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Illicit Drug Flows and Seizures in the United States: In Focus

Policy discussions around issues such as border security, drug trafficking, and the opioid epidemic include questions about illicit drug flows into the United States. While there are numerous data points involved in understanding the trafficking of illicit drugs into the country, these data are often estimated, incomplete, imperfect, or lack nuance. For more information, see CRS Report R45812, *Illicit Drug Flows and Seizures in the United States: What Do We [Not] Know?*

Illicit Drug Supply Chain

At the top of the illicit drug supply chain (see **Figure 1**) is the total production of illicit drugs around the world—both plant-based (e.g., cocaine, heroin, and marijuana) and synthetic (e.g., methamphetamine and fentanyl). Although some are produced in the United States, many originate elsewhere and are smuggled into the country. For plant-based drugs, a variety of factors affect cultivation as well as surveillance and measurement of crop yields. In addition, not all illicit drug crops may be processed into illicit drugs. For synthetic drugs, the supply chain begins in chemical manufacturing and pharmaceutical facilities. Measuring the stock of these drugs is affected by issues including the availability and inconsistent regulation of precursor chemicals and the proliferation of synthetic analogues, or new psychoactive substances.

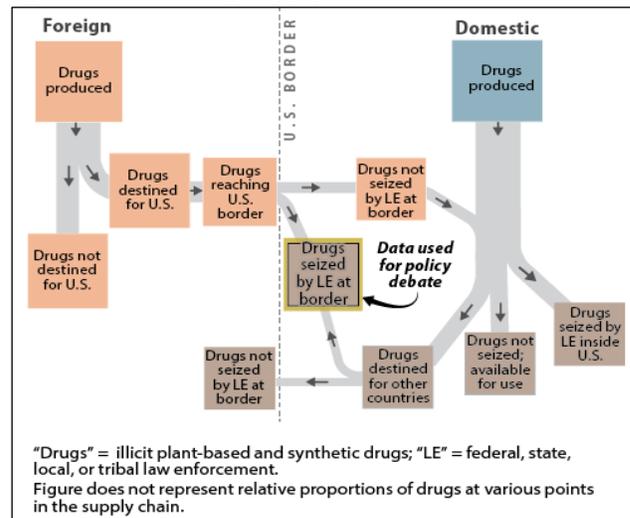
The next step in the supply chain of illicit drugs produced abroad and destined for the United States is their transit toward and into the country. Of the unknown total amount of illicit drugs produced, some may be consumed in the country of production, some may be destined for the United States, and some may be intended for an alternate market. Of those drugs intended to be moved to the United States, some may become degraded or lost in transit, some may be seized by law enforcement or otherwise destroyed or jettisoned by traffickers pursued by enforcement officials, and some reach the U.S. border.

Illicit Drugs Seized (or Not) at the Border

As illicit drugs are brought to the U.S. border, they generally fall into two initial categories: those that are detected and seized by border enforcement officials and those that are not. Those illicit drugs seized during inbound inspections are generally quantifiable. The largely unknown subset of drugs that enter the country without being seized by officials during inbound inspections is divided into two categories: those that are later detected and seized by federal, state, local, or tribal officials, and those that are not. Notably, illicit drugs not seized at the border enter the country where there are also domestically produced drugs. As such, drugs that are later seized by officials in the United States may be of foreign or domestic origin.

The total amount of illicit drugs successfully smuggled across the U.S. borders without being seized—at and between land, air, and sea ports of entry (POEs)—is not known precisely. However, there are data on the amount and locations of illicit drugs *seized* by border officials.

Figure 1. Illicit Drug Supply and Seizure Points



Source: CRS representation of the general illicit drug supply chain and seizure points.

Notes: The figure highlights drug seizure data that are used for policy debates around border security; however, these are not the only data policymakers rely upon in these discussions.

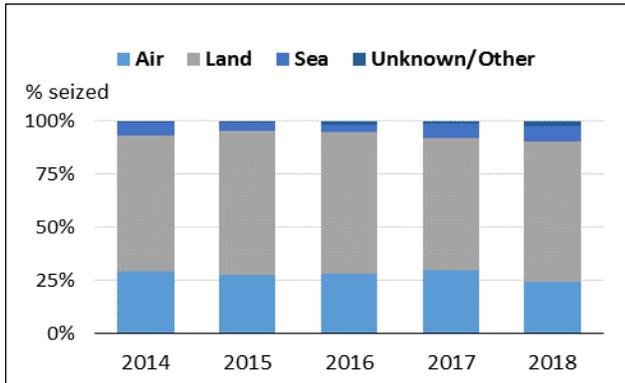
Border Seizure Data

While a number of federal, state, local, and tribal agencies are involved in seizing illicit drugs in the border regions, the primary agency charged with safeguarding the U.S. border, including seizing illicit drugs and other contraband, is U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP). Within CBP, the Office of Field Operations (OFO) is responsible for staffing POEs, and drugs seized by OFO are generally seized *at* POEs. In addition, the Border Patrol is responsible for patrolling the land borders with Mexico and Canada, and the coastal waters surrounding Florida and Puerto Rico; drugs seized by the Border Patrol are generally captured *between* POEs. CBP data indicate that larger quantities (by weight) of cocaine, methamphetamine, heroin, and fentanyl are seized at POEs than between the ports. Conversely, a greater quantity of illicit foreign-produced marijuana is seized between the ports.

