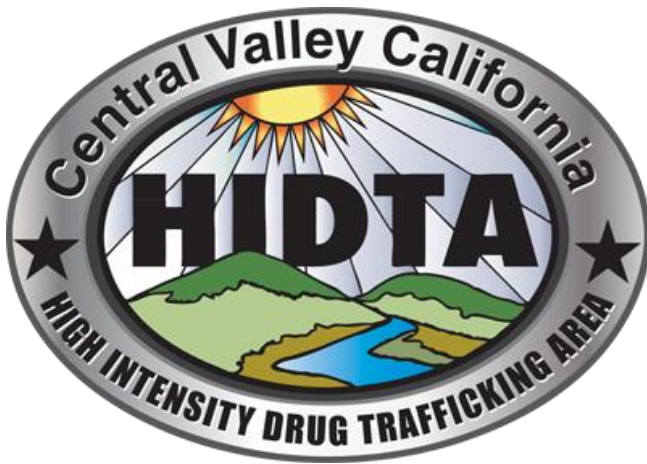


UNCLASSIFIED



2021 THREAT ASSESSMENT

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SCOPE

The purpose of the *2021 Central Valley California High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (CVC HIDTA) Threat Assessment* is to identify current and emerging drug-related trends within the designated area, and deliver accurate and timely strategic intelligence to assist law enforcement agencies in the development of drug enforcement strategies. This document provides a narcotic threat activity overview depicting the regional extent of illicit narcotic abuse and activities, actors and organizations, smuggling methods and routes of transportation, and evolutions in trends, tactics, and procedures. The *2021 CVC HIDTA Threat Assessment* also fulfills statutory and grant requirements issued by the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP). The CVC HIDTA Executive Board has approved it.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the CVC HIDTA's drug threat environment in numerous ways, but it will take years to assess the full impact of this ongoing, global epidemic. This assessment notes how the pandemic appeared to influence illicit drug trafficking and drug abuse during calendar year (CY) 2020.

Methamphetamine remains the CVC HIDTA's primary drug threat. California law enforcement officers seized an increased amount of methamphetamine over the last three years, especially in CY 2020 when seizures increased at least 30%. State public health officials reported that deaths from psychostimulants such as methamphetamine increased 21% from July 2019 to July 2020.¹

Fentanyl is second, but close to surpassing methamphetamine as the most dangerous drug threat. Over the last three years, Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs) based in Mexico have produced increasing amounts of counterfeit prescription pills laced with fentanyl. Often mixed with other drugs, fentanyl is involved in 37% of all drug-related overdose deaths in California.²

Heroin is the CVC HIDTA's third most important drug threat. California law enforcement officers seized an increasing amount of black tar and brown heroin over the last three years. Data from the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) shows that heroin-related hospitalizations and deaths have increased significantly since 2017.

Illegal marijuana poses the fourth most significant drug threat. In CY 2020, California law enforcement officers eradicated significantly more marijuana—nearly 3.75 million plants from 1,500 illicit grow sites—than in previous years. Morbidity and mortality data indicate that illicit marijuana use remains a problem for California residents.

Cocaine is fifth, but increasing availability and abuse means it is not the least of the CVC HIDTA's drug threats. In the twelve CVC HIDTA counties, cocaine-related deaths rose 96% from 2017-2019.³ The discovery of coca fields in Central America raises concerns that DTOs based in Mexico may be trying to produce their own cocaine.

The CVC HIDTA enforcement initiatives reported 78 DTO investigations in CY 2020 and zero money laundering organization (MLO) investigations. These investigations broke down into the following characteristics: 42 international DTOs, 9 multi-state DTOs, and 27 local DTOs.⁴ Of the 77 DTO investigations, 12 were Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force (OCDETF); one was linked to a Consolidated Priority Organization Target (CPOT); and one to a Priority Target Organization (PTO).

THE CENTRAL VALLEY CALIFORNIA HIDTA REGION

The CVC HIDTA's area of responsibility (AOR) comprises over 86,000 square miles with a population of almost 8 million people.⁵ Eight cities, including the state capital Sacramento, boast six-figure populations. Ethnically, the region is very diverse with approximately 45% of the population claiming White alone, 40% Hispanic alone, 7% Asian alone, 5% African American alone, and 3% Native American.⁶

The CVC HIDTA provides direct service to 12 of the 34 counties in Eastern California that comprise its AOR.ⁱ Those 12 counties are Fresno, Kern, Kings, Madera, Merced, Sacramento, San Joaquin, Shasta, Siskiyou, Stanislaus, Trinity, and Tulare.ⁱⁱ Forty-three participating federal, state, and local law enforcement and prosecutorial agencies support the CVC HIDTA. In CY 2020, the CVC HIDTA was comprised of one Investigative Support Center (ISC), eight drug enforcement initiatives, and one fugitive apprehension initiative as well as one prevention and demand reduction initiative, one training initiative, and one management and coordination initiative.

