

**The Poisoning of America:  
Fentanyl, its Analogues, and the Need for Permanent Class Scheduling**

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## **I. Our Shared Tragedies: Homicides, Disappearances, and Overdoses**

Chairman Grassley, Ranking Member Durbin, and Members of the Committee, thank you for conducting this hearing and the opportunity to explain why saving lives in North America requires productive engagement with Mexico. I appreciate the invitation to participate.

I am an expert on organized crime and U.S.-Mexico security cooperation. As a scholar of U.S.-Mexico relations and alumna of the Fulbright program, I am convinced that transnational problems require transnational solutions.

To the families who testified today, I acknowledge your grief. There are no actions that can reverse the tragedies you have experienced. My testimony today does not seek to invalidate yours. On the contrary, it is precisely because I have witnessed and collaborated with families on both sides of the border that have lost loved ones to overdoses, homicides, and disappearances that I am here to offer what I believe is a more constructive and sustainable path forward.

On January 22, Secretary Rubio stated that America's foreign policy must be justified by answering three simple questions: Does it make America safer? Does it make America stronger? Does it make America more prosperous?<sup>ii</sup> Based on extensive research, I can assure you the United States can only be safer, stronger, and prosperous if its neighbors are afforded the same opportunity.

Suffering on both sides of the border is inextricably linked. Today, more than 40 percent of Americans know someone who has died from an opioid overdose.<sup>iii</sup> Synthetic drugs are the number one killer of Americans ages 18 to 45.<sup>iv</sup> Equally important, homicide is the leading cause of death for men ages 25 to 44 and the second cause of death for women ages 15 to 24 in Mexico.<sup>v</sup> Painfully, while families who have lost loved ones to overdoses or homicides may find some degree of solace in visiting their graves, this remains a dream for the thousands of family members who search for the more than 121,000 Mexicans who have disappeared.<sup>vi</sup>

The U.S. is facing one of its worst public health crises due to the availability of illicitly manufactured fentanyl and Mexico faces its own lethal epidemic with 70% of homicides perpetrated with a firearm.<sup>vii</sup> Worryingly, the urgency to save lives is fueling xenophobic discourses and reviving the worst policy failures of the war on drugs. With thousands of lives at risk on both sides of the border, it is urgent that the U.S. and Mexico implement policies based on facts. Through their public sectors, civil society, and academia, both countries have developed robust evidence on how to acquire and maintain the health and safety of our communities.

## II. Interconnected Criminal Markets: Illicitly Manufactured Fentanyl and Firearms

Low production costs are often cited as a key reason suppliers move away from heroin and into synthetic opioids like fentanyl. Overlooked in this conversation is that the same has happened with firearms and ammunition. The ease of acquiring firearms from the U.S. has lowered the costs of perpetrating violence for criminal groups in Mexico.

Even though there are significant variations as to the frequency and the ways criminal groups use violence, they all must issue credible threats on their ability to perpetrate this violence.<sup>viii</sup> Their businesses depend on it. The newer and the more sophisticated the armament is, then the more credible these threats become. Why intimidate potential victims with a rifle left over from the Mexican revolution when your arsenal can include everything from semi-automatic pistols to .50 caliber weapons?

This strategy has paid off for organized crime, including those involved in fentanyl trafficking. According to data released by the ATF, of the firearms recovered in Mexico that were submitted for tracing, more than two thirds were sourced from the U.S.<sup>ix</sup> Today, 74 percent of Mexicans believe criminal groups have more and better weapons than the armed forces; access to illegally trafficked weapons from the U.S. has allowed Mexican criminal groups to amass both a tremendous capacity for violence and a troubling capability to intimidate.<sup>x</sup> Simply stated, by failing to address firearms trafficking to Mexico, the U.S. is subsidizing the operating costs of criminal groups. It is as if cartels received an annual aid package with state-of-the-art technology to carry out the crimes this Congress wants to stop.

## III. A Call to Action

Overdoses, homicides, and disappearances are preventable tragedies.

