



# Fentanyl Report

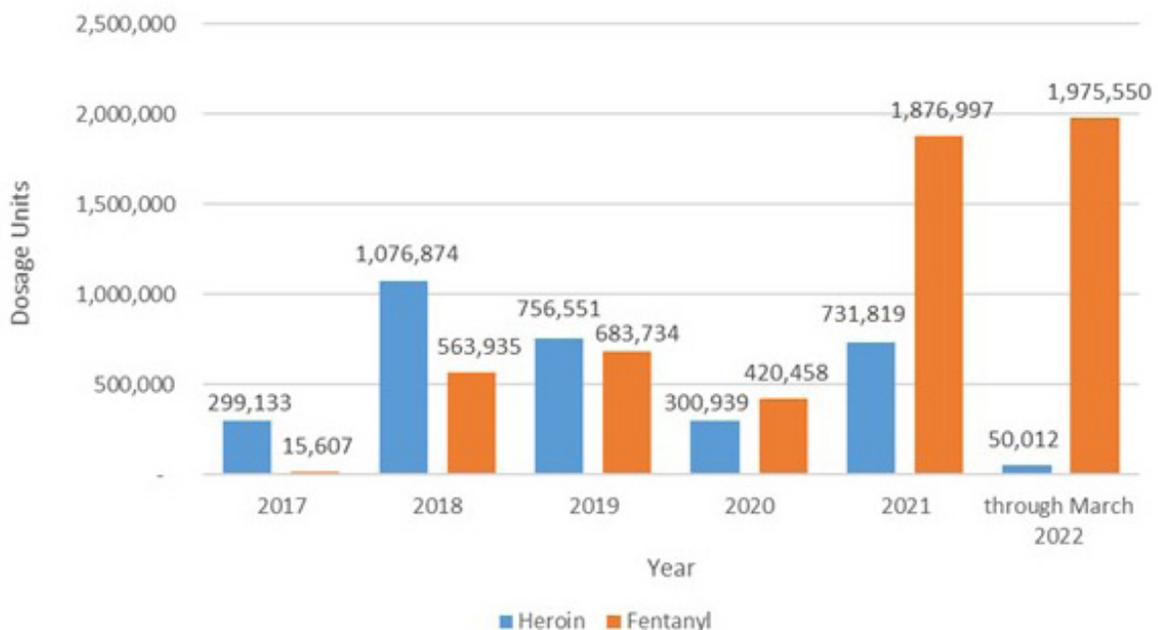
## Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro

### Introduction

The opioid epidemic that has gripped Pennsylvania over the past decade continues to wreak havoc on our communities. While modest gains were made in combatting this epidemic in 2018 and 2019, evidence from a variety of sources indicates that this crisis worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic and remains Pennsylvania’s most critical public health and public safety threat. In Pennsylvania, overdose deaths rose by 16.4% in 2020, and continued rising to 5,438 reported overdose deaths in 2021, another 6% increase from the prior year. To put that in starker terms, an average of 15 Pennsylvanians died each and every day of a drug overdose for the last year.

While this epidemic has continued to ravage Pennsylvania’s communities, the drugs fueling it have changed. According to law enforcement data, what was once a crisis fueled by prescription drugs and heroin has evolved to one primarily fueled by fentanyl, counterfeit pills, and other synthetic opioids. These cheaper, more potent opioids—which are primarily sourced from Mexican transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) and moved across the southwest border—have displaced heroin as the key driver sustaining and escalating the opioid crisis in Pennsylvania.<sup>1</sup> Fentanyl is approximately 50 times more potent than heroin and 100 times more potent than morphine<sup>2</sup>, with doses selling for the price of a six-pack of beer. As the United States has dealt with increasing opioid overdoses, illicit fentanyl has further compounded and driven the issue as it has been mixed with other drugs to increase potency and profits. With cheaper price and higher potency, fentanyl and fentanyl analogues have consistently infiltrated the illicit drug market nationwide.<sup>3</sup>

PA OAG BNI Heroin & Fentanyl Dosage Units Seized



This change is reflected in the doses of fentanyl seized by the Office of Attorney General’s (OAG) Bureau of Narcotics Investigations (BNI), which seized 1.9 million doses in the first 3 months of 2022, compared to 1.8 million doses in all of 2021 and 1.7 million doses combined from 2017-2020. Since 2017, BNI seized over 5.5 million doses through March 2022 compared to 3.22 million doses of heroin over that same time frame. While BNI’s complement has grown modestly over this time frame, it is clear that these changes have been driven by what drugs are available on the street rather than by changes in OAG’s approach to enforcement.

