



North Central HIDTA 2026 Threat Assessment

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2026 NC HIDTA THREAT ASSESSMENT SATISFACTION SURVEY

(U) 2026 TREAT ASSESSMENT SCOPE

(U) The 2026 North Central High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas (HIDTA) Threat Assessment outlines current and emerging illicit drug trends impacting the region's two-state area. It delivers timely, strategic intelligence to inform law enforcement leadership and policymakers as they develop effective enforcement strategies aimed at improving public safety. The assessment provides a comprehensive overview of the regional drug threat, with a focus on abuse patterns, transportation methods, and the trafficking organizations operating within the area. It fulfills statutory and grant requirements set forth by the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) and has been approved by the North Central HIDTA Executive Board.

(U) EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

(U) Fentanyl remains the most significant drug threat to the North Central HIDTA Region (NCHR), primarily due to its strong correlation with drug poisoning deaths. This assessment is supported by findings from the North Central HIDTA (NCH) Law Enforcement Survey (LES), Public Health Survey (PHS), and Performance Management Process (PMP) reports submitted by participating law enforcement initiatives.

(U//FOUO) Methamphetamine and cocaine continue to rank as the second- and third-highest drug threats in the region, respectively. In 2024, the percentage of identified Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs) classified as violent increased compared to the previous year, as did the proportion of gang-affiliated DTOs. The number of polydrug DTOs also rose from 2023 to 2024, reflecting expanded trafficking operations involving multiple drug types.

(U) The NCHR central location within the continental United States (U.S.), along with its extensive roadway infrastructure, continues to make it a key corridor for DTOs and other criminal organizations transporting illicit drugs into and through the area.

(U) The following bullets highlight key aspects of the current drug and DTO threat landscape in the NCHR:

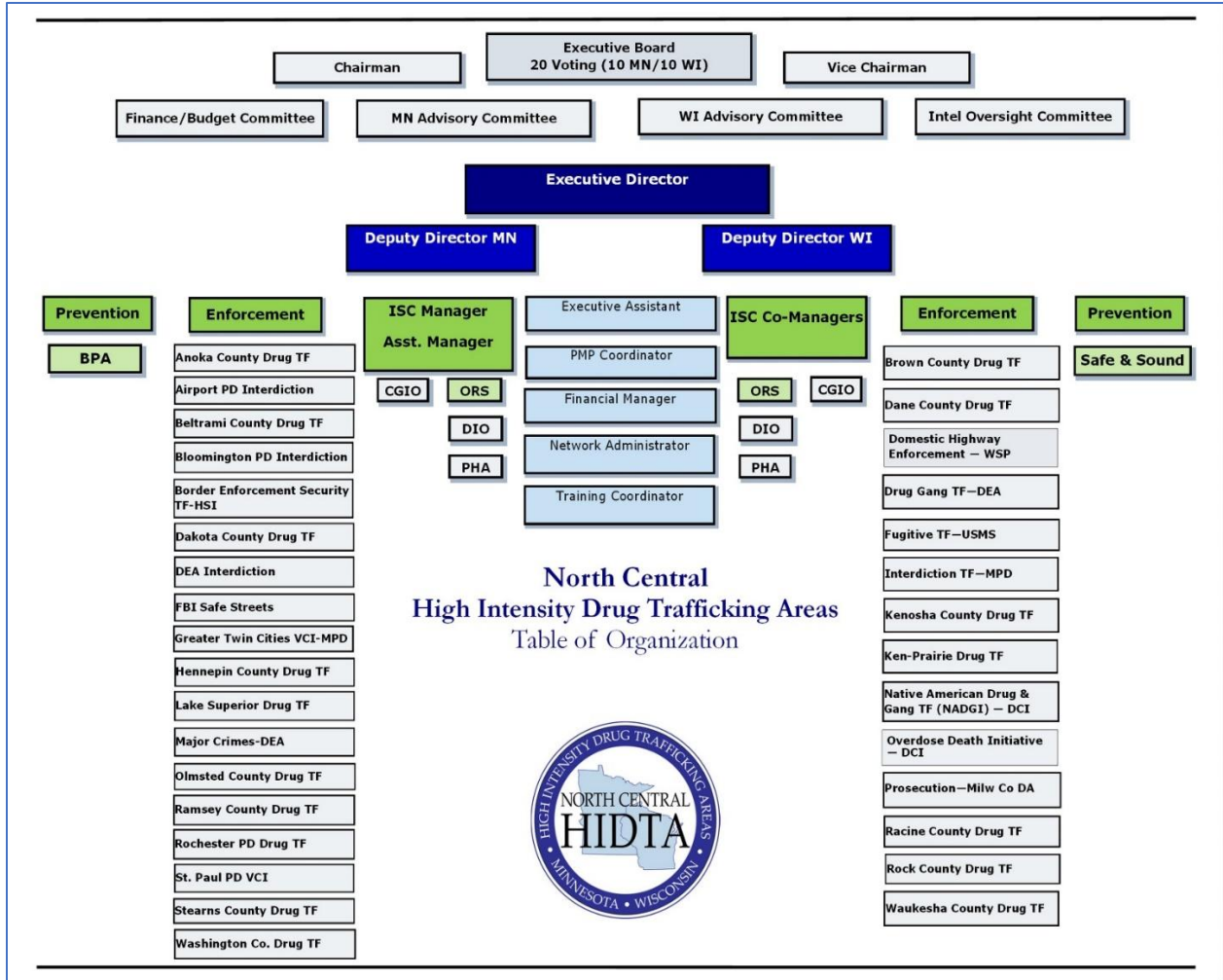
- (U) Methamphetamine, cocaine, and marijuana continue to be the most widely available and frequently used illicit substances across the region.
- (U) DTOs most commonly transport illicit substances using privately owned vehicles, the United States Postal Service (USPS), and commercial parcel delivery services such as Federal Express (FedEx) and United Parcel Service (UPS).

- (U//FOUO) In 2024, NCH law enforcement initiatives identified 168 active DTOs involving 1,495 members, representing a 61 percent increase from the 104 DTOs documented in 2023.
- (U) DTOs operating in the region are increasingly leveraging technology to manage operations. This includes the use of encrypted messaging apps, social media platforms, and GPS tracking devices to communicate, process payments, and monitor courier movements.

(U) NORTH CENTRAL HIDTA REGION

Population

(U) The counties designated within the NCHR encompass significant portions of Minnesota and Wisconsin, representing over 54 percent of the combined estimated 11.8 million residents in both states, according to the latest U.S. Census Bureau data. As of 2024, Minnesota's population was 5,793,151, with Hennepin, Ramsey, Dakota, and Anoka Counties, each located within the NCHR, among the most populous in the state.¹ Wisconsin's population reached 5,960,975, with Milwaukee, Dane, Waukesha, and Brown Counties serving as major population centers within the region. These demographic trends underscore the NCHR's vital role in addressing drug-related challenges and supporting public safety across a growing and diverse population.²



(U) Figure 2; NC HIDTA Table of Organization

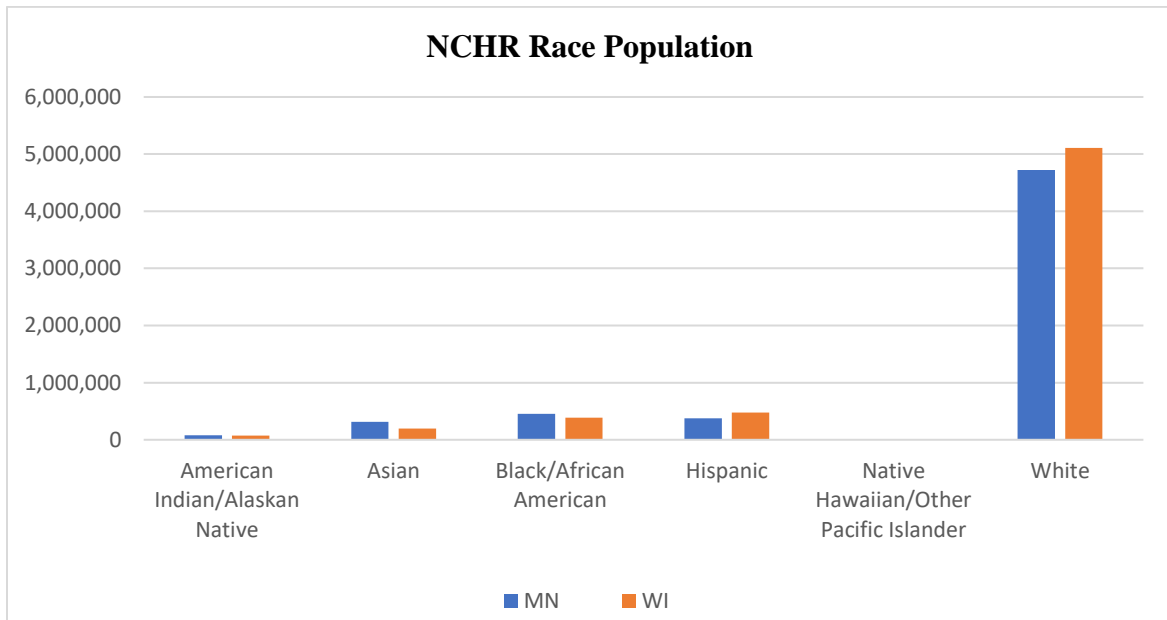
(U) The NCHR includes 17 ONDCP designated counties and supports more than 30 law enforcement, prosecution, and prevention initiatives. These initiatives involve over 150 participating agencies at the federal, state, local, and tribal levels. The Management & Coordination initiative, Training initiative, and Information Technology initiative provide administrative and operational support throughout the NCHR.

(U) Additionally, the region is supported by two Investigative Support Centers (ISCs), located in West Allis, Wis., and Minneapolis, Minn., These ISCs deliver criminal intelligence and deconfliction services to investigators throughout the NCHR.

(U) Per HIDTA Program policy, the NCH is overseen by an Executive Board composed of state, local, and federal law enforcement leaders. The Board is further supported by several committees that meet quarterly to provide recommendations and support strategic decision making.

Demographics

(U) The NCHR exhibits similar demographic patterns in racial composition, educational attainment, and poverty rates. Both Minnesota and Wisconsin are predominantly white but are becoming increasingly diverse, with growing Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Indigenous populations. Minnesota is home to one of the largest Somali populations in the U.S. Both states rank above the national average in high school graduation rates and postsecondary attainment, reflecting strong educational systems and workforce development initiatives. However, disparities persist, especially among minority communities, where access to higher education and overall attainment levels often lag state averages.



(U) Figure 3; US Census Bureau ³

(U) Poverty levels in the NCHR have remained relatively stable in recent years, generally aligning with or slightly below national averages, and are expected to remain largely unchanged soon.⁴

(U) Geography

(U) The NCHR encompasses 17 counties that span urban, suburban, and rural areas. The rural landscape is characterized by abundant lakes, fertile lowlands, and vast forests, which support a diverse range of agricultural activities. Both states are national leaders in the production of corn, soybeans, wheat, forestry products, and dairy and livestock. These natural resources not only define the region’s geography but also play a central role in shaping its economy and way of life.

(U) Key Transportation Nodes

(U) The NCHR, situated within a busy transportation corridor, is connected by an extensive network of interstates, state highways, railways, seaports, and airports. This robust infrastructure enables rapid access to much of the U.S. population, making transportation a cornerstone of commerce across the region. However, it also creates significant opportunities for DTOs and other criminal groups to exploit for the movement of illicit goods.

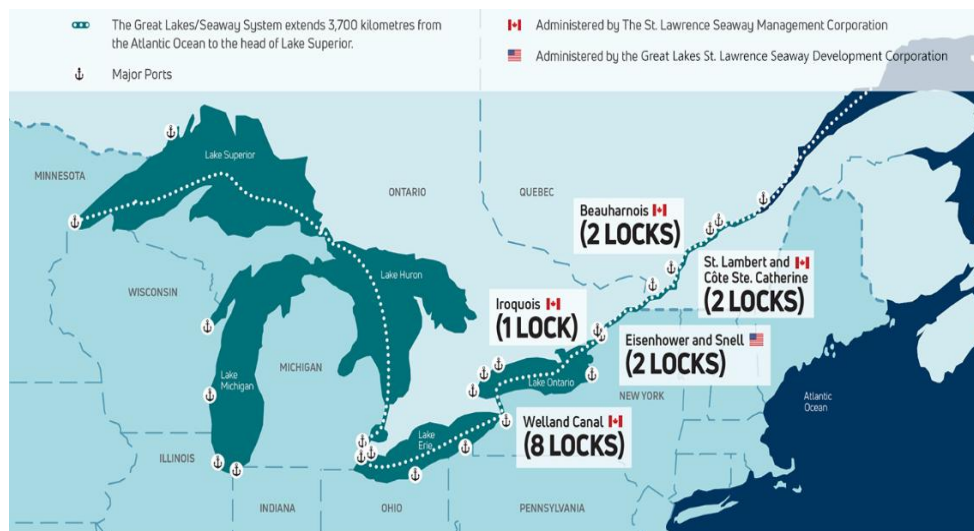
(U) NCH Maritime Region

(U) The Great Lakes, comprising Lakes Superior, Michigan, Huron, Erie, and Ontario, span more than 94,000 square miles, accounting for one fifth of the world’s surface freshwater and nearly 90 percent of the U.S. supply. Lake Superior, the largest by surface area, borders two countries, three U.S. states, and one Canadian province. Lake Michigan, the third largest, lies entirely within the U.S. and supports roughly 12 million residents.

