Ten people coming across the border legitimately seeking asylum aren’t worth one person pretending to [seek asylum] with a bag full of fentanyl.” [Fox News, *The Five*, [8/19/22](#)]
- *Fox & Friends* highlighted footage of “migrants coming over in camo” while criticizing White House comments about fentanyl seized entering the U.S. [Fox News, *Fox & Friends*, [9/14/22](#)]
- *Jesse Watters Primetime* guest Sarah Palin warned “it’s not just the people” crossing the border, “it’s what they’re bringing over — fentanyl.” [Fox News, *Jesse Watters Primetime*, [9/15/22](#)]
- *The Faulkner Focus* guest Sen. John Kennedy (R-LA) emphasized, “Last year we had close to 3 million people, to say nothing of the fentanyl, that streamed into our country, and we do not have the slightest idea who those people are.” [Fox News, *The Faulkner Focus*, [9/20/22](#)]
- On *The Ingraham Angle*, GOP gubernatorial candidate Heidi Ganahl claimed that Colorado saw “skyrocketing crime” and is ranked “No. 2 in fentanyl overdoses” because Gov. Jared Polis “made us a sanctuary state.” [Fox News, *The Ingraham Angle*, [9/23/22](#)]
- **Fox suggests that the increase in migrants at the border and asylum-seekers “distract” or hinder Border Patrol from identifying drug smuggling operations**
- - Host Jeanine Pirro claimed that Border Patrol agents are “too busy monitoring this surge [of migrants] to even look for fentanyl.” [Fox News, *The Five*, [6/15/22](#)]
 - After Fox contributor Jason Chaffetz criticized White House border policy and declared that the Biden administration has attracted “millions” of migrants, guest host Dagen McDowell linked record border apprehensions and fentanyl seizures. [Fox News, *The Faulkner Focus*, [6/29/22](#)]
 - Co-host Steve Doocy lamented that cartels “figured they could sneak the fentanyl into the country because all of our agents are busy processing the millions of people who are coming across because Joe Biden said, ‘Don’t come,’ but really he’s letting them just come on in as quickly as they can.” [Fox News, *Fox & Friends*, [6/28/22](#)]
 - Host Sean Hannity claimed that because “all the resources” on the border are diverted to “Biden aiding and abetting lawbreaking and human trafficking, that means the rest of the border is wide open” to allow fentanyl trafficking. Guest

Rep. Chip Roy (R-TX), agreed that Border Patrol agents are “distracted” with border apprehensions. [Fox News, *Hannity*, [6/28/22](#)]

- Co-host Brian Kilmeade introduced a segment on an Arizona fentanyl bust by noting that “it isn’t just migrants coming across the border, but deadly drugs as well.” Guest and former DEA Special Agent Derek Maltz complained that cartels are “taking total advantage of the wide-open border” because “our Border Patrol is saturated with migrant processing, they’re not able to do the border security they’ve been doing for years.” [Fox News, *Fox & Friends*, [7/12/22](#)]
- After *Fox & Friends* co-host Steve Doocy emphasized the “gigantic number of this 200,000 migrants that crossed the border illegally in July,” co-host Ainsley Earhardt added that “also fentanyl seizures are surging, and that is terrifying, especially for parents.” [Fox News, *Fox & Friends*, [8/16/22](#)]
- Guest anchor Shannon Bream warned of “cartels taking advantage” of “President Biden’s border crisis” to smuggle fentanyl as Border Patrol “encounters with illegal immigrants at our southern border topped 2 million.” [Fox News, *The Story with Martha MacCallum*, [8/17/22](#)]
- Co-anchor Bill Hemmer claimed an increase of migrant border crossings in Arizona made “everything easier for the drug cartels to do their business.” The following segment ran with the chyron “Cartels using migrant surge to hide drug activity” but failed to give any evidence that directly linked the migrant surge to an increase in fentanyl smuggling. [Fox News, *America’s Newsroom*, [8/08/22](#)]
- Co-anchor Sandra Smith did not push back when guest Sen. Roger Marshall (R-KS) blamed the opioid crisis in Kansas on Border Patrol officers “functioning like hotel operators” and “greeting 5,000 to 10,000 illegal immigrants every day.” [Fox News, *America Reports*, [8/8/22](#)]