Going hand-in-hand with the rise of fentanyl is a drastic increase in the number of counterfeit pills

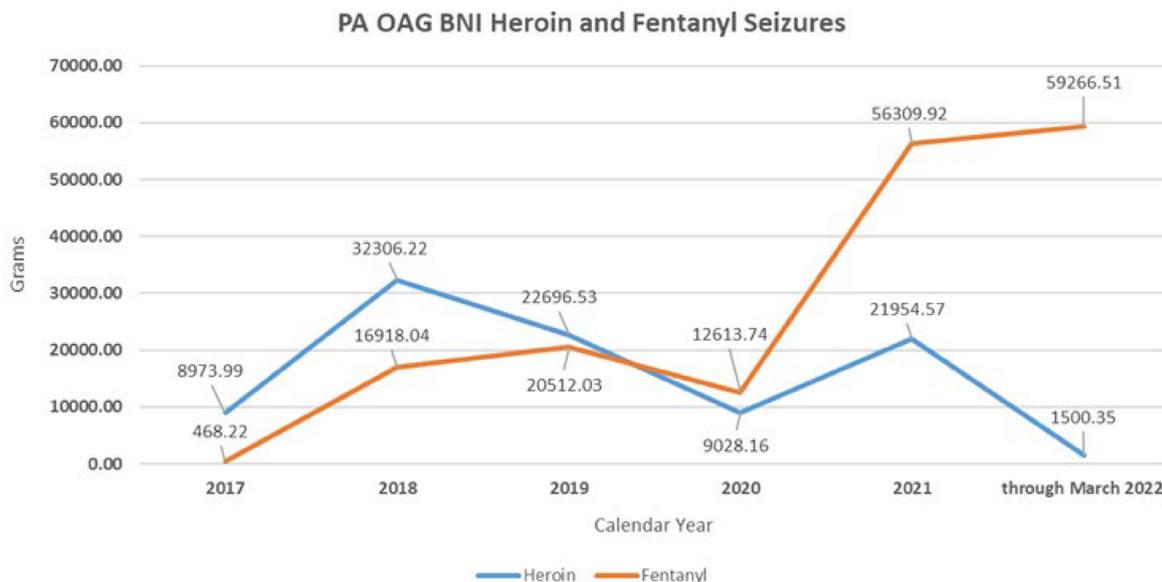
containing fentanyl. The rise in production and widespread availability of fentanyl-laced counterfeit pills is due to the increased accessibility of fentanyl and other synthetic opioids, efficient concealment of trafficked pills and high potency compared to prescription opioids.<sup>4</sup>

This report, utilizing analysis prepared by the Office of Attorney General’s Intelligence Unit, focuses on the transition from heroin to fentanyl in Pennsylvania. Sources include data and reporting from BNI as well the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), Philadelphia Police Department (PPD), New Jersey State Police Office of Drug Monitoring and Analysis - Drug Monitoring Initiative (NJ DMI), and Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