(U) Within the NCHR, Lake Michigan serves as Wisconsin’s main commercial waterway, offering 800 miles of shoreline between it and Lake Superior. Key Wisconsin ports are in Brown, Kenosha, Racine, and Milwaukee Counties. Minnesota ports in Silver Bay, Two Harbors, and the Duluth Superior complex are critical to regional and international trade.⁵

(U) The Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Seaway System, managed jointly by the U.S. and Canada, moves about 32 million tons of cargo annually and underpins much of the region’s economy. The Mississippi River also provides a vital commercial link from the Gulf of America to Wisconsin and Minnesota.⁶

(U) In 2024, the Port of Duluth-Superior moved approximately 26.8 million metric tons of cargo. The Port of Milwaukee moved about 2.5 million metric tons.⁷



(U) Figure 5; The Great Lakes/St. Lawrence Seaway System⁸

(U) Air

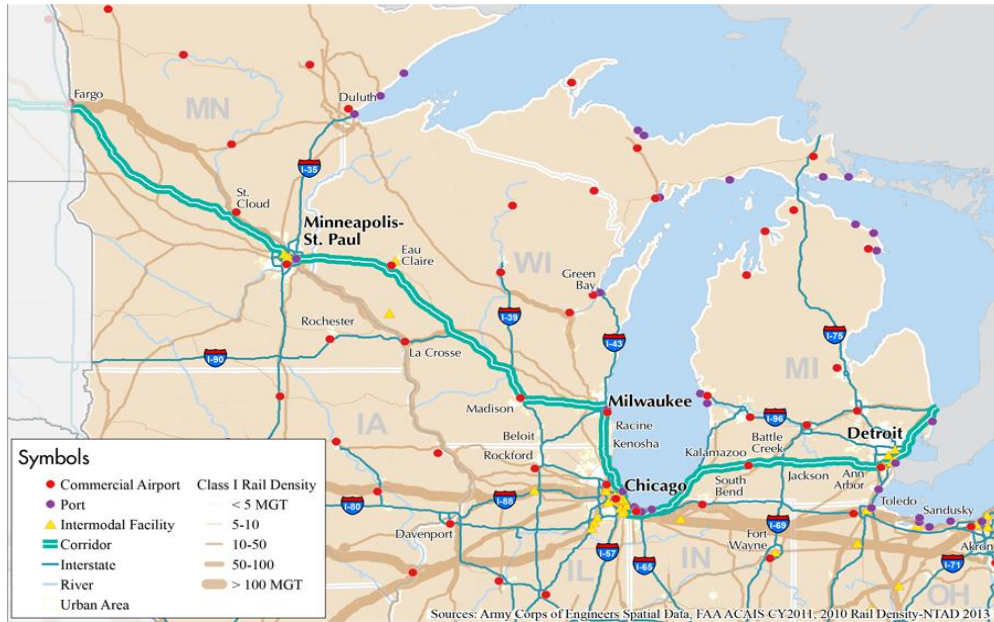
(U) Air transportation plays a critical role in the movement of illicit drugs across the NCHR. As of 2025, there are approximately 230 public-use airports in the region. The primary air hubs include Minneapolis–St. Paul International Airport (MSP) in Minnesota and Milwaukee Mitchell International Airport (MKE) in Wisconsin.

(U) Commercial air travel enables criminal organizations to quickly transport personnel, narcotics, and illicit proceeds across state and international borders. Passenger flights support courier movement and bulk cash smuggling, while cargo services provide opportunities to conceal contraband within legitimate shipments. The speed, volume, and complexity of air transportation make it an essential tool for traffickers seeking to expand operations and avoid law enforcement detection.^{9 10}

(U) Interstate Highways

(U) The NCHR's highway system facilitates efficient vehicle travel while also serving as a critical network for DTOs transporting drugs, weapons, cash, and other contraband. Key corridors include Interstate 35 (I-35), which runs north-south from Mexico to Canada through the Twin Cities; Interstate 94 (I-94), an east-west route from Montana to Michigan that provides direct access to the Chicago metropolitan area, a major source and distribution hub; and Interstate 90 (I-90), a coast-to-coast highway intersecting I-35 near Minneapolis. I-90 and I-94 are vital to trafficking activity due to their national reach and connections to major urban centers.

(U) U.S. Highways 10, 12, and 61 further enhance regional mobility and offer alternate routes traffickers may use to evade detection. In Wisconsin, Interstate 39 (I-39) and Interstate 43 (I-43) serve as key intrastate corridors. I-39 runs north-south from Normal, Illinois, through Madison, Portage, and Wausau, merging with I-51 near Rothschild. I-43, entirely within Wisconsin, extends from Beloit near the Illinois border through Janesville and Milwaukee to Green Bay, terminating in Howard. These routes form important links within the broader interstate trafficking network.¹¹



(U) Figure 6; Interstate Map¹²

(U) Rail

(U) The NCHR contains over 7,700 miles of rail lines, connecting it to major distribution hubs across the U.S. and Canada. Passenger rail systems, including Amtrak, are frequently exploited by DTOs due to limited security screening, minimal passenger identification requirements, and reduced interdiction compared to other transportation modes. There are 14 Amtrak stations located throughout the NCHR.

(U) While recent drug seizures involving rail transport generally include smaller quantities than those found in vehicle interdictions, these incidents highlight ongoing vulnerabilities within passenger rail systems. DTOs continue to use rail networks to move illicit drugs, currency, and other contraband across the NCHR.¹³



(U) Figure 7; MN¹⁴ & WI Amtrak¹⁵ Routes

operational effectiveness. These initiatives aim to disrupt illicit drug and gang activity involving both Native and non-Native individuals on tribal lands by fostering interagency cooperation and supporting tribal efforts to confront public safety threats within their jurisdictions.²⁰

(U) DRUG THREATS

(U) OPIOIDS: FENTANYL, FENTANYL RELATED SUBSTANCES, HEROIN & PRESCRIPTION MEDICATIONS

(U) Overview

(U) As of 2024, fentanyl and fentanyl-related substances (FRS) remain the most significant drug threat in the NCHR according to law enforcement and public health communities. The extreme potency, direct link to most overdose fatalities, and strong association with violence and property crimes continue to drive both law enforcement operations and public health responses. While overall illicit drug seizures declined slightly between 2023 and 2024, volumes remain significantly above pre-2020 levels.²¹

(U) Drug availability across the region continues to be shaped by evolving market dynamics, shifting trafficking routes, and sustained enforcement pressure. Drug-related violence and property crimes remain persistent concerns, with DTO-related disputes and targeted attacks frequently resulting in shootings. Additionally, individuals with substance use disorders are often involved in theft, fraud, or fall victim to human trafficking and exploitation while attempting to support their addictions.

(U) Fentanyl Availability & Use

(U) Fentanyl and fentanyl related substances (FRS) continues to dominate drug seizures across the NCHR, with growing concern over the widespread availability of counterfeit pills containing the substance. These counterfeit pills are often pressed to resemble legitimate pharmaceuticals, such as various oxycodone products or Xanax (alprazolam), significantly increasing the risk of unintentional overdose. A lethal dose of fentanyl is estimated at approximately two milligrams, though risk levels vary based on individual tolerance, body weight, and health conditions. Fentanyl contamination also presents exposure risks for law enforcement and first responders.

(U) In 2024, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) seized over 60 million counterfeit fentanyl pills and nearly 8,000 pounds of fentanyl powder nationwide, representing more than 377 million potentially lethal doses. However, the illicit production and distribution of fentanyl and its analogs now account for a significant share of fatal overdoses.²²

(U) Pharmaceutical-grade fentanyl, approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), remains in medical use in forms such as lozenges, nasal sprays, injectables, and transdermal patches. However, illicit fentanyl and its analogs now account for many overdose deaths.

(U) Despite these ongoing threats, the NCHR experienced a slight decline in reported fentanyl use in 2024. This reduction is likely attributable to enhanced prevention efforts, targeted interdiction operations, harm reduction strategies, and improved coordination among public safety and public health agencies. Still, the production and distribution of counterfeit fentanyl pills is increasing, with confirmed pill press operations identified across the region.

(U//FOUO) Drug traffickers are also employing visual marketing tactics by introducing colored fentanyl powders into the illicit supply, particularly targeting younger users. Purple and grey fentanyl variants have been identified throughout the NCHR. While the specific coloring agents used have not been publicly confirmed, it is believed that traffickers may be utilizing food dyes, industrial pigments, or powdered drink mixes. These modifications are likely intended to differentiate product lines or enhance appeal among adolescent and young adult populations.²³

(U) Production

(U) The Sinaloa Cartel and *Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación* (CJNG) remain the dominant producers of illicit fentanyl trafficked into the U.S. Initially, much of the illicit fentanyl and FRS entering the U.S. were manufactured in China and shipped directly to buyers. However, increased international regulation and enforcement actions prompted a shift in production strategies.²⁴

(U) Today, precursor chemicals such as N-phenethyl-4-piperidone (NPP) and 4-anilino-N-phenethylpiperidine (4-ANPP) are primarily sourced from China and shipped to Mexico, where cartels have established large-scale clandestine laboratories. In these labs, fentanyl and FRS are synthesized in both powder and counterfeit pill forms. The finished product is then trafficked through cartel-controlled corridors along the U.S.–Mexico border and distributed throughout the U.S.²⁵

(U) This decentralized production model has allowed cartels to scale operations, evade regulation, and adapt quickly to enforcement efforts. The availability of synthetic precursors and the low cost of production contribute to Fentanyl's continued dominance in the illicit drug market.

(U) Common Street Names for Fentanyl

*Apache, China Girl, China Town, Dance Fever, Friend, Goodfellas, Great Bear, He-Man, Jackpot, King Ivory, Murder 8, and Tango & Cash.*²⁶

(U) Prescription Medications Availability & Use

(U) The availability of diverted prescription medications such as OxyContin (oxycodone), Vicodin (oxycodone and acetaminophen), morphine, methadone, and codeine, continues to decline across the region. Despite the decrease, these drugs are still misused in various forms, including tablets, capsules, patches, oral and injectable liquids, and syrups. Ingestion remains the most common method of use, followed by smoking and injections.

(U) Illicit access is typically obtained through means such as theft from family members, doctor shopping, forged prescriptions, or theft from pharmacies and healthcare facilities. Although the volume of diverted prescription opioids has decreased, counterfeit versions adulterated with fentanyl, or its analogs remain a contributing factor in regional overdose deaths.²⁷

(U) Common Street Names for Prescription Opioids

Smack, Horse, Mud, Brown Sugar, Junk, Black Tat, Big H, Hillbilly Heroin, OC, Oxy, Oxycotton, Purple Drank, Lean, Sippin Syrup.²⁸

(U) Heroin Availability & Use

(U) White powder heroin remains more prevalent in the eastern U.S. and Great Lakes states, while black tar and brown heroin are more commonly found west of the Mississippi River.²⁹ In the NCHR, heroin seizures declined significantly from 2018 to 2023 but experienced a slight increase in 2024.

(U) Heroin, a Schedule I drug derived from morphine, is primarily sourced from Mexico and South America. It is most often injected but can also be smoked or snorted. Across the NCHR, seizures increasingly show heroin mixed with fentanyl, significantly raising overdose risks, particularly for users unaware of the drug's contents.³⁰

(U) Common Street Names for Heroin

Big H, Black Tar, Chiva, Hell Dust, Horse, Negra, Smack, Thunder.³¹

(U) Fentanyl, Fentanyl Related Substances, & Heroin Source Supplier Demographics

(U) Illicit drug suppliers in the NCHR range in ages from 18 to 60 and represent diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. In Minnesota, a notable concentration of Somali traffickers reflects regional population demographics and localized DTO activity.³²

(U) Fentanyl, Fentanyl Related Substances, & Heroin DTOs

(U//FOUO) In 2024, NCH law enforcement initiatives identified 32 active DTOs involved in fentanyl distribution and 17 associated with heroin trafficking. Fentanyl-related DTOs continue to

surpass heroin operations in size, sophistication, and overall threat, underscoring the region's growing reliance on synthetic opioids.³³

(U) NCHR Seizures and Cases

- In Duluth, Minn., the police seized a total of 1,741 M30 fentanyl pills. Of these, 1,434 were found on the suspect's person, and an additional 307 were recovered from his residence.³⁴
- In Middleton, Wis., two men were charged after renting a private aircraft and flying from Arizona to the Middleton Airport with approximately 46.4 kilograms of M30 fentanyl pills and 17.5 kilograms of a methamphetamine-fentanyl mixture.³⁵

(U) Adulterants

(U) Nitazenes, including metonitazene, etonitazene, isotonitazene, and protonitazene, are synthetic opioids classified as Schedule I substances under the Controlled Substances Act. With potencies exceeding that of fentanyl, these compounds were first identified in the U.S. in 2019. Nitazenes are often combined with fentanyl to intensify its euphoric and respiratory depressant effects. While they are believed to be primarily synthesized and distributed by domestic mid- and street-level dealers, nitazenes remain accessible through China-based online chemical suppliers and may also be obtainable by Mexican cartels.³⁶

(U//FOUO) Medetomidine is a veterinary sedative that is more potent than xylazine. It can cause severe adverse effects including bradycardia, hypotension, dry mouth, hypothermia, and muscle twitching. Although naloxone (Narcan) does not reverse medetomidine's effects, its administration is still recommended due to the frequent presence of opioids in polydrug exposures. The Minnesota Public Health Laboratory confirmed the presence of medetomidine in seized purple powder samples, underscoring growing concerns about its emergence in the regional drug supply. One sample contained fentanyl, heroin, cocaine, para-fluorofentanyl, medetomidine, and xylazine. A second sample tested positive for a complex mix including fentanyl, heroin, ortho-methyl fentanyl, para-fluorofentanyl, parachlorofentanyl, cocaine, delta-9 THC, ketamine, methamphetamine, medetomidine, xylazine, quinine, and tramadol.³⁷

(U) Xylazine is a non-opioid veterinary tranquilizer increasingly found in fentanyl-containing drug mixtures. Though not a controlled substance at the federal level, xylazine is associated with serious health effects, including necrotic skin ulcers, soft tissue infections, and respiratory depression. It is not responsive to naloxone, further complicating overdose response efforts. Xylazine has been confirmed in approximately 47 percent of analyzed drug samples in the NCHR, indicating widespread penetration into the local supply.³⁸

(U//FOUO) Bis (2,2,6,6-tetramethyl-4-piperidyl) sebacate (BTMPS), Also known as Tinuvin 770, BTMPS is an industrial ultraviolet (UV) stabilizer not approved for human use. When smoked, it

emits a distinct burnt plastic odor and does not appear to produce any psychoactive or euphoric effects. Although its pharmacological effects are largely unknown, the presence of BTMPS raises significant health concerns due to its potential toxicity.³⁹

(U) NCHR 2024 Seizure Totals

(U//FOUO) In 2024, authorities in the NCHR seized approximately 125 kilograms of fentanyl, 9.8 kilograms of heroin, and 13.9 kilograms of prescription opioids, with a combined estimated street value of \$18.4 million. Counterfeit opioid pills were seized more frequently than legitimate prescription medications. While the total volume of fentanyl seized declined slightly from 2023 levels, the continued increase in pill-related seizures may indicate a potential rise in fentanyl pill trafficking in 2025.⁴⁰

(U) Key Intelligence Questions

- To what extent is fentanyl being mixed with other substances prior to consumer-level distribution?
- Are local dealers and end-users aware of the presence of fentanyl & FRS in the substances they distribute and consume?
- To what extent is xylazine infiltrating the illicit fentanyl & FRS supply chain in the NCHR?
- What are the significant factors contributing to the recent decline in fentanyl-related overdose incidents?
- To what extent are BTMPS and other chemical analogs being identified in the illicit drug supply within the NCHR?

