

FORTY-THREE STATES AND COUNTING: The Deadly Combination of Imported Fentanyl and Counterfeit Medicines



Introduction

In September 2017, authorities in New York announced that they had seized nearly 200 pounds of fentanyl, which experts estimated could produce [32 million lethal doses](#) of the illegal substance.¹ Over the last few years, this has become a familiar story; law enforcement agencies have also made substantial seizures in Arizona, Utah, Massachusetts, Texas, and elsewhere.

Illicitly produced fentanyl is being sold as a powder, cut into heroin and cocaine, and distributed in clear capsules, in nasal sprays, and in other forms. This report, however, is focused on fentanyl pressed into counterfeit prescription pills, which are poorly made in rogue manufacturing facilities with illegally obtained fentanyl, most often imported from China.

These pills are infiltrating communities across America. Increasingly, toxicology screens are revealing that the pills found next to overdose victims are counterfeits, and the chemical in the pills responsible for death is fentanyl or one of its analogues. The tragedy of addicts dying from fentanyl is significant, but an accidental poisoning from a counterfeit pill is a different, unique tragedy. Victims often believe they are taking medicine in specific doses. Consider the example of world-famous musician Prince. He died from a [counterfeit painkiller made with too much fentanyl](#) in an unidentified illegal lab. A fraction of a counterfeit Xanax made with too much fentanyl killed [Tosh Ackerman in California](#). The counterfeit pill epidemic is so new and fast-moving that even the experts we work with don't appreciate how widespread it is.

As PSM's research staff started tracking these incidents in media reports in 2015, we became alarmed. A few isolated incidents became a dozen, and then suddenly 25 states were affected. Then 30, and 35. In September 2017, when we first released this report, we had documented the spread of counterfeit pills made with illegal fentanyl in 40 states, with deaths in 16 of them. Now, in March 2018, counterfeit pills have been found in 43 states, and deaths as a result of the pills have been confirmed in 22. The other 21 states may have deaths attributable to counterfeits made with fentanyl, but because of resource limitations, those deaths may not have been investigated for counterfeit drugs.

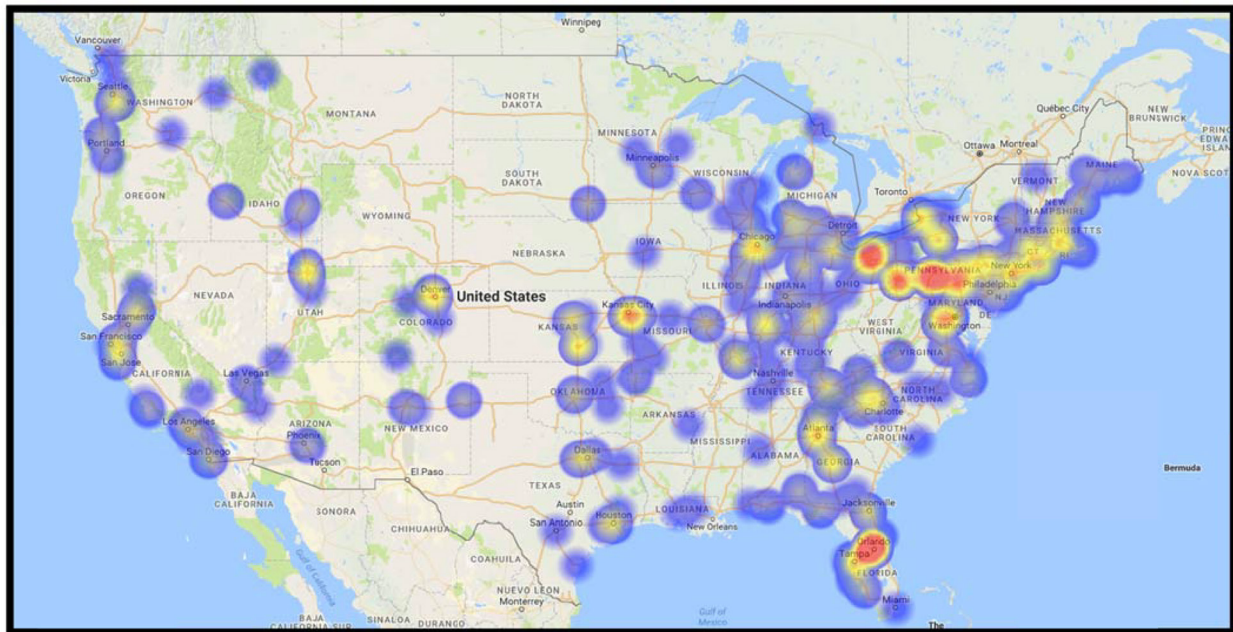
1. Rogue manufacturers are finding new ways to tweak the fentanyl molecule all the time. For the sake of simplicity in this report, when we say "fentanyl," we mean "fentanyl and its analogues."



How does fentanyl get to the United States?

Drug traffickers do bring fentanyl over the border, but the drug is readily available on the Internet. A January 2018 [Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations report](#) showed that illicit manufacturers in China sell powdered fentanyl and pill presses online, accept payment via cryptocurrencies or regular payment options, and ship them to buyers using the international mail service. Members of the subcommittee were easily able to locate dealers through Google searches and carry out transactions all the way to the point of payment.

Regular Americans find it easy, too: an analysis of payment information to just six fentanyl sellers showed that 300 individuals in 43 states made 500 “buys” totaling \$230,000 over a three-month period.



This map marks U.S. locations linked to payments of online sellers. Source: “Combating the Opioid Crisis: Exploiting Vulnerabilities in International Mail,” [Staff Report](#), U.S. Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, January 2018.

What does this have to do with importation?

The sheer volume of packages shipped into the U.S. containing unidentified pharmaceuticals is so great that it is impossible for Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to inspect, intercept and seize all of the illegal shipments. Without any electronic tracking information and with reduced resources, the chance of an inspector detecting counterfeit pharmaceuticals becomes almost random. An [estimated one million packages enter the U.S. every day](#) through the New York (JFK) International Mail Facility, which is just one of over a dozen such sites. There simply aren’t enough inspectors to check them all.

Proposals in Congress which would open the floodgates to the importation of unlicensed foreign medicines will increase the volume of unidentified packages containing pharmaceuticals, and make the problem even worse.

The volume that we have today is a result of impediments to enforcing existing laws and Americans' lack of understanding that counterfeits exist and are dangerous. It is illegal to go online and buy uninspected medical products from a foreign supplier, and yet people do it every day.

Every day hundreds of thousands of packages of drugs come into the U.S. Many that are tested are found to be counterfeit, either containing no active ingredient, the wrong active ingredient, or a tiny amount that isn't sufficient to treat your disease. CBP and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) can destroy packages at the border that are tested as counterfeits. However, excessive regulatory and bureaucratic requirements and processes significantly hamper CBP's ability to seize and destroy counterfeit drugs. The seizure of one small parcel of counterfeit drugs requires the same paperwork as the seizure of a 40 ft. container. In an [analysis](#) done by former FBI Director Louis Freeh studying the impact of importation, he said, "[destruction] still requires the FDA to follow a burdensome, multi-step notification and hearing process that delays the destruction." In addition, CBP is required to store seized packages in secured locked cages in their facilities until destruction is allowed. The sheer volume of seizures exceeds the storage capacity at many International Mail Centers.

