

THE POTENTIAL THREAT OF THE SINALOA CARTEL TO CANADA THROUGH PRODUCTION AND TRANSPORTATION OF FENTANYL

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Abstract

Since the first police bust of fentanyl in Canada in 2013, fentanyl may have become a more powerful and deadly drug than ever before (Howlett & Woo, n.d.). The Canadian healthcare system is likely impacted, with the likelihood of the situation worsening because of COVID-19. One of the possible reasons for this could be Canada's role as a consumer in the supply chain of fentanyl. Accessibility to fentanyl is becoming easier with online purchases and delivery services, such as Canada Post (Brownell, 2019; Howlett & Woo, n.d.). This threat may continue as long as there is financial motivation for drug cartels, such as the Sinaloa cartel to transport fentanyl across borders with the assistance of China. Additionally, the success could potentially incite the production of more man-made synthetic drugs. Hence, in order to minimize this potential risk to Canadian communities, the direct impact Canada is facing must be addressed first.

Position/Purpose Statement

The purpose of this briefing note is to assess the possible impact of the Sinaloa cartel to the Canadian healthcare system and economy through the transportation of fentanyl across borders (Dudley et al., 2019; Mooney, 2020; VICE News, 2017, 00:53; VICE News, 2020a, 01:32). The reign of Jouquin 'El Chapo' Guzman created a global reach between the Sinaloa cartel and transnational drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) that may be contributing to the opioid crisis in Canada through the push of fentanyl from the United States of America (US) into Canada (Logan, 2013).

The Security Problem

The possible security threat to Canada is to healthcare infrastructures, which may then impact the economy. A small quantity of fentanyl has shown to be potent enough to result in thousands of deaths across Canada, in particular, Alberta (AB) and British Columbia (BC) (Baldwin, Gray, Goel, Wood, Buxton, & Rieb, 2018; Howlett & Woo, n.d.; Mooney, 2020). With the high death toll, the probable effect on the healthcare system in Canada may place pressure on the economy and citizens. One of the key contributors to this may be the Sinaloa Cartel.

Further, the ability of the Sinaloa cartel to affect significant infrastructures in another country illustrates traits of a transnational criminal organization (TCO) and their ability to develop international relations (Dudley et al., 2019). Therefore, the impact the opioid crisis has had and may continue to have on Canada cannot be ignored.

Background and Key Facts

This year BC set a record for 175 fentanyl associated overdose deaths in June of 2020 (Mooney, 2020). The level of potency, addictability, and demand of fentanyl is only likely to escalate and result in more fentanyl crossing Canadian borders (Howlett & Woo, n.d.). The Sinaloa cartel's part in the drug trade of fentanyl is likely production and transportation to the US with the assistance of China, which is then likely pushed into Canada (Dudley, Bonello, Lopez-Aranda, Moreno, Clavel, Kjelstad, & Restrepo, 2019; VICE News, 2017, 4:15; VICE News, 2020b, 4:57). China's probable role within the Sinaloa cartel's fentanyl operations is to supply the precursor chemicals for production (Brownell, 2019; VICE News, 2017, 4:15; VICE News, 2020b, 00:57). Yet, China may also be a 'player' in the transportation of fentanyl, in which they utilize postal services to ship fentanyl directly to individuals globally (Brownell, 2019; VICE News, 2017, 4:15; VICE News, 2020b, 00:57). Thus, China is a likely contributor to the fentanyl crisis.

Canada Post has been found to be a delivery option for fentanyl products that are disguised as legal products when shipped (Brownell, 2019; Howlett & Woo, n.d.). 'Dark web' forums, such as EC21 operate similarly to legal business operating online with ease (Howlett & Woo, n.d.; VICE News, 2020a, 00:53). Potentially, the ease in access of purchasing and receiving fentanyl for consumers is a contributing factor to the opioid crisis in Canada.

It has been suggested that the Sinaloa cartel is playing an active role in the production and transportation of fentanyl into the US (Dudley et al., 2019; Logan, 2013; VICE News, 2020b, 03:02). From the US borders it is likely that shipments are further transported across to Canada entering a large market for fentanyl (Dudley et al., 2019). Marine ports that connect Mexico and Asian countries are major factors in the smuggling of precursor chemicals to Mexico (Dudley et al., 2019). China is likely to drop off shipments where a DTO in Mexico will come and pick them up before they are taken by the Sinaloa cartel to safehouses for production (VICE News, 2020b, 01:31). This demonstrates the different levels in the supply chain of fentanyl that possibly contribute to its transportation across borders into Canada. Arguably, the lethality of fentanyl occurs during the

production phase, in which the product may be cut with other drugs, such as heroin (Dudley et al., 2019; Howlett & Woo, n.d.; VICE News, 2020b, 04:42). Once produced it will be transported across to the US, primarily in vehicles (VICE News, 2020b, 05:52).

