

# ILLICIT FENTANYL: A GEOPOLITICAL AND OPEN SOURCE ANALYSIS

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&  
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**FENTANYL**

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**Report Cover**

U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers at the Nogales Commercial Facility seized nearly \$4.6 million in fentanyl and methamphetamine totaling close to 650 pounds on Saturday, January 26, 2019 from a Mexican national when he attempted to enter the United States through the Port of Nogales. Credits: CBP Photography, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

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She completed her Bachelor of Arts (Summa Cum Laude with Research Distinction) in International Studies and Italian at The Ohio State University. During her undergraduate career, she wrote a thesis on Italian fascist subversion in the Maghreb, for which she won "Honorable Mention" at the Denman Undergraduate Research Forum and was published in the university Undergraduate Research Journal, *JUROS*. Having studied both Italian and French during her Bachelor's degree, she decided to continue her studies in Europe, where she completed an MSc with Honors in International Relations at the University of Milan. Here, she wrote a thesis on the governmental structure of the United Republic of Tanzania and the resulting discrepancies in human development throughout the country; while visiting Tanzania, she discovered an affinity for the themes of food security, food sovereignty, and human development. In her current role at Mondo Internazionale, she has participated in the 2021 World Food Forum and the 2022 "IFAD: Bridging the Gap between Research and Policy" conference. Besides her role in Mondo Internazionale, she is also an Economic and Political Consultant for Minter Group Ltd. and an English teacher.



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## Abstract

### Abstract in English

This report endeavors to analyze the issue of the illegal fentanyl market proliferation in the United States and North America, aiming to delineate its primary facets pertaining to geopolitics and security. Additionally, this work strives, through various Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) investigative methodologies, to demonstrate the ease with which fentanyl consumers and buyers can access this substance by leveraging the Dark Web and cryptocurrencies. The convergence of geopolitical factors and advancements in digital technologies has engendered an environment conducive to the expansion of this illicit market, warranting a comprehensive examination to inform policy and intervention strategies. The utilization of OSINT techniques allows for a nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play, shedding light on the intricate web of actors, mechanisms, and technologies involved in the dissemination of fentanyl. Through this rigorous analysis, this report endeavors to contribute to the broader discourse on countering illicit drug trade and safeguarding public health and security.

**Keywords:** United States, fentanyl, narcotics, Dark Web, Open Source Intelligence

### Abstract in Italiano

Questo report si prefigge come obiettivo quello di analizzare il problema della diffusione del mercato illegale del fentanyl negli Stati Uniti e in Nord America cercando di delinearne i principali aspetti legati alla geopolitica e alla sicurezza. In aggiunta, questo lavoro si prefigge attraverso alcune metodologie di indagine dell'Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) di mostrare la facilità con la quale i consumatori e compratori di fentanyl possano accedere a questa sostanza sfruttando il Dark Web e le criptovalute. La convergenza di fattori geopolitici e dei progressi nelle tecnologie digitali ha generato un ambiente favorevole all'espansione di questo mercato illecito. L'utilizzo delle tecniche OSINT consente una comprensione delle dinamiche in gioco, facendo luce sull'intricata rete di attori, meccanismi e tecnologie coinvolti nella diffusione del fentanyl. Attraverso un'analisi rigorosa, il presente rapporto tenta di contribuire al discorso più ampio sulla lotta al traffico illecito di droga e sulla salvaguardia della salute e della sicurezza pubblica.