The result is that those small packages add up to an enormous volume of products that cross the border and provide ample places to hide deadly fake pills and dangerous ingredients such as illegal fentanyl.

How do we stop this?

To stop the importation of fentanyl in finished form, we need to sufficiently resource our CBP officers. That includes both making their job easier by requiring electronic data on packages before they arrive at international mail facilities, and giving them the resources to handle the volume. We need to clamp down on the illegal but currently unprosecuted importation of medicine and stop making CBP and the FDA jump through hoops to destroy packages of verified counterfeits.



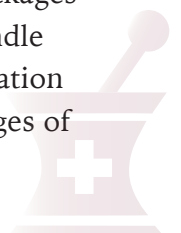
Scott Gottlieb, M.D. ✓
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Toured operations at [#FDA](#) JFK Airport mail facility. Just some of thousands of seized fake, controlled drug packages



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We also need to handle the problem of domestic illegal pill manufacturing. A good first step would be to ensure that the right to purchase or own a pill press or other pill manufacturing equipment is limited to licensed entities such as drug manufacturers or specific types of pharmacists. Only licensed professionals should be able to purchase and own such equipment. In addition, old or seized equipment should have a restriction requirement, so it cannot be reused for counterfeit production.

Like all broad public policy issues, this one will not have easy, fast, or cheap fixes. Some of them are cheaper and faster than others, though. Allowing CBP to destroy counterfeit pharmaceuticals without onerous bureaucratic processes is one of them. Outlawing the purchase or possession of a pill press without a compounding pharmacy or manufacturing license is another. Requiring the destruction of old, obsolete or seized equipment is yet another.

Screening all fatalities that present as an overdose for toxic compounds will cost money, as will giving CBP officers additional resources they've been lacking. Implementing the global tracking system for medicine that is being put into place right now is another.

In the end, ensuring a safe drug supply costs money, but it's absolutely worth it.

Marv Shepherd

President, Partnership for Safe Medicines

Shabbir Safdar

Executive Director, Partnership for Safe Medicines

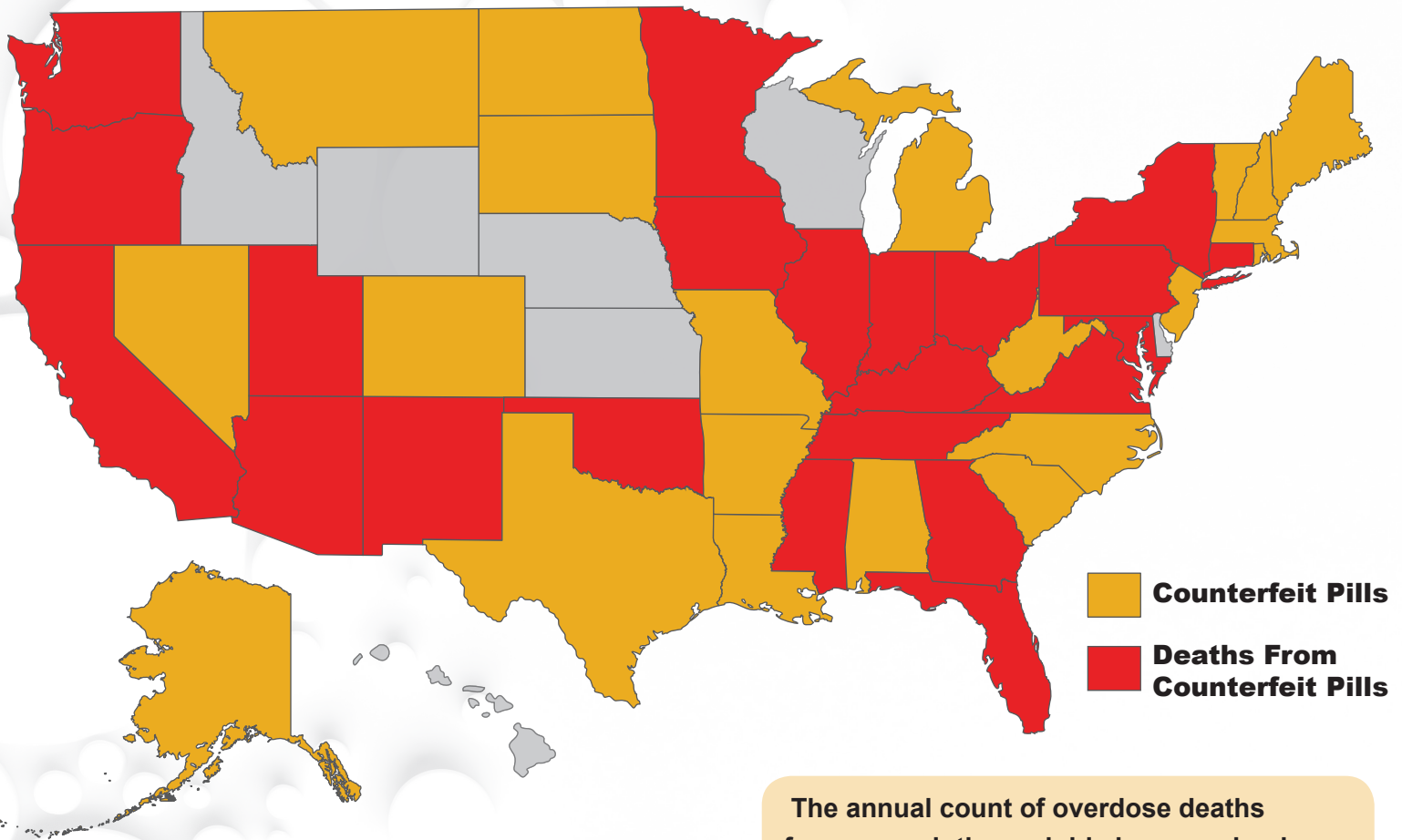


Photo Credits

Jessie Hyde, "From Mormon Kid to Alleged Drug Kingpin: Inside the Rise and Fall of Aaron Shamo," *Deseretnews.com*, June 22, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2HbvOYX>.

Scott Gottlieb, M.D. (@SGottliebFDA) [Commissioner of the FDA], "Toured operations at #FDA JFK Airport mail facility. Just some of thousands of seized fake, controlled drug packages, <https://t.co/RLXA81lkt>," Aug 25 2017, 16:33 UTC. [Tweet]

43 States Have A Deadly Fentanyl Pill Problem



States with confirmed counterfeit fentanyl pills

Alabama	Maryland	Oklahoma
Alaska	Massachusetts	Oregon
Arizona	Michigan	Pennsylvania
Arkansas	Minnesota	Rhode Island
California	Mississippi	South Carolina
Colorado	Missouri	South Dakota
Connecticut	Montana	Tennessee
Florida	Nevada	Texas
Georgia	New Hampshire	Utah
Illinois	New Jersey	Vermont
Indiana	New Mexico	Virginia
Iowa	New York	Washington
Kentucky	North Carolina	West Virginia
Louisiana	North Dakota	
Maine	Ohio	

The annual count of overdose deaths from prescription opioids has remained constant since 2011, but deaths from fentanyl poisoning [have spiked](#) since then. As fentanyl-laced pills mimicking legitimate medication have flooded the illicit drug supply, prescription drug users have been poisoned by the counterfeits. The tally of deaths because of counterfeit pills made with fentanyl is probably undercounted because lab protocols lagged behind this shift and weren't testing for fentanyl. In late 2017, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) [recommended](#) that medical examiners and coroners screen for fentanyl as a cause of death in regions where the drug had been found. The agency also directed \$4.7 million to medical examiners and coroners in 32 states and D.C. to fund [comprehensive toxicology testing](#) and improved surveillance.

