



2021 UPDATE

ILLEGAL PILL PRESSES: AN OVERLOOKED THREAT TO AMERICAN PATIENTS

A JOINT PROJECT BY:

**NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF DRUG DIVERSION INVESTIGATORS
AND THE PARTNERSHIP FOR SAFE MEDICINES**

APRIL 2021



OVERVIEW: COUNTERFEIT PILLS AND PILL PRESSES HAVE SPREAD CROSS COUNTRY

When we released [*Illegal Pill Presses*](#) with National Association of Boards of Pharmacy and National Association of Drug Diversion Investigators in March 2019, counterfeit fentanyl pills had been found in 46 states and public sources had reported pill poisoning deaths in 30 of them. After a [*frightening intelligence brief in 2016*](#), the Drug Enforcement Administration's [*2018 National Drug Threat Assessment*](#) characterized fentanyl pills as a growing market. Drug traffickers were importing fentanyl powder directly from China, or from Mexican cartels who had acquired it from China. Domestic manufacturing rings and cartels were pressing pills that mimicked opioid painkillers or Xanax and selling them to people who often believed they were legitimate prescription pills.

Two years later, it is clear that the DEA's warning was prescient. Although China made efforts to [*crack down on illicit fentanyl exports*](#) beginning in late 2019, organized crime groups in countries like [*Myanmar*](#) have stepped up fentanyl production to fill the void. Newer intelligence suggests that Mexican cartels are [*importing precursor chemicals from China and India*](#) to make [*their own fentanyl*](#) in-house and that they have industrialized their production. The DEA's Fentanyl Signature Profiling Program found that [*cartels manufactured 71 percent of the counterfeit pills*](#) regional offices submitted for analysis in 2020.

In the meantime, the U.S. has been deluged with fentanyl pills; federal authorities in Arizona reported that they confiscated [*more than one million of the pills in fiscal year 2019*](#) alone. As of October 2020, pressed counterfeit pills made with fentanyl had been found in [*all 50 U.S. states*](#), with associated deaths in 42 of them.



ILLEGAL PILL PRESSES: AN OVERLOOKED THREAT—2021 UPDATE

Because pill presses allow criminals to change the form of their pills simply by trading out a mold, traffickers have been making these fentanyl pills in a wider variety of forms. In August 2020, law enforcement reported fentanyl pills mimicking [metformin](#), a prescription drug used by diabetics, [aspirin](#) and [Aleve](#).

Drug traffickers have also expanded their offerings. [Several large counterfeiting](#) operations have outfitted their pill presses to produce hundreds of thousands of fake Adderall pills made with methamphetamine. Others have [counterfeited Xanax](#) (and its generics) with illegally imported [alprazolam](#), other [benzodiazepines](#), or, in one notable case, with [cocaine](#). In the U.K and Canada, similar drug rings have sold [counterfeit anxiety medications](#) made with another benzodiazepine, etizolam, that have led to [hospital admissions](#) and [deaths](#). Reports of etizolam have surfaced in coverage of pill press and smuggling operations in [California](#), [Florida](#), [Nevada](#), [Pennsylvania](#) and elsewhere.

The full picture of the situation suggests, as we did in March 2019, that the pill press as a vehicle for the distribution of dangerous drugs is not going away.

COUNTERFEIT PILL PRODUCTION IS A NATIONWIDE PROBLEM

HIGH-VOLUME PILL-PRESSES CAPABLE OF PRODUCING THOUSANDS OF PILLS AN HOUR HAVE BEEN SEIZED IN:



- [ARIZONA](#)
- [CALIFORNIA](#)
- [DELAWARE](#)
- [FLORIDA](#)
- [GEORGIA](#)
- [INDIANA](#)
- [KENTUCKY](#)
- [MASSACHUSETTS](#)
- [MINNESOTA](#)
- [NEW JERSEY](#)
- [NEW YORK](#)
- [OHIO](#)
- [RHODE ISLAND](#)
- [SOUTH CAROLINA](#)
- [TEXAS](#)
- [WEST VIRGINIA](#)

By the time Utah's [fentanyl pill king Aaron Shamo](#) was sentenced to life in prison for the manufacture and distribution of counterfeit Xanax and oxycodone made with fentanyl in October 2020, do-it-yourself pill-press operations had proliferated throughout the United States. Since then, cartel shipments of fake pills smuggled over the border compete with dozens of counterfeit pill shops all over the country.