**Parole chiave:** Stati Uniti, fentanyl, narcotraffico, Dark Web, analisi fonti aperte

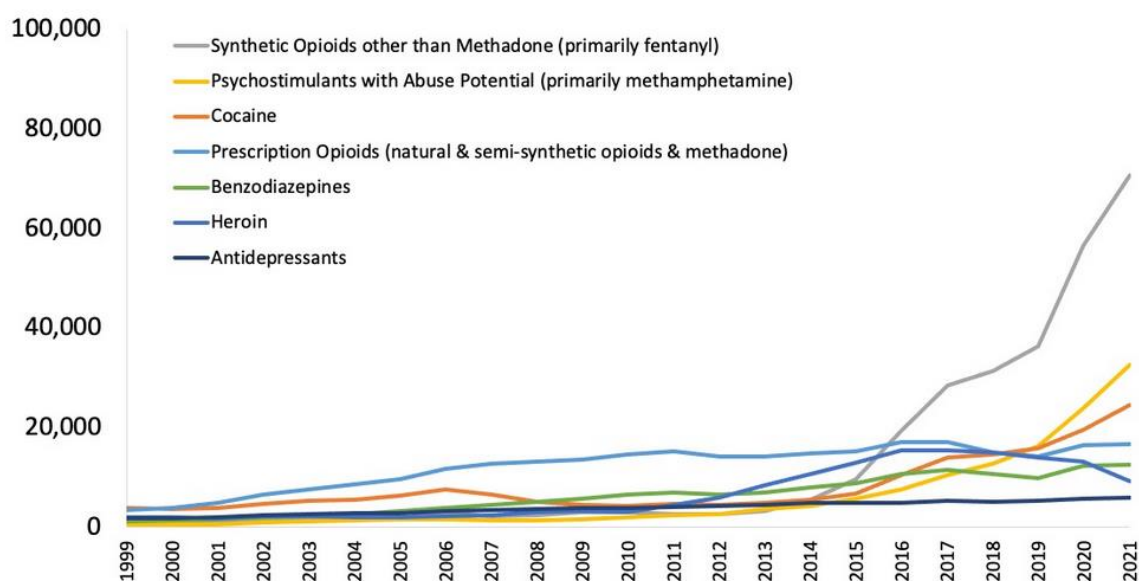




## Introduction

Given its ease of production and cost-effectiveness, fentanyl—a synthetic opioid originally produced as a pain reliever for people with end-of-life cancers—has replaced traditional poppy-based heroin as a favorite opioid among drug producers and drug dealers<sup>1</sup>. According to the DEA, 2 mg of fentanyl is usually considered to be a fatal dose for most people—although even less may be fatal for opioid-naive users—and, according to the DEA’s 2021 Fentanyl Profiling Program report, seized and analyzed tablets contained 2.2 mg of fentanyl on average<sup>2</sup>.

As a result, while there has been an increase in the number of deaths caused by all drugs currently analyzed by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, synthetic opioids—primarily fentanyl have, since 2015, represented the drug with the highest increase in fatality rate (see Figure 1).



\*Includes deaths with underlying causes of unintentional drug poisoning (X40–X44), suicide drug poisoning (X60–X64), homicide drug poisoning (X85), or drug poisoning of undetermined intent (Y10–Y14), as coded in the International Classification of Diseases, 10th Revision. Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Multiple Cause of Death 1999-2021 on CDC WONDER Online Database, released 1/2023.

**Figure 1 "National Drug-Involved Overdose Deaths, Number Among All ages, 1999-2021". Source: National Institute on Drug Abuse.**

<sup>1</sup> «Fentanyl Fact Sheet», *Colorado’s 17th Judicial District Attorney Office*, s.d., <https://adamsbroomfieldda.org/Fentanyl-Fact-Sheet>.  
<sup>2</sup> «Fentanyl Profiling Program Report», *dea.gov*, January 2022, <https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2022-05/FPP%20Report%20January%202022.pdf>.

Given the ease of production and cost-effectiveness, fentanyl—a synthetic opioid originally produced as a pain reliever for people with end-of-life cancers—has replaced traditional poppy-based heroin as a favorite opioid among drug producers and drug dealers. According to the DEA, 2 mg of fentanyl is usually considered to be a fatal dose for most people—although even less may be fatal for opioid-naïve users—and, according to the DEA’s 2021 Fentanyl Profiling Program report, which collects and analyzes seized drug samples, tablets, on average, contained 2.2 mg of fentanyl, explaining the devastating effects fentanyl has on public health, particularly throughout the United States.

The production, transportation, and consumption of fentanyl, however, is not simply a domestic issue related to the US. Since Beijing cut off all counternarcotics cooperation with the US due to Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan (which was perceived as a violation of the “One-China Policy”), China has been identified as the largest producer of fentanyl and its precursor chemicals. Furthermore, India has become a second location for drug producers looking to diversify their production locations. At the same time, Mexican cartels are largely responsible for the shipment of fentanyl from China and across the Mexican border into The United States. Furthermore, in today’s age, drug dealers have moved from the streets online, and it is now possible and relatively simple to access fentanyl products online and via the Dark Web.

This report is a qualitative researcher based on a comprehensive review of rigorously selected scientific papers, specialized reports, and pertinent media articles, supplemented by a meticulous collection of open-source data in the dedicated chapter on the Dark Web, employing a methodological framework designed to ensure both privacy and security.