CRS analysis of OFO drug seizure data from FY2014 to FY2018 indicate that across those five years, about 65% (by weight) of seized illicit drugs were confiscated at land POEs. In addition, about 28% of seized drugs were

confiscated at air POEs, and about 5% were seized at sea POEs (see **Figure 2**).

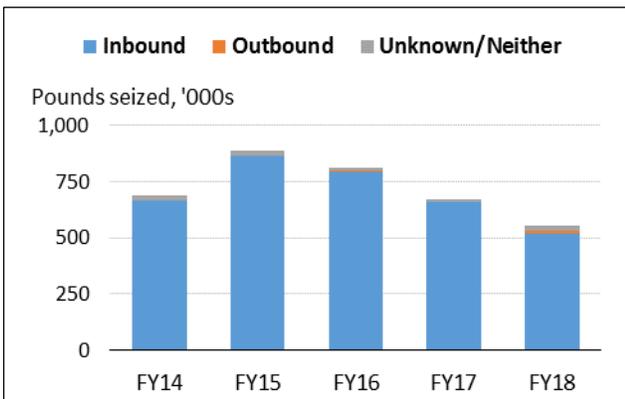
Figure 2. OFO Drug Seizures, FY2014-FY2018
Percentage seized by port of entry type



Source: CRS analysis of CBP data provided on May 14, 2019.
Notes: OFO seizure data do not include Border Patrol data. The unknown/other category could involve OFO seizures of drugs during law enforcement operations occurring away from POEs or seizures with uncertainty about how the drugs were moved through a POE.

CRS analysis of OFO drug seizure data from FY2014 to FY2018 also indicate that nearly 97% of seized drugs were confiscated during inbound inspections (see **Figure 3**). Some 65% of seized drugs were seized during inbound inspections at land POEs within the jurisdiction of the OFO field offices along the Southwest border.

Figure 3. OFO Drug Seizures, FY2014-FY2018
Amount (in pounds) seized during inbound and outbound inspections



Source: CRS analysis of CBP data provided on May 14, 2019.
Notes: OFO seizure data do not include Border Patrol data. The unknown/neither category could involve drug seizures at a POE that for certain reasons cannot be attributed to an inbound or outbound inspection, as well as drug seizures during enforcement activities occurring away from official POEs.

Sourcing Drugs Seized in the United States

While the quantities of illicit drugs that are successfully smuggled into the country are unknown, U.S. officials look at illicit drugs seized in the United States and, in conjunction with drug intelligence, produce estimates of which countries are the major suppliers of certain types of

illicit drugs. These estimates come from chemical testing and analysis of certain drug samples, namely heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine, and fentanyl. This analysis helps determine, among other things, the primary source countries and/or methods of production.

Going Forward

Reliance on Border Drug Seizure Data

In the absence of comprehensive and precise data on illicit drugs trafficked into the United States, seizure data can provide some insight into elements of drug flows such as smuggling points into and target markets within the country. For instance, some have relied on selected border seizure data to help understand the locations at which federal enforcement efforts are stopping a portion of the illicit drugs produced abroad from entering the country and joining the domestic illicit drug market. However, a focus on border seizures largely excludes a discussion of drug seizures by law enforcement officials throughout the interior of the country. As such, border seizures cannot speak to drug transportation and distribution throughout the U.S. market or law enforcement priorities in the interior of the country. And because border seizures largely reflect drugs detected during inbound inspections (and thus are more likely to reflect foreign-produced drugs), a focus on border seizures also largely excludes a discussion of illicit drugs that are produced domestically.

Enhancing Seizure Data Collection and Reporting

CBP is not the only agency that seizes illicit drugs in the United States or even in the border regions. Federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies are all involved in enforcement actions that—even if not focused on drug-related crimes—may involve drug seizures. Notably, there is no central database housing information on all illicit drug seizures from all law enforcement agencies (though the Drug Enforcement Administration runs the National Seizure System, containing data on drug seizures of certain sizes made by specific federal agencies as well as other voluntarily reported seizure data). If policymakers are interested in having a more comprehensive view of drug seizures throughout the United States, they could move to enhance and consolidate existing data collection efforts.

Evaluating Border Risk Management and Drug Trafficking-Related Strategies

The Department of Homeland Security uses a risk management approach to help evaluate the diverse and evolving threats—including drug smuggling—at the border. Policymakers may question how officials use intelligence about drug flows and data on drug seizures to assess the risks posed by drug smuggling and appropriately allocate resources to counter the threat. Congress may also evaluate how well available data on drug seizures can help measure progress toward achieving goals outlined in strategies like the National Drug Control Strategy, aimed, at least in part, at reducing drug trafficking into and within the country.

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