[A review of published news](#)

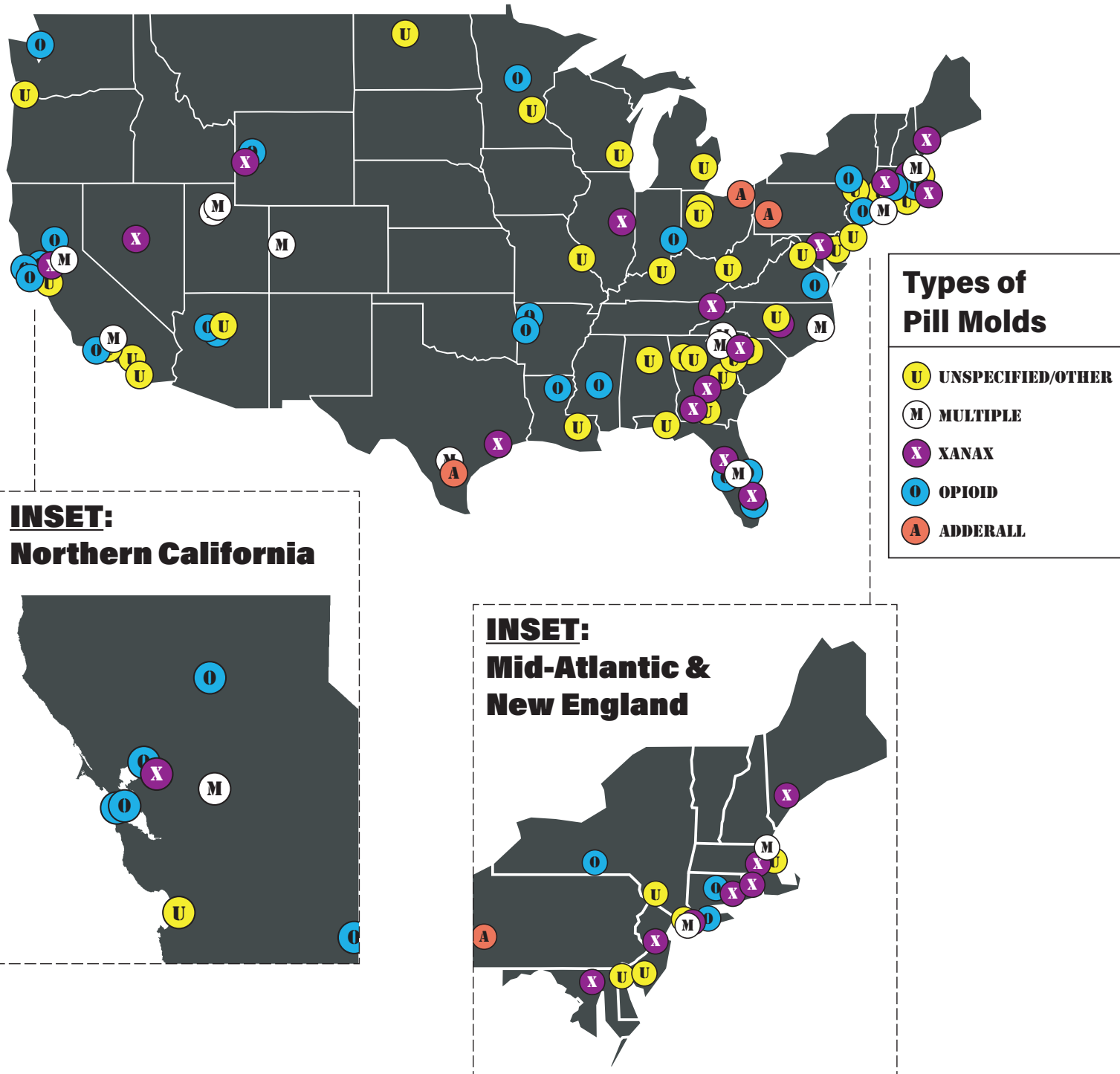
[articles](#) from January 2016 through February 2021 found 92 incidents in 37 states where law enforcement seized at least one pill press. Opioids and Xanax, the most commonly counterfeited types of pills, appeared in 48 of the incidents. Law enforcement seized fentanyl in pill or powder form in 51 of the cases. Alprazolam, the active pharmaceutical ingredient in Xanax, and methamphetamine were seized either in pill or powder form 10 and 12 times, respectively. Thirty-three of the articles used generic terms such as “fentanyl pills,” “meth pills,” or did not describe the pills, making it impossible to know if the pills seized were made to mimic legitimate pharmaceutical pills.