(U) STIMULANTS: METHAMPHETAMINES

(U) Overview

(U//FOUO) Methamphetamine, a Schedule II stimulant under the Controlled Substances Act, has a high potential for abuse but remains legally available in limited FDA-approved medical formulations. Despite its restricted legal use, methamphetamine continues to pose a significant threat to the NCHR due to its widespread availability, high purity, and low cost. These characteristics are largely driven by large-scale clandestine production operated by Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs).

(U) The drug's potency and affordability contribute to high levels of use, particularly among individuals with substance use disorders. This widespread use exacerbates the regional overdose crisis and places additional strain on already burdened healthcare and behavioral health systems.

(U//FOUO) Methamphetamine use is also strongly linked to drug-related violence, property crime, and other illicit activities. NCH law enforcement agencies frequently report firearm seizures during methamphetamine-related investigations, including stolen weapons and privately made firearms. The drug is commonly associated with property crimes such as theft, burglary, and vandalism, and offenses often prosecuted as misdemeanors. These patterns complicate enforcement efforts and contribute to high rates of recidivism among repeat offenders.⁴¹

(U) Availability and Use

(U) Methamphetamine remains widely available across the NCHR and is consistently ranked by law enforcement agencies as one of the top drug threats. In 2024, agencies identified methamphetamine as a primary concern due to its strong correlation with violent crime, property offenses, and increasing overdose incidents.⁴²

(U) Methamphetamine is commonly encountered in pill, powder, and crystal form (“Ice”). The crystal form, typically composed of blue-white rocks or glass-like shards, is most frequently smoked, but the drug is also snorted, injected, or ingested. NCH law enforcement has reported a growing number of cases involving methamphetamine mixed with other substances such as MDMA or heroin. These emerging poly-drug combinations elevate health risks and complicate treatment protocols for substance use disorders.⁴³

(U) Declining street-level prices across the region suggest an increase in supply and sustained consumer demand, indicating methamphetamine’s deepening presence within the regional illicit drug market.

(U) Production

(U) Large-scale methamphetamine production is dominated by Mexican TCOs. Prior to the 2000s, methamphetamine was frequently manufactured in the U.S. using ephedrine or pseudoephedrine as precursor chemicals. However, the implementation of strict regulatory controls on these substances led to a significant decline in domestic production. In response, TCOs shifted large-scale operations to Mexico, where access to precursors remains less restricted.

(U) Today, Mexican TCOs maintain industrial-scale laboratories capable of producing high-purity methamphetamine for widespread distribution across the U.S., including remote markets such as Hawaii. This shift has resulted in the U.S. becoming heavily reliant on foreign-sourced methamphetamine.

(U) Small-scale domestic methamphetamine production persists but remains very limited and is heavily reliant on precursor availability. Strict regulations and reporting requirements have made large-scale domestic manufacturing increasingly rare, reinforcing U.S. reliance on foreign-sourced methamphetamine.⁴⁴

(U) While domestic production has become rare, small-scale operations such as “one-pot” or “shake and bake” labs, persist in some areas. These are highly dependent on local precursor availability and are subject to strict regulatory oversight. Nevertheless, their impact on the overall methamphetamine supply is minimal.

(U) According to the DEA’s El Paso Intelligence Center (EPIC), domestic meth lab seizures have dropped dramatically, from 23,700 in 2004 to just 60 in 2023, marking a 20-year low and highlighting the overwhelming dominance of foreign-produced methamphetamine.⁴⁵

(U) Sourcing and Trafficking Routes

(U//FOUO) The Twin Cities, Minn., area remains a longstanding distribution hub for methamphetamine throughout the NCHR. However, recent Wisconsin-based investigations have identified a parallel trafficking route originating in Chicago, Illinois, and extending through Kenosha and Milwaukee to Sheboygan and Green Bay. This evolving route structure reflects the adaptability of DTOs in response to law enforcement pressure and supply chain disruptions.⁴⁶

(U//FOUO) In 2024, NCH law enforcement identified 38 active DTOs involved in methamphetamine distribution across the NCHR, underscoring the scale, coordination, and regional entrenchment of the methamphetamine threat.⁴⁷

(U) Cases and Seizures

(U) Methamphetamine seizures increased across the NCHR in 2024, reversing the post-2021 decline and highlighting sustained distribution activity and demand.

- (U) A Minnesota man was indicted for leading a Mexico-based DTO with connections to the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG. The organization trafficked methamphetamine, cocaine, and fentanyl throughout the region. Related seizures included more than 1,600 pounds of methamphetamine and 4 kilograms of cocaine.⁴⁸
- (U) In July 2024, an NCH law enforcement initiative seized 120.5 grams of methamphetamine during an enforcement operation.⁴⁹
- (U//FOUO) In November 2024, an NCH law enforcement initiative located and seized approximately 81,000 grams of crystal methamphetamine in Minneapolis, Minnesota.
- (//FOUO) Also in November 2024, an NCH law enforcement initiative discovered and dismantled a clandestine methamphetamine laboratory operating within a family residence in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The lab had the capacity to produce 20 pounds or more of methamphetamine.

(U//FOUO) In 2024, law enforcement agencies across the NCHR seized approximately 1,736 kilograms of methamphetamine, with an estimated street value of \$8,413,354. Much of this methamphetamine was sourced from Mexico and trafficked into the NCHR.⁵⁰

(U) Methamphetamine remains the second most significant drug threat in the NCHR, following fentanyl. It is strongly linked to violence and property crimes driven by addiction, as well as a rising number of overdose incidents. Most methamphetamine seized in the region is high-purity, foreign-produced, and distributed by TCO-affiliated DTOs. While limited domestic production still occurs using basic methods, these small-scale operations contribute minimally to the regional supply.

(U) Key Intelligence Questions

- Is methamphetamine being added to other illicit drugs prior to consumer-level distribution?
- What is the estimated volume of methamphetamine trafficked from the Minneapolis–St. Paul distribution hub into Wisconsin, other Upper Midwest states and Canada?
- What are the trafficking patterns of methamphetamine from the Twin Cities in Minnesota to Wisconsin, other Upper Midwest states and Canada?
- To what extent are Native American drug traffickers and Tribal lands being exploited for methamphetamine transportation into northern Minnesota and Canada?
- What are the primary methods and routes used to smuggle methamphetamine across the U.S.–Canada border in the NCHR?

(U) STIMULANTS: COCAINE AND CRACK COCAINE

(U) Overview

(U) Cocaine and cocaine base (commonly known as crack cocaine) continue to pose a significant public health and safety threat in the NCHR. As a powerful Schedule II stimulant with high potential for abuse and addiction, cocaine contributes to substance use disorders, overdose fatalities, and sustained challenges for law enforcement and healthcare systems. In 2024, agencies reported increased trafficking and seizures, suggesting a resurgence in regional distribution activity and an elevated threat environment.

(U) Availability and Use

(U) While national efforts remain focused on opioids, cocaine remains widely available across the NCHR and is associated with rising overdose deaths, trafficker profits, and treatment admissions. Powdered cocaine is more commonly encountered across the region, while crack cocaine use is concentrated in urban areas. Local distributors frequently convert powder cocaine into base form to meet specific market demands.

(U) Powdered cocaine is typically snorted or injected, whereas crack is smoked and sometimes mixed with marijuana or tobacco. Both forms are linked to a variety of health risks, including cardiovascular complications, psychosis, and increased vulnerability to overdose, especially when adulterated with fentanyl.

(U) Common Street Names

Blow, Coca, Coke, Crack, Flake, Snow, Soda Cot⁵¹

(U) Production

(U) Cocaine is a powerful and highly addictive stimulant derived from the leaves of the coca plant, which is primarily cultivated in Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia. These coca leaves are processed in remote clandestine laboratories, mostly in Colombia, operated by organized criminal groups. Through chemical extraction and purification, the leaves are converted into cocaine hydrochloride, the powdered form commonly trafficked into the U.S. Colombia remains the leading global producer, responsible for approximately 90 percent of the cocaine entering the U.S.⁵²

(U) Crack cocaine is a smokable form of cocaine derived from cocaine hydrochloride. It is produced by dissolving powdered cocaine in water and adding a base, typically sodium bicarbonate (baking soda) or ammonia. The mixture is heated until a solid, freebase cocaine precipitates out. This solid is then removed, dried, and broken into chunks or “rocks” for distribution.⁵³

(U) Trafficking and Distribution

(U) Colombian TCOs dominate global cocaine production and supply major Mexican cartels, including the Sinaloa Cartel, CJNG, and Gulf Cartel, which coordinate large-scale trafficking operations into the U.S. Cocaine enters the country primarily through the Southwest Border via land, air, and maritime routes, with major entry points including Arizona, Southern California, Texas, Florida, and Puerto Rico.

(U) Once inside the U.S., cocaine is funneled to distribution hubs such as Chicago, Illinois, and Minneapolis, Minnesota. From there, it is redistributed to both urban centers and rural markets throughout the Midwest, including the NCHR. In 2024, law enforcement identified 78 DTOs involved in cocaine distribution in the NCHR, representing 46 percent of all documented DTO activity, underscoring the scale and complexity of the threat.⁵⁴

(U) In addition to traditional land routes, a steady flow of cocaine continues to arrive from Puerto Rico via the U.S. Postal Service (USPS), often concealed within parcels destined for Wisconsin. This tactic enables traffickers to bypass direct border enforcement.

(U) Cases and Seizures

(U) Cocaine seizures in 2024 reversed the downward trend observed from 2021 to 2023, with NCH law enforcement initiatives reporting increased enforcement activity. While powdered cocaine seizures dominate, crack cocaine seizures remain comparatively limited.

- (U) The Milwaukee Police Department, in partnership with the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, intercepted a parcel containing two kilograms of cocaine. A follow-up investigation recovered an additional 300 grams of cocaine and an AR-style rifle.⁵⁵
- (U) A long-term investigation led to the discovery of a storage unit containing over 6 kilograms of cocaine, 17 kilograms of an unidentified substance, and five firearms. A subsequent residential search yielded 2 more kilograms of cocaine and 90 grams of heroin.⁵⁶



(U) Figure 10; We Are Green Bay⁵⁷

- (U) On December 31, DEA intercepted a tractor-trailer at a truck stop in Oak Creek, Wis., and recovered approximately 40 kilograms of cocaine. A Milwaukee-based DTO member was arrested at the scene after arriving to pick up the shipment. The investigation later revealed that the truck driver was working on behalf of a larger transnational criminal organization based in California.



Figure 11; Tractor-trailer Arrest

(U//FOUO) In total, law enforcement in the NCHR seized approximately 473 kilograms of cocaine in 2024, with an estimated street value of \$13,445,233. These seizures highlight both the scope of trafficking operations and the success of ongoing interdiction efforts.⁵⁸

(U) Cocaine trafficking continues to pose a serious and persistent threat within the NCHR, contributing to both violent and property crimes. It remains a leading factor in both fatal and nonfatal overdoses.

(U) Key Intelligence Questions

- To what extent is cocaine being mixed with other illicit drugs prior to consumption, and how aware are end users of this?
- How extensively are the USPS and commercial parcel services being utilized to traffic kilogram-level quantities of cocaine into the NCHR?
- To what extent are cocaine-related overdose patterns evolving in the region, and are there correlations with analogs like fentanyl or xylazine?
- Are there notable shifts in the demographics of cocaine users (e.g., age, location, socioeconomic background) in the past year?
- What law enforcement strategies have shown the most success in disrupting cocaine supplies being trafficked into the region?

(U) CANNABIS & THC PRODUCTS

(U) Overview

(U) Marijuana remains classified as a Schedule I controlled substance under federal law, with delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) as its primary active compound. Within the NCHR, cannabis legislation varies widely. Minnesota legalized medical marijuana in 2014 and expanded to adult-use recreational cannabis in 2023, allowing adults 21 and older to possess, use, and cultivate limited amounts. Retail sales are expected to phase in gradually as the state finalizes regulatory frameworks.

(U) In contrast, Wisconsin continues to prohibit both medical and recreational marijuana. Criminal penalties remain in place for possession, sale, and cultivation, though municipalities such as Madison and Milwaukee have decriminalized user amounts as civil infractions. These local reforms exist alongside state and federal enforcement authority, creating a complex and often conflicting legal landscape. Disparities between neighboring states including Illinois, Michigan, and Iowa, further influence trafficking patterns, cross-border possession, and public perception.

(U) Availability and Use

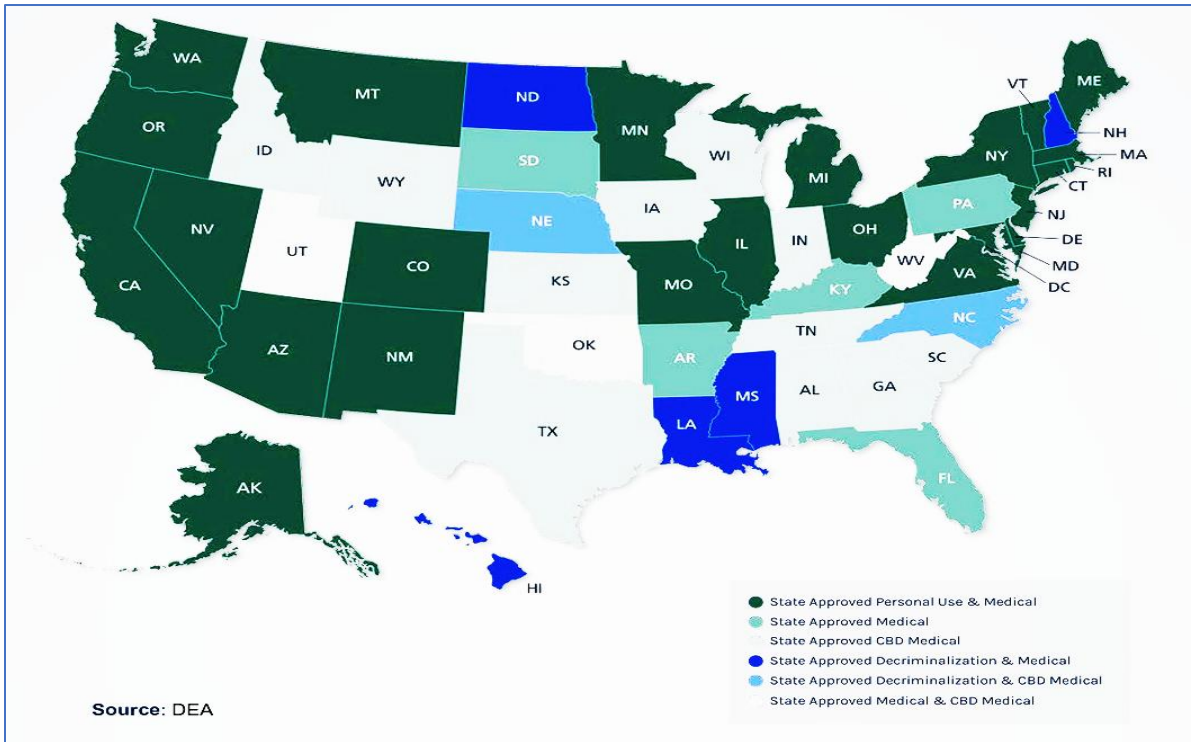
(U) Marijuana remains widely available across the NCHR, as demonstrated by consistent seizure volumes and ongoing enforcement activity. Despite legalization in neighboring states, a robust black market persists, driven by strong consumer demand, lower prices, and limited retail access in newly legalized jurisdictions. Nearly half of Wisconsin's population lives within a 90-minute drive of states where marijuana is legal, such as Minnesota, Illinois, and Michigan; however, many users continue to purchase unregulated cannabis products, increasing the risk of contamination and drug-related violence.