The investigation is meticulously structured into distinct chapters, each dedicated to a specific facet of the burgeoning fentanyl crisis. The first part scrutinizes the unprecedented surge of fentanyl within the United States, placing particular emphasis on the geopolitical intricacies surrounding its production and distribution. This investigation commences by examining the contours of China-US counternarcotics endeavors from 2019 onwards. Drawing extensively from authoritative sources including official government websites and investigative journalism reports, we delve into the China-Mexico-India axis that underpins the production and dissemination of fentanyl and its precursor chemicals.

Subsequently, in the second part, we illuminate the avenues through which users gain access to fentanyl via the Dark Web, elucidating user-friendly protocols that both individuals and intelligence analysts may employ.

Finally, in the last part – the conclusion – we culminate with a series of pragmatic recommendations aimed at mitigating the pervasive issue of fentanyl distribution.

## The Geopolitics of Fentanyl

### A) Beijing's pre-2021 counternarcotics measures and relations with the US

In a January 2020 report entitled “Fentanyl Flow into the United States”, the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) declared that China was “the primary source of fentanyl and fentanyl-related substances trafficked through international mail and express consignment operations environment, as well as the main source for all fentanyl-related substances trafficked into the United States”<sup>1</sup>. In previous years, however, both Beijing and The Autonomous Special Region of Hong Kong had taken measures to contain the production of fentanyl and fentanyl precursor chemicals, including:

- 2017: Beijing's scheduling of 4-anilino-N-phenethyl-4-piperidine (ANPP) and N-phenethyl-4-piperidone (NPP),
- 2018: Hong Kong's scheduling of the above 2 fentanyl precursors as well as the synthetic opioid U-47700, along with Xi Jinping's commitment at the G20 to schedule fentanyl as a class<sup>2</sup>,
- 2019: Beijing fulfilling the above G20 commitment to treat all fentanyl variants as controlled substances.

Thus, China—which had been the main source of fentanyl precursor chemicals flowing into North America since 2013—began to publicly acknowledge the role of its pharmaceutical industry in the international spread of fentanyl. In 2019, Chinese authorities even utilized US intelligence to convict traffickers in Hebei province for mailing fentanyl directly to consumers and dealers located in the United States<sup>3</sup>. Such actions led the White House Press Office

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<sup>1</sup> «Fentanyl Flow to the United States», *dea.gov*, January 2020, [https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2020-03/DEA\\_GOV\\_DIR-008-20%20Fentanyl%20Flow%20in%20the%20United%20States\\_o.pdf](https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2020-03/DEA_GOV_DIR-008-20%20Fentanyl%20Flow%20in%20the%20United%20States_o.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> «Fentanyl Profiling Program Report», *dea.gov*, January 2022, <https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2022-05/FPP%20Report%20January%202022.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Vanda Felbab-Brown, «Why America Is Struggling to Stop the Fentanyl Epidemic | Foreign Affairs», May 15, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/mexico/why-america-struggling-stop-fentanyl-epidemic>.

of former President Donald Trump—so often considered a “China hawk” by the media—to praise Xi Jinping for a “wonderful humanitarian gesture”<sup>4</sup>.

## **B) Post-Pelosi Visit: Beijing’s Response and Cutoff of China-USA Cooperation Measures**

Such joint efforts, which represented a productive effort in growingly tense US-China relationships, effectively ended following then Speaker-of-the-House Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan, which she defended as “an unequivocal statement that America stands with Taiwan, our democratic partner, as it defends itself and its freedom”<sup>5</sup>.

In response, China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared that Pelosi’s visit violated the 1979 China-US Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations, which states that the USA would recognize the Government of the People’s Republic of China “...as the sole legal Government of China. Within this context, the people of the United States will maintain cultural, commercial, and other unofficial relations with the people of Taiwan.” According to this interpretation of the Communiqué, The Ministry claimed that the US Congress and its members must inherently observe the One-China Policy and that the Executive Branch, then led by President Joe Biden, had the responsibility to stop the visit<sup>6</sup>.