The Central Valley is a high intensity drug trafficking area because its roadways serve as a transit zone for illicit narcotics smuggled from Mexico into the United States and bulk currency smuggled back to Mexico. Interstate 5 is the main north-south interstate highway on the west coast, running from Mexico to Canada through the Central Valley of California. U.S. Route 99 also bisects the Central Valley, reaching north to south from Calexico, CA to Blaine, WA. Interstate 80 is an east-west transcontinental freeway that stretches from San Francisco through Sacramento to Reno, NV and beyond to the New York City metropolitan area. It is a nexus for U.S. Route 50, which begins in West Sacramento and runs slightly south of I-80 to South Lake Tahoe, CA and Carson, NV before continuing more than 3,000 miles to Ocean City, MD. The Central Valley also has international airports in Sacramento and Fresno, and a metropolitan airport in Stockton. It has dozens of general aviation and private airports, which are all vulnerable to exploitation by drug traffickers.

According to Open Justice, a California Department of Justice (CAL DOJ) initiative that publishes criminal justice data, felony arrests for drug offenses in California decreased 30%—from 38,988 in 2016 to 27,280 in 2019. Drug offenses constituted 10% of all adult felony arrests and 3% of juvenile felony arrests in 2019. Drug offenses constituted 26% of all 735,220 adult misdemeanor arrests and 9% of all 22,836 juvenile misdemeanor arrests.⁷

ⁱ See Appendix A for a map of the CVC HIDTA region.

ⁱⁱ On May 18, 2021, ONDCP designated Placer and El Dorado as new HIDTA counties. They will be included in the *2022 Central Valley California HIDTA Threat Assessment*.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) database breaks down arrests for drug sale offenses in California by type of drug. Over a three year period, arrests in every category decreased: from 2,299 marijuana arrests in 2017 to 1,419 in 2019; from 7,169 arrests in 2017 for opium or cocaine or their derivatives to 6,714 in 2019; from 10,826 arrests in 2017 for other dangerous non-narcotic drugs to 10,564 in 2019.⁸

In 2019, California's violent crime rate ranked 12th nationwide. According to the UCR, California's crime rate is higher than the national average with the City of Stockton reporting the highest violent crime rate in the state.⁹

SOURCE CONSIDERATIONS

The CVC HIDTA considered numerous sources while preparing the *2021 CVC HIDTA Threat Assessment*.ⁱⁱⁱ

- The CVC HIDTA Threat Assessment Survey for CY 2020, administered by the ISC to the CVC HIDTA enforcement initiatives;
- Records and statistics from the CVC HIDTA Performance Management System (PMP);
- State-wide drug and drug lab seizure statistics from El Paso Intelligence Center's National Seizure System (NSS)^{iv}, the Drug Enforcement Administration's (DEA) Domestic Cannabis Eradication/Suppression Program (DCESP), and CAL DOJ's Campaign Against Marijuana Planting (CAMP);
- Drug abuse mortality and morbidity data for drug-related emergency department visits, hospital admissions, and fatalities from CDPH;
- Law enforcement bulletins and intelligence assessments;
- Law enforcement and government websites, official press releases, and media reports.

Several intelligence and public health agencies advised that, at the time of this writing, they are still collecting, processing, and analyzing data from CY 2020 because the pandemic diverted their resources to other tasks. If a significant change occurs, the CVC HIDTA will correct and update this assessment.

METHAMPHETAMINE

METHAMPHETAMINE: AVAILABILITY

In CY 2020, methamphetamine remained readily available in the United States even though the COVID-19 pandemic caused disruptions to precursor supply and smuggling routes. Over the last three years

ⁱⁱⁱ See Appendix B: Source Descriptions and Confidence Ratings for more information.

^{iv} NSS is the only nationwide repository of seizure data, but it is not a comprehensive database because EPIC does not have the authority to mandate reporting from all U.S. law enforcement agencies. It is an intelligence pointer, and should be used in corroboration with other reporting to gain an understanding of drug trends.

(2018-2020), law enforcement officers seized an increasing amount of methamphetamine in California; especially crystal methamphetamine, which is the dominant form found in the Central Valley.

- Over the last three years, CVC HIDTA enforcement initiatives have seized an increasing amount of methamphetamine (all forms) in the Central Valley—from 1,182 kilograms in CY 2018 to 2,061 kilograms in CY 2020. The greatest increase occurred during the pandemic when they seized 65% more methamphetamine in CY 2020 (2,061 kilograms) than in CY 2019 (1,252 kilograms).¹⁰
- Per NSS, over the last three years, law enforcement agencies have seized 90% more crystal methamphetamine in California—from 36,246 kilograms in CY 2018 to 68,738 kilograms in CY 2020. During the pandemic, law enforcement seized 31% more crystal methamphetamine in CY 2020 (68,738 kilograms) than in CY 2019 (52,600 kilograms).¹¹
- Per NSS, in CY 2018, law enforcement agencies seized 877 kilograms of powder methamphetamine in California. In CY 2019, seizures decreased to 434 kilograms. In CY 2020, powder methamphetamine seizures increased 34% to 582 kilograms.¹²

U.S. law enforcement officers report methamphetamine in solution seizures by volume or weight. The actual amount of methamphetamine in each seizure may vary by concentration.

