

Amid fentanyl crackdown, Mexico risks 'balloon effect'

May 31 2019, by Joshua Howat Berger



President Donald Trump says China's new ban on all fentanyl-related substances will be a "game-changer" in the deadly US opioid crisis

President Donald Trump says China's new ban on all fentanyl-related substances will be a "game-changer" in the deadly US opioid crisis, but

experts warn it may just shift production elsewhere—particularly Mexico.

Under pressure from Trump, China on May 1 banned all chemical analogues of [fentanyl](#), the synthetic drug at the heart of an overdose epidemic that is killing tens of thousands of people a year in the United States.

Trump won the fentanyl concession as part of his trade war with China, which is allegedly the world's leading supplier of the powerful narcotic, along with designer drugs that mimic it and the precursor chemicals used to make all of them.

But law enforcement officials and anti-narcotics experts warn the ban will probably just push production to other countries—including the United States' southern neighbor, whose powerful drug cartels are already deeply immersed in fentanyl trafficking.

Blame it on the "balloon effect", the idea that banning a drug is like trying to squeeze the air out of a balloon: it just moves somewhere else.

The US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) is preparing for exactly that possibility.

"It's a balloon effect.... As we put more pressure on China, they'll just send the chemicals over to Mexico to make (fentanyl) there," a DEA official told AFP, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Chinese suppliers will now likely start shipping "pre-precursors" abroad to get around the ban, he said.

So many different substances can be used to make fentanyl, and the Chinese chemicals industry is so massive, that it will be impossible to

regulate every potential source of the drug, he added.

"They'll figure out how to go generate two or three (chemicals) to replace the one we just put controls on," he said.

"It's great that they did that, but a chemist can go back to what is uncontrolled, work that up to the precursor they need, and make fentanyl."

Circling home

The balloon effect is what pushed narcotics production to China in the first place, experts say.

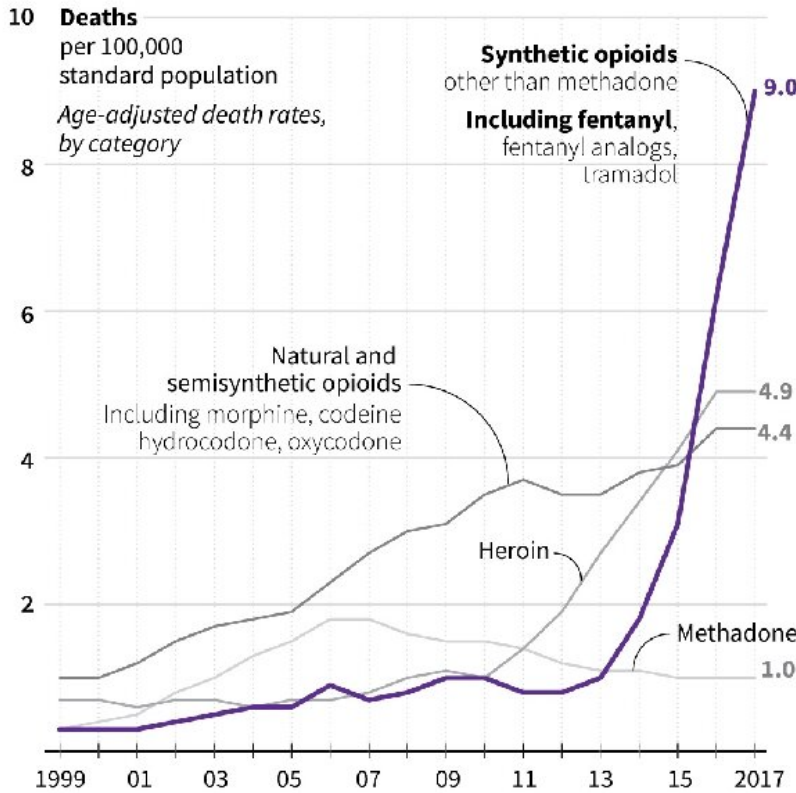
Responding to a crystal meth boom in the United States around the turn of the millennium, authorities imposed tougher controls on cough syrups and other legal medications used to "cook" the drug.