The United States, on the one hand, has detached its vision of the matter of counternarcotics cooperation from any geopolitical significance, for example, by attempting to lead the Global Coalition to Address Synthetic Drugs<sup>7</sup>. On the other hand, Beijing views the matter of counternarcotics cooperation from a geostrategic perspective, tying counternarcotics efforts to its diplomatic relations and ending such efforts with countries that do not meet what it sees to be as diplomatic obligations towards the PRC. Furthermore, even where China maintains serious joint counternarcotics efforts—in particular, in Southeast Asia and the area of the so-

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<sup>4</sup> «Statement from the Press Secretary Regarding the President’s Working Dinner with China – The White House», December 1, 2018, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/statement-press-secretary-regarding-presidents-working-dinner-china/>.

<sup>5</sup> Norah Huang, «A Taiwan perspective on what is at stake after Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan», *Brookings*, September 26, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/a-taiwan-perspective-on-what-is-at-stake-after-nancy-pelosis-visit-to-taiwan/>.

<sup>6</sup> «Statement by China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan», *China Daily.com*, August 22, 2022, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202208/02/WS62e93e1fa31ofd2b29e6fdc8.html>.

<sup>7</sup> «Global Coalition to Address Synthetic Drug Threats», *United States Department of State*, s.d., <https://www.state.gov/globalcoalition/>.

called “Golden Triangle”<sup>8</sup>--Beijing’s anti-trafficking activities tend to be subordinated to geopolitical interests and selective based on the threat the origin country represents to China’s internal stability<sup>9</sup>.

Thus, in retaliation to Pelosi’s visit, Beijing subsequently ended cooperation with the United States in eight main areas, namely:

1. Canceling China-U.S. Theater Commanders Talk
2. Canceling China-U.S. Defense Policy Coordination Talks (DPCT)
3. Canceling China-U.S. Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA) meetings
4. Suspending China-U.S. cooperation on the repatriation of illegal immigrants
5. Suspending China-U.S. cooperation on legal assistance in criminal matters
6. Suspending China-U.S. cooperation against transnational crimes
7. Suspending China-U.S. counternarcotics cooperation
8. Suspending China-U.S. talks on climate change<sup>10</sup>.

As a result, in 2023 there is little visibility surrounding China’s counternarcotics enforcement. Given the links between business and the Chinese Communist Party, Beijing tends to only act against the top ranks of Chinese crime syndicates when they violate the Chinese government’s specific interests and, given the services that illicit enterprises sometimes provide to legal businesses—who are often connected to government officials—controls are sparsely implemented and, in the case of ‘surprise checks’, are implemented with *72 hours* of advance notice<sup>11</sup>.

### **C) The China-India-Mexico Nexus of Fentanyl**

Returning to the period between 2017 and 2019, a result of Beijing’s growing restrictions on the production of fentanyl and its precursor chemicals, Mexican Transnational Criminal Organizations—the main traffickers of fentanyl precursor chemicals and final fentanyl products

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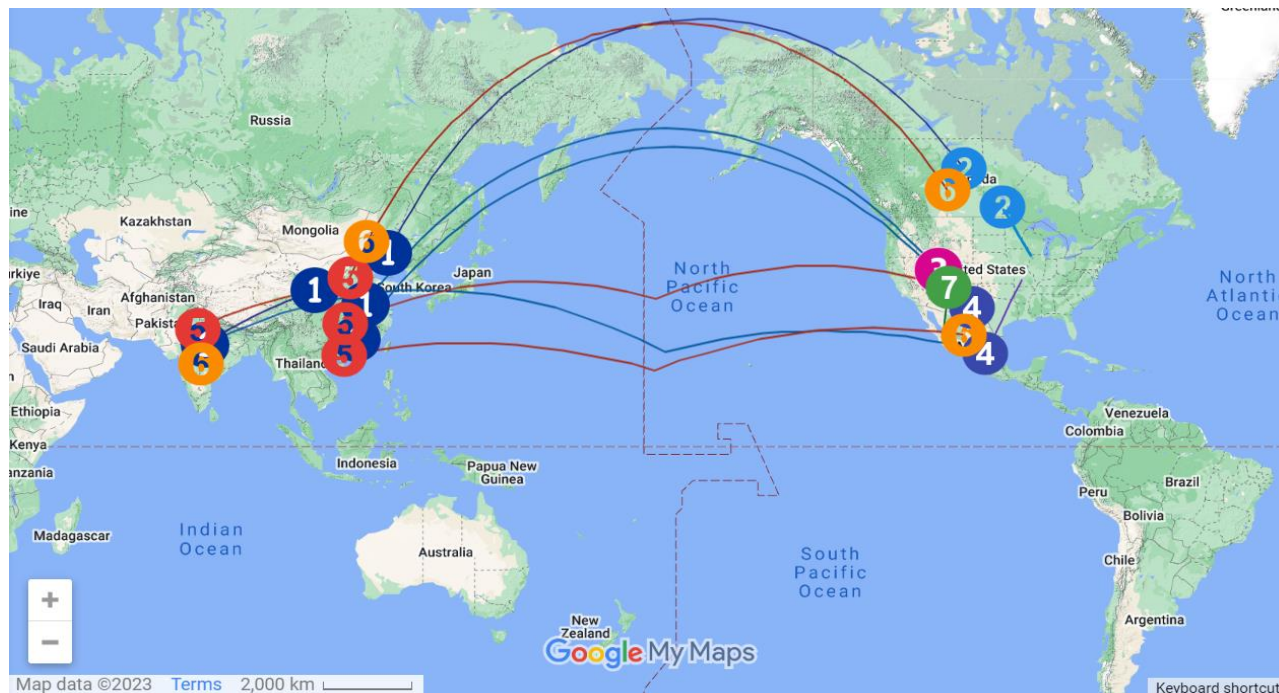
<sup>8</sup> Bertil Lintner, «Guide to Investigating Organized Crime in the Golden Triangle: Chapter 1 — Drug Trafficking», *Global Investigative Journalism Network*, November 28, 2022, <https://gijn.org/guide-to-investigating-organized-crime-in-the-golden-triangle-chapter-1-drug-trafficking/>.

