



Tackling Illicit Fentanyl at the Southern Border: Five Takeaways from Law Enforcement on the Front Line

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Introduction

The production and transportation of illicit fentanyl is not exclusively an immigration issue, but it is connected to the larger conversation around the U.S.-Mexico border. The smuggling and prevalence of illicit fentanyl impacts border communities in unique ways, creating distinctive challenges and placing local law enforcement on the front lines of the issue.

The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) [describes fentanyl](#) as a “synthetic opioid...a Schedule II controlled substance that is similar to morphine but about 100 times more potent.” Illicit fentanyl is sometimes sold as a powder or a nasal spray or pressed into pills. It may also be laced into other illicit drugs to increase the potency of those drugs. U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) [data shows](#) illicit fentanyl smuggling is increasing, and that most of the fentanyl seized by the Border Patrol and other border officials is coming across the Southern border. As border communities increase efforts to interdict illicit fentanyl, it is important to acknowledge key points that must play a part of the solution.

In Tucson, Arizona, Chief of Police Chad E. Kasmar, a law enforcement leader with more than 20 years of experience, oversees the Tucson Police Department’s five public safety bureaus, which are actively engaged in efforts to disrupt the flow of illicit fentanyl into the community and the United States. In conversation, Kasmar highlighted five takeaways from a border community about the fight to interdict and stop the flow of illicit fentanyl.

1. Proximity to the U.S.-Mexico Border Matters

Illicit fentanyl has a devastating impact across all corners of the United States, causing public health issues in thousands of American communities. Chief Kasmar believes that for border communities, the impact is heightened: Illicit fentanyl tends to be more affordable and accessible the closer one is to the U.S. southern border. And Tucson, the first major city north of the border in Arizona, is only 60 miles from the U.S.-Mexico border.

Tucson serves mainly as a corridor for drug smuggling organizations, posing a particular challenge to local law enforcement. Smugglers move illicit fentanyl and other illicit substances through I-10 and I-19, interstates crossing the city, and through nearby Native American reservations. While most of the smuggled drugs are being transported north by criminal networks, the proximity to the source makes them widely available in Tucson and surrounding communities. “The impact that I initially think about is the affordability,” Chief Kasmar notes, “it’s just accessible and it is affordable because we’re so close to the border.” According to Kasmar, one pill

of illicit fentanyl may cost only \$1 or \$2 in Tucson, whereas it might cost as much as \$5 to \$20 per pill in Chicago or Washington, D.C.

Kasmar also notes that criminal networks [may be more active](#) in the community, recruiting local youth to help smuggle drugs and migrants. In some cases, teenagers as young as 14 are targeted by drug smuggling organizations through social media platforms like Snapchat and TikTok.

Border communities – which [benefit economically](#) and [culturally](#) from their proximity to the U.S.-Mexico border – face a unique challenge. As a matter of supply and demand, the closer one is to the U.S. southern border, [where most illicit fentanyl enters the U.S.](#), the more widely available and less expensive illicit fentanyl will be and the larger the presence of drug smuggling organizations. Solutions to the challenges brought forward by illicit fentanyl must consider the unique circumstances faced by border communities.

2. No One Solution

Chief Kasmar also highlights that Tucson, like many other communities across America, has experienced an increase in the use of illicit fentanyl. Along the U.S. southern border, seizures of illicit fentanyl [are up significantly](#): 480 percent higher in fiscal year (FY) 2023 compared to FY 2020. This increase reflects higher levels of illicit fentanyl trafficking, as well as higher levels of enforcement efforts by federal, state, and local law enforcement. “This is a topic that we discuss on a routine basis, and certainly a topic that we discuss with our border colleagues,” notes Chief Kasmar, “[t]here is no one solution to this very complex problem.”

Congress established the Commission on Combating Synthetic Opioid Trafficking in 2019, [which found that](#) it is not possible to reduce the availability of illegal synthetic opioids like fentanyl by focusing on supply alone. Tackling the problem will require a broad-based, comprehensive response. The Commission determined that, to “reduce illegal supply, the United States must also reduce demand,” including through public health awareness campaigns, expanded high-quality treatment programs, and intervention efforts to prevent fatalities. Illicit fentanyl and opioids are far more than just an immigration or border issue.

At the local level, Kasmar notes that he is “trying to balance our response with compassion [and] a continuum of accountability.” While it is not possible to “arrest out of the problem,” Kasmar notes, broad legalization efforts, like the [decriminalization law passed](#) in Portland, Oregon in 2020, are probably not the answer. “I’m certainly...watching communities like Portland who have legalized narcotics,” says Kasmar, “and I do not think that has actually worked out well.” Kasmar explains that illicit fentanyl, which is 100 times more potent than morphine, is incredibly addicting and leads people to have a significant fear of withdrawal.

Kasmar also argues that youth engagement is essential. “As a chief, I’m as invested in the [Parks and Recreation] budget as I am on my own,” says Kasmar, noting the community-building and public safety benefits of providing extracurricular activities and opportunities to children and young adults. Kasmar believes there might also be a need for a public awareness campaign, similar to the campaigns that warn people about the dangers of tobacco and smoking. A solution will require a multi-pronged approach, with partnership at the federal, state, and local levels.