CASE STUDY:

Fentanyl Pill Distribution on a Massive Scale

In November 2016, Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agents confiscated a [pill press, powdered synthetic opioids and alprazolam, 70,000 counterfeit pills made of fentanyl \(and another 20,000 counterfeit Xanax\)](#), and \$1.2 million in [cash](#), from houses in Cottonwood Heights and South Jordan, Utah.

The following May, the Department of Justice [indicted](#) the owner of the Cottonwood Heights house, Aaron Shamo, and five co-conspirators for selling counterfeit pills on the Internet between July 8, 2015 and November 22, 2016. Over just five days, agents documented the shipment of more than 3,500 counterfeit oxycodone pills made of fentanyl to buyers in 23 states.¹ If that were a steady rate, Shamo could have sold more than 350,000 of the pills over the 503 days of the operation.

The U.S. has seen counterfeit prescription drug operations on this scale before. Chinese counterfeiter Kevin Xu, who was [sentenced to 78 months](#) in federal prison, sold \$1.5 million in counterfeit and subpotent prescription drugs—including treatments for blood clots, schizophrenia, prostate cancer, influenza, and Alzheimer's—in the U.K. and U.S. over the course of 2007. Shamo's pills, however, were even more deadly: prosecutors are [investigating 28 deaths](#) that may be connected to the alleged drug ring.

1. California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Maryland, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, North Carolina, North Dakota, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Texas and Virginia.

Fentanyl endangers first responders across the nation.

In June 2016, the DEA released [*Counterfeit Prescription Pills Containing Fentanyl: A Global Threat*](#), warning that fentanyl is a “grave threat to law enforcement officials and first responders, as a lethal dose of fentanyl can be accidentally inhaled or absorbed through the skin.”

A year later, the agency [warned](#) law enforcement about the threat of fentanyl exposure and published [*A Briefing Guide for First Responders*](#), which recommended that first responders carry naloxone and wear personal protective equipment ranging from nitrile gloves, safety glasses, a dust mask, coveralls and shoe covers to a “Level A” hazmat suit with its own breathing apparatus, depending on the risk.

Fentanyl's Impact on First Responders

August 2015: Officers in [New Jersey](#) experienced dizziness, shortness of breath and respiratory problems after performing a field test on a mix of heroin, cocaine, and fentanyl.

June 2016: Parole officers in [Sandy, Utah](#) were treated for possible fentanyl exposure after contacting a probation violator who was manufacturing fentanyl-laced counterfeit pills.

September 2016: Eleven SWAT team members in [Hartford, Connecticut](#) became ill after exposure to airborne fentanyl during a drug bust. A [Woonsocket, Rhode Island](#) police officer had a similar experience while booking a fentanyl dealer.

October 2016: Three dogs from the [Broward County, Florida](#) Sheriff’s Office were treated with naloxone when they were sickened by fentanyl exposure during an investigation. A fourth dog suffered injury in [Louisville, Kentucky](#) in August 2017.

December 2016: [North Smithfield, Rhode Island](#) police officers were hospitalized after being exposed to fentanyl while processing evidence.

February 2017: A police officer in [Waterford, Connecticut](#) was treated for fentanyl exposure following a drug bust.

May 2017: Paramedics who treated a [Harford County, Maryland](#) sheriff’s deputy with Narcan for fentanyl exposure had to seek treatment themselves. An officer in [East Liverpool, Ohio](#) overdosed after arresting a drug dealer. It took four doses of Narcan to revive him. A detective in [Kent County, Michigan](#), and officers in [Washington Township, Pennsylvania](#), and [Cincinnati, Ohio](#) were also treated. (Two additional officers in Cincinnati sought treatment for fentanyl exposure in [August](#) 2017.)

June 2017: Hazmat crews quarantined a police department parking lot after a fentanyl spill in [Duluth, Georgia](#). White powder on an officer’s uniform triggered a hazmat response at a hospital in [Alexandria, New Hampshire](#), where he sought treatment after being sickened by

fentanyl exposure. Exposure incidents were reported in [Chamberlain, South Dakota](#), [Fostoria, Ohio](#) and [Nicholasville, Kentucky](#).

July 2017: News reported fentanyl exposure among police officers in [Boyd County, Kentucky](#), [Menasha, Wisconsin](#) and [Cleveland, Ohio](#). Two paramedics, an EMT, and a firefighter in [Bucks County, Pennsylvania](#) were treated for possible carfentanil exposure. The [Orlando, Florida](#) Police Department upgraded required protective gear after a homicide detective became ill at the scene of an overdose death. Wisconsin's Attorney General gave law enforcement officers access to the [Wisconsin State Crime Laboratory Bureau](#) to perform field tests of seized drugs more safely.

August 2017: Members of an 18-person [Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania](#) SWAT team became dizzy and were treated at a hospital after airborne fentanyl exposure during a drug raid. Three officers in [Chelsea, Massachusetts](#) and a [Stafford County, Virginia](#) deputy and a nurse were also treated. Three nurses in [Massillon, Ohio](#) were revived with Narcan after they lost consciousness while cleaning a room where an overdose victim had been treated. Police in [Dauphin County, Pennsylvania](#) halted field tests of drugs because of the danger to officers.

September 2017: Three [Philadelphia, Pennsylvania](#) police officers, an agent with the state's attorney general's office and nine suspects were treated for possible fentanyl exposure. Treatment was also necessary for federal task force officer in [Cleveland, Ohio](#) and an officer with the [Aliquippa, Pennsylvania Police Department](#). Police in [Hammond, Indiana](#) began carrying naloxone after officers suffered fentanyl exposure in December 2016 and February 2017.

October 2017: Two officers in [New Hanover, Pennsylvania](#) sought treatment after being exposed to a substance believed to be carfentanil.