What to Stop

- 1) **Accusatory statements.** Language matters. The U.S. and Mexico have a complicated history on security cooperation. It is one of the most challenging areas of the bilateral relationship. Accusatory rhetoric, on either side of the border, stalls bilateral action to the detriment of communities in Mexico and the U.S. Equally important, statements based on xenophobia and racism will not improve the safety and health of our communities. Policies based on evidence will.
- 2) **Drug induced homicide laws.** Decades of evidence show that mass incarceration does not save lives, nor does it reduce the supply of illicit substances. On the contrary, these laws weaken communities and set in motion long-term structural inequalities that can reproduce lethal and non-lethal forms of violence.

## What to start

- 1) **Support the Stop Arming Cartels Act.** Effective actions to reduce supply of synthetic drugs such as illicitly manufactured fentanyl can only be accomplished by reducing the firepower capacity that criminal groups have.
- 2) **Develop mutually accepted vetting mechanisms for exchanging information.** Best practices from other parts of the world show that weakening and precluding the activities of organized crime requires trusted partnerships across countries. Successful operations that take out entire management structures, instead of just one alleged kingpin, can take years to develop. As long as Mexico and the U.S. lack these mutually accepted vetting mechanisms, bilateral cooperation will be hindered.
- 3) The **Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA)** is an important step in addressing straw purchasing and trafficking. However, **successful implementation requires resources for prosecutors and the ATF.** The BSCA also provides an opportunity for seeking meaningful cooperation with Mexican counterparts.<sup>xi</sup>
- 4) **Provide funding and support research for improved metrics of border security.** In 2025 it is unacceptable that the indicators for border security are detentions and seizures. Recording how many people were stopped or how many drugs were seized hardly builds a smart border. There is significant room for improvement. These metrics should be developed in partnership with civil society, the private sector, and academia. The bottom line is that we can help but the government needs to share data.
- 5) Work with the government of Mexico to **start a naloxone distribution pilot program along the U.S.-Mexico border.** This will save lives and stop excess mortality for both countries.

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## References

<sup>i</sup> This testimony is based on the testimony presented by the author on September 10, 2024 before the House Judiciary Committee. The full text can be accessed here: <https://judiciary.house.gov/committee-activity/hearings/biden-harris-border-crisis-victim-perspectives-0>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.state.gov/priorities-and-mission-of-the-second-trump-administrations-department-of-state/>

<sup>iii</sup> Secretary Anthony J. Blinken at the 67<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs. March 18, 2024. <https://china.usembassy-china.org.cn/secretary-antony-j-blinken-at-the-67th-session-of-the-un-commission-on-narcotic-drugs/>

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), “Estadísticas de defunciones registradas,” January 22, 2025. [https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/saladeprensa/boletines/2025/edr/edr2024\\_en-jun\\_RR.pdf](https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/saladeprensa/boletines/2025/edr/edr2024_en-jun_RR.pdf)

<sup>vi</sup> Registro Nacional de Personas Desaparecidas y No Localizadas. February 2025. <https://versionpublicarnpdno.segob.gob.mx/Dashboard/ContextoGeneral>

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- <sup>vii</sup> National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), Defunciones por homicidio: [https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/saladeprensa/boletines/2024/DH/DH2023\\_Ene-dic.pdf](https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/saladeprensa/boletines/2024/DH/DH2023_Ene-dic.pdf)
- <sup>viii</sup> Farfan-Mendez, C. (2016). *Beyond cartels and kingpins: A theory on behavioral patterns of drug trafficking organizations*. Ph.D. Diss. University of California, Santa Barbara.
- <sup>ix</sup> Stop U.S. Arms to Mexico (2024). *The Iron River of Weapons to Mexico: Its Sources and Contents*. <https://stopusarmstomexico.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Iron-river-of-weapons-web.pdf>
- <sup>x</sup> Encuesta sobre la Calidad de la Democracia en México 2024, “Security and Armed Forces,” Forthcoming. Data available upon request.
- <sup>xi</sup> The Mexico Institute, Woodrow Wilson Center, “Mexico’s Next President: Challenges and Recommendations,” accessed February 23, 2024, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/MexicoElectionBookletFinalWebProof.pdf>