(U) Law enforcement reports continued involvement of marijuana in robbery, assault, theft, and weapons offenses. Use is associated with both property and violent crime, often tied to illicit distribution networks or behavior resulting from intoxication.⁵⁹

(U) Common consumption methods include joints, blunts, pipes, bong, edibles, infused beverages, and vaporizers. Vape cartridges and concentrated products such as "honey oil" and "budder," with THC levels between 40 and 80 percent, are especially popular among youth due to their potency, discreteness, and ease of concealment. However, illicit vape products have been linked to severe lung injuries, frequently associated with additives like Vitamin E acetate.

(U) In Wisconsin, where marijuana remains illegal, alternative THC products have surged in popularity. These include delta-8, hemp-derived delta-9, CBD, CBG, and HHC. While marketed as legal under federal hemp laws, many of these products are psychoactive and unregulated. A recent example includes a vending kiosk offering these substances in a Milwaukee area shopping mall. Public health officials have expressed concern about their use as gateway substances, particularly among youth.⁶⁰

(U) Some reports have suggested marijuana may be contaminated with fentanyl; however, most cases appear to involve unintentional cross-contamination through shared paraphernalia or surfaces. Nonetheless, this perception among users underscores the risks associated with unregulated supply chains.



(U) Figure 12; DEA NDTA: Approved Marijuana States⁶¹

(U) Production and Cultivation

(U) Marijuana is cultivated in both outdoor and indoor settings, with indoor grows increasingly favored for their controlled conditions, year-round yields, and higher potency. While large-scale cultivation remains limited in the NCHR, isolated indoor grow sites continue to be identified.

(U) Under Minnesota law, individuals aged 21 and over may cultivate up to eight plants per household (with no more than four mature plants) in a secure, non-visible area. As the legal market develops, compliance monitoring and diversion prevention will present challenges, particularly if high taxes and regulatory burdens incentivize illegal cultivation.⁶²

(U//FOUO) In 2024, NCH law enforcement seized approximately 49 kilograms of marijuana from indoor grow sites, reflecting the ongoing presence of concealed cultivation operations within the region.⁶³

(U) Sourcing and Trafficking

(U) Marijuana and THC-infused products in the NCHR are primarily sourced from states with legal markets, including California, Oregon, Washington, Arizona, Colorado, Minnesota, Michigan, and Illinois. These states act as supply hubs for raw cannabis, edibles, vape cartridges, and concentrates.

(U) Products are often diverted from legal markets into illicit channels to avoid high taxes and regulatory burdens. This diversion fuels black market activity in states like Wisconsin, where marijuana remains illegal, but demand remains high.

(U) Mexican TCOs continue to smuggle bulk marijuana into the U.S., though their influence has declined due to increased domestic production. However, marijuana trafficked across the Southwest Border still reaches the NCHR, typically through established multi-drug corridors.

(U//FOUO) In 2024, NCH law enforcement identified 14 DTOs involved in marijuana distribution. These DTOs sustain illicit market activity and are frequently linked to firearms, violence, and polydrug operations.⁶⁴

(U) Armed robberies targeting marijuana or drug proceeds, referred to as “rips,” remain a persistent threat. These often involve firearms and can escalate into violent confrontations, many of which go unreported due to the threat of retaliation.

(U) Traffickers increasingly leverage digital platforms to distribute marijuana and THC products. Social media, encrypted messaging apps, and online marketplaces allow for broader reach while reducing direct contact, complicating interdiction and investigative efforts.

(U) Cases and Seizures

- (U) In 2024, an NCH Task Force arrested an individual for the delivery of THC and psilocybin. A subsequent search yielded a privately made firearm (ghost gun) equipped with an extended magazine, approximately 264 grams of psilocybin-infused chocolate bars, over 1.9 kilograms of THC products, and \$4,685 in U.S. currency. The estimated street value of the seized drugs exceeded \$11,000.⁶⁵



(U) Figure 13; Fox 6 News⁶⁶

(U//FOUO) In 2024, NCH law enforcement seized a total of approximately 2,718 kilograms of marijuana and 49 kilograms of indoor-grown plants, with an estimated wholesale value of \$26,599,360, reflecting ongoing interdiction success against both cultivation and trafficking operations.⁶⁷

(U) Impaired Driving and Public Safety

(U) THC remains the most frequently detected controlled substance in Wisconsin Operating While Intoxicated (OWI) cases. However, testing is often canceled if a suspect's blood alcohol content (BAC) exceeds 0.100 g/100 mL, unless a fatal crash occurs or a Drug Recognition Expert (DRE) is involved, limiting accurate tracking of marijuana-related impairment.

(U) In 2023, there were 45,842 DWI/OWI arrests throughout the NCHR involving alcohol or drugs, highlighting the ongoing threat of impaired driving. While alcohol remains the most common substance, drug impaired driving, especially involving cannabis and polysubstance use, is a growing concern. The widespread availability of THC products and the challenges of roadside drug detection continue to complicate enforcement efforts. As legalization expands, impaired driving remains a critical public safety and public health issue.^{68 69}

(U) Key Intelligence Questions

- What impact has the legalization of recreational marijuana in Minnesota, Illinois, and Michigan had on the NCHR?
- How has Minnesota's marijuana legalization influenced illicit market dynamics throughout the NCHR and beyond?
- What is the impact of unscheduled Delta-8-THC and Delta-10-THC products on the marijuana and THC product market?
- To what extent are cannabis cultivation operations being established on Tribal lands and public lands?
- How frequently is marijuana and THC product packaging being used to conceal other illicit drugs in the NCHR?

(U) SYNTHETIC/NATURAL HALLUCINOGENS AND PSYCHOSTIMULANTS

(U) Overview

(U) Synthetic and natural hallucinogens and psychostimulants include a broad range of substances that alter perception, mood, and cognition. These compounds may be derived from plants, fungi, or other organic materials, or synthetically manufactured using chemical precursors. They are

encountered in various forms, including tablets, capsules, powders, dried mushrooms, blotter paper, infused sugar cubes, and crystalline substances.

(U) Availability & Use

(U) Synthetic and natural hallucinogens are moderately available throughout the NCHR supported by localized production and decentralized distribution networks. Substances such as psilocybin, N,N-Dimethyltryptamine (DMT), and 3,4-Methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA) have all been reported in the region. While not as widely abused as opioids, cocaine or methamphetamine, these compounds retain recreational, spiritual, and cultural appeal.

(U) Psilocybin availability has increased regionally in alignment with national trends. It is typically consumed raw, brewed into tea, smoked with cannabis or tobacco, or incorporated into food. MDMA is most often taken orally in pill or capsule form.

(U) Use of these substances is generally episodic and intentional rather than compulsive. Users often space out consumption to manage psychological intensity and avoid tolerance, contrasting with the more frequent and dependent patterns seen in stimulant or opioid misuse.

(U) Common Street Names

Psilocybin: Mushrooms, Shrooms

DMT: Dimitri

MDMA: Ecstasy (XTC), Molly, Adam, Beans, Clarity, Disco Biscuit, E, Ecstasy, Eve, Go, Hug Drug, Lover's Speed, Peace, STP, X, and XTC⁷⁰

(U) Production

(U) Psilocybin mushrooms are commonly cultivated at home using grow kits and spores that are widely available online. This low-cost, low-risk method allows small-scale producers to bypass traditional trafficking networks and supply directly within peer or social circles.

(U) Although regional production remains limited, it is increasing particularly for psilocybin and DMT, due to the relative ease of manufacturing and the abundance of online instructional resources. DMT extraction labs have been identified within the NCHR, often operating out of private residences or concealed locations using chemical or botanical extraction techniques.⁷¹

(U) MDMA is a synthetic drug with both stimulant and psychedelic properties. It is illicitly manufactured in clandestine laboratories using precursor chemicals such as safrole, which is found in sassafras oil. The final product is typically pressed into pills or sold as crystalline powder, commonly referred to as "Molly." MDMA is frequently adulterated with other substances, increasing the risk of toxicity and unpredictable health effects.⁷²

(U) Precursor chemicals used in synthetic drug production are often mislabeled and shipped via commercial parcel services to evade detection. In contrast, psilocybin and DMT are typically produced domestically through small-scale, decentralized operations.

(U) Sourcing and Trafficking

(U//FOUO) In 2024, NCH law enforcement identified five DTOs involved in the distribution of synthetic and natural hallucinogens. These groups trafficked a range of substances, including psilocybin, DMT, and MDMA, with some operations relying on internationally sourced chemical precursors from China, India, and Eastern Europe.⁷³

(U) Online platforms including forums, encrypted messaging apps, and dark web marketplaces play an increasing role in the distribution of hallucinogens. While MDMA trafficking is typically more structured and organized, the broader hallucinogen market remains fluid, decentralized, and opportunistic.

(U) NCHR Cases & Seizures

- (U) In November 2024, an NCH Task Force uncovered a hazardous DMT extraction laboratory during an investigation. Subsequent enforcement actions identified additional labs in multiple jurisdictions, confirming a growing trend of small-scale hallucinogen production within the NCHR.⁷⁴



(U) Figure 14; Hennepin Sherriff's Office⁷⁵

- (U) Also in 2024, a K9 unit alerted deputies during a traffic stop to a parcel originating from Oregon. The parcel contained THC vape cartridges, edibles, and psilocybin mushrooms disguised as snack foods. This incident highlights the use of deceptive packaging and inter-state parcel-based trafficking involving multiple controlled substances.⁷⁶



(U) Figure 15; Fox 11⁷⁷

(U//FOUO) In 2024, NCH initiatives seized approximately 24.3 kilograms of synthetic hallucinogens (MDMA, and LSD) and 140 kilograms of natural hallucinogens (DMT, Psilocybin and mushrooms) with a combined estimated wholesale value of \$1,267,585.⁷⁸

(U) Key Intelligence Questions

- What hallucinogens are most encountered in the NCHR, and how is availability changing over time?
- What are the emerging trends in hallucinogen use, particularly among youth, college populations, and music festival attendees?
- To what extent are psychedelics being used for self-treatment of mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, or PTSD?
- Are there shifts in user demographics (e.g., age, location, socioeconomic background) for substances like psilocybin, DMT, and MDMA?
- How are perceptions of risk and legitimacy changing around psychedelics due to growing interest in their “legitimized” therapeutic potential?

(U) NEW PSYCHOACTIVE SUBSTANCES: SYNTHETIC CANNIBINOIDS/CATHINONES

(U) Overview

(U) The illicit production of clandestinely synthesized drugs, commonly referred to as designer drugs, continues to pose a significant threat globally and within the NCHR. Commonly referred to as new psychoactive substances (NPS) or designer drugs, these substances are chemically engineered to slightly modify the molecular structure of controlled substances while preserving similar psychoactive effects. This structural manipulation allows producers to exploit legal loopholes, evade scheduling, and avoid detection by standard toxicology screens. Designer drugs

span multiple substance categories, including stimulants, hallucinogens, and depressants. Two prominent NPS found in the NCHR are synthetic cathinones and synthetic cannabinoids.⁷⁹

(U) Synthetic cannabinoids, a depressant with some hallucinogenic properties is commonly known as spice, K2, K3 or “synthetic marijuana” and has emerged as a growing concern. Typically sprayed onto plant material and smoked to mimic the effects of THC, these substances can cause severe and unpredictable reactions, including seizures, psychosis, cardiovascular distress, and loss of consciousness. Their compact form, inconsistent chemical composition, and resistance to standard detection methods make them particularly attractive for smuggling at the user level.

(U) Availability and Use

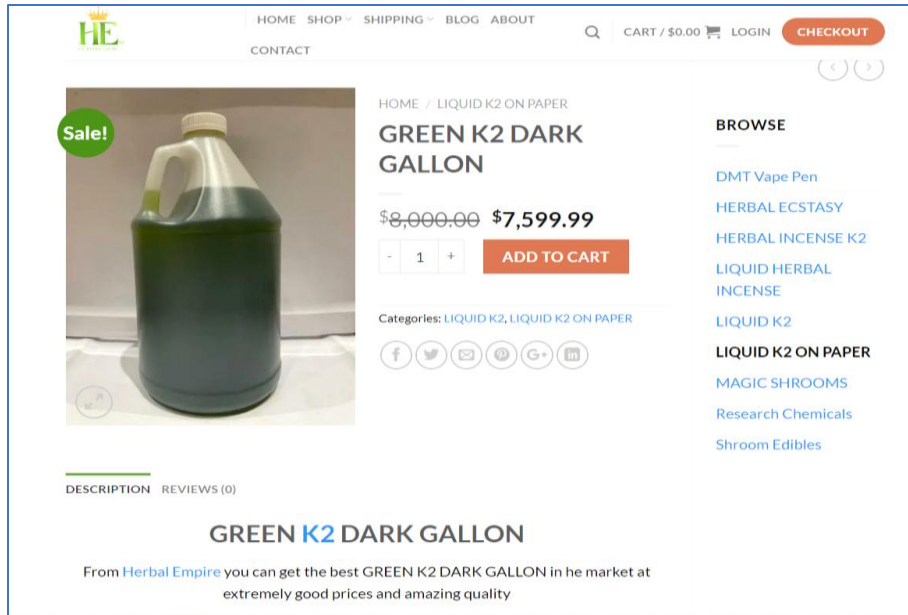
(U) While synthetic cathinones and cannabinoids are not widely reported among DTOs operating in the NCHR, the use of synthetic cannabinoids, particularly within correctional facilities, has increased sharply. Their appeal among incarcerated individuals stems from high potency, ease of concealment, and the ability to evade standard drug detection methods. In Wisconsin Department of Corrections facilities, the proliferation of synthetic cannabinoids poses a growing threat to inmate health, institutional stability, and staff safety. Rising incidents of overdose, violence, and staff exposure to unknown substances highlight the urgent need for improved detection technology, targeted staff training, and comprehensive policy reforms to address this evolving threat.