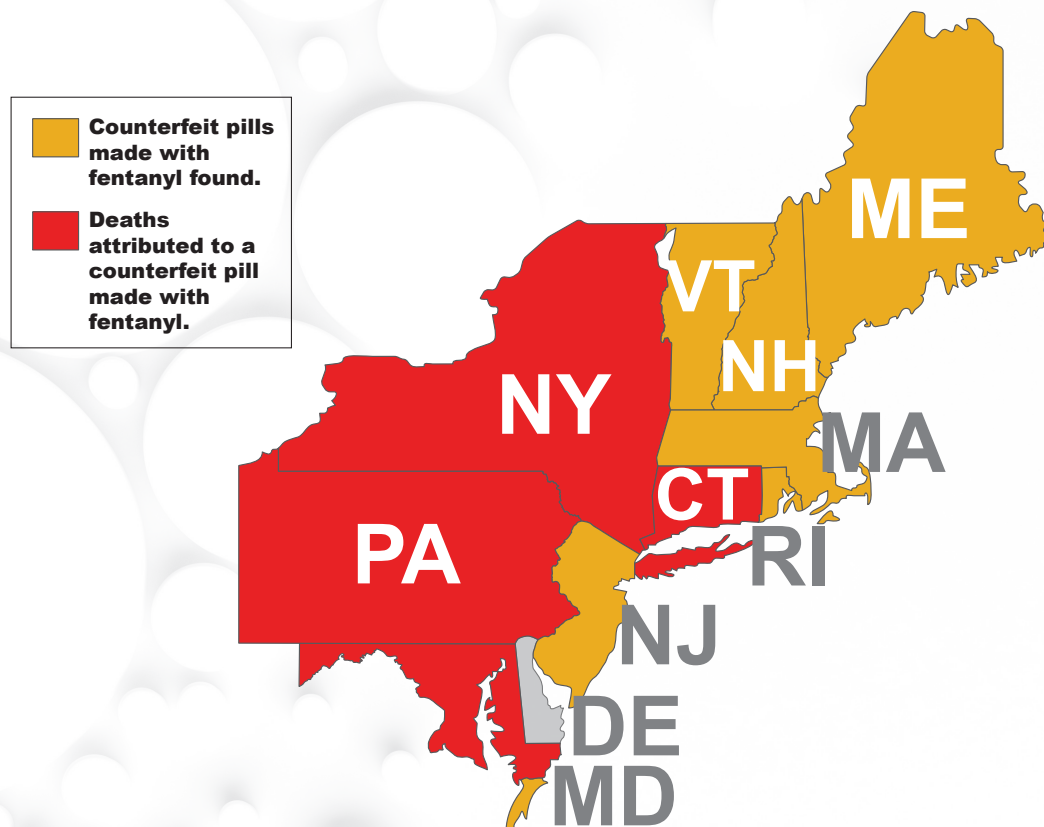
November 2017: A paramedic in [Fairborn, Ohio](#) overdosed while driving an overdose patient to the hospital. Officers in [Warwick, Rhode Island](#), [Collinsville, Illinois](#) and at the [Cincinnati Veterans Affairs Medical Center](#) were also treated.

December 2017: Three police officers in [Lawrence, Massachusetts](#), three in [Baltimore County, Maryland](#), and two sheriff's deputies in [Rockingham, New Hampshire](#) were taken to hospitals because they felt ill after suspected fentanyl exposure.

January 2018: Three [Trumbull County, Ohio](#) sheriff's deputies were treated for probable fentanyl exposure. [Oregon State Police](#) stopped spot testing drugs found during traffic stops because of the exposure risk. State police in Arizona, Michigan, and Missouri, as well as in New York and Houston have also [abandoned](#) field testing.

February 2018: Two officers in [Waukesha County, Wisconsin](#) suffered airborne exposure to fentanyl during a traffic stop.

Incidents of note in the Northeastern region



Connecticut ➤ A 30-year-old man in Hamden died of a fentanyl overdose when he inadvertently purchased [fake oxycodone pills](#) (March 2017). An Essex man pleaded guilty to selling fentanyl- and heroin-adulterated [counterfeit oxycodone](#) and other controlled substances he purchased on the internet (January 2018).*

Maine ➤ Police seized [counterfeit pills made with fentanyl](#) while searching the home of a drug trafficker in Surry (February 2018).*

Maryland ➤ Authorities in [Carroll](#) and [Anne Arundel](#) Counties warned that they had found counterfeit prescription pills laced with fentanyl and/or heroin (April 2016, May 2017). Carroll County officials reported that residents had died after taking the pills.*

Massachusetts ➤ Between September 2016 and September 2017, police in [Salem](#), [Quincy](#), and [Weymouth](#) reported finding fentanyl-laced counterfeit drugs.*

New Hampshire ➤ State police [seized large quantities of fentanyl tablets](#) that resembled 30-milligram oxycodone pills (August 2017).

New Jersey ➤ DEA agents seized [two pill presses and an unstated amount of fentanyl](#) from a home in Carneys Point Township (June 2017). Authorities announced that they had found fentanyl-laced oxycodone pills in Monmouth County on [three separate occasions](#) in 2017.

New York ➤ A woman in Chatham [died](#) from a [fentanyl-laced oxycodone](#) (September 2017). That same month, investigators announced that they had [seized a shipment](#) that contained 500 of the pills. The DEA [raided a Long Island](#) home and arrested two men in the act of [manufacturing fake oxycodone pills](#) made of fentanyl (July 2017).

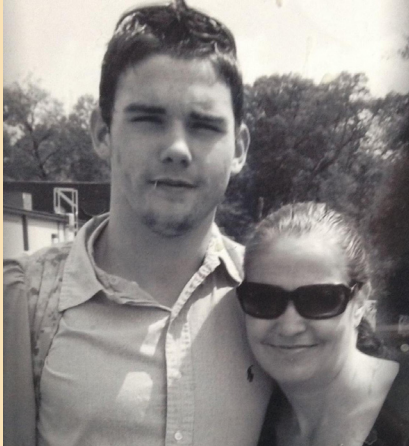
Pennsylvania ➤ A Bucks County man and a Montgomery County man died [after taking fake, fentanyl-laced Percocet](#) (November 2015). A Hazleton couple were charged with trying to sell [40,000 counterfeit oxycodone](#) made with heroin to undercover law enforcement in New Jersey (February 2018).*

Rhode Island ➤ State police [arrested an East Providence man](#) for possession of fentanyl pills and cocaine (July 2017).

Vermont ➤ Law enforcement arrested a [Burlington man](#) for buying and distributing oxycodone laced with both fentanyl and methamphetamine (May 2017).

* Utah drug trafficker Aaron Shamo allegedly [shipped counterfeit oxycodone pills](#) to Connecticut, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York and Pennsylvania in November 2016.





Before he died of a fentanyl overdose on February 16, 2015, 23-year-old Joe Patterson had a lot to look forward to.

The Georgia resident worked for Sherwin-Williams while he pursued a degree in exercise science. He aspired to be a personal trainer because of his devotion to physical fitness. He and his girlfriend were looking forward to the birth of their first child in April 2015. They had even picked out their son's name: Gabriel.

On the weekend of Valentine's Day, Joe pulled a muscle during a workout. Rather than spend a lot of time and money going to a doctor for painkillers, Joe called a friend, Casey Trichel, to ask if he could buy a couple of oxycodone. He met up with Casey, made his purchase, and went on with his evening's plans.

