

How much fentanyl seized in the Carolinas in 2022? Enough to kill all living here.

BY KALLIE COX

UPDATED JANUARY 05, 2023 1:04 PM



In the Carolinas last year, the Department of Homeland Security Investigations seized three times the amount of fentanyl capable of killing every resident in both states.

That amount is nearly 800% more than the federal agency seized in the two states in 2020, and over 200% more than was found in 2021, the agency reports.

The increase in fentanyl strikes fear into law enforcement and public health experts because it's more potent and more dangerous than most drugs sold illegally. Just two milligrams can be a fatal dose, according to the Drug Enforcement Agency.

The drug increasingly takes lives in North Carolina. Fentanyl-related overdoses [increased 30% from 2020 to 2021](#) in the state, according to the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, meaning 3,163 North Carolinians died from the drug in 2021.

Last year, agents in the Carolinas helped seize 222 pounds of [fentanyl](#), the majority of this was from North Carolina, said Michael Prado, the deputy special agent in charge at Homeland Security Investigations in Charlotte.

In 2021, the agency seized 100 pounds of the drug, and seized just 25 pounds of fentanyl in 2020, Prado said.

This year, Homeland Security investigators have prioritized the seizure of fentanyl because of its potency, Prado said.

“We have dedicated additional resources and personnel to combat this issue, resulting in more seizures and arrests,” Prado said.

This includes partnering with other law enforcement agencies to form a task force dedicated to cracking down on illegal activity coming through Charlotte Douglas International Airport.

FENTANYL IS “TOP PRIORITY”

One cartel is a major player in the trafficking of fentanyl to this region, Prado said in an email response to questions.

“Most of our cases in the Charlotte metro area involving the trafficking of fentanyl are focused on the illicit activities of the Cartel Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG),” he said. That’s a Mexican-based transnational drug trafficking organization with a well-established network in the Carolinas, he added.

“Previously, small amounts of fentanyl were smuggled into the U.S., predominantly from China, via mail and private shipping services,” Prado said.

The fentanyl making its way to the Carolinas often originates from clandestine labs run by illegal organizations in Mexico, Prado said. The DEA has tracked most fentanyl smuggling to illegal groups in China, with illegal cartels in Mexico and India also producing large quantities of the drug.

Fentanyl, originally developed to treat cancer patients’ pain, is 50 to 100 times stronger than morphine, according to the DEA. It was originally created by Dr Paul Janssen, a Belgian chemist and founder of [Janssen Pharmaceutica](#). It was then introduced to European countries before being approved by the FDA and sold in the U.S., according to [Pharmaceutical Technology](#).

Since fentanyl’s introduction to the opioid market, in the early 1960s, demand for the drug has skyrocketed because of its [addictive qualities](#). Now fentanyl entering communities comes from a myriad of sources, including by theft and [fraudulent prescriptions in the U.S.](#), and drug trafficking from other countries, [according to the DEA](#).

The drug can be snorted, ingested with a pill, injected or smoked, according to the DEA.

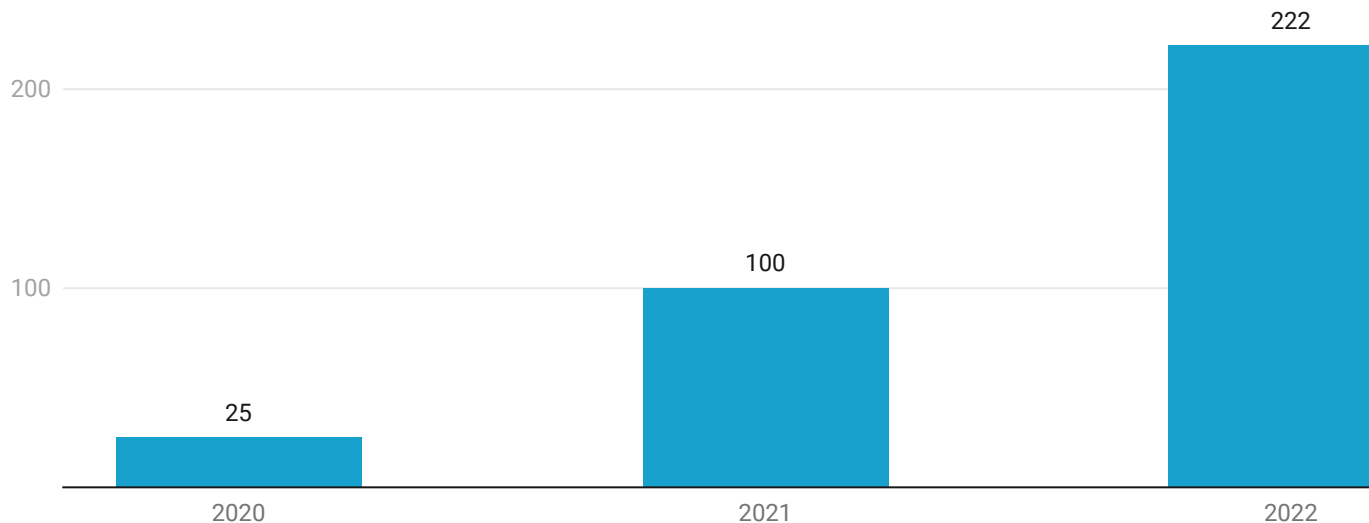
Homeland Security Investigations believes fentanyl overdoses are a national crisis at “epidemic proportions,” Prado said.

“Our top priority has been to really interdict and investigate, disrupt and dismantle transnational criminal organizations that are responsible for the distribution of fentanyl throughout the Carolinas and beyond,” Prado said.

The drug is becoming more common because of demand and the ability to cheaply produce it, Prado said. Criminal organizations that distribute it have found an “insatiable” market in the U.S. making it more difficult for law enforcement to prevent the drug from entering communities, Prado said.

HSI fentanyl seizures in the Carolinas

This chart displays the fentanyl seized by Homeland Security Investigations in the Carolinas from 2020-2022. In two years, fentanyl seizures increased more than 800%. The numbers in this chart represent pounds of fentanyl.



FENTANYL DOMINATES DRUG SUPPLY

Fentanyl, in all its forms, is the most common illicit drug being distributed in Charlotte, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Lt. Sean Mitchell [told The Observer in July](#).

Prado said the increase in fentanyl seizures by law enforcement is due to both an increase in distribution and better police work.

“There is no doubt that cartels have made a more concerted effort to saturate the U.S. market with massive amounts of fentanyl, while simultaneously HSI has become more adept at identifying, disrupting and dismantling trafficking networks,” Prado said.

Narcotics laced with fentanyl are creating a “whole different level of danger,” Mitchell said. Fentanyl is so dangerous, anyone who takes it could be dead in moments.

“The potency of fentanyl is unlike anything that we’ve seen in law enforcement,” Prado said. “The fatalities and the overdoses that occur on a daily basis in the Carolinas and throughout the country is a crisis.”

This story was originally published January 5, 2023 5:55 AM.



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