The swelling epidemic of drug trafficking makes a mockery of the current law(s) and its protections; better prevention tools—including those that would control illicit pill presses—are necessary to address the surge. We need to focus on border controls, information sharing, and nationwide oversight to curb the appeal of dealing and using.

—Lisa McElhaney, Chief Operating Officer,
National Association of Drug Diversion Investigators



PILL PRESS SEIZURES, 2016-2021



An exploded view of a pill press mechanism, showing various components like the upper and lower dies, the frame, and the motor assembly. The components are rendered in a light blue, semi-transparent style, giving a technical and clean appearance.

UPDATES TO PILL PRESS LEGISLATION AND COUNTERFEITING STATUTES

Not much has changed in the legal or regulatory environment of pill presses and it does not appear likely that much will change in the next two years.

Fraudulent medication created in clandestine labs has continued to dupe unsuspecting consumers, sometimes fatally. We have no reason to believe these operations will slow down without outside intervention.

-Lemrey “Al” Carter, PharmD, MS, RPh, Executive Director and Secretary,
National Association of Boards of Pharmacy

FEDERAL

The Criminalizing Abused Substance Templates (CAST) Act was introduced in the House ([H.R. 4510](#)) on September 26, 2019. The bill would modify the Controlled Substances Act to make possession of a press mold with intent to counterfeit schedule I or II substances a crime. Current law prohibits this practice but does not define the penalty. The CAST Act would also increase the offense level of making or selling controlled substances in conjunction with possessing a pill press mold by at least two levels. Violations of the act would carry a penalty of up to 20 years in prison.

However, the CAST Act never made it out of committee in the 116th Congress. The Judiciary and Energy & Commerce committees forwarded the bill on to subcommittees (Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security & Health, respectively), where it stalled. On February 24, 2021, Representative David Kustoff (R-TN-8) [reintroduced the legislation](#) into the 117th Congress.



FLORIDA

In 2018, the state of Florida passed [HB 21](#), which made it a crime for an individual to “possess, purchase, deliver, sell, or possess with intent to sell or deliver a tableting machine, an encapsulating machine, or controlled substance counterfeiting materials knowing, intending, or having reasonable cause to believe that it will be used to manufacture a controlled substance or counterfeit controlled substance.”

NEW JERSEY

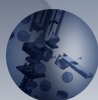
In 2019, the state of New Jersey passed [A-5037](#), a law that made it a crime of the second degree for any person to possess, sell, dispense or administer a counterfeit drug, a term defined to include the medication, the container, or the labeling. In addition to any criminal penalty, this law carries with it civil fines and bars anyone convicted from bidding on state contracts, receiving a state contract, or conducting business with certain state agencies, boards, et cetera. The law requires that a list of violators be published on the [Department of Law and Public Safety’s website](#). At the time of publication, no published list could be found.

UTAH

In 2019, the state of Utah made it possible to legally infer that an individual intended to operate a clandestine laboratory if the individual [illegally possessed precursor ingredients or was in possession of certain equipment](#). Included on the state’s list of potential equipment was a pill press.

