



# COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

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## Hearing Statement of Border Security, Facilitation, & Operations Subcommittee Chairwoman Nanette Barragán (D-CA)

### *Examining DHS's Efforts to Combat the Opioid Epidemic*

May 18, 2022

The past few years have weighed heavily on the American people. A once-in-a-lifetime virus and the resulting economic slowdown exacerbated existing public health crises, including our nation's struggle with drug addiction and overdose deaths. In fact, data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggests that drug overdoses have increased sharply since the pandemic began. They believe more than 107,000 overdose deaths occurred in 2021, breaking all previous yearly records.

The opioid crisis in the United States claims more lives each year than firearms, suicide, homicide, or motor vehicle crashes. Tackling the drug crisis is one of our most pressing national security, law enforcement, and public health challenges. We must do more to protect American lives.

I am grateful to see this Administration tackling the challenge head on. Last month, President Biden released a new National Drug Control Strategy focused on the actions needed to reduce overdoses and save lives. Those actions include disrupting and dismantling drug trafficking operations, in which our witnesses here today play a key role.

As we are all aware, the rise in the misuse of fentanyl and other synthetic opioids has its origins in the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's approval of the prescription opioid painkiller OxyContin in 1995, when it was falsely marketed as a nonaddictive pain-management medication. With the increased prescription opioid dependence and addiction came an increased demand for synthetic opioids, which transnational criminal organizations have exploited.

Almost all of the synthetic opioids harming Americans are manufactured outside of the United States. The smuggling of these drugs into our country is an issue the Biden Administration and Democrats are focused on tackling. In the past, Chinese fentanyl was frequently shipped directly to the United States in small, high purity quantities. It was also shipped to Mexico and then smuggled across the border. However, as China took steps to police fentanyl and related drugs, production and distribution has increasingly shifted to Mexico. It has never been more important to enhance cooperation with Mexican authorities and disrupt the movement of hard drugs like heroin and fentanyl across the border – this is exactly what the Biden Administration is doing.

This Administration also understands that the overwhelming majority of hard drugs are smuggled through legal ports of entry by documented travelers—not in between them. Rather than waste resources building a wall or tearing families apart, the Biden Administration has directed resources to ports of entry to interdict opioid shipments where they are arriving. They have also focused attention on disrupting and dismantling the transnational criminal organizations that smuggle these drugs into our communities.

Despite the talking points I expect we will hear today from some of my colleagues, I'd like to be clear that migrants seeking asylum are not responsible for the vast majority of drugs arriving in our communities. According to CBP data, there is no correlation between the volume of hard drugs being seized at the border and the number of migrants encountered. For example, we saw seizures of fentanyl and heroin reach current levels in June 2020. At the time, migration was still unnaturally suppressed by border closures throughout Central America. High levels of opioids and other illicit drugs are seized at ports of entry during times of both high, and relatively low, migration.

The Department of Homeland Security is in a unique position to respond to this crisis, both with its investigative arm and through our personnel and technologies stationed at the border, including the Non-Intrusive Inspection systems and radiation technology to scan travelers, vehicles, and cargo entering the United States for narcotics. This technology is critical, and I support the Department's goal of achieving a 100 percent scan rate. However, much more work needs to be done - currently less than 2 percent of private vehicles and 15 percent of commercial vehicles are screened for narcotics at the Southwest border.

Today I look forward to hearing more about CBP's use of technology and canine units to detect opioids at our ports of entry. I also look forward to learning more about HSI's efforts to investigate transnational criminal organizations and their drug supply chains to intercept drug shipments heading to the U.S. Combatting illicit drugs is no easy task. And enforcement alone will not solve the challenge.

Tackling the opioid epidemic in our country requires a whole-of-society approach that goes beyond the scope of border enforcement. Nonetheless, the Department of Homeland Security has an important role in this fight. We must identify and resolve vulnerabilities, especially as traffickers continue to adapt their methods.

Today's hearing will provide us with an opportunity to learn more about the Department's efforts and challenges in combatting the opioid epidemic. I look forward to a frank conversation on the current situation and our witnesses' recommendations for how Congress can take action to further protect our communities.

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