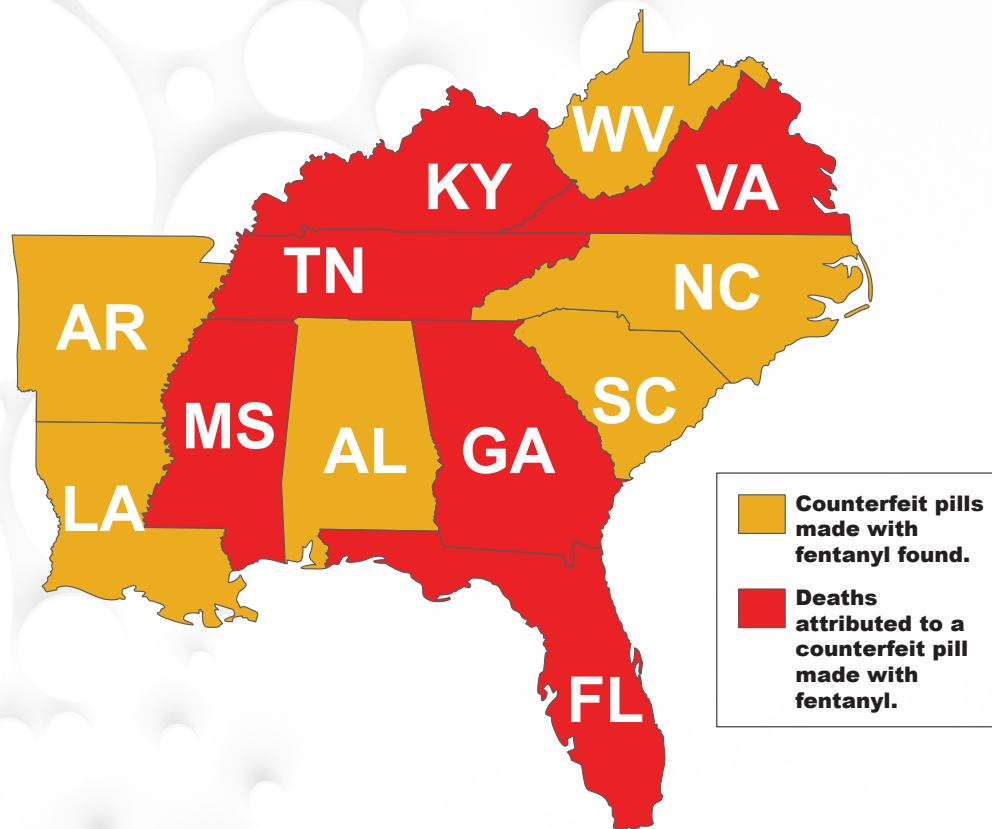
Later that night, Casey sampled half of a tablet of the oxycodone he'd sold. He quickly realized that something was wrong. He tried desperately to contact Joe—even calling Joe's mother, Lisa Hicks—in an attempt to warn Joe, but it was too late.

After the call, Joe's mom anxiously tried to get in touch with her son, without success. In the morning, Joe's stepfather, Julian, called her at work to tell her that he had been contacted and that something was wrong with Joe. When they got to the cousin's house in Gainesville, Georgia, Joe was already dead.

As the investigation unfolded, Hicks learned that Joe had died of a [massive fentanyl overdose](#). Even worse, Joe might have survived if the three people at his cousin's house had not panicked and failed to call 911.

Casey pleaded guilty to distribution of fentanyl and involuntary manslaughter and was [sentenced to 15 years in prison](#) in December 2015. Joe's case was the first fentanyl murder prosecution in the state of Georgia. Since Joe's death, Hicks has been busy. Her grandson was born on April 9, 2015. She and her husband are raising the child, who she has named Joseph Gabriel Patterson, adding his father's name to the name her son had already chosen. Working with another bereaved parent on FentanylGeorgia.com, she has been steadily raising awareness about fentanyl overdose victims in an effort to honor the dead and save lives. She's also pushing hard for Joe's Law, a bill in the Georgia state legislature that would both increase penalties for people dealing these dangerous drugs, and enable prosecution of people who stand by overdose victims without offering help. Through all this, Joe is always on Hicks' mind. "I have Joe's photo on my desk with a plaque below it," she told us. "It says that if love could have saved you, you would have lived forever." ■

Incidents of note in the Southeastern region



Alabama ► The Russell County Sheriff's Office arrested a man for possession of fentanyl pills [disguised to look like Percocet](#) (June 2017).

Arkansas ► Arkansas's crime laboratory announced they had identified 56 samples of fentanyl—in [powder and counterfeit pill form](#)—in the first three months of 2017 (July 2017).

Florida ► At least [nine Pinellas County residents died](#) after taking fake Xanax laced with fentanyl in the first three months of 2016. A Wellington woman [died](#) from fake oxycodone in September 2016. Between April 2016 and August 2017, law enforcement seized fake pills in [Osceola, Brevard](#), and [Okaloosa](#) Counties. Two south Florida residents were among 21 people charged with operating an [international fentanyl pill manufacturing and smuggling ring](#) (October 2017).*

Georgia ► [Eight people overdosed](#) in Bibb and Houston Counties after taking fake Percocets (August 2017). A similar outbreak in June 2017 killed four and prompted the hospitalization of nearly 20 people. Another Georgian died in [February 2015](#).

Kentucky ► A woman [died after taking a counterfeit oxycodone pill](#) that contained fentanyl (July 2015). Seven Ohio residents were arrested their part in shipping illicit drugs, including [heroin/fentanyl pills disguised as oxycodone](#), to Ohio and Kentucky (February 2018).*

Louisiana ► The Natchitoches Drug Task Force reported that dealers were selling counterfeit hydrocodone [laced with fentanyl](#) (April 2017).

Mississippi ► A Madison County man died after taking [counterfeit oxycodone made with fentanyl](#) (November 2017).

North Carolina ► A traffic stop in Iredell County resulted in police seizing [5,000 counterfeit OxyContin pills](#) made of fentanyl (November 2016).*

South Carolina ► Authorities in Greenwood County warned residents [counterfeit Aleve tablets](#) made with heroin and fentanyl (September 2017).*

Tennessee ► A Nashville woman died after taking [counterfeit Xanax](#) (January 2016). Since then, [additional deaths](#) have been attributed to fake pills and, in October 2016, federal authorities [charged five Tennessee residents](#) with making and selling fentanyl-laced counterfeit prescription pills that killed two. Between July 2017 and February 2018, police seized counterfeit pills laced with fentanyl in [Grundy, Marion](#), and [Jefferson](#) Counties, as well as [12 counterfeit pill presses](#) across the state.