TEXAS

In 2019, the state of Texas made updates to sections of its laws. Texas began to require recordkeeping for a period of at least two years for any sales or transfers of any chemical laboratory apparatus, including pill presses. Additionally, the state of Texas [made it a felony](#) to violate recordkeeping requirements as well as to sell, transfer, or otherwise furnish a “chemical laboratory apparatus with the knowledge or intent that the recipients will use the apparatus to unlawfully manufacture a controlled substance or controlled substance analogue.”



ONLINE EFFORTS TO SHUT DOWN SALES OF PILL PRESSES AND MOLDS

COUNTERFEIT PILLS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

While sales on the dark web and the street continue, social media has become a significant vehicle for the sale of counterfeit pills, particularly for teenagers and young adults. Facebook made a publicized effort to [crack down on dealers](#) advertising through hashtags on Facebook and Instagram in 2018, but pill dealers and enthusiasts simply moved to other hashtags. A survey of Twitter suggests similar issues. As of January 2021, the media had reported that teens in [Santa Clara](#) and [Fresno](#), California, and [Prescott Valley, Arizona](#) died of fentanyl intoxication after taking prescription pills they purchased via Snapchat. (A fourth teen, in [Nampa, Idaho](#), survived.)

PILL PRESS PARAPHERNALIA IN ONLINE MARKETPLACES

As the threat of counterfeit pills became even more clear, third-party marketplaces made visible efforts to regulate the sale of paraphernalia that produce them. In August 2020, the Drug Enforcement Administration [launched an education campaign](#) for online retailers about pill presses and the regulations around them.

POLICY

[eBay](#) had already added “pill presses” to its examples of items that are banned because they might “enable or encourage illegal activity” when we first published our report.

After [criticism](#) for [enforcement failures](#), Amazon updated its restricted products policy. The [prohibition on drug paraphernalia](#) used to manufacture illicit drugs evolved to [explicitly forbid](#) the sale of tableting and encapsulating machines and pill molds. The [current policy](#) reads:

- Tableting machines (commonly known as “pill presses”) or encapsulating machine (commonly known as “capsule fillers”), whether those devices are mechanical or manual, are prohibited
- Tablet presses or molds used to press or imprint a pharmaceutical drug name or identification number onto a tablet or pill are prohibited

China-based Alibaba has stuck to a [more general policy](#) that forbids drug paraphernalia.

PRACTICE

Results are variable. Alibaba readily lists pill molds for M30 pills and for made to order pill dies and molds. A search on “pill press” returns an error: “Sorry, this product can’t be shipped to your region.”



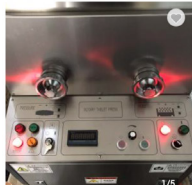
ILLEGAL PILL PRESSES: AN OVERLOOKED THREAT—2021 UPDATE

We were unable to find listings for specific counterfeit pill dies and molds or pill presses on eBay or Amazon, but sellers had listings offering to “custom-make” molds to a buyer’s specifications. eBay also offered ads for other websites selling pill-making materials when it couldn’t locate relevant results.


Finally, a search on eBay for “tablet presses” with “include description” selected returned results. While a Chinese seller was explicit that it did not ship pill presses to the U.S., domestic resellers were selling industrial pill presses for thousands of dollars. Furthermore, once you discovered one pill press, eBay’s helpful algorithm readily offered options like “related sponsored items,” “similar sponsored items,” and “people who viewed this also viewed....”

Former Supervisory Special Agent Milton Tyrrell, who worked on the DEA’s new pill press education campaign, is hopeful that educating retailers will have a strong impact: ***“Online retailers are often unaware that these items are being used to make counterfeit pills or that there are restrictions and regulations that govern selling them. Once they are aware, they will be more effective partners.”***


If large third-party sites shut down these sales even further, they will provide a significant barrier to entry for enterprising fake pill dealers. Given that third-party marketplaces are multinational and not necessarily obligated to follow U.S. regulations, vendors still sell pill-making equipment on their individual websites—and some of those sales go to legitimate purposes. The online regulation of this market continues to be a significant challenge.