The new regulations hit American meth labs hard. But they gave Mexican cartels a new line of business—leading them to develop connections with the chemical industry in China, which supplied them precursors for meth.

Then, the opioid epidemic began to take hold in the United States, rooted in decades of over-prescription of addictive painkillers.

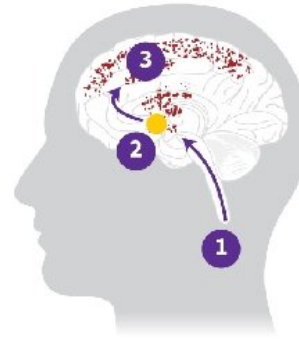
America's deadly addiction to opioids

In 2017, a record 71,568 people died from overdose deaths, reflecting a crisis that is rooted in decades of over prescription of addictive painkillers



Opioid payback

Opioids stimulate the brain's reward system



- 1 Delivery via injection, patches, lozenges or snorted powder
- 2 Concentrate near *nucleus accumbens*, bind to *opioid receptors*, and send signal to the *dopamine terminal*
- 3 Dopamine is released and pushed to reward areas of the brain in the *frontal cortex*. This **numbs pain and can induce euphoria**

Source of opioids

Legal

- Licenced pharmaceutical products, obtained through legitimate prescriptions
Includes oxycodone, morphine, fentanyl

Illegally procured

- Stolen or diverted prescription drugs
- Illegally produced or mixed**
- Non-pharma fentanyl made in clandestine labs
- Illegal narcotics mixed with prescription drugs

The power of synthetics

Lethal doses compared
Average, non-tolerant adult



Source: CDC National Center for Health Statistics

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Chart showing US drug overdose death rates by opioid category, source of opioids, and how they work

That led to tighter controls on prescription narcotics such as OxyContin, and so Chinese suppliers expanded into making fentanyl—a potent narcotic up to 100 times stronger than morphine that has killed thousands of people in the US, including celebrity overdose victims Tom Petty and Prince.

Soon, Mexican cartels were trafficking counterfeit pain pills into the United States made with Chinese fentanyl.

With the Chinese ban now in place, Mexican criminal groups such as the Sinaloa and Jalisco New Generation cartels, whose current role in production is limited, have an incentive to onshore more of the fentanyl supply chain, said Edgardo Buscaglia, an organized crime expert at Columbia University.

"The Chinese ban will clearly create an effect where smaller suppliers, including Mexico, scale up production to satisfy demand. That's how markets work," he said.

"Production will also expand in Pakistan, India, North Korea," he added.

But "Mexico in particular has a very serious problem regulating its pharmaceutical industry," he said. "And it's an enormous, enormous market. So it's very possible fentanyl production will increase in Mexico with the criminal structures that already exist."

'About to get complicated'

Upstart fentanyl producers' main challenge will be matching China's scale, said Javier Oliva, a researcher at Mexico's largest university, UNAM.

"Producing fentanyl requires a certain level of pharmaceutical

sophistication that won't be easy to install in Mexico," he said.

"Unlike methamphetamines, which can be produced here, fentanyl's characteristics aren't so basic."

In fact, China became the go-to fentanyl supplier precisely because of the economic powerhouse's sheer production capacity, said another US official.

"Drug traffickers source their drugs in China for the same reason everything is made in China," he told AFP, also speaking on condition of anonymity.

"Why don't we make sneakers in the US anymore, for example? It's not because we can't make them in the US. It's because the Chinese can do it cheaper, and on a much larger scale."

But law enforcement officials are already worried about the implications a Mexican fentanyl boom would have, both for the United States—where overdose deaths have surged from less than 17,000 in 1999 to more than 70,000 in 2017—and for Mexico—where more than a quarter-million people have been murdered since 2006, in violence largely fueled by the so-called "[drug](#) war."

Experts fear an already gruesome situation could now get worse.

"It's about to get complicated," the DEA official said.

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Citation: Amid fentanyl crackdown, Mexico risks 'balloon effect' (2019, May 31) retrieved 16 June 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-05-fentanyl-crackdown-mexico-balloon-effect.html>

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