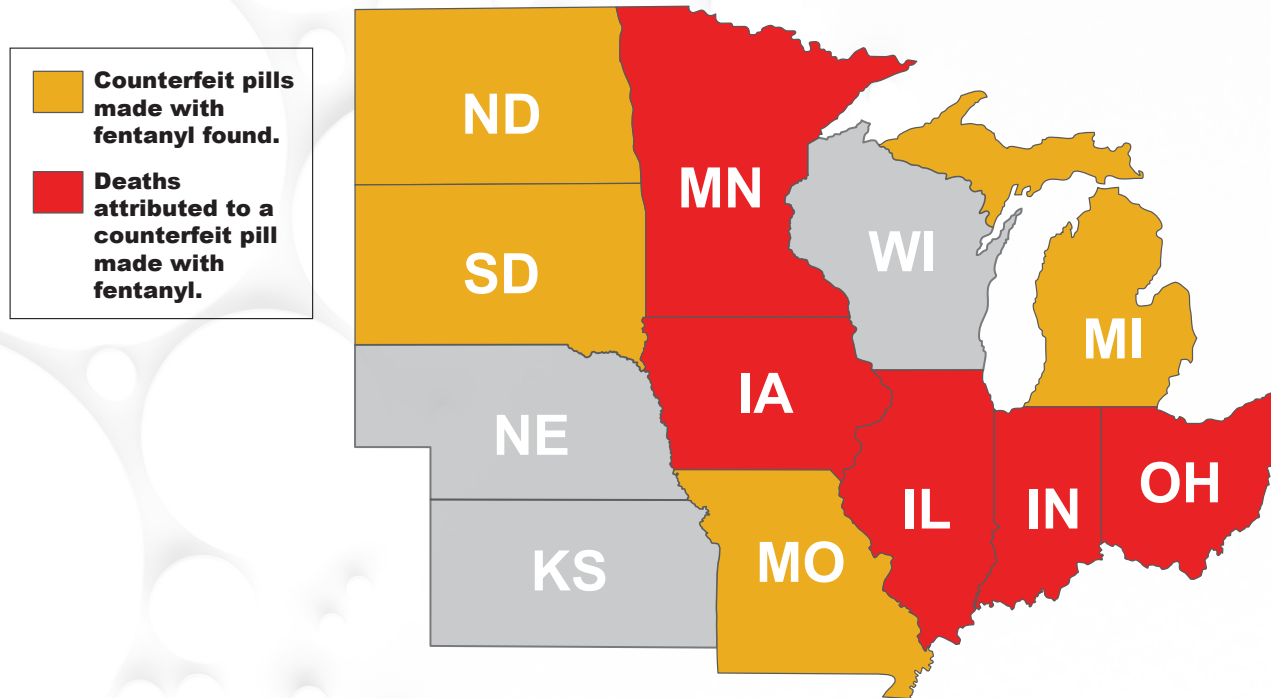
Virginia ► State Police reported that Virginians [had been killed by fentanyl-laced counterfeit pills](#) (January 2018).*

West Virginia ► The Charleston Police Department reported seizing [fake oxycodone pills made from pure fentanyl](#) (November 2017).

* Utah drug trafficker Aaron Shamo allegedly [shipped counterfeit oxycodone pills](#) to Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia in November 2016.



Incidents of note in the Midwestern region



Illinois ➤ Officials in Kankakee County reported [four deaths](#) from illicit fentanyl in pills or powder form (July 2016).*

Indiana ➤ DEA agents [seized almost 1000 fentanyl-laced oxycodone pills](#) during an arrest (May 2017). A 19- and a 20-year-old in Fort Wayne died after [taking fake Xanax pills](#) (March 2016).

Iowa ➤ Four Iowa health and public safety agencies [reported](#) that counterfeit oxycodone is in circulation in Iowa and that Iowans had died after taking the drug (July 2017).

Michigan ➤ Argentine Township police reported [finding counterfeit Xanax](#) made with fentanyl (February 2018).*

Minnesota ➤ [Prince Rogers Nelson](#) died after taking counterfeit painkillers laced with fentanyl in April 2016. Between February 2017 and January 2018, individuals in [Chisago County](#) and [Golden Valley](#) were charged with selling fake pills that resulted in at least two additional deaths, and [another](#) man was sentenced for distributing them. In Northfield, [fake oxycodone](#) caused at least three fentanyl overdoses (March 2018).*

Missouri ➤ A Cape Girardeau resident [pleaded guilty](#) to selling [fentanyl](#) and other drugs, including fake prescription opioids and counterfeit Xanax, via the Internet (August 2017).*

North Dakota ➤ In 2015, five Grand Forks residents pleaded guilty for [their part](#) in a 21-person, international drug trafficking operation that sold [fentanyl powder and pill presses](#) to buyers across the U.S. In 2017, police [seized 500 counterfeit oxycodone pills](#) at a traffic stop in Grand Forks. Six individuals who had acquired and sold those pills [pleaded guilty](#) between October 2017 and January 2018.*

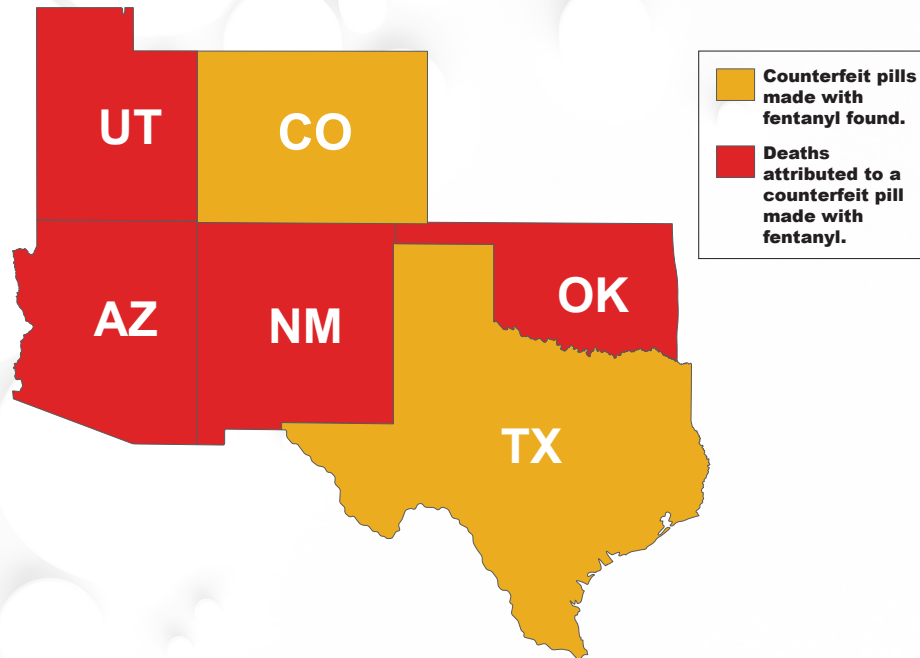
Ohio ► A Baltimore man [overdosed and died](#) after taking a fentanyl-laced oxycodone (September 2015). The same thing happened to a man in Riverside [after he took a Xanax pill](#) in March 2016. Between February 2016 and February 2018, authorities made pill seizures in [Cuyahoga](#) and [Hamilton](#) Counties, as well as [two seizures](#) in Franklin County. Counterfeit Xanax pills [were also reported](#) in the Miami Valley in March 2016.*

South Dakota ► The Sioux Falls police first [found](#) counterfeit oxycodone pills made with fentanyl (October 2016). In 2017, investigators intercepted a package containing [20,000 fentanyl pills](#) at the Chamberlain post office and seized another [1,000 pills](#) during the search of a home in Mitchell.

* Utah drug trafficker Aaron Shamo allegedly [shipped counterfeit oxycodone pills](#) to Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, North Dakota, and Ohio in November 2016.



Incidents of note in the Southwestern region



Arizona ➤ 32 [Maricopa County residents died](#) after taking fake prescription pills laced with fentanyl between May 2015 and February 2017. Between August 2017 and January 2018, authorities seized 30,000 pills in [Pima County](#), four pounds of pills in [Santa Cruz County](#), and made smaller seizures in [Maricopa](#) and [Yavapai](#) Counties.