Pill Press Tablet Press Machine Zp-15d Pill Press Tablet Press Machine
\$7,700.00-\$7,900.00 / Set
 1 Set (Min. Order)
 Herun Machinery (Shanghai) Co., Limited > CN 1 YRS
 5.0 ★ (4)
[Contact Supplier](#) [Chat Now!](#) [compare](#)



Pill Press Tablet Press Machine Low Price Automatic Medicine
\$700.00-\$1,400.00 / Set
 1.0 Sets (Min. Order)
 Zhengzhou Jinhe Machinery Manufacture Co., Ltd. > CN 10 YRS
 @ US \$80,000+ in 32 Transaction(s) 5.0 ★ (6)
[Contact Supplier](#) [Chat Now!](#) [compare](#)



Press Single Punch Tablet Press Machine Manual Type TDP 1.
\$900.00 / Set
 1 Set (Min. Order)
 Wuxi Reta Pharma Machinery Co., Ltd. > CN 5 YRS
 @ US \$90,000+ in 20 Transaction(s) 5.0 ★ (2)
[Ready to Ship](#)



12963-001 Used Key International Model DC-16, automatic, 16 station rotary table
 Condition: Used
 “Condition and item description are “as-is and where-is” as shown in the photo pictures. The ” ... [Read more](#)
 Price: **US \$7,500.00**
[\\$313 for 24 months with PayPal Credit*](#)
[Buy It Now](#)
[Add to cart](#)
 Best Offer: [Make Offer](#)
[Add to Watchlist](#)
 Ships from United States 5 watchers
 Shipping: Freight - Read the item description or contact the seller for details | [See details](#)
 Item location: Hammon, New Jersey, United States
 Ships to: United States [See exclusions](#)
 Delivery: Varies
 Payments: [PayPal](#) [VISA](#) [MasterCard](#) [eBay](#) [Discover](#)
PayPal CREDIT
 *\$313 for 24 months. Minimum purchase required. | [See terms and apply now](#)
 Earn up to 6x points when you use your eBay Mastercard®. [Learn more](#)
 Ad [Finance It & Save \\$5 | Low Monthly Payments!](#)
 Returns: Seller does not accept returns | [See details](#)

Search results from AliBaba, March 2021

A pill press listing on eBay, January 2021



FLORIDA: A STUDY IN PILL PRESS LEGISLATION

FLORIDA'S PILL PRESS LEGISLATION

Florida's [HB21](#), which made using a pill press in the illegal production of controlled substances a second- or third-degree felony punishable by a maximum of five years in prison, was signed in March 2018 and became effective the following July.

PROSECUTIONS

[Florida's 2018 pill press statute, 893.147](#), covers the “use, possession, manufacture, delivery, transportation, advertisement, or retail sale of drug paraphernalia,” including pill presses. Media coverage of five Florida cases reported pill press seizures since the statute passed. Only one included charges or enhancements specifically related to the pill press or presses seized in conjunction with the cases. In January 2021, *The Palm Beach Post* reported a pill press seizure in Acreage. However, as of March 29, no indictment had been provided to indicate whether pill press-specific charges will be levied. In total, PSM considered the following cases:

- January 2021: The Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office [arrested an Acreage man](#) and seized oxycodone pills, a pill press, plastic bags and other drugs. The case is ongoing.
- October 2020: [Two people in Inverness](#) arrested in possession of a pill press and other pill-making equipment. The duo are alleged to have been making and selling counterfeit Xanax. The case is ongoing.
- October 2020: The Martin County Sheriff's Office arrested an Okeechobee man and shut down a pill press operation he had been running [in a Tequesta garage](#). The case, which is still ongoing, includes charges for possession of a pill-making machine.
- June 2019: Dion Gregory Fisher of Seminole was found guilty of [manufacturing and selling counterfeit pills containing fentanyl](#). This case began in Pinellas County, which did not include pill press charges. However, it grew into a [federal prosecution](#) that made state pill press charges extraneous.
- May 2018: The Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office arrested 15 and [seized a pill press](#), heroin, cocaine and diet pills. The case is ongoing.