- Per NSS, over the last three years, law enforcement agencies have reported 81% more methamphetamine in solution seizure incidents in California—from 22 incidents in CY 2018 to 40 incidents in CY 2020.¹³
- Per NSS, during the same timeframe, seizures of methamphetamine in solution reported by volume increased 79%—from 455,698 milliliters in CY 2018 to 815,855 milliliters in CY 2020. During the pandemic, law enforcement officers in California seized 135% more methamphetamine in solution in CY 2020 (815,855 milliliters) than in CY 2019 (346,346 milliliters).¹⁴
- Per NSS, during the same timeframe, seizures of methamphetamine in solution reported by weight increased 283%—from 438 kilograms in CY 2018 to 1,702 kilograms in CY 2020.¹⁵

Methamphetamine conversion labs convert powder methamphetamine to crystal methamphetamine or recrystallize methamphetamine in solution. DEA reported that the majority of conversion lab seizures in the country occurred in California from CY 2000 to CY 2019 (with the exception of CY 2018).¹⁶ The number of ice conversion labs seized in the state has decreased from 13 in CY 2018 to 11 in CY 2020, but the majority of the conversion labs have a high production capacity of 20 pounds or more that offsets the decreasing number of labs. In CY 2018, for instance, law enforcement authorities seized three labs capable of producing two ounces or less, two medium capacity labs, and eight labs capable of producing more than 20 pounds. In CY 2020, authorities seized one lab capable of producing two to nine pounds and 10 labs capable of producing more than 20 pounds.¹⁷

METHAMPHETAMINE: USE

The CDC reported that the COVID-19 pandemic, which has disrupted public health, social services, and other efforts, led to a spike in drug overdose deaths over the past year. From June 2019 to May 2020, U.S. deaths involving overdoses of psychostimulants such as methamphetamine increased 35%.¹⁸ Likewise, DHCS reported that deaths from psychostimulants with abuse potential (excluding cocaine)^v increased 21% from July 2019 to July 2020.¹⁹

The CDPH provided the CVC HIDTA with morbidity and mortality data for California residents in the 12 HIDTA counties for the years 2017-2019. Although not broken down by specific drug, the amphetamine-related data provides some insight into the effects of methamphetamine abuse in the HIDTA counties.

- Emergency department visits decreased 7%—from 261 visits in CY 2017 to 242 visits in CY 2019.
- Hospitalizations increased 16%—from 530 in CY 2017 to 615 in CY 2020.
- Deaths increased 41%—from 434 in CY 2017 to 611 in CY 2020.²⁰

Fentanyl is driving the increase in overdose deaths. According to California Health Policy Strategies, fentanyl is involved in 37% of all drug-related overdose deaths in California.²¹

METHAMPHETAMINE: PRICE

The purity and potency of methamphetamine reflects the high availability of the drug. For CY 2020, the DEA Methamphetamine Profiling Program reported 97.2% purity and 97.5% potency.²²

The CVC HIDTA does not break down methamphetamine prices by type but reports a range of low to high prices for methamphetamine in general. Methamphetamine prices decreased significantly at the beginning of the pandemic. During the last quarter of CY 2019, the CVC HIDTA enforcement initiatives reported an average price of \$1,967 per pound. By the end of the first quarter of CY 2020, the enforcement initiatives reported an average price of \$1,833 per pound. Three months later, the reported price increased significantly to an average of \$2,150 per pound.²³

METHAMPHETAMINE: TRANSPORTATION AND DISTRIBUTION

DTOs based in Mexico produce the majority of methamphetamine available in the United States. They produce the drug clandestinely in Mexico, and then smuggle it across the Southwest Border. Although it is available throughout the United States, the West and Midwest regions have the highest availability.²⁴

Traffickers employ a wide variety of smuggling tactics: human body couriers, parcels, private and commercial vehicles. The CVC HIDTA typically encounters methamphetamine transported through the Central Valley in commercial and private vehicles. Traffickers conceal methamphetamine in tires and

^v The psychostimulants are methamphetamines, 3,4-Methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA), dextroamphetamine, levoamphetamine, or Ritalin.

other natural voids, including sophisticated after-market concealed traps, or hidden in gas tanks in liquid form. Mexico-based DTOs typically control the wholesale distribution of methamphetamine in the United States.²⁵

METHAMPHETAMINE: INTELLIGENCE GAPS

- To what extent will methamphetamine in pill form appeal to non-traditional users? Will DTOs based in Mexico produce methamphetamine in pill form?
- Will the increase in methamphetamine availability, combined with high prices, drive down demand?

FENTANYL

FENTANYL: AVAILABILITY

The fentanyl crisis, which began on the East Coast, reached the Central Valley in 2016 when 14 people in the Sacramento area died and 38 others overdosed on counterfeit prescription pills containing lethal amounts of fentanyl. Since then, the CVC HIDTA has removed an increasing amount of fentanyl from the marketplace. Over the last three years (2018-2020), powder fentanyl has given way to increasing amounts of fentanyl-laced, counterfeit prescription pills supplied by DTOs based in Mexico.

