

Fentanyl gets into Washington state in 'any manner you can think of'

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Through vehicles on Interstate 5, through packages disguised as merchandise from abroad, or through smugglers traveling north, fentanyl has poured into the Puget Sound area.

In the past couple of years, the symptoms of this crisis have become more apparent: Overdose deaths involving [fentanyl](#) have surged, less deadly opioids have decreased in demand, and policymakers are debating how to combat the epidemic.

But why and how fentanyl is showing up in force in Seattle now, after years of ravaging the East Coast, is less obvious.

Seattle police did not respond to repeated requests to explain the supply chain they are seeing. But court records from cases in Kent, Spanaway and Marysville demonstrate how a sophisticated network of international drug-trafficking organization operatives manufacture, transport and distribute fentanyl in Washington.

From China to Marysville

U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers in Los Angeles inspected a package shipped from China in June 2022. The package was declared as coming from Changsha, China, but had a "third party" return address on it in California. The package was addressed to Jose Garnica in Marysville.

It was labeled "furniture parts," but contained dies for use in a pill press.

Washington's fentanyl pills often start as chemicals manufactured in China and are shipped with false labeling, according to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration.

Commonly, the raw ingredients are shipped to Mexico to be pressed into pills or powder, and then smuggled across the southwest border up the Interstate 5 corridor, said Jake Galvan, acting special agent in charge of the DEA Seattle Field Division.

In this case, the Marysville man manufactured the pills himself in a rental home.

Garnica, working with his co-conspirator Lauren Wilson, intended to use the dies to make pills that look like oxycodone, an opioid prescription painkiller that has a high addiction risk.

The M30 pill—typically small, round and pale blue—is one of the most common forms that street fentanyl takes. They can look nearly identical to actual oxycodone.

Homeland Security investigators searched the man's property and found he had received five other packages from China.

The investigators also found 27 guns and 55 pounds of fentanyl in the home.

Investigators also found finished M30 pills packaged in "large brick-shaped bundles" they believe were manufactured in Mexico and then smuggled into the U.S., according to the court documents.

"This is one of the largest fentanyl seizures in the district," U.S. District Judge Tana Lin said during Garnica's sentencing hearing in June. "[The suspect] had so much fentanyl a hazmat team had to be called in."

The drug's powders, likely spread by the HVAC system, covered the residence.

The Marysville man was sentenced to 15 years in prison in June after pleading guilty to conspiracy to manufacture and deliver controlled substances, possession of a firearm in furtherance of a drug-trafficking crime and conspiracy to commit money laundering.

'Any manner that you can think of'

Federal law enforcement officials say fentanyl traffickers are transporting drugs by sea, air and car, and through social media.

"They're smuggled through in any manner that you can think of," said Galvan at the DEA.

While testifying before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations earlier this year, DEA Administrator Anne Milgram said the agency's priority is targeting the Sinaloa and Jalisco cartels. The cartels, Milgram said, have associates and brokers operating in every state, and control the majority of the global supply chain from manufacture to distribution.

Fentanyl took over heroin as the dominant market in the Seattle area about 1 1/2 to two years ago, said Dr. Caleb Banta-Green, a research professor at the University of Washington School of Medicine. Most people, particularly young adults and their parents, are familiar with the headlines about fentanyl but don't fully grasp the dangers, he said.

Many people are still trying to buy illicit, highly addictive opioid pills, not knowing most are tainted with fentanyl, like the ones the Marysville man was producing.

"Every instance in which they found a M30 at a death scene, there was never oxycodone present. ... It was always fentanyl," Banta-Green said.

Unless someone gets M30 pills from a pharmacy, Banta-Green said, it's almost guaranteed the pill they obtained contains fentanyl.

DEA testing has found that an average of 6 of 10 fentanyl-laced fake prescription pills contain a potentially lethal dose, Milgram said.

The fake pills are often sold online, targeting young people. While open air drug markets—like the area around Third and Pine—are traditionally thought of as dealers' playgrounds, DEA special agent Galvan said every distributor mastered social media use after the pandemic.

"Cartels have maximized their influence on [social media](#) because of the anonymity and amount of users it can reach out to," he said.

The results are deadly. Nearly four people a day in King County die from a fentanyl-related overdose.

"The user's lives, as well as the lives of their families and friends, will never be the same," began a federal prosecutor's sentencing memo for a fentanyl dealer in a Western Washington court case. It's a refrain prosecutors often repeat in cases involving the drug.

An intricate web

Once in the U.S., drug-trafficking organizations rely on scores of distributors and dealers, many of whom use the drugs they sell or have a history of drug-related convictions.

Undercover confidential sources bought meth and fentanyl several times over the course of a year from drug-trafficking leader Jose Alfredo Maldonado-Ramirez and his associates. He and his girlfriend, Iris Amador-Garcia, were distributing in other regions across the nation.

Interstate couriers often transported the drugs in rental cars. The couple was helped by family members in Mexico, Washington, California and New York.

Drug-trafficking organization leaders are often heavily armed with illegally procured firearms for protection.

Maldonado-Ramirez also attempted to trade tens of thousands of fentanyl pills for semi-automatic rifles from DEA confidential sources. He stored the pills with other drugs and firearms at his apartment and storage unit in Kent.

Drug-trafficking operatives were captured on bank and ATM surveillance cameras depositing portions of the cash they got from selling drugs. The cartels use U.S.-based money-laundering organizations.

Maldonado-Ramirez and his fellow drug-trafficking leaders spawned a larger network. They supplied drugs to redistributors who then sold smaller quantities directly to users or to other distributors.

Intercepted communications show how one redistributor, a 61-year-old Spanaway, Pierce County, resident, would then distribute supplied drugs to local sellers—many of whom were addicted to the drugs they sell. The volume was high, with the Spanaway resident selling often in pounds rather than ounces.

Fentanyl's effects wear off quicker than those of other opioids. Many people addicted to the drug say they must use every 20 minutes or so, or they will start to feel a craving or withdrawal.

Maldonado-Ramirez and his co-conspirators were indicted as part of a large investigation into his network in Western Washington. Many of those indicted have pleaded guilty.

As fentanyl floods the market, putting those criminals away slows distribution. But it may not be enough to stop motivated cartels from continuing to spread the incredibly addictive drug even further.

"The cartel is doing this on purpose," Galvan said. "They're putting the

fentanyl in there because they want to drive addiction."

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