## Shift from Heroin to Fentanyl

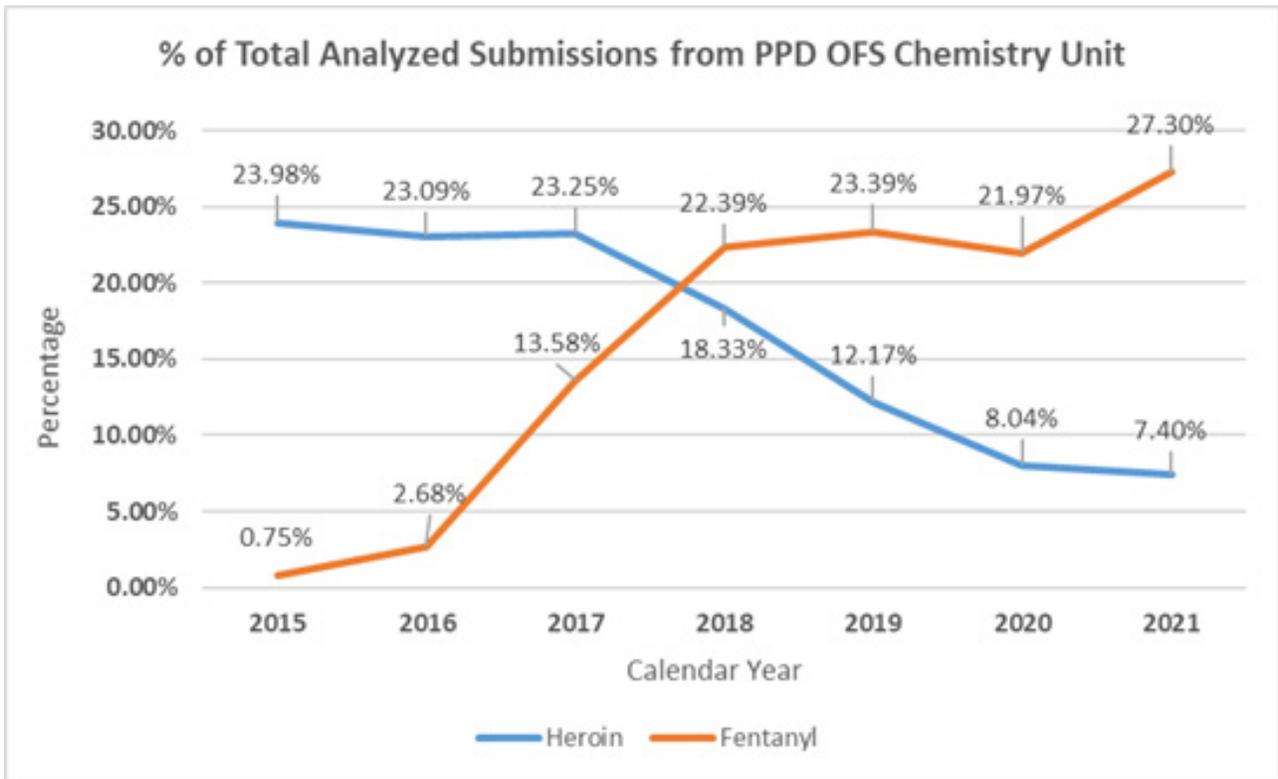
Pennsylvania primarily maintains a white powder heroin market making it ideal for the transition and integration of illicit fentanyl.<sup>5</sup> While heroin remains a part of the Pennsylvania illicit drug market, the shift to more potent, cheaper and highly available fentanyl is supported by BNI seizure data with a reported 346% increase of fentanyl seizures from 2020–2021 (12,613 to 56,309 grams). Although heroin seizures increased 143% from 2020–2021, the overall trend for heroin seizures has gradually declined since 2018. While 2020 seizures of both drugs were likely lower than expected because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the drastic increase in the amount of fentanyl seized coupled with the trend of lower seizure figures for heroin clearly demonstrates the displacement of heroin by fentanyl in the Pennsylvania market.

These trends appear to be accelerating. In 2021, BNI regions seized over double the amount of fentanyl than heroin. In the first three months of 2022, BNI seized approximately 40 times the amount of fentanyl compared to heroin – and more fentanyl than was seized in all of the previous year. BNI regional reporting and strategic intelligence both note an overall decrease of heroin, and regional and local laboratory testing reveals increasing analyzed submissions of fentanyl/synthetic opioids.



The DEA Philadelphia Field Division noted several indicators of sharp increases in productions and supply of fentanyl within Pennsylvania. They reported the total weight of fentanyl seized and analyzed by DEA in Pennsylvania almost doubled from 2018 to 2020 (>160 kilograms in 2020). In 2021, the total weight of fentanyl seized and analyzed was more than eight (8) times the totals from 2016. Another sign of the increase in supply is the number of individual seizures of fentanyl of five (5) kilograms or more doubled from 2019 to 2021. This point also highlights the willingness of suppliers to send higher quantities together within shipments.<sup>6</sup>

