

Dark-web sales flooding U.S. mailboxes with deadly opioids

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As the nation's opioid crisis worsens, authorities are confronting a resurgent, unruly player in the illicit trade of the deadly drugs, one that threatens to be even more formidable than the cartels.

The internet.

In a growing number of arrests and overdoses, law-enforcement officials say, the drugs are being bought online. Internet sales have allowed powerful synthetic opioids such as fentanyl — the fastest-growing cause of overdoses nationwide — to reach living rooms in nearly every region of the country, as they arrive in small packages in the mail.

Dark web's origin

Dark-web technology was originally developed by U.S. intelligence agencies to allow for encrypted communication. News organizations, including The New York Times, use it to receive story tips from vulnerable sources.

The illicit markets enabled by the dark web have made stopping the flow of deadly drugs much more complicated than when authorities were trying to stop earlier waves of drug overdoses.

“We could give you a pretty good idea of the drug traffickers in town who can order kilos from Mexico; that’s a known commodity,” said Joseph M. Pinjuh, chief of the organized-crime task force in the U.S. Attorney’s Office in Cleveland. “What’s harder to track is the person ordering this from his grandmother’s basement.”

The New York Times

Authorities have been frustrated in their efforts to crack down on the trade because these sites generally exist on the dark web, where buyers can visit anonymously using special browsers and make purchases with virtual currencies such as bitcoin.

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The problem of dark-web sales appeared to have been stamped out in 2013, when authorities took down the most famous online marketplace for drugs, known as Silk Road. But since then, countless successors have popped up, making the drugs readily available to tens of thousands of customers who would not otherwise have had access to them.

Among the dead are two 13-year-olds, Grant Seaver and Ryan Ainsworth, who died last fall in the wealthy resort town of Park City, Utah, after taking a synthetic opioid known as U-47700, or Pinky. The boys had received the powder from another local teenager, who bought the drugs on the dark web using bitcoin, according to the Park City police chief.

“It’s unimaginable that Grant could gain access to a drug like Pinky so easily, and be gone so quickly, poof,” said Jim Seaver, Grant’s father. “The pain and brutality of this tragedy is crippling.”

Largely because of their potency, synthetic opioids have become the fastest-growing cause of the overdose epidemic, overtaking heroin in some areas. Just a few flakes of fentanyl can be fatal.

Their deadly efficiency also makes them ideal for sale online. Unlike heroin and prescription painkillers, which are relatively bulky, enough fentanyl to get nearly 50,000 people high can fit in a standard first-class envelope.

Silk Road outpaced

Darknet drug markets first gained attention six years ago with the rise of Silk Road, the online market created by Ross Ulbricht. Ulbricht was arrested and the site taken down in late 2013, but imitators quickly

proliferated.

No federal agencies have released data on the prevalence of drugs ordered online. But the leading sites are doing far more business than the original Silk Road, according to findings by RAND Europe and researchers at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh.

Authorities say these markets account for a small proportion of the overall traffic in most drugs, including heroin and cocaine. But when it comes to synthetic opioids, many authorities tracking the traffic say that dark-web markets have quickly assumed a more prominent and frightening role.

The dark web “has become such an important source of distribution for this sort of deadly drug,” said Kathryn Haun, who was a prosecutor in San Francisco until last month, and the Justice Department’s first digital-currency coordinator. “It has enabled distribution channels that previously didn’t exist.”

As of Friday, the leading darknet market, AlphaBay, had more than 21,000 listings for opioids and more than 4,100 for fentanyl and similar drugs, from dozens of dealers. Many of those individual listings are like items in a catalog, representing an endless backroom supply of pills, powders and nasal sprays.

Last month, federal authorities announced charges against a six-person operation in Utah that was purchasing fentanyl in bulk from China on the dark web and then pressing the powder into pills and selling the pills on the dark web to users in the United States.

Authorities said the group had sold hundreds of thousands of these pills, often marketed as less dangerous drugs such as Xanax and Oxycodone.

The alleged ringleader of the operation, Aaron Shamo, was identified by many AlphaBay users as the vendor known as Pharma-Master, who had 8,332 verified sales on the site.

Nightmarish chatter

The social forums on AlphaBay and other sites are filled with conversations about how potent the drugs are, with frequent mentions of trips that ended up in emergency-room visits or blackouts.