- The CVC HIDTA seized 28 pounds in 2018, and then 178.64 pounds and 5,004 dosage units of fentanyl in 2019 to more than 76,322 dosage units in 2020.²⁶
- Per NSS, over the last three years, law enforcement officers seized 225% more fentanyl in 2020 (2,731 kilograms) than in 2018 (841 kilograms) in California. Officers seized 59% more fentanyl mix in 2020 (130 kilograms) than in 2018 (82 kilograms).²⁷
- Per NSS, over the last three years, law enforcement officers seized 1,518% more fentanyl dosage units in 2020 (898,753 du) than in 2018 (55,535 du) in California. Officers seized 31,343% more dosage units of fentanyl mix in 2020 (329,531 du) than in 2018 (1,048 du).²⁸

FENTANYL: USE

Morbidity and mortality data from the CDPH do not specifically track fentanyl-related incidents. It captures incidents involving “synthetic narcotics,” which can include drugs other than fentanyl. It is difficult to conclude whether fentanyl or a fentanyl-related substance caused the emergency department visit, hospitalization, or death of an individual. First, it only takes a microscopic amount of fentanyl to cause an adverse reaction. Second, it is possible that a blood sample will not contain fentanyl in it because only a small amount is present in the body. Third, common lab tests do not screen for fentanyl. The cost of the test prohibits labs from running it without cause.

Synthetic narcotics-related data for California residents in the 12 CVC HIDTA counties shows that:

- Emergency department visits decreased 8%—from 130 in CY 2017 to 120 in CY 2019.
- Hospitalizations decreased 17%—from 47 in CY 2017 to 39 in CY 2019.
- Deaths increased 225%—from 52 in CY 2017 to 169 in CY 2019.²⁹

CDPH data ends at 2019. However, the CDC reports that synthetic opioid deaths increased 38.4% nationwide from June 2019 to May 2020.³⁰ Synthetic opioid-related overdose fatalities in California has increased 541% since 2017.³¹ Furthermore, there were 2,579 deaths statewide from June 2019 to May 2020.³²

California's Naloxone Distribution Project (NDP) provides naloxone free of charge to first responders, emergency medical services, law enforcement, veteran organizations, homeless programs, schools and universities, community organizations, etc. The NDP reports that it has distributed over 600,000 Naloxone units and recorded over 31,000 overdose reversals since October 2018.³³

FENTANYL: PRICE

The price of powder fentanyl rose slightly from a high of \$30,000 per kilogram in January 2020 to a high of \$32,000 per kilogram in May 2021.³⁴ The price can depend on the quality of the pill, the location, or whether purchased in bulk.

FENTANYL: TRANSPORTATION AND DISTRIBUTION

Mexico is the primary source of illicit fentanyl to the United States, superseding China. Consequently, DTOs based in Mexico smuggle fentanyl over the Southwest Border into the United States, typically alongside other illicit drug shipments. The CVC HIDTA encounters fentanyl transported through the Central Valley in commercial and private vehicles, oftentimes alongside other illicit drugs.

The distribution of fentanyl in pill form is a pervasive problem, especially in California. One of the commonly reported problems is that users are not always aware that they are purchasing pills pressed with fentanyl.

FENTANYL: PRODUCTION

Fentanyl is a synthetic drug produced in labs. Mexico is the primary producer of fentanyl, importing precursor chemicals from China and India. The Sinaloa Cartel and the CJNG dominate fentanyl production; most of the seized clandestine labs were in their territories.

Mexican authorities seized 1,301 kilograms in 2020, a 486% increase from CY 2019 when they seized 222 kilograms. They seized 175 fentanyl laboratories, which is almost twice what they raided in 2019.³⁵ In the fall of 2020, the Government of Mexico seized an industrial-scale fentanyl and methamphetamine

lab that could process 5,000 kilograms of raw material at a time. It was located in the outskirts of Mexico City.³⁶

FENTANYL: INTELLIGENCE GAPS

- Fentanyl is appearing in a vast array of colors. What affect does this have on demand?
- To what extent are Mexico-based DTOs utilizing industrial-scale labs to produce fentanyl?

HEROIN

HEROIN: AVAILABILITY

Heroin exacerbates the opioid epidemic because it is the drug most commonly laced with fentanyl. Fentanyl mixed with heroin occurs nine times more often than fentanyl mixed with cocaine.³⁷ In the Central Valley, black tar heroin remains the most available form of heroin and white heroin the least available.

- Over the last three years, CVC HIDTA enforcement initiatives have seized an increasing amount of heroin, from 62 kilograms in 2018 to 97 kilograms in 2020.³⁸
- Per NSS, during the same timeframe, seizures of all types of heroin in California decreased from 2,283 kilograms in 2018 to 2,268 kilograms in 2020.³⁹
- Per NSS, black tar heroin seizures in California increased 50% from 426 kilograms in 2018 to 641 kilograms in 2020.⁴⁰
- Per NSS, brown heroin seizures in California increased 31% from 525 kilograms in 2018 to 692 kilograms in 2020.⁴¹

HEROIN: USE

Heroin-related morbidity and mortality data from CDPH indicates that California residents in the 12 CVC HIDTA counties suffered fewer emergency department visits but more hospitalizations and deaths.⁴² As stated previously, it is highly likely that fentanyl exacerbated the rise in hospitalizations and deaths.