(U) Unlike natural cannabis, synthetic cannabinoids are unregulated and highly variable in chemical composition. They are often sprayed onto paper, dissolved in liquids, or infused into everyday items such as greeting cards or clothing, methods that make detection during standard mail screenings and cell inspections particularly challenging.

(U) Production

(U) Synthetic cathinones and synthetic cannabinoids are primarily produced in clandestine laboratories located in China. Once synthesized, these substances are shipped in bulk to global markets, including Europe, North America, and Australia. Synthetic cannabinoids compounds are then often applied to plant material or dissolved into liquid forms for easier concealment and transport. Synthetic cathinones are also primarily produced in China and shipped to points across the globe via commercial carrier in a crystalline powder form.⁸⁰

(U) The availability of NPS through unregulated online vendors and dark web marketplaces further expands access for traffickers. Due to their unregulated status, manufacturers frequently modify chemical structures to evade drug scheduling laws and avoid detection in standard toxicology screenings. This continual evolution poses persistent challenges for law enforcement and customs officials around the world.



(U) Figure 16; Herbal Empire World Sales⁸¹

(U) Correctional Facilities Threat and Concealment Methods

(U) Within correctional facilities, the trafficking of synthetic cannabinoids is often coordinated by prison gangs in partnership with outside criminal networks. These substances function as high-value contraband, sustaining underground economies that contribute to violence, extortion, and power dynamics among incarcerated populations.

(U) External suppliers exploit weaknesses in prisons and jail systems to smuggle synthetic cannabinoids into secure environments. Common concealment methods include soaking paper, clothing, legal mail, or greeting cards in liquid cannabinoid solutions. In more serious cases, traffickers may attempt to bribe or coerce correctional staff into facilitating smuggling operations, significantly complicating enforcement efforts and elevating institutional risk.

(U) The introduction of synthetic cannabinoids into correctional facilities often involves creative and evolving smuggling techniques that exploit weaknesses in mail systems, visitation protocols, and internal oversight. These tactics present ongoing challenges for facility administrators and law enforcement personnel responsible for maintaining institutional safety and security.

(U//FOUO) Documented concealment methods include:

- Ingestion smuggling: Visitors swallow balloons containing synthetic drugs, later retrieved by inmates.
- Worker-Assisted Drops: Inmate workers, such as cleaners, discreetly place drugs in predetermined locations for later retrieval.

- Drug-Laced Books: Pages of books are saturated with synthetic substances and distributed to inmates through mail services.
- Online Vendors: Vendors unknowingly or intentionally sell books infused with synthetic cannabinoids.

(U) These concealment methods underscore the adaptive strategies employed by traffickers and reinforce the need for continuous enhancement of screening and detection protocols within correctional environments.

(U) Key Intelligence Questions

- What are the most encountered synthetic cannabinoids and cathinones in the NCHR?
- How is the availability and use of synthetic cannabinoids changing within correctional facilities?
- Are synthetic cathinones (e.g., "bath salts") re-emerging in regional drug markets, and if so, in what forms and communities are they found?
- What are the most frequently reported health effects or medical emergencies linked to synthetic cannabinoid or cathinone use in the region?
- How are traffickers modifying chemical structures to evade regulation and drug testing?

(U) DRUG TRAFFICKING ORGANIZATIONS

(U) Overview

(U) The HIDTA program defines DTOs as an organization consisting of five or more individuals, including at least one identified leader, that (1) has a clearly defined chain-of-command and (2) whose principal activity is to generate income or acquire assets through a continuing series of illegal drug production, manufacturing, importation, transportation or distribution activities. DTOs are further categorized by operational scope: international, multi-state, and local. Among these categories, multi-state DTOs currently pose the most significant threat to the NCHR, surpassing both international and local organizations in influence and operational complexity. Their cross-jurisdictional structures enhance organizational resilience, complicate enforcement, and support expansive, adaptable supply networks.

(U) This assessment draws on PMP data and survey responses submitted by NCH initiative supervisors in accordance with HIDTA reporting guidelines. It analyzes drug availability, usage trends, transportation methods, DTO structures and affiliations, illicit financing strategies, and operational tactics across all tiers of DTO activity.

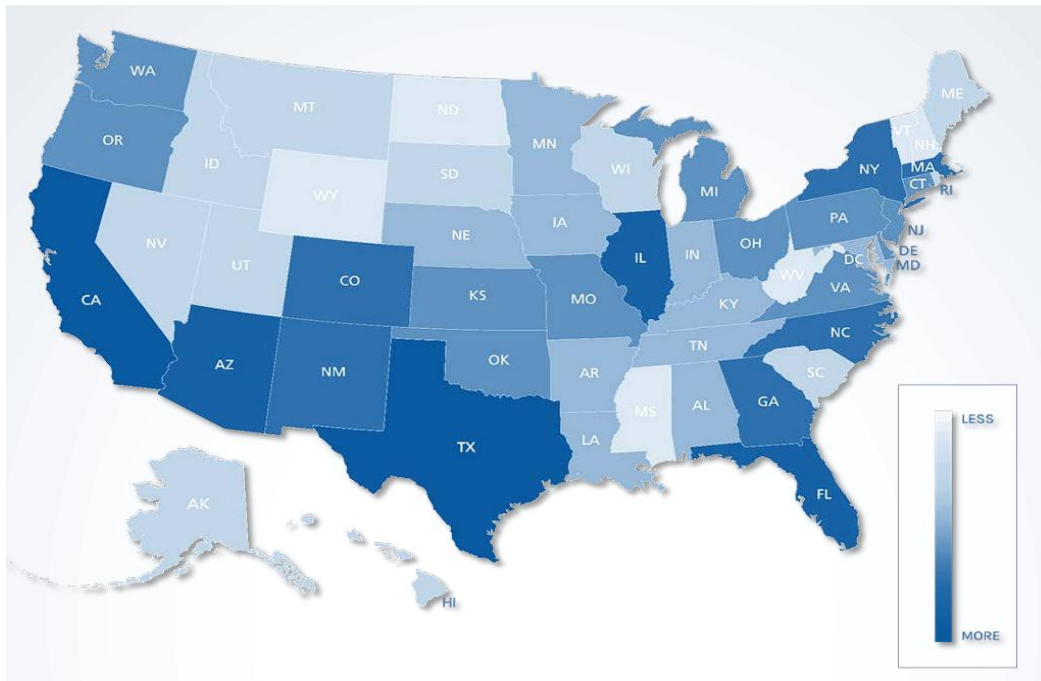
(U) Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) Designations

(U) On February 20, 2025, the U.S. Department of State designated several international DTOs as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs), including the Sinaloa Cartel, CJNG, Tren de Aragua (TdA), and MS-13. This designation provides expanded authority to U.S. law enforcement agencies to target these groups using enhanced legal tools, disrupt financial networks, and leverage coordinated diplomatic and economic pressure.⁸²

(U) Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs)

(U) TCOs are self-sustaining entities operating across international borders in pursuit of profit, power, and influence. These groups engage in drug trafficking, human smuggling, firearms trafficking, cybercrime, extortion, and money laundering. They exploit global trade, communication systems, and logistical infrastructure while relying on violence, intimidation, and corruption to maintain control.⁸³

(U) For purposes of this assessment, TCOs are synonymous with International DTOs. Mexico-based TCOs remain the primary suppliers of fentanyl, heroin, methamphetamine, and South American-sourced cocaine trafficked into the United States. These groups dominate production and control trafficking routes from Mexico into major U.S. distribution hubs. The Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG continue to control vast criminal markets in the U.S. and internationally, expanding their operations to Europe, Africa, Asia, and Oceania.



(U) Figure 17; DEA NDTA: Mexican Cartel Presence in the U.S.⁸⁴

(U) International DTO/MLO	An organization, or identifiable cell of an organization, that regularly conducts illegal drug trafficking or money laundering activities in more than one country or that is based in one country and conducts or coordinates illegal activities in another.
(U) Multi-state DTO/MLO	An organization that regularly carries out illegal drug trafficking or money laundering activities in more than one state.
(U) Local DTO/MLO	An organization whose illegal drug trafficking or money laundering activities are generally, but not always, limited to the same metropolitan area, or, for rural areas, limited to an easily defined region or a small number of geographically proximate counties.
(U) Money Laundering Organizations	An organization of two or more individuals engaged in processing illegal drug profits through a continuing series of illegal activities (placement, layering, and integration) to disguise the source of the money and make the illegal profits appear to be legitimate income.
(U) Cells	A unit within a DTO or MLO. When a unit acts under its own command and control in its drug business, it should be considered a separate DTO or MLO, not a cell of a larger organization.
(U) Gangs	A group or association of five or more people with a common identifying sign, symbol, or name, the members of which, individually or collectively, engage in criminal activity that creates an atmosphere of fear and intimidation.

(U)Figure 18; PMP Definitions

(U) International DTO Overview

International DTOs Identified by NCH	
Characteristics	
Total International DTOs	25
Total Members (Leaders)	215 (36)
Average DTO Size	8.6
Gang Related	15
Violent	21
Polydrug	12
Federal Case Designations	
OCDETF	5
CPOT	0
RPOT	1

(U//FOUO) Figure 19; NCH PMP⁸⁵

(U) Even though multi-state DTOs are the most prevalent in the NCHR, Mexican International DTOs pose a significant drug trafficking threat to the NCHR due to their prevalent drug sourcing to multi-state and local DTOs directly impacting the NCHR. These organizations are responsible for smuggling large volumes of fentanyl, methamphetamine, heroin, cocaine, and marijuana into major urban hubs, where multi-state and local DTOs manage regional and street-level distribution.

(U) International DTOs collaborate closely with local street gangs and multi-state criminal organizations to extend their influence. Leadership structures frequently include U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs), and foreign nationals, many of whom possess deep community ties that support long-term engagement in DTO activity. In some cases, Mexican cartel operatives are directly deployed to reinforce or expand local cells. DTOs use financial incentives and threats of violence, including against family members, to ensure loyalty and compliance.

(U) Notable Case:

(U) In 2024, fifteen individuals were indicted in connection with a Mexico-based International DTO trafficking methamphetamine, fentanyl, and cocaine into the Twin Cities metro area. The organization's leader, originally arrested in 2019 with over eight pounds of methamphetamine, fled to Jalisco, Mexico, where he formed operational ties with both the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG. From 2019 to 2024, he directed a cartel-backed network that trafficked thousands of pounds of methamphetamine into Minnesota using semi-trailers and privately owned vehicles.⁸⁶

(U) The investigation resulted in:

- Over 50 arrests
- Seizure of 1,600 pounds of methamphetamine
- 4 kilograms of cocaine
- 2 kilograms of fentanyl
- 30,000 counterfeit pills
- 45 firearms
- \$2.5 million in drug proceeds



(U) Figure 20; DEA⁸⁷

(U) International DTO Financing

(U//FOUO) These organizations use bulk cash smuggling, conversion of drug proceeds to cryptocurrency, and trade-based money laundering to finance operations and conceal profits. Brokers manage logistics involving cash collection, fund transfers, and asset conversion using shell companies and falsified invoices.⁸⁸

(U//FOUO) In 2024:

- 14 percent of all money seized in the NCHR was tied to international DTOs
- 23 percent of drug seizures were attributed to the Sinaloa Cartel
- 15 percent of drug seizures were attributed to CJNG

(U) The Wisconsin Cartel Project

(U//FOUO) Following a joint NCH/Wisconsin National Guard Counterdrug Program study conducted in mid-2024, no confirmed, specific cartel DTOs were identified operating within the state in 2024. However, drugs supplied by the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG were identified as being trafficked throughout Wisconsin via intermediaries and regional networks (multi-state and local DTOs), highlighting sustained cartel influence across local supply chains.⁸⁹

(U) Emerging Threat - Tren de Aragua (TdA)

(U) TdA is a Venezuelan-based TCO involved in a broad range of criminal activities, including extortion, kidnapping, firearms trafficking, human smuggling, drug trafficking, and homicide. TdA's footprint has expanded significantly throughout the Western Hemisphere and poses a growing concern for regional and national security.⁹⁰

(U//FOUO) 2024 NCH Reporting:

- 8 percent confirmed TdA-related activity in their jurisdiction
- 39 percent of agencies were unsure of the group's presence

(U) This combination of confirmed sightings and widespread uncertainty highlights the organization's potential to operate covertly within the region and underscores the need for enhanced intelligence sharing, interagency coordination, and situational awareness to monitor this emerging threat.

(U) Multi-State DTOs Overview

Multi-State DTOs Identified by NCH	
Characteristics	
Total Multi-State DTOs	60
Total Members (Leaders)	621 (97)
Average DTO Size	10.35
Gang Related	22
Violent	43
Polydrug	35
Federal Case Designations	
OCDETF	7
CPOT	0
RPOT	0

(U//FOUO) Figure 22; NCH PMP⁹¹

(U) Multi-state DTOs represent the most frequently investigated category of DTOs throughout the NCHR. This is primarily due to the NCHR’s geographical location being a great distance from Mexico. California, Illinois, Arizona, and Texas, serve as primary source states, with distribution patterns shaped by wholesale availability, supplier relationships, and geographic access to target markets.⁹² The slight exception would be the Minneapolis/St. Paul Minn. metro area, which has been identified as periodically acting as a hub area for northern states to include northwest Wisconsin. Multi-state DTOs are responsible for trafficking significant quantities of controlled substances, including fentanyl, methamphetamine, cocaine, heroin, marijuana, and THC products. Their operations are typically centered in major urban areas and extend into surrounding suburban and rural communities, sustained by adaptive and resilient distribution networks.

(U) Multi-state DTOs often traffic multi-kilogram quantities of methamphetamine, opioids, and cocaine. Many rely on deep-rooted families, neighborhood, or community ties to maintain

cohesion, sustain operations across state lines, and recover quickly from leadership disruption or enforcement pressure.

(U) Approximately 37 percent of these DTOs were connected to street gangs. These alliances are crucial to the groups' structure, facilitating regional mobility, enforcement capability, and localized sales. The most trafficked substances, in order of prevalence, are fentanyl, methamphetamine, cocaine, heroin, marijuana, crack cocaine, MDMA, and psilocybin.⁹³

(U) In marijuana trafficking, some multi-state DTO members travel to California during harvest seasons, returning to the NCHR with either product or financial proceeds. These organizations employ shipment tracking, encrypted communications, role compartmentalization, and frequent rotation of personnel and delivery locations to maintain security and adaptability.