Data from Philadelphia tells a similar story. The Philadelphia Police Department’s Office of Forensic Science (PPD OFS) data from 2015-2021 highlights the transition of fentanyl increasingly found within analyzed submissions. These submissions further corroborate the present street level environment of expanding fentanyl and declining heroin. In 2021, fentanyl made up 27.30% of submissions compared to 0.79% in 2015. In Philadelphia, the largest year to year fentanyl surge within analyzed submissions was from 2016- 2017 (2.68%-13.58%) and has steadily increased as heroin continuously declines.<sup>7</sup>

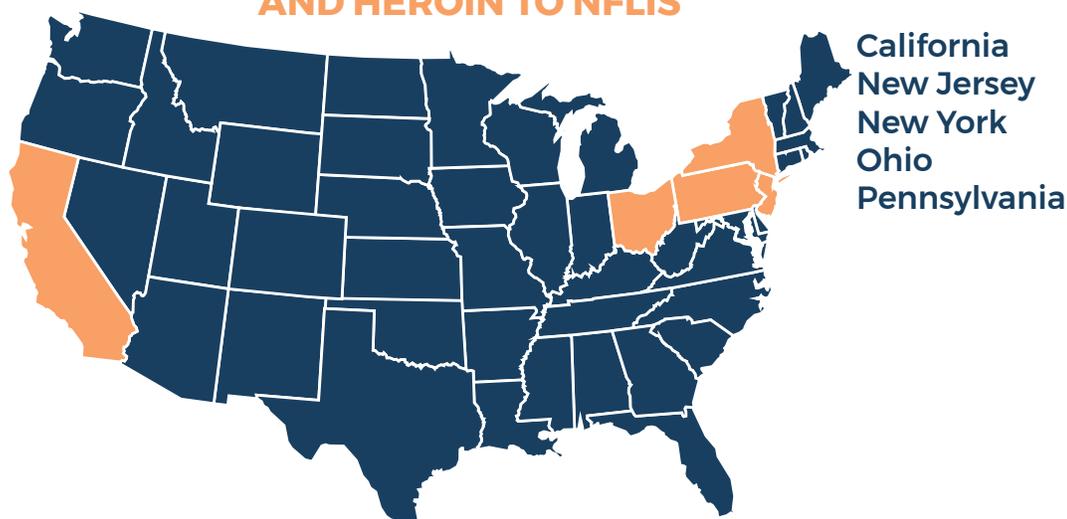


This trend of fentanyl displacing heroin is evident in other jurisdictions locally and regionally. Reports from NJ DMI indicate that the number of suspected heroin submissions testing positive for heroin, with no other drugs, has consistently declined, decreasing from 88% of submissions during the 4th quarter of 2015, to just 3% of the submissions in the 4th quarter of 2021.<sup>8</sup> From 2015-2021, there was a 978% increase in fentanyl-related submissions and a 2,863% increase in fentanyl related glassine bags.<sup>9</sup>

US forensic laboratories continue to report an overall decline of heroin seizures and an increase

of fentanyl.<sup>10</sup> Last year, “DEA seized more than 15,000 pounds of fentanyl—four times the amount seized in 2017 – which is enough to kill every American.”<sup>11</sup> DEA’s National Forensic Laboratory Information System (NFLIS) 2019 drug data demonstrated that state and local fentanyl and heroin markets remain consistently interdependent. The report also indicated that Pennsylvania was in the top five states to submit the most fentanyl and most heroin for analysis to NFLIS, as well as other bordering states such as, New Jersey, New York and Ohio, further supporting fentanyl’s availability and saturation within this area of the country.<sup>12</sup>

## TOP 5 STATES SUBMITTING MOST FENTANYL AND HEROIN TO NFLIS



### The Rise of Counterfeit Pills

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Fentanyl-laced counterfeit pills also contribute to the overall overdose rates in Pennsylvania. Counterfeits resemble legitimate prescription pills and allow dealers continued access to users addicted to prescription opioids with a cheaper, more potent option.<sup>13</sup> The DEA Philadelphia Field Division reported their percentage of fentanyl seizures in pill/tablet form has risen sharply in recent years, and in 2022 comprised more than 20% of their analyzed fentanyl seizures to date (April 2022). The total weight of analyzed fentanyl seizures by DEA in Pennsylvania in pill/tablet form was five (5) times higher in 2020 than in 2019. These are strong markers of the transition to counterfeit pills, due to their ease of concealment and production, versus powder fentanyl.<sup>14</sup>