- Emergency department visits decreased 12%—from 654 in CY 2017 to 572 in CY 2019.
- Hospitalizations increased 6%—from 94 in CY 2017 to 100 in CY 2019.
- Deaths increased 16%—from 86 in CY 2017 to 100 in CY 2019.⁴³

HEROIN: PRICE

As with drug use, there is some variance in the price of heroin across the CVC HIDTA due to the large geographic scope of the region, as well as differences in the prices of black tar heroin and white heroin. A look at the heroin prices reported in the *CVC HIDTA Quarterly Newsletter* shows that the overall price of heroin (all forms) remained steady in CY 2020, beginning at \$11,550 per pound in the first quarter and rising slightly to \$11,583 in the second quarter before holding steady for the remainder of the year.⁴⁴

In November 2020, the DEA Heroin Signature Program reported the following purity levels for heroin from Mexico:

- The average purity of black tar decreased from 51% in 2018 to 48% in 2019.
- The average purity of brown powder increased from 39% in 2018 to 42% in 2019.
- The average purity of white powder decreased from 83% in 2018 to 78% in 2019.⁴⁵

HEROIN: PRODUCTION

DTOs based in Mexico produce the majority of U.S. heroin. In July 2020, ONDCP announced a significant reduction in poppy cultivation in Mexico. According to their report, the Mexican government's efforts to provide alternative livelihoods for drug-producing farmers led to a 27% decrease in poppy cultivation—from 41,800 hectares in 2018 to 30,400 hectares in 2019.⁴⁶

HEROIN: INTELLIGENCE GAPS

- What percent of fentanyl-related morbidity and mortality cases involved heroin?
- Will the reduction in poppy cultivation in Mexico lead to a corresponding reduction in heroin production?

ILLICIT MARIJUANA

ILLICIT MARIJUANA: AVAILABILITY

Even though marijuana is illegal under federal law, medical marijuana has been legal in California since 1996 and recreational marijuana has been legal in California since January 1, 2017. The CVC HIDTA focuses on illicit marijuana and tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) extracts that violate state laws or meets the threshold for federal violations under the Cole Memorandum. Over the last three years (2018 to 2020), the amount of illicit marijuana has increased steadily.

- The CVC HIDTA seized 662,063 kilograms of illicit marijuana in CY 2020. This is a 2% increase from 2018 (646,262 kilograms).
- The final DCESP statistical report for CY 2020 indicates that law enforcement agencies in California seized 3,740,368 marijuana plants from 1,533 illicit grow sites. They seized an additional 72,487 kilograms of processed marijuana. (An unknown percent of this total overlaps with CAMP statistics.) This is an average of 2,440 plants and 47 kilograms processed marijuana seized per site, which is greater than 2018 when authorities seized 2,034 plants and 163 kilograms processed material per illicit grow site.⁴⁷
- Per NSS, the number of THC extraction labs seized in California continues to decrease from 133 labs in 2018 to 26 labs in 2020.⁴⁸ The number of labs yielding 20 pounds or more of THC extract has increased, though.

ILLICIT MARIJUANA: USE

Marijuana-related morbidity and mortality data for California residents in the 12 CVC HIDTA counties indicates that illicit marijuana use remains a problem. Please note that public health providers did not distinguish between illicit or licit, medical or recreational marijuana when collecting their data. Therefore, this data refers to marijuana use in general.

- Emergency department admissions increased slightly from 344 in CY 2017 to 357 in CY 2019.
- Hospitalizations increased 40%—from 75 in CY 2017 to 105 in CY 2019.
- Deaths increased slightly from five in CY 2017 to six in CY 2019.⁴⁹

A new article in the medical journal *JAMA Open* reports an increasing number of calls—28,630 calls from 2017 through 2019—to Poison Control centers in the United States by people who have consumed too much cannabis in its various forms. The majority of calls came from healthcare facilities on behalf of poisoned individuals.⁵⁰

ILLICIT MARIJUANA: PRICE

The price of marijuana in the CVC HIDTA can vary based on a number of factors that include but are not limited to type, quality, amount purchased; type of product; quality; time of year; and point of sale in the region. As stated earlier, this report only addresses the price of illicit marijuana and marijuana products.

The prices reported by the CVC HIDTA enforcement initiative during 2020 shows marijuana prices held steady at an average \$1,300 per pound.⁵¹ This price reflects high quality marijuana.

In 2019, according to the University of Mississippi, the average THC potency of traditional marijuana was 13.85% while the average THC potency of concentrated marijuana was 53.63%.⁵²

ILLICIT MARIJUANA: TRANSPORTATION AND DISTRIBUTION

The Central Valley's robust highway system is the dominant method used by marijuana traffickers to transport marijuana through the region and to markets all over the United States. Traffickers may use personal or commercial vehicles to transport the material.

A significant amount of marijuana is trafficked through the U.S. mail and private parcel companies. The U.S. Postal Inspection Service's Administrative Non-Mailability Protocol (ANP) program, established to remove marijuana from the mail system, processed 54,877 packages suspected of containing marijuana in FY 2019.⁵³

ILLICIT MARIJUANA: INTELLIGENCE GAPS

- Are DTOs or organized criminal elements behind the rise of large-scale THC extraction and distillation labs?