EFFECTIVENESS

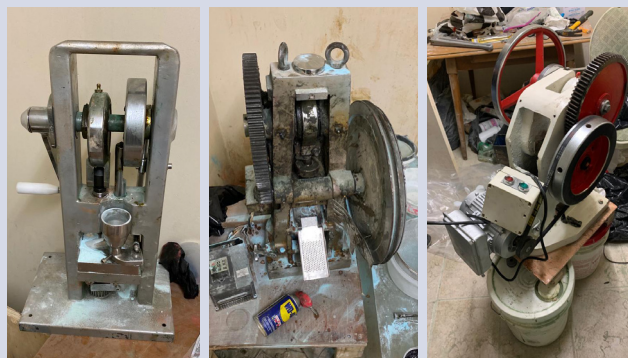
We pulled publicly available court documents on these Florida cases and sent them to career prosecutors we work with to see if they thought this law had much impact on these cases.



Prosecutors we consulted were doubtful about the statute's effectiveness. From their point of view, five years was a light sentence. As George Karavetsos, a former head of FDA's Office of Criminal Investigations, noted, perpetually scarce resources mean that ***"states will always want to bring the most serious charges against a defendant and serious controlled substance violations that carry more significant prison sentences."*** Thus, prosecutors would narrow charges in a pill press case to the controlled substance violations, which must already be present to charge a defendant with 893.147 because it only covers the counterfeiting of scheduled medicines. Those violations are second degree felonies that carry sentences of up to 15 years.

Others in the field noted that prosecutors sometimes add pill press-specific charges and drop them when a defendant plea-bargains. Nevertheless, in a case where a prosecutor was seeking an enhanced sentence, 893.147 could still be relevant. It is too early to tell if 893.147 will be an effective tool or deterrent.

We will continue to follow this law to see if it has an impact on future cases.



Controlled deliveries of pill presses are an effective law enforcement tool. In June 2020, for example, agents dismantled a pill trafficking operation by following the person who [received three presses and delivered them to an apartment building in the Bronx.](#)

"Seizing a pill press on its way into the country and following to its destination is one of the best ways to find and shut down these dangerous operations."

-Mark Baughman, a retired DEA special agent who also headed the Pinellas County, Florida Narcotics Division



CONCLUSION

Two years on, we have difficulty feeling hopeful. The CDC's numbers show that deaths involving fentanyl are the highest they have ever been and are still rising. Law enforcement is better educated, but industrialization of fake pill production by the Mexican cartels is fueling a flood of pills into the United States. Prosecutors do not seem to be taking advantage of pill press laws for reasons we outlined in our first paper.

Based on data available for analysis on:

4/4/2021

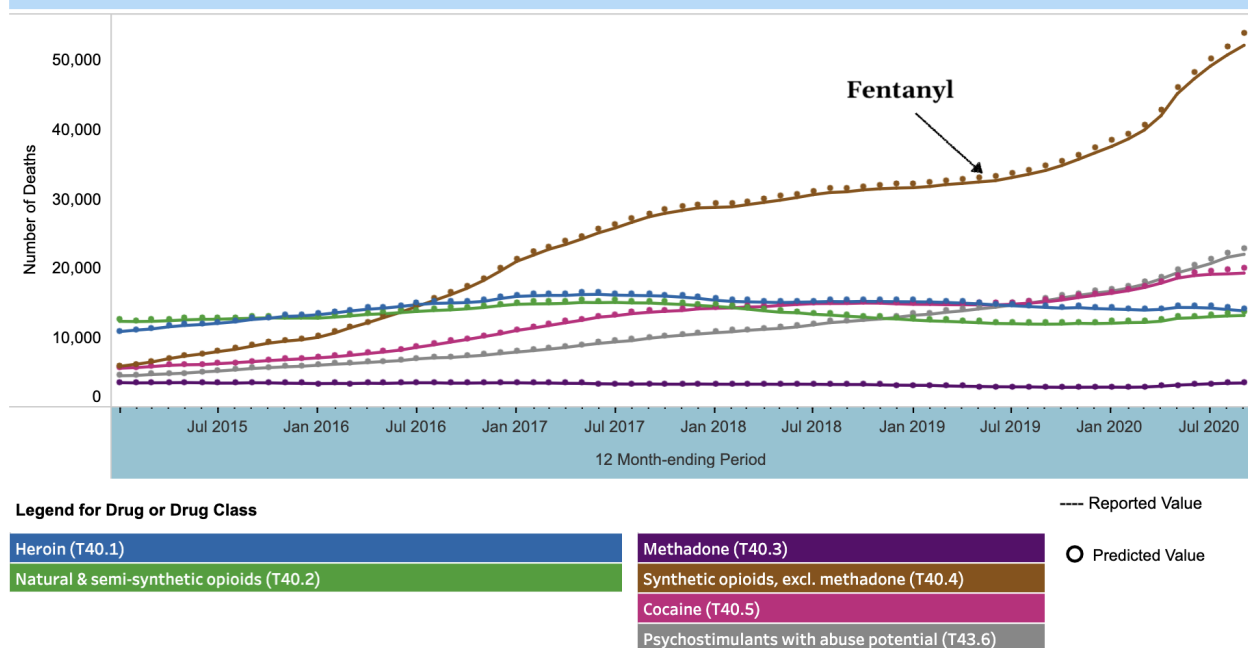
Select Jurisdiction

United States

Select specific drugs or drug classes

(Multiple values)

Figure 2. 12 Month-ending Provisional Number of Drug Overdose Deaths by Drug or Drug Class: United States



"Provisional drug overdose death counts..." bit.ly/3aN7WjZ

Hope, if any, can be found in law enforcement successes. We've seen law enforcement understanding the role pill presses play in crime and crafting strategies, including controlled deliveries, to turn pill press interdiction into a powerful investigative tool. Additionally, legislation that would increase penalties on those convicted of controlled substance crimes while in possession of a pill press remains alive this year. While passing legislation is never a short-term endeavor, we believe this will be a deterrent to domestic pill manufacturers.

Looking ahead, we hope to see more success stories in the coming years from law enforcement and a drop in the CDC's numbers for fentanyl overdoses.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are indebted to all the hardworking allies who work every day to reduce drug-related deaths in America. While they provided input on this report, any errors and omissions are purely the responsibility of PSM.

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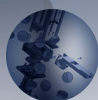
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To keep up with report updates and new pill press cases, please go to the home page for this report at <http://safedr ug/pill-press-update>.



APPENDIX

MAJOR REPORTED CASES AND UPDATES SINCE MARCH 2019

CANADA

June 18, 2020: Project Javelin. Counterfeit oxycocet made with fentanyl in real-looking packaging. As a result of the enforcement actions, investigators seized:

- 123,700 fentanyl pills;
- 70 kg of fentanyl powder;
- More than 300 kg of bulk powder utilized as binding/cutting agent;
- One commercial-sized pill press;
- One industrial pill press with counterfeit tableting stamp;
- Three commercial-sized mixers;
- One pill coating machine;
- Approximately 700 empty bulk pharmacy-sized pill bottles;
- One roll of fraudulent “Teva-Oxycocet” labels;
- One pill bottling tableting table; and
- \$20,000 in CAD currency.

This is the largest seizure of fentanyl by law enforcement in Ontario. For information on this case: <https://bit.ly/3wTAUYd>

ARIZONA

May 1, 2020: PANT seized a pill press, fentanyl, methamphetamine, and heroin during a search conducted at a home in Prescott Valley. 225 fentanyl pills were also seized. For information on this case: <https://bit.ly/3eoG9wJ>

CALIFORNIA

December 21, 2020: Federal agents and Vallejo law enforcement seized a commercial pill press, methamphetamine pills, and other drugs and weapons. For information on this case: <https://bayareane.ws/3x6xwJQ>

January 12, 2021: The Butte County Narcotics Task Force seized a pill press and counterfeit pills in Oroville, California during a warranted search. For information on this case: <https://bit.ly/3g9xuL9> and <https://bit.ly/3g5RsX8>

FLORIDA

October 17, 2020: The search of a home in Inverness turned up a commercial pill press operation and 16,000 counterfeit Xanax pills made with etizolam, alprazolam, and flualprazolam. For information on this case: <https://cbsloc.al/3tnUiYu>