“I was injecting slowly got 1/3rd of the hit in, next thing i know i wake up with 3 paramedics above me,” a user named AgentOrange 007 wrote in a forum posting on AlphaBay. “If i hadn’t been found because i was making a loud snoring sound (tongue rolled back in my throat) i’d be dead no doubt.”

Court documents show that in the past year, there have been more than two dozen arrests of American drug dealers with significant operations buying or selling synthetic opioids online, most of which were tied to specific overdose deaths.

In late February, a man in South Carolina was accused of receiving more than 3 kilograms of fentanyl ordered on the darknet, enough to kill 1.5 million adults, given that just 2 milligrams is a lethal dose.

A few weeks later in New Jersey, authorities arrested Chukwuemeka Okparaeké, who allegedly went by the screen name of Fentmaster on AlphaBay. He had received 2 kilograms of fentanyl from an address in Hong Kong, according to a criminal complaint.

In April, a Cleveland man, Alec Steinberger, 21, was arrested and accused of receiving a package of fentanyl that he was preparing to sell on the streets. He is said to have texted a 19-year-old who was helping him distribute the drugs to warn about their strength.

“Bro I did it last night any my pupils got so small they disappeared and then I was nodding for 18 hrs,” the text said, according to the indictment.

When the 19-year-old tried the drugs, he overdosed and died.

Okparaeké, Steinberger and Shamo have all pleaded not guilty. Lawyers for the men had no comment on their cases.

Law enforcement officials investigating these cases say that public documents underrepresent the number of cases involving the dark web because many court documents don’t mention the online sources of the drugs.

And many cases — including the death last year of musician Prince from a fentanyl overdose — are still being investigated because of the relatively recent advent of the phenomenon.

“It has come to play a key role in the overdose crisis,” said Tim Plancon, who oversees the Drug Enforcement Administration in Kentucky, Michigan and Ohio, states at the epicenter of the overdose crisis. “It’s expanded beyond just your traditional drug smuggling and trafficking. There is just a lot more involved with it when you are dealing with folks on the dark web with virtual currencies.”

Beyond our borders

The U.S. is not the only country dealing with an influx of mail-order synthetic opioids. Canada and several European countries have also made recent arrests of suspects accused of being major online drug dealers responsible for multiple deaths.

But the numbers are particularly staggering in the United States. In 2015, the last year for which national data is available, fentanyl and similar drugs killed 9,580 people, or 73 percent more than 2014. The number of deaths rose even faster last year in areas that have released figures, such as Ohio and New Hampshire. Overall, deaths from drug overdoses are soaring in the United States, and most likely exceeded 59,000 last year.

Authorities say that most of the illicit supply of synthetic opioids is produced in labs in Asia and especially China, where many of the precursor chemicals are either legal or easier to procure.

Latin American drug cartels are also getting synthetic opioids from Asia and moving them into the United States. But the operational ease of sending the drugs through the mail gives the method obvious appeal for Chinese producers, many of whom are technologically skilled enough to set up their own dark-web shops.

One of the most frequently reviewed vendors of synthetic opioids on AlphaBay goes by the screen name BenzoChems. The vendor has shared online videos of his operations in China.

In a series of messages exchanged on AlphaBay's internal messaging system, BenzoChems, who declined to provide his real name, said he had found that routing packages through Hong Kong, and then through the U.S. Postal Service, was the most efficient method of transit.

Some Chinese producers also list synthetic opioids for sale on websites on the ordinary internet, without requiring users to navigate to them through a special dark-web browser. But most of the recent criminal complaints in the United States appear to involve drugs procured through markets that exist only on the dark web.

BenzoChems said he had sold his products on ordinary websites, but those sites were quickly shut down by authorities.

Lawmakers have tried to attack the problem by introducing legislation in Congress that would tighten the requirements on information gathered by the Postal Service. Last month, at a Senate hearing on the problem, Postal Service officials said they were working to collect information on more packages coming from China.

In recent months, though, the number of listings for fentanyl on AlphaBay and other dark websites has been rising steadily.

Haun, the former federal prosecutor in San Francisco, said the tools that enabled dark-web commerce made it very unlikely that the expanding traffic would be curtailed anytime soon. "It's only going to increase, and increase the types of communities and markets that might not have had as easy access to it before," she said.