(U) NCH law enforcement has reported the seizure of pill presses and brick presses, used to manufacture methamphetamine, fentanyl, and opioid tablets, as well as cocaine and meth bricks. These devices allow traffickers to mix analogs and cutting agents to maximize profit but result in inconsistent dosages, increasing overdose risks. U.S. Customs and Border Protection has identified China as a major source of these machines and components.⁹⁴

(U) Notable Case – Dane County, Wisconsin (2024):

(U) Two individuals were sentenced for trafficking large quantities of fentanyl and methamphetamine into the NCHR using a rented aircraft. The suspects flew from Phoenix, Arizona to Middleton, Wisconsin, where they were intercepted by law enforcement.⁹⁵

(U) The seizure included:

- 19 pounds of methamphetamine
- ~200,000 fentanyl pills
- Estimated street value: \$2 million

(U) One suspect, who coordinated the operation while under federal supervision, received 16 years in federal prison and eight years of supervised release. The second was sentenced to 12 years in federal prison.

(U) Local DTOs Overview

Local DTOs Identified by NCH	
Characteristics	
Total Local DTOs	84
Total Members	665
Leaders	(109)
Average DTO Size	7.92
Gang Related	30
Violent	73
Polydrug	33
Federal Case Designations	
OCDETF	2
CPOT	1
RPOT	0

(U//FOUO) Figure 23; NCH PMP⁹⁶

(U) Local DTOs continue to pose a dynamic and evolving threat to the NCHR. These organizations are directly responsible for the distribution of methamphetamine, fentanyl, heroin, cocaine, counterfeit pills, marijuana, and THC products at the community level. Their operations contribute significantly to drug-related violence, property crimes, overdoses, and community destabilization across urban, suburban, and rural areas.

(U) Local DTOs often maintain close operational ties to street gangs, which serve both as distribution networks and enforcement arms. These alliances are frequently associated with shootings, assaults, robberies, home invasions, and other violent incidents. Local DTO activity is also linked to broader public safety concerns, including firearms trafficking, vehicle theft, and burglaries.

(U) These groups obtain supply through various channels, including direct or indirect ties to international DTOs and multi-state DTOs, as well as independent traffickers. Regardless of supply origin, local DTOs often function as the final distribution layer in transnational supply chains, delivering cartel-supplied methamphetamine, fentanyl, and cocaine to end users.

(U//FOUO) In 2024, law enforcement within the NCHR dismantled or significantly disrupted 36 local DTOs through targeted investigations and enforcement operations, demonstrating the region's ongoing commitment to proactive and sustained intervention.⁹⁷

(U) Gang Activity in the NCHR

(U) A variety of street gangs, hybrid groups, prison gangs, and outlaw motorcycle clubs operate across the NCHR. These groups often serve as retail distributors or enforcement arms for multi-state and international DTOs, contributing to the violence and complexity of the regional drug market.

(U) Gang affiliations in the region are fluid and opportunistic, with shifting membership and territorial presence. Many gangs form quickly, dissolve, or re-align with others, making them difficult to track. Allegiances are commonly based on social status, quick access to money, or familial connections.

(U) While narcotics trafficking remains a primary source of income, many gangs have diversified into fraud, theft, robbery, and burglary. Low-impact and juvenile crimes are often exploited due to reduced sentencing guidelines. Current gangs are increasingly mobile, frequently operating beyond traditional turf boundaries and crossing into neighboring jurisdictions to conduct criminal activity.

(U) Hybrid gangs and neighborhood crews continue to operate in both urban and rural areas. Cooperation between historically rival groups is increasingly observed when mutual profit incentives are present.⁹⁸

(U) Identified NCHR Gangs

(U//FOUO) Known gangs with a presence in the NCHR include: 4 Corner Hustlers, Asian Bloods, Asian Crips, Black Disciples, Black P-Stones, Bloods, Brown Pride Locos 13, Dirty P, Gangster Disciples, Garfield Boys, GTR Crew, Hot Boys, Imperial Gangsters, Kia Boys, Latin Kings, Maniac Latin Disciples, MS-13, Native Mob, North for Life, Renzo Boyz, Gettin' Money Family (GMF), 6400, 100 Boys, Free Gram Ent (FGE), Burleigh Zoo Family (BZF), Simon City Royals, Skinheads, Spanish Cobras, Supreme White Power, Sureños, EBK/KSS, 1500WC, MBlock, Baby8, SSG, 045, 083, 073, 076, Paid N Verified (PNV), Mud Brothers, Brooklyn Park, Cash Money Boys (CMB), The Pack, Slime Gang Entertainment (SGE), 1600 Stretch Gang, and the Warlords.⁹⁹

(U) NCHR Outlaw Motorcycle Clubs

(U//FOUO) The Outlaws Motorcycle Club (MC) is the predominant one-percenter motorcycle gang throughout the NCHR. One-percenter clubs refer to the estimated 1% of motorcyclists who are not law-abiding. Members typically display a diamond-shaped "1%" patch on their vests to signify this affiliation.

(U//FOUO) Additional one-percenter motorcycle clubs operating in the region include the Black Pistons MC, Mixtecas MC, and DC Eagles MC. Both the Black Pistons MC and DC Eagles MC are recognized support clubs of Outlaws MC. Other Outlaws MC support clubs identified in the NCHR include Disciple Christian MC, Savage Breed MC, Iron Breed MC, Wisconsin Riders MC, Road Runners MC, MotoPsychoz MC, Sinners MC, Troggs MC, Wanted MC, Ozaukee Guzzlers MC, Outcast Nation MC, Combat Vets Association, Axe Men MC, and the Milwaukee Motorcycle Gang.¹⁰⁰

(U//FOUO) Other outlaw or criminally affiliated MCs with a presence in the region include Hells Angels, Hells Outcasts, Iron Order, Peckerwoods, Prison Motorcycle Brotherhood, Society for Brotherhood (SFB), Sons of Silence, Silent Thunder, Themadones, Zodiacs, and additional Black Pistons MC and DC Eagles MC chapters.¹⁰¹

(U) Common roles within motorcycle clubs include president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, sergeant-at-arms, and road captain.

(U) DTO Trends

(U) In addition to drug trafficking, DTOs and affiliated networks are involved in a broad range of criminal enterprises, including:

- Human trafficking
- Firearms trafficking
- Money laundering
- Fraud
- Armed robbery
- Extortion

(U) DTO members are frequently armed, and crime guns are regularly recovered during arrests, traffic stops, and search warrants. The nexus between illicit drug trafficking and illegal firearm possession continues to elevate public safety risks, particularly in densely populated areas and further complicated law enforcement operations.

(U) Transportation Methods

(U//FOUO) In 2024, DTOs in the NCHR increasingly relied on parcel delivery networks, including USPS, FedEx, and UPS, to transport illicit drugs and proceeds. To avoid detection, shipments are frequently divided into smaller quantities and delivered to trusted individuals, vacant residences, or short-term rental properties.

(U//FOUO) Commercial air travel continues to be exploited through tactics such as the “ghost bag” method, wherein a suitcase containing drugs is checked under one individual’s name and retrieved by a co-conspirator at the destination or during a layover.

(U) DTOs also routinely utilize personal, rental, and commercial vehicles to move drugs, firearms, and currency throughout the region. Concealment strategies include post-manufactured hidden compartments, natural vehicle voids, and packaging within luggage, containers, or legitimate freight. A common method involves loading contraband-laden vehicles on commercial car carriers. Additionally, DTOs conceal narcotics and proceeds within legitimate goods such as produce, textiles, or manufactured products, that travel through regional and interstate supply chains.

(U) Concealment Methods

(U//FOUO) DTOs employ a wide array of concealment strategies designed to defeat law enforcement inspection, X-ray screening, and scent detection by K9 units.

- (U//FOUO) Physical Concealment: Common tactics include the use of modified vehicle compartments, magnetic boxes affixed to undercarriages, and drugs embedded within consumer products such as candy or food packaging. More advanced techniques involve hiding narcotics within materials used to fabricate statues, figurines, or decorative items. Human couriers, often women, are also recruited to transport drugs on or within their bodies across borders.¹⁰²
- (U//FOUO) Odor Masking Techniques: To evade K9 detection, traffickers frequently use strong-smelling agents such as coffee grounds, motor oil, mustard, black pepper, and dryer sheets. These are often combined with vacuum-sealed packaging and chemical barriers to reduce odor leakage and hinder X-ray visibility.¹⁰³

(U) Technology and Communications

(U) DTOs in the NCHR are increasingly leveraging advanced technology to expand operations, evade detection, and protect communications. Common tools include commercial encrypted messaging apps (WhatsApp, Signal, Telegram), virtual private networks (VPNs), and anonymizing software to coordinate trafficking activities and conceal identities and movements.

(U) Social media platforms, encrypted communication channels, and peer-to-peer marketplaces have transformed the way drugs, particularly marijuana and counterfeit pills, are advertised, distributed, and sold. These tools allow traffickers to discreetly expand customer bases and conduct transactions beyond traditional geographic constraints.

(U) Local trafficking networks are adopting decentralized, technology-driven business models. Digital payment platforms, mobile apps, and cryptocurrency enable traffickers to rapidly move funds and reorganize operations following law enforcement disruptions.

(U) For money laundering purposes, traffickers exploit online banking systems, shell companies, and GPS-tracked shipments to covertly transfer illicit proceeds while maintaining real-time

visibility. These methods obscure financial trails, hinder investigations, and complicate interdiction efforts.

(U) Access to synthetic drugs and precursor chemicals is increasingly facilitated through online marketplaces operating on both the surface web and the dark web. International chemical suppliers, particularly those operating without regulatory oversight, disguise synthetic drugs and precursors to resemble legitimate commercial goods, making detection during shipping and inspection more difficult.

(U) Communication security remains a critical operational priority for DTOs across all levels. Disposable cell phones often referred to as "burner phones" or "dope phones," are widely used due to their anonymity and short-term usage. These devices are typically discarded or reassigned frequently to evade surveillance.

(U) Even after arrests or enforcement actions, DTOs may maintain communication continuity by transferring phone numbers to new devices or reusing SIM cards, minimizing operational disruption.

(U//FOUO) The miniature mobile phone shown below was discovered concealed inside a jail cell in Wisconsin during a routine search; such devices are commonly used by inmates to coordinate illicit activities, including drug distribution, contraband smuggling, and communication with criminal associates outside the facility.



(U//FOUO) Figure 24; Discovered in a Wisconsin County Jail

(U) Key Intelligence Questions

- Have security changes at the Southwest Border led domestic drug traffickers to turn to local supplies?
- What effect have recent border policy changes had on drug distribution within the U.S.?
- What emerging tactics, techniques, and procedures are Mexican TCOs using to circumvent detection at U.S. ports of entry when smuggling illicit drugs?
- To what extent are cartel leaders operating within the United States directly influencing local DTO/MLO activities in the NCHR?
- What proportion of drug-related violence in the NCHR is attributable to conflicts involving Mexican TCOs versus local DTO disputes?

(U) MONEY LAUNDERING ORGANIZATIONS/ ILLCIT FINANCIAL ACTIVITY

(U) Overview

(U) DTOs generate billions of dollars annually through the sale of illicit drugs. To sustain and expand operations, DTOs rely on complex money laundering schemes to move, conceal, and legitimize illicit proceeds across domestic and international financial systems. Increasingly, DTOs outsource laundering functions to independent money laundering organizations (MLOs) and financial brokers, who assume responsibility for cleaning the money in exchange for a percentage of the proceeds. However, within the NCHR, most DTOs retain laundering operations in-house, integrating trusted individuals into their internal structure rather than outsourcing externally.

(U) Money laundering networks often operate across multiple countries and criminal enterprises, blending traditional methods with emerging financial technologies. Tactics include front businesses, bulk cash smuggling, asset purchases, trade-based money laundering, electronic fraud, and cryptocurrency exploitation. These networks exploit gaps in regulatory oversight, both in formal institutions and informal value transfer systems, to preserve anonymity, evade scrutiny, and rapidly adapt to enforcement pressure.¹⁰⁴

(U) Business Fronts and Casino Laundering

(U) DTOs and associated criminal organizations frequently operate front businesses, often registered as Limited Liability Companies (LLCs), to launder drug proceeds under the guise of legitimate commercial activity. Common fronts include bars, car washes, used car dealerships, restaurants, and construction companies. These businesses are typically registered to proxies, relatives, or shell owners to conceal the true beneficiaries and frustrate financial tracing efforts. This type of money laundering has been found to be the most prevalent within the NCHR.

(U) Many of these entities are also involved in fraudulent activity, such as insurance fraud, unemployment benefit scams, and COVID-relief fraud, layering additional transactions to obscure illicit income streams.

(U) Casinos, particularly Native American gaming establishments, are also exploited for laundering. Common methods include exchanging small bills for larger denominations with minimal gambling activity. These venues have also been observed as meeting locations for DTO affiliates conducting financial handoffs or coordinating trafficking logistics.

(U) Electronic Money Laundering and Cryptocurrency

(U) Electronic money laundering has emerged as a primary tactic among DTOs, enabling rapid and discreet financial transfers with limited regulatory oversight. Popular peer-to-peer (P2P) platforms such as Cash App, Venmo, and Zelle are frequently used to move funds in small increments, often under \$500 per transaction, to avoid financial reporting thresholds and detection. Cash App is the most reported platform due to its ease of use and minimal compliance protocols.

(U) Traditional wire transfer services such as Western Union, MoneyGram, and Ria remain favored for anonymous and cross-border transactions, especially where digital literacy or access to cryptocurrency is limited.¹⁰⁵

(U) Cryptocurrencies play an increasingly significant role in laundering drug proceeds. Bitcoin remains the most widely used digital asset due to its global availability, ease of use, and user-to-user transferability. However, stablecoins, cryptocurrencies that are designed to maintain a fixed value, are becoming the preferred vehicle for high-value laundering. Stablecoins such as USDT (Tether) and USDC (USD Coin) offer reduced volatility and perceived anonymity. USDT is frequently used for transactions exceeding \$100,000, reinforcing its use in large-scale laundering operations.

(U) DTOs and associated MLOs also use cryptocurrency tumblers (also known as mixers or blenders) to obscure the origin of digital assets. Tumblers aggregate cryptocurrency from multiple users, then redistribute funds in randomized amounts, effectively severing transactional links between source and destination wallets. This technique frustrates blockchain forensic analysis and presents a significant challenge to law enforcement agencies seeking to trace illicit financial activity and enforce accountability.¹⁰⁶

(U) Across the NCHR, these tactics are increasingly employed by local and multi-state DTOs leveraging digital platforms and cryptocurrencies to launder proceeds, thereby complicating interdiction and investigative efforts.