October 15, 2020: A commercial pill press used in making counterfeit Xanax was seized during a raid on an Okeechobee home. For information on this case: <https://bit.ly/32cHN97>

January 6, 2021: A Royal Palm Beach resident was arrested after thousands of counterfeit oxycodone pills made with fentanyl and a pill press were seized during a search of his home. For information on this case: <https://bit.ly/3toSoJW>



GEORGIA

November 9, 2020: Pill press seized and three arrested during search of a Midville home. The pill press was being used to make fake pills containing methamphetamine, heroin, and other drugs. For information on this case: <https://bit.ly/2RAZYTP>

INDIANA

Pill press seized during a raid on a home in Aurora. Two people who were using the pill press to make fake oxycodone containing fentanyl and tramadol were arrested. For information on this case: <https://bit.ly/3mLOVTj>

MASSACHUSETTS

January 11, 2021: Quincy Police discovered a commercial-grade pill-press along with a large quantity of fentanyl powder while conducting a search at a local storage facility. The pill-making operation was found in a self-contained trailer that had the looks of a mobile drug-counterfeiting lab. For information on this case: <https://bit.ly/3dYHgNo>

MINNESOTA

November 24, 2020: Spring Lake Park resident indicted for selling fake pills made with fentanyl. A commercial pill press was seized during a search of his home. For information on this case: <https://bit.ly/3mOgrPR>

NEW JERSEY

August 7, 2020: Seven people arrested and thousands of counterfeit OxyContin pills containing fentanyl were seized along with a pill press. For information on this case: <https://njersy.co/3diulqx> and <https://bit.ly/3djLJLv>

OHIO

July 13, 2020: West Central Ohio Crime Task Force seized 11.5 kilograms of fentanyl and a commercial pill press from what appeared to be a pill processing facility in a private home. For information on this case: <https://bit.ly/32fulRM>

August 12, 2020: West Central Ohio Crime Task Force seized five pounds of suspected fentanyl, 2,500 suspected fentanyl pills, and a second commercial pill press from a home in Lima. This case is connected to the July 13 case. For information on this case: <https://bit.ly/2QqYlrj>

September 22, 2020: 179 people were arrested in a major nationwide counterfeiting operation in Cincinnati. The group is accused of manufacturing and selling one million fake pills made with fentanyl. During a search in Ohio, 5,095 fake Xanax and an industrial pill press were seized. For information on this case: <https://bit.ly/3e0ooL6>

September 25, 2020: Pill press seized during search in Lima, along with 100 fentanyl pills. For information on this case: <https://bit.ly/3siZ5vN>

SOUTH CAROLINA

June 19, 2020: Pill press seized during raid on Simpsonville. For information on this case: <https://bit.ly/32jdfCk>

June 26, 2020: Finished fentanyl/methamphetamine pills and two pill presses were seized in Greenville. Five people were arrested. For information on this case: <https://bit.ly/3mUzZIN>

July 23, 2020: Seven people arrested, four kilograms of fentanyl seized along with two pill presses used to make fentanyl pills. For information on this case: <https://bit.ly/2QsxVFj>

TENNESSEE

August 14, 2020: Pair arrested when a pharmaceutical pill press and fake Xanax made with fentanyl were seized from their vehicle. For information on this case: <https://bit.ly/3e2crRz>

TEXAS

December 11, 2019: Two arrested after a police found their clandestine pill operation that manufactured counterfeit Adderall pills that contained methamphetamines. For information on this case: <https://bit.ly/3dXQCcg>



October 3, 2019: The leader of a San Antonio counterfeit pill trafficking organization received a 30-year sentence. Using multiple industrial sized pill presses, this organization produced and distributed an estimated 850,000 counterfeit pills, including oxycodone containing fentanyl, Adderall containing methamphetamine, and Xanax. For information on this case: <http://bit.ly/2RGAwdB>

UTAH

October 15, 2020: Fentanyl pill king of Utah sentenced to life in prison for the manufacture and sale of thousands of counterfeit pills made with fentanyl. For information on this case: <https://bit.ly/3bua54E>

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