<sup>9</sup> Vanda Felbab-Brown, «China’s role in the fentanyl crisis», *Brookings*, March 21, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/chinas-role-in-the-fentanyl-crisis/>.

<sup>10</sup> «The Ministry of Foreign Affairs Announces Countermeasures in Response to Nancy Pelosi’s Visit to Taiwan», *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China*, August 5, 2022, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx\\_662805/202208/t20220805\\_10735706.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202208/t20220805_10735706.html).

<sup>11</sup> Vanda Felbab-Brown, «Fentanyl and geopolitics: Controlling opioid supply from China», July 2022; «Fentanyl: l’euforia chimica del Dragone», *Difesa Online*, July 31, 2023, <https://www.difesaonline.it/geopolitica/analisi/fentanyl-leuforia-chimica-del-dragone>.

across the US-Mexico border—began to diversify the countries of origin for fentanyl precursor chemicals, mainly resorting to chemicals produced in India (see Figure 1).



**Figure 2 Fentanyl Flow to the United States 2019 . Source: Fentanyl Market & Geopolitics, SpecialEurasia, <https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mid=1HHdWaD4qH65rdRBhtzGQbxqiBhPD1QE&usp=sharing>.**

Furthermore, many of the Chinese citizens who desired to escape from Beijing’s increasingly stringent legislation on fentanyl precursor chemicals expatriated to India—for example, Kevin Dai, the manager of the *Richest Group*, a “large global chemical manufacturer and producer”, according to the holding’s LinkedIn page<sup>12</sup>. The largest subsidiary of the Richest Group, Shanghai Ruizeng—a company with such a spotless reputation as to be visible on Alibaba and to be partnered with companies like Samsung, LG, and Canon—openly sold fentanyl precursor chemicals on Alibaba until October 2019. Furthermore, according to an investigative report by *Forbidden Stories*, one of Ruizeng’s employees, Alia Yang, openly sold 4-AP (a precursor chemical) on her Facebook page, geo-localizing her posts in Mexico to optimize the product’s visibility.

According to the same investigative report, as of 2019, The Richest Group also had an Indian subsidiary by the name of Mondiale Mercantile Pvt. Ltd., a company run by Manu Gupta, who was arrested in possession of fentanyl by Indian authorities in September 2018. When

<sup>12</sup> «Richest Group Limited | 领英», n.d., [https://cn.linkedin.com/company/richest-rubber-limited?trk=public\\_profile\\_topcard-current-company](https://cn.linkedin.com/company/richest-rubber-limited?trk=public_profile_topcard-current-company).

confronted about his company's connection to Gupta, Dai claimed Alia Yang had left the company several months before the interview. Moreover, he asserted that he was no longer be in business with Mondiale Mercantile Ltd., and the subsidiary disappeared from Richest Group's organizational chart hours later.

