

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-205](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

Increased illicit use of synthetic (man-made) opioids has contributed to drug-related overdose deaths. Synthetic opioids like fentanyl—a substance 100 times stronger than morphine—accounted for more than 19,000 of the nearly 64,000 overdose deaths in 2016, the most recent year for which federal data are available. GAO was asked to review U.S. agency efforts to combat illicit synthetic opioids.

This report examines how U.S. agencies (1) work with international partners to limit production of illicit synthetic opioids; (2) work domestically to limit the availability of and enhance their response to these drugs and how agencies can improve their effectiveness; (3) measure performance in their documented opioid response strategies; and (4) have adapted their approaches to prevention and treatment.

GAO reviewed documents that described agencies' international coordination efforts, domestic opioid reduction strategies and prevention and treatment approaches, and interviewed international and federal agency officials engaged in drug control policy. GAO also interviewed state and local law enforcement and public health officials in seven states, selected in part for their high rates of overdose deaths.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making six recommendations, including that agencies develop performance metrics. DHS agreed, ONDCP did not state whether they agreed or disagreed, and DOJ did not agree with GAO's recommendations. GAO continues to believe that these recommendations remain valid.

View [GAO-18-205](#). For more information, contact Diana Maurer at (202) 512-8777 or [maurerd@gao.gov](mailto:maurerd@gao.gov).

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## ILLICIT OPIOIDS

### While Greater Attention Given to Combating Synthetic Opioids, Agencies Need to Better Assess their Efforts

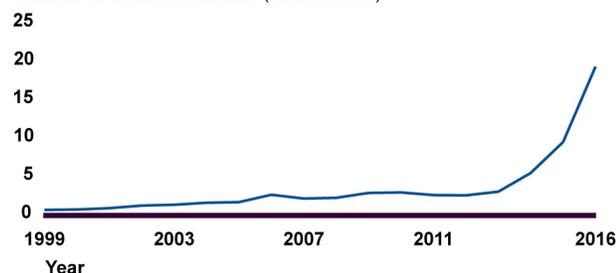
## What GAO Found

Federal agencies collaborate with foreign governments, such as China, Mexico, and Canada, as well as with international organizations, to limit the production of illicit synthetic opioids. They do this by enhancing investigations, sharing information on emerging trends, helping to expand the regulation of illicit substances, and building capacity to thwart the distribution of illicit drugs.

Federal agencies have ongoing efforts to limit the domestic availability of and enhance their response to illicit synthetic opioids. For example, federal efforts include treating overdose death scenes as crime scenes where officers collect evidence to investigate and identify the drug source.

#### Overdose Deaths Involving Synthetic Opioids and Size of a Lethal Dose of Fentanyl

Number of overdose deaths (in thousands)



Source: National Center on Health Statistics; adaptation of U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration information (photo). | GAO-18-205

Federal agencies have also documented specific strategies to combat illicit opioids. However, only one of the five strategies we reviewed included outcome, or results-oriented measures—largely due to agency perceptions that designing such measures posed challenges. The Government Performance and Results Act Modernization Act of 2010 directs agencies to develop goals, as well as performance indicators. Without specific outcome-oriented performance measures, federal agencies will not be able to truly assess whether their respective investments and efforts are helping them to limit the availability of and better respond to the synthetic opioid threat. We also found that while federal law enforcement agencies are increasingly coordinating with the public health sector to share overdose information, both sectors reported ongoing data sharing obstacles and related challenges with the timeliness, accuracy, and accessibility of overdose data. Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government states that information for decision-making should be appropriate, current, complete, accurate, accessible, and provided on a timely basis. Embarking on a concerted effort, led by the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), to examine and address data related concerns will enhance agencies' efforts continue to understand and respond to the opioid epidemic.

Federal agencies have adapted to the opioid epidemic by, among other things, expanding prevention programs and treatment options. For example, agencies have increased engagement with medical professionals about the implications of prescribing practices to help reduce opioid abuse, and provided additional resources to states and localities to expand the distribution and use of overdose reversal and treatment options.