Another sign of the changing opioid market is the presence of Xylazine, a veterinary tranquilizer that remains a common cutting agent for heroin

and fentanyl. Of the submissions to New Jersey forensics laboratories, 68% of suspected heroin submissions and 84% of suspected heroin glassine bags contained Xylazine in 2021.<sup>15</sup>

Fentanyl is increasingly mixed with other illicit drugs to increase the potency, at a cheaper cost. Counterfeit pills containing fentanyl continues to be a rising threat nationwide. In September 2021, DEA reported “more than 9.5 million counterfeit pills were seized in total from the United States, which is more than the last two years combined.”<sup>16</sup> Thus far in 2022, “DEA has seized almost 2,000 pounds of fentanyl and one million fake pills.”<sup>17</sup> CDC stated that synthetic opioids (including fentanyl), increasingly found in counterfeit pills, were some of the primary drivers of the increase in overdose deaths in the last several years. DEA states two (2) milligrams can be a lethal dose of fentanyl and their analysis found that counterfeit pills can range from .02 to 5.1 milligrams.<sup>18</sup>

### Conclusion

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Fentanyl’s displacement of heroin as the dominant drug within Pennsylvania’s opioid market and the role of counterfeit pills in causing overdose deaths are important developments for law enforcement, policymakers and the public alike. In response to this development, law enforcement must shift resources and tactics to better interdict these more potent, cheaper drugs that are easier to conceal. This includes even more emphasis on intelligence-driven enforcement, better tracking of cutting agents like Xylazine and enhanced detection strategies. Devoting additional resources to stopping fentanyl at the Southern border is also a critical law enforcement imperative.

Policymakers should continue to focus on making substance use disorder treatment available to those suffering from addiction, and to assess what types of treatment are most effective for fentanyl dependency. The influx of funds for opioid abatement strategies from the national opioids settlements, including the \$1.07 billion secured in 2021, will provide needed resources to augment current funding. Policymakers should also look at the relative costs and benefits of legalizing fentanyl test strips and other methods of testing drugs to know what is actually in these complex compounds and reduce inadvertent overdose deaths.

The public must understand that the risk of inadvertent overdose is far higher with fentanyl than heroin and that with the prevalence of this powerful, and easy to conceal, synthetic drug, that risk is everywhere but is especially prevalent in counterfeit pills. Moving forward, efforts to combat Pennsylvania's heroin and opioid overdose epidemic must incorporate and respond to this new development.

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#### Endnotes

- 1 - Drug Enforcement Administration. 2020. "2020 Drug Enforcement Administration NDTA - National Drug Threat Assessment."
- 2 - Drug Enforcement Administration Press Release, [4/27/21](#).
- 3 - Drug Enforcement Administration. 2020. "2020 Drug Enforcement Administration NDTA - National Drug Threat Assessment."
- 4 - Drug Enforcement Administration. 2020. "Counterfeit Controlled Prescription Drug Availability in Pennsylvania and Delaware." DEA-PHL-DIR-035-20. September 2020.
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- 7 - Philadelphia Police Department - Office of Forensic Science (OFS). March 17, 2022
- 8 - New [Jersey State Police Office of Drug Monitoring and Analysis - Drug Monitoring Initiative](#). 2021. "Office of Drug Monitoring and Analysis 4<sup>th</sup> Quarterly Report."
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- 14 - Drug Enforcement Administration Philadelphia Field Division. 2022. Email Communication. 11 April 2022.
- 15 - New Jersey Office of Drug Monitoring and Analysis. 2021. "Office of Drug Monitoring and Analysis 4<sup>th</sup> Quarterly Report."
- 16 - DEA issues Public Safety Alert on sharp increase in fake prescription pills containing fentanyl and meth. DEA. (n.d.). Retrieved March 18, 2022, from <https://www.dea.gov/press-releases/2021/09/27/dea-issues-public-safety-alert>
- 17 - Drug Enforcement Administration. "DEA Warns of Increase in Mass-Overdose Events Involving Deadly Fentanyl". <https://www.dea.gov/press-releases/2022/04/06/dea-warns-increase-mass-overdose-events-involving-deadly-fentanyl>
- 18 - Drug Enforcement Administration. "Facts about Fentanyl." <https://www.dea.gov/resources/facts-about-fentanyl>



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