- To what extent will the influx of competing ethnic groups affect rates of violence in northern California?

COCAINE

COCAINE: AVAILABILITY

The availability of cocaine in the United States remained steady in CY 2020 despite fluctuations in the market at the beginning of the pandemic.⁵⁴

- The CVC HIDTA seized 158 kilograms in CY 2020. This is a decrease from the 186 kilograms seized in CY 2018, but an increase from the 108 kilograms seized in CY 2019.⁵⁵
- Per NSS, over the last three years, law enforcement authorities in California seized 8% more cocaine powder—from 758 kilograms in CY 2018 to 822 kilograms in CY 2020.

COCAINE: USE

The consumption of cocaine and crack cocaine is on the rise in the United States. However, fentanyl appears to be driving an increase in cocaine-related deaths. Nationwide, overdose deaths involving cocaine mixed with some other drug increased 197% between 2013 and 2018, from 3,822 to 14,666. Overdose deaths involving just cocaine increased 28% during the same period.⁵⁶ Recent reports from the CDC indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic spurred a spike in overdose deaths involving cocaine by 26.5% from June 2019 to May 2020.⁵⁷

California reflects the nationwide trend. Morbidity and mortality data for California residents in the 12 CVC HIDTA counties shows the increasing influence of cocaine abuse.

- Emergency department mentions increased from 48 in CY 2017 to 51 in CY 2019.
- Hospitalizations increased 38%—from 77 in CY 2017 to 106 in CY 2019.
- Deaths increased 96%—from 49 in CY 2017 to 96 in CY 2019.⁵⁸

COCAINE: PRICE

The average price of cocaine in the Central Valley increased significantly in CY 2020—from \$12,583 per pound in CY 2019 to \$14,583 per pound in CY 2020. The fear of possible disruptions to cocaine supply at the beginning of the pandemic likely caused this rise in price.

The DEA Cocaine Signature Program tested 153 exhibits from 45 seizures in California and found an average cocaine HCl purity of 82.1%, while the average purity nationwide was 83.8%.⁵⁹

COCAINE: TRANSPORTATION AND DISTRIBUTION

The Central Valley is primarily a transit zone for cocaine destined for other parts of the United States and Canada. DTOs based in Mexico typically obtain multi-ton quantities of cocaine from South America, and then smuggle it through Central America and into the United States. Cocaine traffickers employ the

same smuggling methods to transport cocaine as they use to transport methamphetamine, heroin, and fentanyl.

COCAINE: PRODUCTION

Colombia remains the primary producer of cocaine distributed in the United States. However, in 2014, the Mexican government discovered a coca field in the Chiapas state near the Guatemalan border. This was a first for Mexico and prompted speculation that Mexico might try to reduce its dependence on South American cocaine by growing and producing its own. Recent reporting indicates that Mexico-based DTOs may be experimenting with coca production. In February 2021, the Mexican government eradicated a four-hectare plantation of coca and a cocaine production laboratory in the mountains of Guerrero state.

DEA recently reported that their counterparts in Honduras and Guatemala seized several coca fields and cocaine base laboratories in 2020. Honduran law enforcement seized 11 coca fields while Guatemala seized two.

COCAINE: INTELLIGENCE GAPS

- To what extent are Mexico-based DTOs involved in Central American coca cultivation and production?
- To what extent does fentanyl drive cocaine-related deaths?

DRUG TRAFFICKING ORGANIZATIONS

INTERNATIONAL DTOS

International DTOs participate in illicit drug sales that occur in more than one country.

INTERNATIONAL DTOS: AFFILIATIONS AND MEMBERSHIP

The CJNG and the Sinaloa Cartel are the predominant DTOs in the Central Valley. Although it is second to the Sinaloa Cartel in terms of nationwide strength, the CJNG is the dominant cartel in the Central Valley.

In the fall of 2020, the CVC HIDTA's Tri-County Drug Enforcement Team (TRIDENT) identified a methamphetamine trafficking organization. Supplied by the CJNG, the DTO operated stash houses in Los Angeles and Modesto, CA to distribute drugs in the Central Valley. TRIDENT arranged to purchase one pound of methamphetamine but two additional suspects delivered an additional 19 pounds of methamphetamine. TRIDENT arrested all three suspects on federal charges.

INTERNATIONAL DTOS: ACTIVITIES AND METHODS

The CVC HIDTA's investigations illustrate the poly-drug nature of the CJNG and the Sinaloa Cartel as well as their methods of operation. The international DTOs identified by the CVC HIDTA have direct contact

with drug sources in Mexico. They typically involve the seizure of wholesale amounts of methamphetamine, heroin, fentanyl, and/or cocaine that have been smuggled into the United States in vehicles. The DTO's methods of communication typically employ a mix of satellite phones, cell phones, social media, and encrypted messaging services.