Despite Manu Gupta's arrest and Dai's insistence on his company's clean record, China and India continue to supply a majority of fentanyl's precursor chemicals to The United States and to Mexico. In an internal report from 2018, the DEA claimed that Gupta was an "alleged associate of a Sinaloa cartel member, who obtained precursor chemicals used to manufacture illicit drugs in Mexico that are subsequently distributed in the United States"<sup>13</sup>. Since Gupta's arrest, however, The United States' attention has returned to the cartel's relationship with China, as highlighted by the 2023 House hearing "Follow the Money: The CCP's Business Model Fueling the Fentanyl Crisis", in which John A. Cassara, Special Agent of the US Treasury (ret) stated,

*"It is important to remember that the People's Republic of China (PRC) is a command state. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) could easily block websites advertising fentanyl and other dangerous and illegal drugs. They choose not to... CCP Inc., also excels at elite capture and influence operations."*<sup>14</sup>

In the same hearing, multiple mentions of the Sinaloa cartel's relationship with Chinese suppliers were made. The Sinaloa cartel, originally run by Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, has been managed by his sons "Los Chapitos" since El Chapo's arrest and extradition to The United States in 2017, according to the DEA. Below is a diagram of the DEA's interpretation of the Sinaloa cartel network and their main precursor suppliers, released to the public in April 2023.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Audrey Travère, «Mexican cartels: "The Asian Connection" • Forbidden Stories», dicembre 8, 2020, <https://forbiddenstories.org/mexican-cartels-the-asian-connection/>.

<sup>14</sup> «Follow the Money: The CCP's Business Model Fueling the Fentanyl Crisis», legislation, s.d., <https://www.congress.gov/event/118th-congress/house-event/115542/text>.

<sup>15</sup> «SINALOA CARTEL CHAPITOS' FLOW OF FENTANYL INTO THE US», *dea.gov*, aprile 2023, <https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2023-04/Chapitos%20Media%20Slides%20FINAL.pdf>.





**Figure 3 “Sinaloa Cartel–Chapitos Network” 2023**

Since El Chapo’s arrest and extradition—as he is currently serving a life sentence at a prison in Colorado—the “Chapitos” have revamped their fathers’ drug empire, having bet on fentanyl early on for its profits. In doing so, they have transformed Mexico, previously more of a transit hub for Chinese fentanyl into the United States, into a production hub itself through the construction of clandestine super labs throughout the Sinaloa province.

The ascent of *Los Chapitos* and their transformation of the Sinaloa region of Mexico into a fentanyl production hub has, furthermore, coincided with the election of López Obrador’s election to the Mexican presidency in December 2018. Obrador’s approach toward counter-narcotics differs from the aggressive approach of that of his predecessors, focusing on grass-roots and social programs rather than aggressive enforcement—“*abrazos, no balazos*” or “hugs, not bullets”—all while curbing cooperation efforts with the US, calling the DEA’s indictments against the Chapito’s a ‘violation of sovereignty’. While the President’s supporters have pointed out that the murder rate in Mexico has stabilized since he took office, the total number of murders remains high and, as previously shown, the number of fentanyl deaths across the border in The United States has only continued to rise<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> Drazen Jorgic, «How El Chapo’s sons built a fentanyl empire poisoning America», *Reuters*, May 9, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/mexico-drugs-chapitos/>.

## **Fentanyl and the Dark Web**

The proliferation of fentanyl trafficking represents a critical menace to Western nations, notably the United States, as explained previously in our geopolitical and economic analysis of the phenomenon.

We dedicate this chapter to clarify the accessibility that customers possess to numerous Dark Web markets, enabling the acquisition of fentanyl and assorted narcotics. We designed solely the procedural methodologies and directives provided here to support the overarching thesis, which posits the Dark Web as an emerging illegal marketplace of fentanyl. Remarkably, this domain caters to a wide range of customers with different backgrounds and rudimentary computer skills to complete illegal transactions. This assessment underscores the potential ramifications of a growing and accessible underground market for narcotic substances.

Prior to delving into our Dark Web investigation, it proves beneficial to acquaint the reader with the details of the World Wide Web. The Internet, a vast network of millions of web pages, databases, and servers operational around the clock, encompasses three distinct layers.