3. Coordination Is Key: Federal, State, Local, and Tribal Law Enforcement Must Work Together

U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) is the primary agency charged with safeguarding U.S. borders, but [it is not the only agency](#) that seizes illicit fentanyl and other drugs. Federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies are involved in enforcement actions that may result in drug seizures, including at or near the border. As Chief Kasmar notes, “it takes...federal, state, and local partners to collaborate to have a meaningful impact on this crisis.”

The Tucson metropolitan area, home to about [one million residents](#), has at least 10 state and local public safety agencies. “There is a lot of coordination that occurs between all of us,” Kasmar notes, “Beyond the ports of entry (POEs), you really depend on the Sheriff’s Department and the [Arizona] Department of Public Safety to do those interdiction efforts.” Collaboration and communication are key. Interdiction efforts in one community might drive drug smuggling organizations into other communities, creating an unintended domino effect.

Currently, “there is more communication than I’ve seen at a local, state, and federal level,” Kasmar says, noting his 24 years of law enforcement experience, “but I definitely still think there is room for improvement” with how the federal government approaches the issue, including how it works with officials on the ground at the state and local level. “Cartels are learning and adapting faster than the federal government does,” explains Kasmar, “and in between those two spaces local communities like mine - border communities - are impacted by our inability to move swiftly.”

Kasmar notes that the federal government has a broader responsibility to do more in the fight. “We need meaningful immigration reform,” says Kasmar. Needed reforms include addressing a dysfunctional immigration system, creating more orderly pathways for those seeking work or protection in the U.S., enhancing border security to prevent the smuggling of illicit fentanyl, and providing additional resources to state and local partners on the ground.

4. Border Communities Need Support from the Federal Government

Kasmar emphasizes that border communities already play a major role in helping to stop the flow of illicit fentanyl coming from the U.S. southern border. In Tucson, state and local law enforcement agencies are on the front line of the crisis. They work together to interdict illicit fentanyl and disrupt drug smuggling networks, but more assistance from the federal government is needed. “There is more space for federal funding to be infused in sheriff departments and police departments that are faced with combating fentanyl [at the border],” argues Chief Kasmar. The funding would go towards purchasing new vehicles, technology, and other resources to help fight the crisis.

Kasmar notes that there are key interdiction tools, such as planes and helicopters that provide air support, that could strain local law enforcement agency budgets. Since those items are not always affordable for local governments, in the absence of adequate federal support, local law enforcement agencies must plan and save up for multiple years to obtain these types of big-ticket resources. As Kasmar explains, “[t]here could be some immediate support from the federal government that recognizes, okay, Chief Kasmar has border-related issues, along with his peers in southern Arizona, how are we investing in those communities?” Kasmar also notes the importance of elected officials, such as Arizona’s governor and the state’s two senators, requesting more funding and support from the federal government to bolster state and local law enforcement agencies.

5. Global Responsibility and Solutions

The U.S. must find innovative solutions to stop and reverse the prevalence of illicit fentanyl in American communities. “This is like peeling an onion back,” notes Chief Kasmar, “We can’t just fortify the border enough, can’t arrest your way out, can’t give enough treatment out.” The answer, explains Kasmar, must be collaborative and holistic, bringing together all the stakeholders and partners involved in the fight. This includes working together with other countries, because global issues have local impacts.

Border officials [seized 4,600 pounds of fentanyl](#) along the southern border in 2020, a number that skyrocketed to 26,700 pounds in FY 2023. Most of the fentanyl seized in FY 2023, about 98.9 percent (26,700 out of 27,000 pounds), was seized at the southern border. The substance is typically produced in Mexico with chemicals largely manufactured from China. As chief of police in a major trade corridor and background working on interdicting narcotics, Kasmar says it is important to consider the global aspect of the issue.

“The U.S. government must do more to leverage our partners to the south,” says Kasmar. “In my opinion as a chief of police in this country right now, [the U.S.] government and the Mexican government need to do more, because what they are doing right now is not working.” Elaborating on his point, Kasmar notes that U.S. officials need to work with authorities in Mexico and China to come up with tangible steps to disrupt the creation and flow of illicit fentanyl. “This is impacting every aspect of life,” Kasmar argues, even if people do not realize it. Noting how increased use of opioids can drive shoplifting by addicts in local communities, Kasmar notes “It should not take you going into a store and not being able to buy something because it is locked up” to start addressing these challenges.

Conclusion

Chief Kasmar’s message to the federal government is straightforward: “It’s time in a bipartisan way to recognize what we are doing is not working – we should be less interested in attacking each other and more interested in coming up with solutions that will protect constituents,” including legislation reforms and administrative efforts aimed at tackling illicit fentanyl. And he emphasizes that as the U.S. considers ways to address the growing challenge related to illicit fentanyl, it is important to consider the experience and unique circumstances of border communities.

Kasmar notes that any solution must account for the reality that proximity to the border matters, making fentanyl cheaper and more prevalent in border communities. The solution will have to take a multi-pronged approach and consider the global aspect of the challenge, so that every element of the challenge is tackled, and that partners like Mexico and China are part of the conversation.

Finally, Kasmar notes that the federal government must consider the unique circumstances faced by law enforcement along the border and provide much-needed support. In furtherance of these efforts coordination and communication between federal, state, local and tribal law enforcement agencies will continue to be essential.