The CVC HIDTA's High Intensity Impact Team (HIIT) investigated narcotics brokers working in Mexico and California who were distributing a variety of illegal narcotics to the United States. HIIT intercepted seven cell phones utilized by three brokers and one distributor, which allowed the enforcement initiative to identify distribution networks in Colorado, Nebraska, New York, and Oregon. Over the course of this investigation, HIIT arrested 21 subjects on federal drug trafficking charges.

MULTI-STATE/REGIONAL DTOS

Multi-state/regional DTOs establish and maintain drug trafficking networks in more than one state.

MULTI-STATE/REGIONAL DTOS: AFFILIATIONS AND MEMBERSHIPS

Multi-state/regional DTOs based in the Central Valley often have ties to organizations in other parts of the country or they may operate across state lines. In general, multi-state/regional DTOs affiliate themselves with a larger cartel that acts as a drug source of supply or be members of a regional gang, such as the *Norteños*. They utilize similar communication and transportation methods as international DTOs.

MULTI-STATE/REGIONAL DTOS: ACTIVITIES AND METHODS

Multi-state DTOs operate the same way international DTOs do, but with a smaller geographic reach that does not extend outside of the United States. Marijuana trafficking organizations exemplify multi-state DTOs because they can run the full spectrum of criminal activities from production to distribution. In general, though, multi-state DTOs rely upon communication networks to establish and maintain their organization. They also exploit the domestic infrastructure, such as U.S. roadways, to transport their illicit goods.

On March 4, 2020, the CVC HIDTA's Sacramento Area Intelligence/Narcotics Team (SAINT) and the DEA executed two search warrants on a multi-state marijuana trafficking DTO based in Grass Valley, CA. The investigation, which began two years earlier in Texas, targeted a young and successful Dallas entrepreneur who sold his health care company for almost \$100 million, and then purchased multiple properties in Northern California to grow marijuana. The subject transported the marijuana to Texas inside soda vending machines in semi-trailers, and then used his private jet to fly the cash proceeds back to California. Law enforcement authorities seized at least \$5 million in drug proceeds from the DTO.

LOCAL DTOS

Local DTOs have a limited geographic area.

LOCAL DTOS: AFFILIATIONS AND MEMBERSHIP

Like their international and multi-state counterparts, local DTOs in the Central Valley affiliate themselves with a larger organization that acts as a source of supply, such as the *Norteños*.

In July 2020, the CVC HIDTA's Stanislaus Special Investigations Unit (SIU) concluded a four-month long investigation into three *Norteño* gang subsets—Turlocos, *Familia Unida*, and Varrios West Side Turlock—that operated in the Turlock area. Through a combination of traditional investigative techniques, the authorization of electronic surveillances, and social media exploitation, SIU uncovered evidence of poly-drug sales, illegal weapons sales, robberies, home invasions, and other criminal activities.

LOCAL DTOS: ACTIVITIES AND METHODS

Local DTOs operate in much the same way as larger criminal organizations. With the exception of illicit marijuana trafficking where organization members cultivate and process the drug themselves, local DTOs in the Central Valley primarily distribute narcotics they obtain from Mexico although the investigations were unable to identify and pursue a source. Although they cover a smaller geographic area, local DTOs also rely upon similar communication and transportation networks to conduct their criminal activities.

DRUG TRAFFICKING ORGANIZATIONS: INTELLIGENCE GAPS

- To what extent do the Los Zetas influence marijuana operations in Northern California?

OUTLOOK

The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented event. It introduced new elements into the illicit drug trafficking environment, and it continues to drive drug demand.