The surface web, also known as the open or visible web, constitutes the topmost portion, akin to the tip of an iceberg visible above water. Comprising less than 5% of the total internet, this stratum encompasses commonly accessed websites via mainstream browsers. Search engines like Google, Bing, and Yahoo facilitate the discovery of surface web content through a process known as ‘crawling’, where they traverse the web in a manner akin to a spider’s movement<sup>19</sup>.

Beneath the surface lies the deep web, an expansive domain constituting roughly 90% of all websites. Analogous to the submerged portion of an iceberg, it encompasses a vast array of content, including academic journals, private databases, and other materials beyond the reach of conventional search engines. The deep web also incorporates what we commonly refer to as the dark web. It is essential to clarify that the deep web primarily comprises legal and secure content, including databases, intranets, and sensitive organizational networks.

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<sup>19</sup> “What Is the Deep and Dark Web?,” Kaspersky, May 18, 2023, <https://www.kaspersky.com/resource-center/threats/deep-web>.

The deep web encompasses a multitude of concealed web pages, evading search engine indexing through various means such as password protection or directives to not be ‘crawled’. These pages, although hidden from mainstream search results, often include secure and confidential content like financial accounts, private communications, and sensitive legal documentation. While venturing into the deeper layers of the web can lead to accessing copyrighted material or bypassing regional content restrictions, the dark web presents a distinct level of anonymity and potential hazards.

The dark web, constituting the lowest extremity of the deep web, encompasses sites inaccessible via conventional browsers and only reachable through specialized software such as Tor Browser. It comprises an even smaller fraction than the surface web and is characterized by a lack of indexing by standard search engines, reliance on an encrypted network infrastructure, and additional security measures like firewalls and encryption. While the dark web has garnered notoriety for illicit activities, it is essential to note that legal entities also leverage this space for private communications and secure data exchange. In evaluating dark web safety, it is imperative to distinguish between potential accidental encounters with extreme content and the deliberate pursuit of illegal activities<sup>20</sup>.



**Figure 4 Surface web, Deep web, and Dark Web. Source: Harkiran78. “What Is Dark Web and Why You Should Access It Carefully!” GeeksforGeeks (blog), December 4, 2019. <https://www.geeksforgeeks.org/what-is-dark-web-and-why-you-should-access-it-carefully/>.**

<sup>20</sup> Divya Yadav, Bharat Bhushan, and Shivam Saxena, “The Dark Web: A Dive Into the Darkest Side of the Internet,” SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY, May 12, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3598902>.

## **Searching fentanyl on the Dark Web: some possible approaches**

In the initial phase of our research, we selected and installed a suitable VPN software. A Virtual Private Network (VPN) constitutes a technological tool, facilitating the establishment of a secure and encrypted conduit across the Internet. This engenders the creation of a private network environment, even within the confines of a public network. The VPN mechanism enables the seamless transmission of data between the user's device and a remote server, typically under the operation of the VPN service provider. This process ensures the preservation of data confidentiality, integrity, and authenticity. By obfuscating the user's IP address and encrypting their online activities, the VPN system effectively cloaks their digital identity and geographical location, thereby furnishing a heightened degree of anonymity and bolstering online privacy. Widely recognized for its utility, this technology finds extensive application in circumventing access restrictions, particularly for content that is geographically confined<sup>21</sup>.

Since acquiring popularity among Internet users, individuals seeking to purchase fentanyl online often resort to employing the Tor Browser for access to the Dark Web<sup>22</sup>. The fundamental concept behind 'onion routing', as elucidated by Tor Browser's official website, was to afford users the highest degree of online privacy possible. This was achieved by directing traffic through a series of servers, with encryption applied at each juncture. Originally conceived to offer support to individuals dwelling in nations characterized by stringent censorship and authoritarian regimes, as well as catering to the needs of journalists, researchers, and others requiring heightened privacy and identity protection, Tor has evolved into the most straightforward means of reaching illicit markets within the Dark Web.