Colorado ➤ Utah drug trafficker Aaron Shamo [allegedly shipped counterfeit oxycodone pills](#) to Colorado (November 2016).

New Mexico ➤ Authorities reported that at least [20 people have died](#) after taking black-market oxycodone made of fentanyl (October 2016). A doctor in [Albuquerque](#) reported that patients were overdosing on fake oxycodone laced with fentanyl (April 2017).

Oklahoma ➤ Three family members in Oklahoma City were found dead in the morning after they [fatally overdosed](#) on counterfeit pain medication they had taken at bedtime (March 2016).*

Texas ➤ In 2017, federal agents in San Antonio and Houston seized [10 kilos of oxycodone pills laced with fentanyl](#), other drugs, and four commercial pill presses, and [arrested 14 people](#) involved in manufacturing and distributing them. Fake pills were first reported in [Houston](#) in August 2016, and Amarillo police issued warnings about them in [June 2017](#) and [February 2018](#).*

Utah ➤ The DEA shut down a counterfeiting operation headed by Aaron Shamo that distributed [untold quantities of counterfeit, fentanyl-laced oxycodone and alprazolam tablets](#) throughout the United States (November 2016). Layton Police reported [an overdose death](#) from fentanyl-laced counterfeit pills (June 2016). Authorities have also closed pill making operations in [South Jordan](#) and [Sandy](#) (February 2018, June 2016).

* Utah drug trafficker Aaron Shamo allegedly [shipped counterfeit oxycodone pills](#) to Colorado, Oklahoma and Texas in November 2016.



The evening of October 26, 2015, twenty-nine-year-old Aptos, California resident Tosh Ackerman took a Benadryl and part of a Xanax pill to help him sleep. He never woke up, and his girlfriend found him dead the next day. Ackerman died because the Xanax he took was counterfeit. It contained a fatal dose of a powerful synthetic opioid called fentanyl.

Tosh Ackerman was a respected member of his community, known and loved by his co-workers and customers at Nob Hill Grocery in Watsonville, CA, and a devoted brother and friend. His death was a shock and a blow to everyone who knew him. In a condolence letter to his mother, one customer characterized him as “genuine and pleasant.” “He cared about

what I had to say,” she wrote. “He was a person who engaged with you, always with a smile and a kind word...[all] who knew Tosh felt the same way I did about him.”

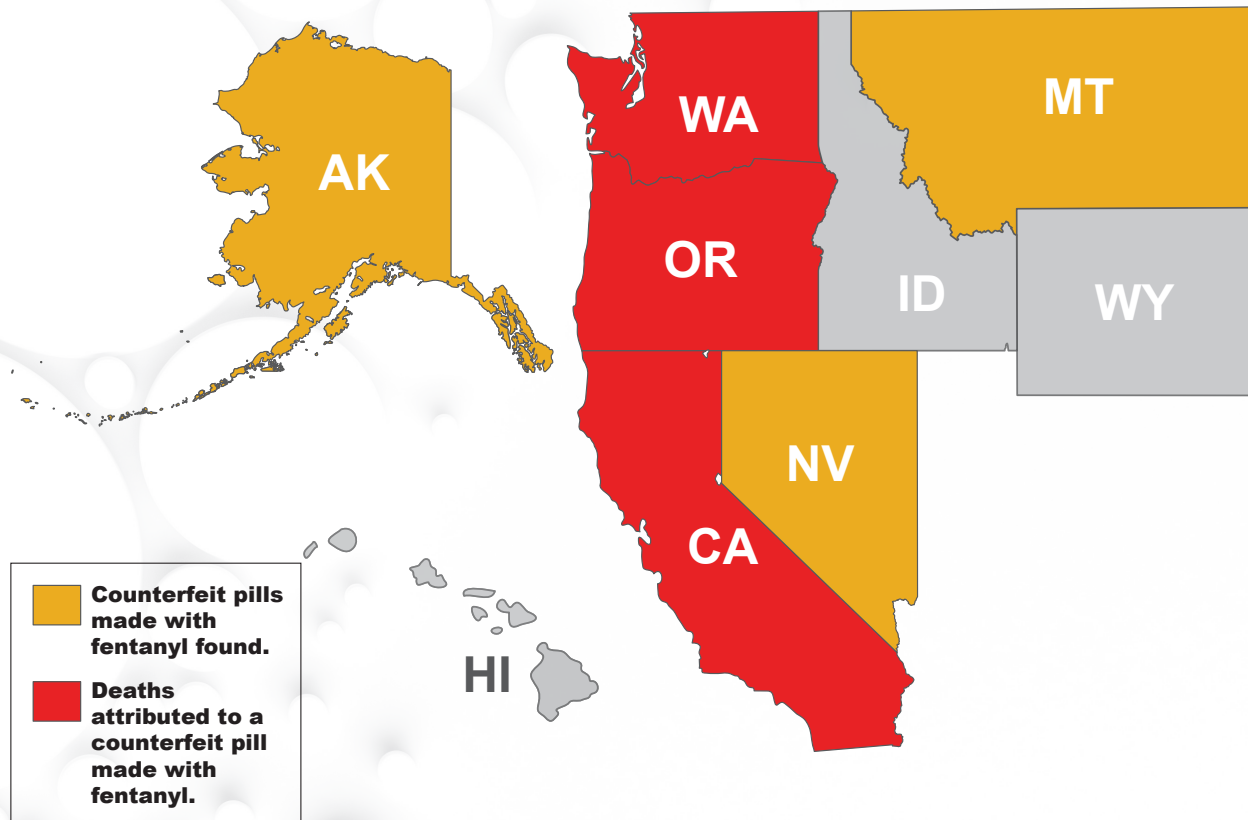
His family, too, felt his loss keenly. Tosh was extremely close to his family, often getting together for family dinners and playing games with his mom, dad, three siblings and two nieces, who adored him. They shared a love of sports and enjoyed going to many San Francisco Giants games together.

On the day he died, Tosh had a case of hives. According to his grandmother, they had been plaguing him for weeks. He spent the day at the beach with friends, but when he got home he was so itchy he couldn't sleep. Battling insomnia, he spoke to his girlfriend, Zoe, on the phone for an hour and made plans to meet up with her the following day. Sometime that night, in an effort to sleep, Tosh took part of a Xanax pill. When he didn't call her the next day, Tosh's girlfriend stopped by his house to check on him. She found him still in bed. He had vomited and was cold and unresponsive. She called 911 and tried to revive him, but Tosh was already dead.

Law enforcement investigating Tosh's death found Benadryl (probably for the hives) and a quarter of a Xanax pill in a Motrin bottle in his room. According to Sgt. Chris Clark, the Santa Cruz Sheriff's Office detective who worked on Tosh's case, a toxicology report revealed that he had overdosed on fentanyl, [a synthetic opioid 50 to 100 times more potent than morphine](#). FDA testing confirmed that Tosh's Xanax was the source. It was counterfeit and contained fentanyl rather than the alprazolam he expected. Later, the [Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office arrested a local man](#) after they found more of the counterfeit medication among many other illicit substances in his home.