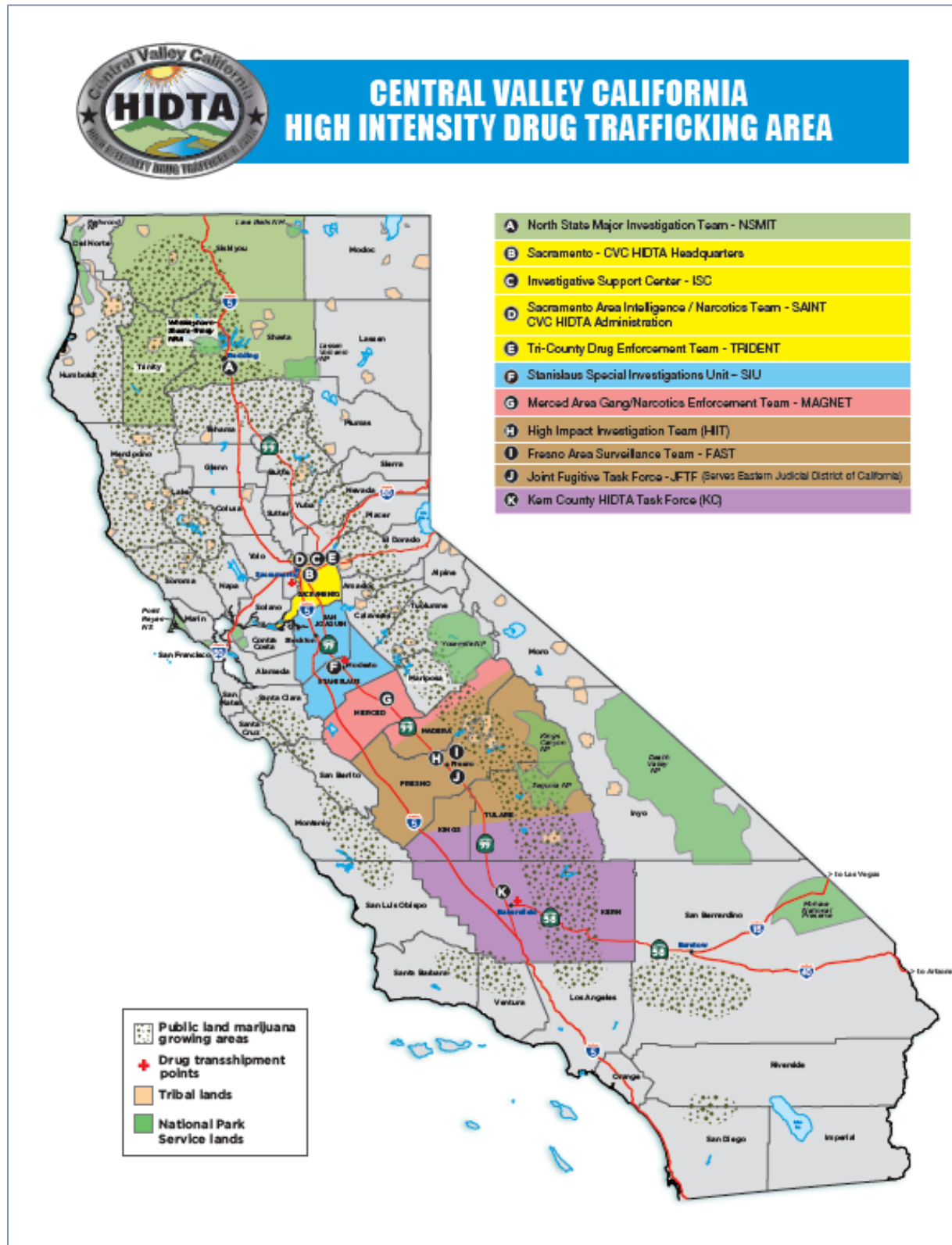
The CVC HIDTA Executive Board anticipates that fentanyl may displace methamphetamine as the Central Valley's most serious drug threat in CY 2021. It is uncertain whether the supply of fentanyl will continue to grow or level off if the market becomes saturated. It is likely, unfortunately, that fentanyl will continue to cause drug-related deaths.

Black tar heroin will remain the most popular form of heroin used in CVC HIDTA's AOR. Its growing popularity in other parts of the country may lead DTOs based in Mexico to provide an increasing supply that transits the Central Valley.

Cocaine may overtake marijuana as the CVC HIDTA's fourth significant drug threat. In the early part of CY 2021, the ISC noted a significant seizure of crack cocaine in Stanislaus County and flagged it for further observation in case it developed into a trend. Although cocaine use might increase, it is more likely that Mexico-based DTOs will continue to transport cocaine through the Central Valley to Canada or other parts of the United States where there is a higher demand.

The illegal cultivation of marijuana on public and private lands will continue. It is possible violence will increase in Northern California as new criminal groups compete for the market. Illicit marijuana cultivation practices will continue to cause substantial harm to wildlife and the environment.

APPENDIX A: MAP OF THE CENTRAL CALLEY CALIFORNIA HIDTA



APPENDIX B: SOURCE DESCRIPTIONS AND CONFIDENCE RATINGS

Information Source	Description	Confidence Rating
<i>Drug Threat Assessment Survey for CVC HIDTA Initiative Commanders</i>	HIDTA program staff developed a set of questions forming a survey relating to the ranking of drug threats and the factors used to decide the ranks, as well as other drug crime information. The survey was delivered to regional law enforcement leaders in February 2019 via the HIDTA survey system. There were 46 completed responses.	Confident
<i>CA Dept. of Public Health (CDPH)</i>	CDPH prepared a report for the CVC HIDTA containing information relative to mortality, hospital admissions, and emergency room (ER) encounters. DPH provides the same data specific to opioid drugs on its Opioid Dashboard, as well as prescription rates for opioid drugs.	Highly Confident
<i>HIDTA Performance Management Process (PMP)</i>	The PMP database includes enforcement statistics, DTO characteristics, and other information related to the activities of HIDTA initiatives.	Highly Confident
<i>Law Enforcement Agency Records</i>	Data from law enforcement sources such as DEA's Domestic Cannabis Eradication//Suppression Program (DCE//SP), National Drug Threat Assessment, Campaign Against Marijuana Planting (CAMP), Western States Information Network (WSIN) and similar sources were utilized.	Highly Confident
<i>Integrated Ecology Research Center (IERC)</i>	The IERC, a non-profit organization concerned with the conservation of wildlife and ecosystems, partners with Federal land management agencies, the national HIDTA Program and the CAMP program to document and assesses the environmental damage caused by illegal marijuana cultivation on public lands.	Highly Confident
<i>Anecdotal Sources</i>	Media reports, drug use surveys, discussions with HIDTA initiative members, members of allied law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, and other professionals provide details and insight not provided by other sources were utilized.	Confident

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