

Beloved Mother Slain by a Colorado Counterfeit Drug Trade



Ashley Romero, with her son and dogs.

32-year-old Grand Junction resident Ashley Romero was the cherished eldest daughter of her close-knit Colorado family. Her parents, grandparents, and five younger siblings surrounded Ashley and her eight-year-old son with love.

Ashley's tough exterior belied a warm heart and a brilliant, 1,000 watt smile. Despite bouts of severe pain from chronic pancreatitis, she made friends everywhere she went and helped feed the homeless in Grand Junction on Sundays. "She'd start talking with someone when we walked into a convenience store and would leave with a new friend," her mother, Andrea Thomas said. Ashley didn't judge: she accepted people as they were. "When she looked at you, she did not see the clothes you had on or anything like that. She just looked at the person. She just looked at them for them."

Ashley died on June 11, 2018 after taking half of an oxycodone pill. The pill was fake and actually made with fentanyl. Local police, who had seen similar deaths in the area, referred her case to the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA).

As a result, the Department of Justice indicted a group of Colorado residents on charges related to distributing counterfeit controlled substances that resulted in serious bodily injury of one Colorado resident and the death of another. The drug trafficking ring allegedly acquired thousands of counterfeit pills a month in Mexico, smuggling them over the border and home to Colorado. Federal prosecutors believe the ring may be responsible for other fatal overdoses in western Colorado.

Although justice cannot console Ashley's devastated family, Andrea Thomas has been glad about the prosecutions: "Had the police not found what they did and if the DEA had not already had an open investigation going, my daughter would have just been another overdose and book closed," she told PSM. "When those DEA agents walked in and let us know that five people [had been] indicted [on federal charges] and several more on state charges, it was phenomenal."

After Ashley's demise, Andrea Thomas co-founded the Voices for Awareness Foundation with D'Ann Hopkins, who lost a brother to suicide in 2018. The organization works to bring awareness of the dangers of illicit drugs, drug addiction, self-harm, and suicide to the residents of Grand Junction, and across the whole country. In the summer of 2019, Voices for Awareness hosted a free conference to educate Mesa County residents about the epidemic that stole Ashley from her family and friends. "I just keep on going," Thomas told us. "Something good will come of my daughter's life. Her life will make a difference. This is not all in vain." ■

48 States Have a Deadly Fentanyl Problem

What is in these fake pills?

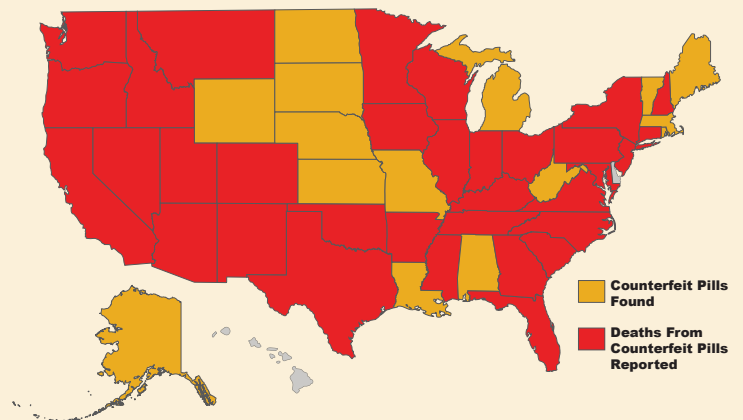
Pills that look like prescription painkillers, anti-anxiety meds, and even aspirin have all been found. They contain deadly doses of fentanyl or related analogues sourced from illegal labs overseas.

Where do they come from?

Mexican cartels and rogue Chinese manufacturers make finished pills which are then smuggled and mailed into the U.S. Illicit Chinese chemical companies also mail raw fentanyl and pill presses to ambitious U.S. drug dealers who then use them to make counterfeit prescription medication.

When did the epidemic start?

Cartels and dealers first mixed fentanyl into heroin in the 1990s, but the first reports of fake prescription medications made with fentanyl came in 2014.



As of June 2019, counterfeit fentanyl pills have been found in 48 states with confirmed deaths in 33. The full "48 States and Counting" update is available at <http://safedr.org/48states>