Tosh Ackerman would never have willingly taken a pill made of fentanyl. He thought he was taking prescription Xanax. Tosh was a much-loved brother, son and friend with a bright future ahead of him. His loss, as with so many others, is an American tragedy. People don't know that counterfeit prescription drugs made with fentanyl are out there, or that they are risking their lives unless they buy their medicine from a licensed American pharmacy. ■

Incidents of note in the Western region



Alaska ➤ Alaska's state crime lab [confirmed](#) that a pill confiscated during a DUI arrest was fentanyl disguised as oxycodone (January 2017).

California ➤ Between October 2015 and April 2016, [14 people in the Sacramento area](#), [three in San Francisco](#), and [two in Santa Cruz County](#) died of fentanyl poisoning after taking counterfeit prescription pills. Three California residents were arrested for manufacturing and selling [counterfeit pills](#) in San Francisco in June 2016. Since February 2016, authorities have seized more than 6,000 counterfeit pills at the [Otay Mesa](#) and [San Ysidro](#) Ports of Entry and at least 20,000 in [San Diego and Imperial Counties](#).*

Montana ➤ Billings police seized approximately [100 counterfeit oxycodone pills](#) made of fentanyl (October 2017).*

Nevada ➤ Police reported a spike in overdoses from [counterfeit oxycodone](#) in the Reno area (May 2016).

Oregon ➤ A Portland man [died after taking fake oxycodone](#) laced with fentanyl. Police seized approximately 2,000 counterfeit oxycodone pills in the course of the investigation (August 2016). In 2017, [Salem police](#) issued a warning about fentanyl-laced oxycodone, and Portland police circulated photographs of [fake tablets](#) that contained combinations of fentanyl, heroin, tramadol, and alprazolam.

Washington ➤ A Yakima-area resident overdosed after taking [a fentanyl pill masquerading as Percocet](#) (May 2016). Yakima police, who also reported [counterfeit Xanax](#) in circulation in November 2017, suspected two additional overdoses and two deaths were the result of fentanyl-laced pills. In October 2017, officials in [Seattle](#) reported the death of a King County resident who took fake oxycodone pills.

* Utah drug trafficker Aaron Shamo allegedly [shipped counterfeit oxycodone pills](#) to California and Montana in November 2016.



Resources

Use these resources to keep up-to-date and learn more information about counterfeits made with fentanyl.

- Find out on what's happening nationally and on a state level at [The Partnership for Safe Medicines Fentanyl Pill Crisis Tracker](#)
- Sign up for law enforcement fentanyl training from the [National Association of Drug Diversion Investigators](#)
- Watch the [U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration training video](#) on handling fentanyl in a law enforcement environment.

Methodology

The Partnership for Safe Medicines has compiled this report based on an extensive survey of public sources beginning in April 2015, a list of which may be found on our website at <http://safedr.org/43states>.

We focused exclusively on the United States, only including a state when we found explicit reports of counterfeit pills laced with fentanyl or fentanyl analogues in news coverage, statements by law enforcement or public health agencies, or in court records. Because public sources are not focused on reporting about counterfeit prescription pills, we encountered some limitations:

- Authorities did not always test confiscated pills or run toxicology reports to identify a victim's cause of death. When they did run tests, they did not always report their findings.
- Public sources do not always report the form of fentanyl seized in raids, or disclose the form of fentanyl that killed a victim.
- Authorities and journalists do not always offer clear lists of victims, distinguish fatal overdoses from those in which patients survived, or confirm the cause of death months later when toxicology tests come in.
- Authorities may not report counterfeit pill incidents at all, especially if they are in the middle of an investigation.

Throughout this process, if a news report or police account didn't explicitly cite a counterfeit pill made with fentanyl, we did not count it. This means that we have certainly underestimated the size of the epidemic and its impact.

We also did not include any incident of a person dying from fentanyl that wasn't a counterfeit pill. Addicts sometimes take fentanyl directly, as well as mix it with heroin. This is a dangerous practice and often fatal, but it is outside the scope of our study.

Because of the limitations we've encountered relying on public sources, we have not offered an overall accounting of victims. We are not a government agency, and medical privacy laws limit our ability to investigate the cause of death. We have, however, noted every state in which a death was reported.

Become A Member

The Partnership for Safe Medicines is a group of organizations and individuals that have policies, procedures, or programs to protect consumers from counterfeit or contraband medicines. **Contact Executive Director Shabbir Safdar at shabbir@safemedicines.org to learn more about membership.**



Comprised of 69 non-profit organizations, the **Partnership for Safe Medicines (PSM)** works with patient advocacy groups, consumer groups, pharmacy and law enforcement groups to teach them how to buy medication safely and affordably without risking their lives by dealing with unlicensed, dangerous counterfeit medication sellers.



PSM MEMBERS

Academy of Managed Care Pharmacy
Alaska Pharmacists Association
American Association for Homecare
American College Health Association
American Pharmacists Association
American Society of Health System Pharmacists
Arizona Pharmacy Alliance (AzPA)
Association for Accessible Medicines
Association of Nurses in AIDS Care
BioForward
Biotechnology Innovation Organization
California Life Sciences Association
California Pharmacists Association
California Society of Health-System Pharmacists (CSHP)
Colorado BioScience Association
Community Access National Network
European Federation of Pharmaceutical Industries and Associations (EFPIA)
Healthcare Distribution Alliance
HealthCare Institute of New Jersey
Healthcare Leadership Council
The Hispanic Institute
Illinois Pharmacists Association
Institute for Safe Medication Practices
International AntiCounterfeiting Coalition
International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers and Associations

International Health Facility Diversion Association
Kidney Cancer Association
The Latino Coalition
The Life Raft Group
Maryland Pharmacists Association
Maine Pharmacy Association
Maine Society of Health-System Pharmacists (MSHP)
Men's Health Network
Minnesota Pharmacists Association
Missouri Pharmacy Association
National Alliance for Hispanic Health
National Alliance On Mental Illness
National Association of Chain Drug Stores
National Association of Boards of Pharmacy
National Association of Drug Diversion Investigators
National Association of Manufacturers
National Alliance of State Pharmacy Associations
National Biopharmaceutical Security Council
National Community Pharmacists Association
National Grange of the Order of Patrons of Husbandry
NeedyMeds
New York State Council of Health-system Pharmacists (NYSCHP)
North Carolina Association of Pharmacists

Oklahoma Pharmacists Association
Parenteral Drug Association
PDMA Alliance
Pennsylvania Pharmacists Association
Pennsylvania Society of Health-system Pharmacists
Pharmaceutical Industry Labor-Management Association (PILMA)
Pharmaceutical Security Institute
Pharmacist Planning Services Institute
PhRMA
RetireSafe
Spina Bifida Association of America
Texas Pharmacy Association
Texas Society of Health-System Pharmacists
United States Chamber of Commerce
University of New England College of Pharmacy
University of Texas at Austin College of Pharmacy
Vietnam Veterans of America
Virginia Pharmacists Association
Vermont Pharmacists Association
West Virginia Rx
WomenHeart
GOVERNMENT PARTNERS
Orange County Health Care Agency
INTERNATIONAL MEMBERS
Centre for Mental Health