Key Considerations and Implications

The violence that has been associated with the Sinaloa cartel, such as murders of city officials, state elected individuals, rival cartels, and citizens of other countries, illustrates the boundaries they may be willing to cross for financial gain (Dudley et al., 2019; Logan, 2013). Therefore, to understand possible implications of fentanyl in Canada, coming to grasp with this process continuing is an important first step (Howlett & Woo, n.d.; Mooney, 2020). The involvement of several gangs and organized entities in the supply chain, combined with the easy access of consumers can create a complex issue to combat.

The role of the Sinaloa cartel in the supply chain has the potential of opening different transportation routes to the US to reach a wider consumer base, such as in Canada (Dudley et al., 2019). The further the location for transportation of fentanyl becomes, the profit that the cartel earns also rises (Dudley et al., 2019). In return, this may create more possibilities for ‘business’ expansion for the Sinaloa cartel in Canada, and therefore potentially increasing its threat to Canada.

Another potential implication is that the overdoses and deaths in Canada are accumulating, and the probability of them being associated with the use of illicit fentanyl is high (Mooney, 2020). In addition, the current global pandemic does not help this situation, but instead is appearing to worsen as the same resources that were once available for drug users prior to the pandemic may not likely be available now (Mooney, 2020). Thus, possibly adding more burden to the Canadian healthcare system that is already under a considerable amount of pressure due to the pandemic with a possible increase in overdose emergency calls that may require more emergency personnel and/or overtime shifts to be worked.

The impact on the Canadian healthcare system could be due to different countries in the supply chain having an international stake in the success of fentanyl, such as, DTO’s in China. China not only may be smuggling precursor chemicals to Mexico, but also producing and shipping fentanyl themselves that is made in China through postal services (Brownell, 2019; Howlett & Woo, n.d.).

Alternative Perspectives to be Considered

- Is illicit fentanyl the only cause of the opioid crisis in Canada? Being that fentanyl tends to be cut with a range of drugs, such as heroin, the ‘mix’ in chemicals and drugs could be the result of an overdose, instead of just pure fentanyl.
- Are there specific demographics, such as the age and health of an individual that make it more likely for an individual to overdose from fentanyl? Often, the only information that may be provided to the public associated with fentanyl related deaths is the amount of deaths associated with provinces, but specific demographics of individuals are not.
- How likely is it that the increase in overdoses related to fentanyl may be only due to the global pandemic? Safe user sites and resources that were available for users prior to the pandemic have not all been as available during COVID-19. Therefore, is fentanyl still a problem in Canada or has it only gotten worse because of the pandemic?

What is Not Known

It is not known whether all the fentanyl coming into Canada is produced and transported by the Sinaloa cartel. Authorities believe there are large amounts coming directly from China through postal services, but the percentage coming from China directly compared to Mexico is unknown (Dudley et al., 2019). In addition, the continent of Asia, not just China, has been known as a potential hub for production and/or as suppliers of precursor chemicals for synthetic drugs (Broadhurst, 2017). Yet, what is not completely known is India’s position in the supply chain of fentanyl. It is believed that India may begin to contribute to the production of fentanyl (Dudley et al., 2019). Whether India would be producing and shipping it on their own or instead formulate a ‘partnership’ with a drug cartel, similar to China is also unknown (Dudley et al., 2019).

Next Steps

- To address the potential strain of fentanyl on the Canadian healthcare system. It is possible that COVID-19 made the fentanyl situation worse, especially in BC (Mooney, 2020).
- Determining the amount that is coming across the borders from the US compared to the amounts being parcelled from China. This can provide a better understanding of the situation for better resource allocation for law enforcement. For example, keeping track of the US borders in which the majority of the products are entering from and entering into Canada.

Implementing new detection methods of fentanyl at borders and at postal services. It can be difficult for fentanyl to be detected because it is likely to be transported in small amounts (Baldwin et al., 2018; Howlett & Woo, n.d.; Mooney, 2020). With the introduction of new spectrometry, it may assist in detecting more packages that are carrying fentanyl (Vice New, 2017).

Available Options

- Decriminalizing the possession of small amounts of fentanyl to instead target dealers and traffickers, rather than users.
- Utilizing spectrometry at postal services to scan packages to determine what packages may contain fentanyl, similar to the US (VICE News, 2017, 01:21).

Recommendation and Justification

The best option for Canada may be decriminalizing the possession of small amounts of fentanyl. In order for Canada to address larger threats, Canada, arguably must work on its role as a consumer because that is what is likely having a direct effect on the Canadian health care system and its citizens. The criminalization of a product that is highly addictive may only place more pressure on healthcare facilities and the justice system, therefore decriminalizing fentanyl could assist in lessening the burden (Mooney, 2020).

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Published by the Journal of Intelligence, Conflict and Warfare and Simon Fraser University

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