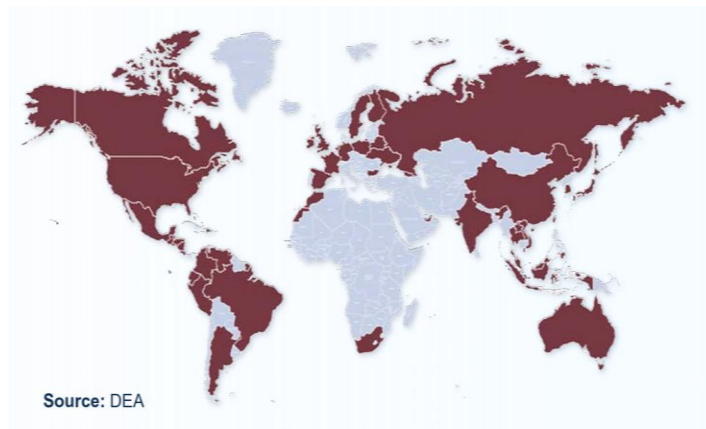


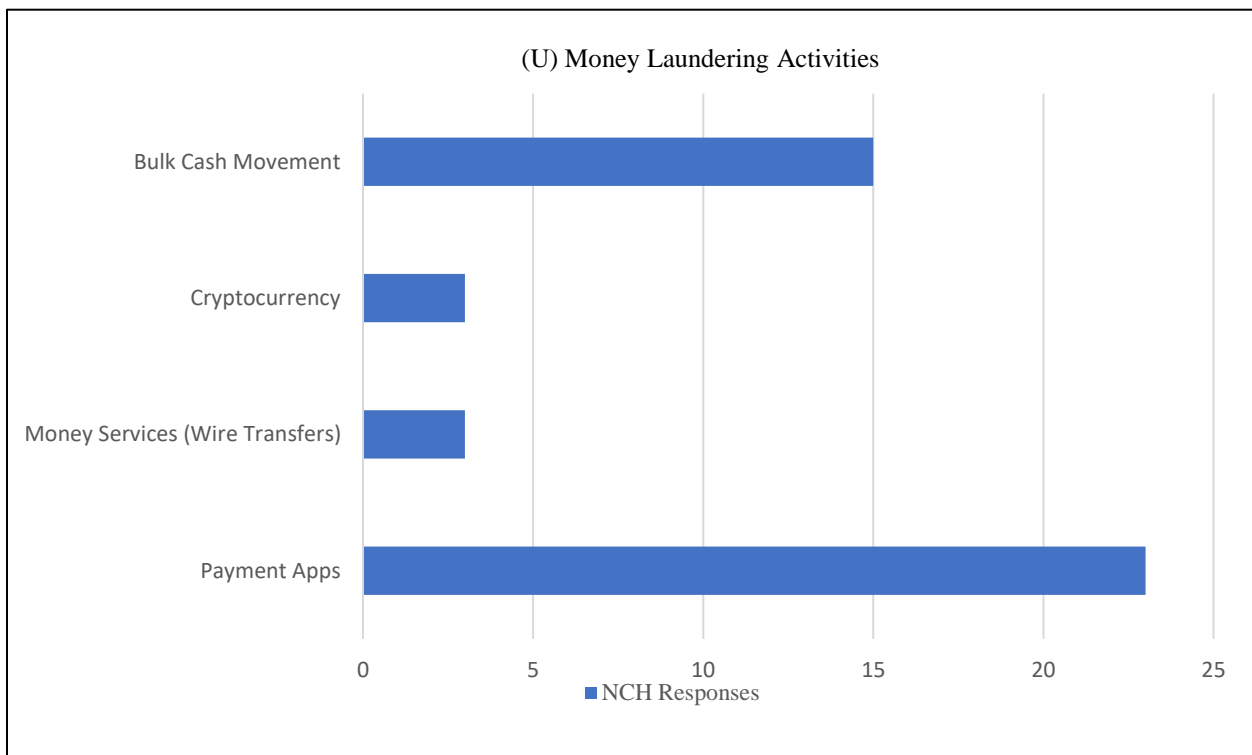
Figure 25; DEA NDTA¹⁰⁷ Sinaloa Cartel- Affiliated Crypto Transactions by Country

(U) Bulk Cash Movement

(U) Despite the increasing prevalence of digital laundering methods, bulk cash smuggling remains the most frequently employed technique for moving drug proceeds within the NCHR. DTOs transport large sums of currency using parcel services, personal and rental vehicles, commercial freight, and couriers traveling by bus, train, or commercial air. The true scope of passenger-based smuggling is difficult to quantify due to the covert and compartmentalized nature of these operations.

(U) To avoid detection by financial institutions, traffickers often engage in "structuring," the practice of making numerous small cash deposits at ATMs or bank branches to evade federal reporting thresholds. Once deposited, funds may be withdrawn at source locations and routed through wire transfers, cryptocurrency platforms, or trade-based money laundering networks to obscure their origin.

(U) DTO leaders based in Mexico often rely on contracted brokers to coordinate cash pickups and deposits throughout the U.S. and sporadically in the NCHR. Once funds are collected and deposited, they are transferred to offshore accounts or converted into cryptocurrency, precious metals, or other assets and financial instruments. These additional layers of complexity significantly hinder law enforcement’s ability to trace, detect, and seize illicit funds.



(U//FOUO) Figure 26; NCH Threat Assessment Survey 2026¹⁰⁸

(U) Money Laundering Tactics and Operational Security

(U) DTOs rely on sophisticated operational security protocols to protect laundering operations and evade detection. Key strategies include:

- Compartmentalized logistics chains
- Use of multiple low-profile couriers
- Frequent rotation of communication platforms
- Rigorous vetting of associates and intermediaries

(U) Secure communication is a critical enabler. DTO members frequently use encrypted messaging apps such as WhatsApp, Signal, and Telegram, along with burner phones and virtual private networks (VPNs) to obscure their digital footprint and hinder surveillance efforts.

(U) Technology plays an increasingly central role in laundering operations. DTOs often utilize:

- GPS tracking devices to monitor courier routes and ensure operational compliance
- Concealed cameras or recording equipment to surveil internal operations
- Electronic payment processors, P2P platforms, and online banking tools to execute discreet financial transfers

(U) These overlapping tactics enhance DTO resilience and present considerable challenges for law enforcement and financial intelligence analysts attempting to:

- Identify key individuals
- Map organizational hierarchies
- Disrupting illicit financial flows

(U) Seizures and Enforcement Actions

(U) Recent enforcement operations have increasingly prioritized the financial infrastructure of drug trafficking organizations, reflecting a strategic shift toward financial disruption as a core method for weakening criminal networks. This shift highlights a growing recognition of the critical role that illicit finance plays in sustaining DTO operations across the region.

(U//FOUO) In 2024, NCH law enforcement initiatives seized approximately \$7,856,334 in cash and \$1,705,358 in property and other assets, including vehicles and real estate linked to ongoing investigations. Of this total, NCH initiative agencies were directly responsible for \$1,165,000 in cash seizures, along with the recovery of multiple vehicles of varying types tied to DTO activity.¹⁰⁹

(U) These seizures underscore the increasing emphasis on financial enforcement in the NCHR and reinforce the need to complement traditional interdiction efforts with:

- Proactive financial investigations
- Targeted asset forfeiture operations
- Interagency coordination to dismantle DTO financial networks and infrastructure

(U) Key Intelligence Questions

- To what extent are reloadable value cards (RVCs) being used by drug traffickers and other criminal enterprises? Additionally, how frequently are reprogrammed RVCs, such as hotel room keys, gift cards, or magnetic stripe-based identification cards, used to facilitate illicit financial transactions?
- What enforcement challenges exist in detecting or seizing illicit proceeds stored on RVCs, particularly during interdiction or arrest operations?
- How extensively are cryptocurrencies being utilized for money laundering by drug trafficking and other criminal organizations in the NCHR?
- To what extent are casinos being exploited by DTOs to launder proceeds from illicit drug sales?

(U) NCHR CRIME GUNS

(U) Overview

(U//FOUO) Law enforcement agencies across the NCHR report that violent crimes involving crime guns continue to pose a significant threat to public safety. Offenses such as homicides, aggravated assaults, sexual assaults, robberies, and human trafficking are frequently linked to drug-related activity.¹¹⁰ The NCHR law enforcement initiatives also highlight a strong and ongoing correlation between firearm recoveries and drug seizures, emphasizing the persistent overlap between illicit drug distribution and gun violence.¹¹¹

(U) Key Observations

- (U//FOUO) Law enforcement reporting indicates a robust correlation between drug-related investigations, trafficking activities, and the presence of firearms, underscoring a critical nexus in criminal operations.
- (U//FOUO) Law enforcement has encountered increasing numbers of Privately Manufactured Firearms (PMFs) commonly referred to as “ghost guns” by the media.
- (U//FOUO) Law enforcement reported encountering increasing numbers of machine gun conversion devices (MCD) that convert semi-automatic firearms to fully automatic and have seen further advances in 3D printing of firearms and components.
- (U//FOUO) Law enforcement reported that crime guns seized in the NCHR by HIDTA initiatives are continuing to produce valuable intelligence leads, resulting in the apprehension of violent criminals and assisting in solving numerous violent crimes.

(U) Availability

(U//FOUO) In 2024, NCHR law enforcement initiatives reported a continued presence of firearms in drug-related investigations. According to Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) trace data, firearm traces linked to dangerous drugs remained among the most frequently reported categories in the NCHR. While trace volumes remained relatively stable from 2022 to 2023, within the statistical margin of error, overall trends indicate a gradual increase over the past four years, despite inconsistencies in reporting.¹¹²

(U//FOUO) Regionally, NCH initiatives reported the seizure of 1,560 firearms in 2024, marking a 16 percent increase from the previous year. The most frequently recovered firearm makes and models included Glock (326), Smith & Wesson (165), Taurus (150), Ruger (101), Privately Made "Ghost Gun" Firearms (80) and Springfield Armory (68).¹¹³

(U//FOUO) Law enforcement initiatives across the NCHR have reported an increase in PMFs. These firearms are constructed using un-serialized components, often manufactured or assembled by individuals who are not federally licensed firearms manufacturers. PMFs are typically built from kits containing incomplete parts that are not required to bear serial numbers under federal law. Additionally, PMFs and other firearm components are often created using 3D printers. Furthermore, individuals purchasing or selling these parts are not subject to background check requirements that apply to transactions through federally licensed firearm dealers. This lack of serialization and background checks significantly impairs law enforcement’s ability to trace these firearms and contributes to increased access by prohibited individuals.¹¹⁴

(U//FOUO) Law enforcement initiatives in the NCHR have reported a growing prevalence of

MCDs, with the most popular version commonly referred to as “Glock switches.” While the traditional Glock switch, typically affixed to the rear of the slide, has been in circulation for several years, a new and more covert variant has recently emerged. This newer type, often called an “Invisi-Switch,” is designed to mimic a standard slide cover plate, making it extremely difficult to detect without disassembling the firearm.

(U//FOUO) MCDs have become increasingly accessible online through fraudulent websites engaged in the illegal importation of these items into the U.S. In September 2024, Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) seized more than 350 website domains involved in the unlawful importation of switches and silencers from China, violations of the National Firearms Act. The operation resulted in the recovery of over 700 MCDs, 87 suppressors, and nearly 100 firearms.

(U//FOUO) NCH initiative reporting confirms this rising threat, documenting a growing presence of illegal firearm modifications across the region. The proliferation of untraceable and easily obtainable MCDs, many linked to violent crimes per ATF data, poses a critical threat to officers and public safety. The impact is not limited to the NCHR; states such as Illinois and Iowa, which frequently recover firearms traced back to this region, are also affected. These developments highlight the urgent need for expanded cyber investigations and strengthened interagency collaboration to mitigate the evolving risks associated with illegal firearm trafficking.¹¹⁵

(U) Crime Gun Intelligence

(U//FOUO) Crime guns are defined as firearms that have been possessed, used, or intended to be used during, or in relation to, a criminal act. ATF supports law enforcement through two key tools: the National Integrated Ballistic Information Network (NIBIN) and eTrace. NIBIN is a national network that utilizes ballistic evidence comparisons to help solve and prevent violent crimes involving firearms. eTrace is an internet-based system that enables law enforcement agencies to trace the ownership history of recovered firearms, helping identify violent offenders and their sources of crime guns.

(U//FOUO) In 2024, the NCHR recorded 20,132 NIBIN acquisitions resulting in 17,883 investigative leads.¹¹⁶

(U) Key Intelligence Questions

1. How often are the crime guns used by DTOs obtained through straw purchases?
2. How often are “ghost gun” parts manufactured within the NCHR, such as using 3D printers?
3. Is there a predominant source for MCDs in the NCHR? To what extent are they being privately manufactured and sold locally? To what extent are they being procured from an online source?
4. Are local DTOs or street gangs actively involved in the production, assembly, or

distribution of ghost guns?

5. Are there any social media platforms, encrypted messaging apps, or online marketplaces being used to promote or distribute MCDs in the region?

(U) NCHR OVERDOSE RESPONSE STRATEGY

(U) Overview

(U) Overdose fatalities across the NCHR are driven by rapidly evolving drug use patterns and an increasingly volatile drug supply. While both Wisconsin and Minnesota reported slight decreases in total overdose deaths from 2022 to 2023, the continued impact of synthetic opioids, particularly fentanyl, underscores the complexity and lethality of the region's current drug landscape. In 2023, Wisconsin reported 1,772 fatal overdoses, a slight decrease from 1,830 in 2022. Similarly, Minnesota recorded 1,277 fatal overdoses, down from 1,384 the previous year. These trends emphasize the need for continued collaboration between public health and law enforcement agencies to effectively respond to the evolving overdose crisis.^{117, 118}

(U) Polysubstance use remains a leading driver of overdose deaths across both states. In Wisconsin, polysubstance-related deaths have tripled since 2018. In Minnesota, 43.8 percent of overdose fatalities in 2023 involved both opioids and stimulants. Males remain disproportionately affected, accounting for 70.6 percent of overdose deaths in Minnesota and the majority in Wisconsin.^{119, 120}

(U) White, Black, and American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) residents accounted for the highest number of overdose fatalities across the NCHR. While White individuals represented the largest number of deaths overall, Black and AI/AN populations experienced disproportionately high fatality rates relative to their population sizes.

(U) In Wisconsin, Black residents make up 6.6 percent of the population but account for 15.9 percent of opioid-related deaths, 13.7 percent of heroin fatalities, and 30.5 percent of cocaine-involved overdoses. Similarly, in 2023, Black residents in Minnesota comprised 7.9 percent of the population but were involved in approximately 30 percent of synthetic opioid deaths, 33.3 percent of heroin fatalities, and 55.9 percent of cocaine-related overdose deaths.^{121,122,123, 124}

(U) AI/AN residents, while comprising only 1.2 percent of Wisconsin's population and 1.4 percent of Minnesota's, accounted for 5.9 percent and 13.4 percent of methamphetamine-related deaths in their respective states. These disparities were especially pronounced in rural areas of Wisconsin,

where methamphetamine overdose rates were highest in Sawyer (12.4 per 100,000), Jackson (12.7 per 100,000), and Menominee (36.6 per 100,000) counties.¹²⁵

(U) Stimulant-involved overdoses continue to rise across the region. In Minnesota, cocaine-involved fatalities increased by 11.98 percent in 2023, rising from 217 to 243 deaths. In Wisconsin, cocaine-related overdose deaths rose sharply from 13.7 percent in 2016 to 42.7 percent in 2023. Fatal overdoses involving combinations of stimulants and opioids remain the most common scenario in both states.^{126,127,128}

(U) Black residents in Wisconsin and Minnesota experience significantly higher overdose fatality rates than their White counterparts. In Wisconsin, the 2023 overdose death rate for Black residents was 100.7 per 100,000, compared to 36.1 per 100,000 for White residents. Black men in Wisconsin were 4.77 times more likely to die from an overdose than White men. In Minnesota, Black residents experienced an overdose death rate of approximately 65 per 100,000 in 2023.^{129,130}

(U) Urban counties continue to report the highest concentrations of overdose deaths among Black residents. In 2023, Milwaukee County Wis., reported 274 fatal overdoses among Black residents, 41.7 percent of the county's total. In Hennepin County Minn., 477 total overdose fatalities were recorded, with Black residents accounting for 38.26 percent (171 deaths).^{131,132}

(U) Methamphetamine use remains most prevalent among White males aged 18 to 44, particularly in rural areas. However, AI/AN communities continue to be disproportionately affected by methamphetamine-related fatalities. In Wisconsin, the methamphetamine overdose death rate was 4.1 per 100,000 in 2023. In Minnesota, psychostimulants, including methamphetamine, were involved in 42.12 percent of all fatal overdoses.^{133,134}

(U) Synthetic opioids, particularly fentanyl, now dominate the illicit opioid supply in both states. The role of heroin in fatal overdoses has declined significantly; in 2023, heroin was present in fewer than 10 percent of fatal overdoses in Wisconsin and just 2.11 percent in Minnesota.¹³⁵

Forecast

(U) Overdose trends in the NCHR are projected to remain volatile due to the increasingly adulterated drug supply and rising poly substance use. Fentanyl, frequently combined with methamphetamine and cocaine, is expected to continue driving fatal and nonfatal overdoses in both states.

(U) Polysubstance use will likely increase, driven by counterfeit pills and high-potency stimulants, with Black and AI/AN populations remaining disproportionately affected, especially in urban and tribal areas with limited treatment access.

(U) Methamphetamine-related deaths are expected to rise in rural areas with scarce harm reduction infrastructure. Hepatitis C rates will likely increase among younger people who inject drugs and AI/AN communities. Injection-related HIV cases may also rise in underserved regions.

(U) Addressing these complex threats requires a coordinated regional response, expanding harm reduction efforts, improving access to culturally competent care, and fostering collaboration between public health, law enforcement, and community organizations.

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(U) Key Intelligence Questions

- What emerging substances, analogs, or drug combinations are most likely to drive future overdose surges in the NCHR?
- How is the regional drug supply chain adapting to enforcement pressure, especially regarding fentanyl, methamphetamine, and counterfeit pills?
- What are the primary concealment and distribution tactics used by DTOs transporting drugs into and within the NCHR?
- What are the driving factors behind the rise in polysubstance overdoses, and how do these differ by age, race, and geography?
- How are trends in stimulant and synthetic opioid use affecting treatment outcomes and overdose prevention efforts?

(U) NCHR OUTLOOK

(U) Overview

(U) Drug trafficking and abuse trends across the NCHR are projected to become increasingly complex under the new executive. This complexity is being driven by evolving drug production methods, adaptive smuggling tactics, and the continued rise in polysubstance use. Synthetic drug combinations such as fentanyl mixed with methamphetamine, xylazine, or other novel psychoactive substances are becoming more prevalent in the regional supply.

(U) While expanded harm reduction strategies and public health interventions may reduce some overdose fatalities, the widespread presence of fentanyl and other synthetic opioids in the drug supply will continue to drive high mortality rates. At the same time, rising stimulant use, particularly methamphetamine and cocaine, introduces additional behavioral and physiological risks that burden healthcare systems and law enforcement agencies.

(U) Further compounding these issues are increasingly sophisticated money laundering operations, the use of cryptocurrency, and the expansion of front businesses. These tactics allow DTOs to operate without a direct cartel presence, making detection and disruption efforts more difficult. Collectively, these dynamics are expected to complicate enforcement operations and create ongoing challenges for prevention, interdiction, and treatment efforts across the NCHR.

(U) Fentanyl, FRS, Heroin and Other Synthetic Opioids

(U) Fentanyl will remain the most significant drug threat in the NCHR through CY2026, continuing to drive overdose deaths as both a primary substance and a potent adulterant in heroin and counterfeit pills. The prevalence of fentanyl-laced pills will likely persist, particularly endangering younger, inexperienced users and older individuals with complex health vulnerabilities.

(U) Traffickers are expected to introduce emerging fentanyl analogues and variants, including chemically modified and visually distinctive forms (e.g., rainbow fentanyl), to evade detection and appeal to younger demographics. These developments will complicate public health messaging, toxicology efforts, and enforcement.

(U) The regional presence of synthetic opioids like nitazenes is also expected to increase, often unknowingly consumed by users, further elevating fatal overdose risk. First responders may encounter more frequent multi-dose naloxone events, delayed overdose recognition, and difficulty identifying substances. Forensic laboratories and healthcare systems may be strained by the need to respond to rapidly evolving synthetic drug profiles.

(U) Methamphetamine

(U) Methamphetamine availability is expected to remain high, with potential price declines driven by sustained production and distribution by Mexican TCOs. These groups will likely continue using parcel services, personal couriers, and layered concealment methods to traffic the drug into and throughout the region.

(U) The mixing of methamphetamine with fentanyl, either intentional or incidental, is expected to rise, increasing the risk of overdose among users unaware of opioid contamination. This trend will complicate toxicology findings and public awareness campaigns.

(U) As southwestern border enforcement intensifies, small-scale meth production may re-emerge in rural areas, domestically. While industrial scale domestic production remains unlikely, localized clandestine labs could increase availability and pose environmental and safety risks.

(U) Local dealers may begin stockpiling finished products and precursors to hedge against supply disruptions, leading to more volatile market dynamics and higher seizure volumes. A multi-sector response involving law enforcement, public health, and prevention programming will be required to mitigate the long-term impact.

(U) Cocaine and Crack Cocaine

(U) Cocaine availability is expected to remain stable or increase slightly due to strong supply chains maintained by Mexican DTOs, coupled with ongoing production in Colombia and Peru. Prices are likely to remain steady or decline modestly due to surplus availability.

(U) DTOs are expected to enhance concealment strategies, particularly through parcel shipments and secondary roadways and shift toward smaller, and more numerous decentralized trafficking models. Crack cocaine use may rise in some urban areas, presenting additional public health and enforcement challenges.

(U) Polysubstance overdose risk will remain high, as fentanyl continues to contaminate cocaine supplies. Many users remain unaware of this contamination, increasing the likelihood of fatal overdoses.

(U) A coordinated approach, including harm reduction, treatment access, targeted enforcement, and community engagement, will be essential to addressing the broader risks associated with cocaine use.

(U) Marijuana and THC Products

(U) Marijuana and THC product markets are expected to expand, fueled by legalization trends, increased production, and shifting societal attitudes. In prohibition states such as Wisconsin, black market activity is projected to remain strong due to limited retail access and regulatory gaps.

(U) High-potency THC products will continue to appeal to youth and young adults, especially where decriminalization or permissive public messaging outpaces education on health risks. These products are highly portable and discreet, complicating enforcement and detection.

(U) As cannabis markets evolve, prevention of youth access, impaired driving enforcement, and legal-market diversion controls will require enhanced information sharing and coordination across law enforcement, public health, and community organizations.

(U) Synthetic and Natural Hallucinogens and Psychostimulants

(U) Use and availability of psychedelic substances are projected to grow due to expanding decriminalization movements, increased public interest in therapeutic applications, and shifting social attitudes. Local production of psilocybin and DMT may rise, enabled by online cultivation resources and minimal overhead costs.

(U) The lack of regulated therapeutic access may lead to the emergence of underground markets of diverted medically prescribed substances such as ketamine. Law enforcement should anticipate increased use of digital platforms, evolving trafficking tactics, and changing user demographics. Collaboration with public health and behavioral health stakeholders will be vital.

(U) New Psychoactive Substances: Synthetic Cannabinoids/Cathinones

(U) Synthetic cannabinoids are expected to proliferate in DOC facilities, supported by creative concealment tactics and limited detection capabilities. Their use will likely result in increased medical emergencies, inmate violence, and institutional security threats.

(U) While recent investments in mail screening, staff training, and interagency coordination have helped mitigate some risk, ongoing monitoring and intelligence-driven interdiction will be critical to managing the threat in correctional environments.

(U) Drug Trafficking Organizations

(U) DTOs and MLOs are projected to expand their influence in 2025 using increasingly sophisticated trafficking, communication, and distribution models. Recently designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs), Mexican cartels will remain dominant suppliers, leveraging regional infrastructure, domestic partnerships, encrypted communication platforms, violence, and corruption.

(U) Should fentanyl production or smuggling be curtailed due to enforcement or internal disruption, smaller and more volatile criminal networks may emerge to fill supply gaps, increasing fragmentation and unpredictability.

(U) Multi-state and local DTOs will continue to oversee regional and retail-level distribution, often using gang-affiliated groups. DTOs are expected to rely more heavily on parcel shipments, rotating transit methods, encrypted communications, and domestic conversion operations. Intelligence sharing, digital forensics, and interagency coordination will be critical to counter evolving threats.

(U) Money Laundering Organizations/ Illicit Financial Activity

(U) Monitoring and enforcement of illegal financial transactions will remain challenging. Traffickers are expected to continue using cash-intensive businesses, shell entities, and electronic platforms to move illicit proceeds. Some policymakers are advocating changes to asset forfeiture laws that may reduce law enforcement's ability to disrupt financial networks.

(U) The use of cryptocurrency, P2P payment platforms, and cross-border laundering tactics will persist and evolve, often beyond the reach of conventional financial oversight mechanisms. Addressing these challenges will require robust financial intelligence, real-time data sharing, and coordination across law enforcement, regulatory agencies, and financial institutions.

(U) Crime Gun Intelligence

(U) Firearm-related threats will intensify across the region, closely tied to drug trafficking, gang activity, and violent crime. Handguns will remain the most preferred firearms and seized weapons from criminals, often obtained through straw purchases or illicit trafficking from source states.

(U) The presence of privately made firearms (PMFs or “ghost guns”) is expected to increase, complicating tracing efforts and investigative follow-through. The use of auto sears and machinegun conversion devices (MCDs) will continue to escalate, increasing the lethality of criminal encounters and enforcement risk.

(U) Comprehensive firearms interdiction strategies, including cross-agency intelligence sharing and targeted enforcement, will be essential to countering this threat.

(U) Overdose Response Strategy & Public Health

(U) While fentanyl- and FRS-related deaths may modestly decline due to expanded harm reduction measures, the overall threat from polysubstance use, including novel synthetics, will remain a leading driver of overdose mortality.

(U) Racial disparities in overdose rates are expected to persist, particularly among Black and American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) populations. These disparities will likely widen without culturally responsive, community-informed interventions.

(U) Rural communities will continue to experience elevated vulnerability due to limited treatment access, provider shortages, stigma, and infrastructure gaps. Telehealth expansion, community-based outreach, and integrated service delivery will be necessary to address these challenges region-wide.

(U) APPENDICES

(U) Appendix A: Methodology

(U) The 2026 North Central HIDTA (NCH) Threat Assessment was developed by the NCH Investigative Support Center (ISC) using a mixed-methods approach that integrates both quantitative and qualitative research to analyze drug trafficking trends across the region. Information was collected and synthesized by strategic analysts from local, state, tribal, and federal

law enforcement agencies, as well as public health partners and medical examiner offices throughout the NCHR.

(U) Core data collection methods included structured surveys, subject matter expert interviews, and comprehensive reviews of public health, medical examiner reports, and law enforcement case files and investigative reports. This multi-source approach ensured a holistic understanding of drug availability, trafficking methods, DTO operations, concealment tactics, overdose and user trends, and other associated public safety impacts.

(U) The ISC also incorporated data from the NCH Performance Management Process (PMP), EPIC National Seizure System (NSS) State Nexus Reports, and a range of federal, state, tribal, and local law enforcement databases. Open-source intelligence and published analytical products further supplemented the research. While acknowledging limitations such as reporting lags and incomplete datasets, the findings presented in this assessment represent the best available intelligence at the time of publication. The conclusions are supported by extensive field reporting and validated through cross-sector collaboration with regional experts.

(U) Appendix B: Source Considerations

(U) The NCH ISC draws on a wide array of law enforcement and public health sources to produce timely, accurate, and actionable intelligence. Primary sources include the NCH Performance Management Process (PMP) system, regional commander surveys, and initiative-level interviews. National insight is informed by the DEA's National Drug Threat Assessment and the DEA Trends in Trafficking Reports, which provide strategic context to regional trends. EPIC NSS State Nexus Reports and open-source intelligence also contribute to situational awareness and analytical depth.

(U) At the state level, agencies throughout the NCHR, such as poison control centers and departments of health, human services, and public safety, contribute critical data on drug-related incidents, overdose fatalities, public health impacts, and treatment trends. These inputs support a well-rounded view of the region's evolving threat environment.

(U) By integrating enforcement intelligence with public health data, the ISC attempted to establish a comprehensive, interdisciplinary approach to this document. This foundation enables informed decision-making and facilitates strategic planning across agencies. The ISC remains committed to refining future assessments as new data and verified intelligence become available.

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