The focus of our research centers on 'onion domains', a term intricately tied to the Dark Web. These domains represent websites that leverage the specialized addressing system of the Tor network. Diverging from conventional web addresses that use extensions like .com or .org, onion sites bear the distinctive .onion domain extension. This unique identifier indicates a website's exclusivity to Tor-enabled browsers, invigorating the levels of privacy and anonymity afforded to both the server and the user. This deliberate design choice imbues onion

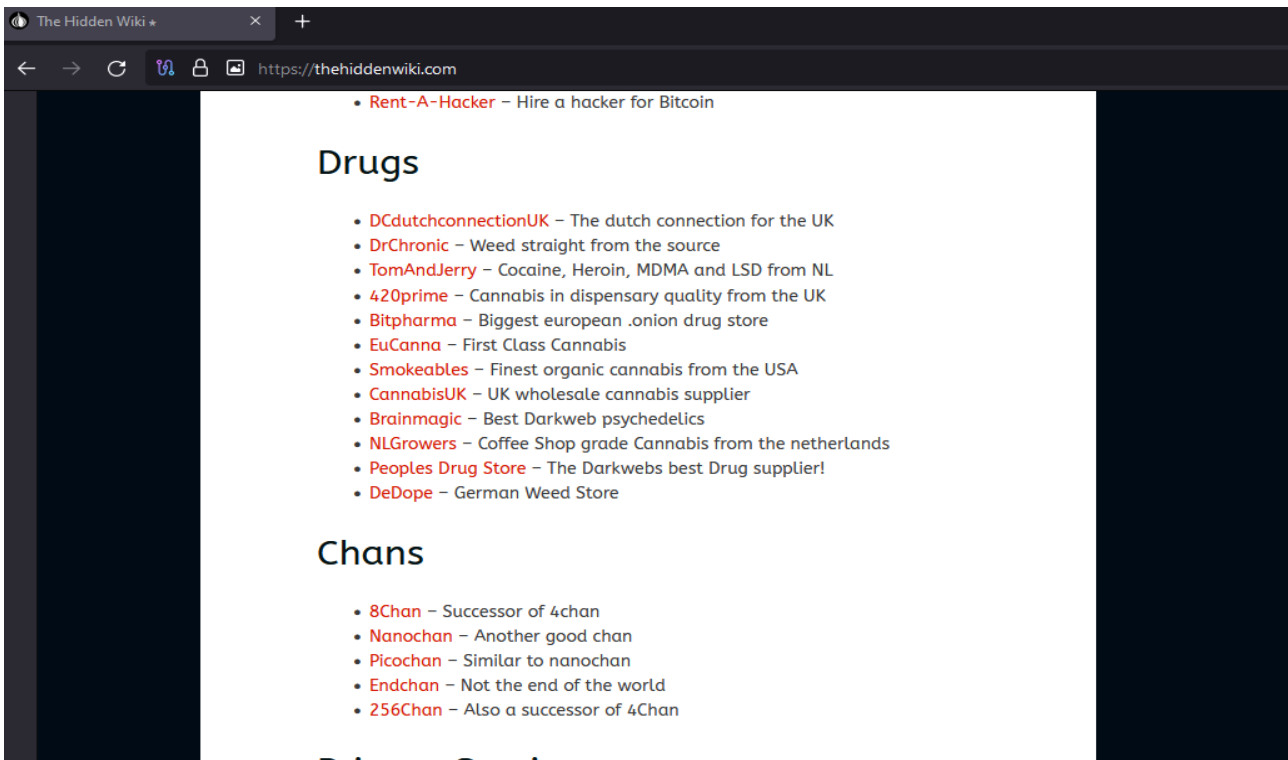
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<sup>21</sup> Nihad A. Hassan and Rami Hijazi, *Open Source Intelligence Methods and Tools* (Berkeley, CA: Apress, 2018), 92–93, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4842-3213-2>; Michael Bazzell, *Open Source Intelligence Techniques. Resources for Searching and Analyzing Online Information*, 9th ed., 2022, 7–8.

<sup>22</sup> "The Tor Project | About | History," Tor Project, accessed October 4, 2023, <https://torproject.org>.

sites with a heightened resilience against surveillance and censorship, rendering them an indispensable element within the structural framework of the Dark Web<sup>23</sup>.

After downloading it, the user can run Tor Browser and get access into the Dark Web. Once within, there are two distinct approaches a user may take to locate markets facilitating the purchase of fentanyl. The initial method involves perusing The Hidden Wiki page<sup>24</sup>. This webpage serves as an aggregator of many onion links, systematically categorized into various sections spanning financial services, commercial offerings, drugs, opportunities in the realm of cybersecurity and hacking, privacy solutions, email providers, personal blogs and sites, hacking resources, news outlets, and open-source software. This curated compilation streamlines navigating the complexity of the Dark Web, providing users with a comprehensive directory of available services and markets, including those related to controlled substances like fentanyl.



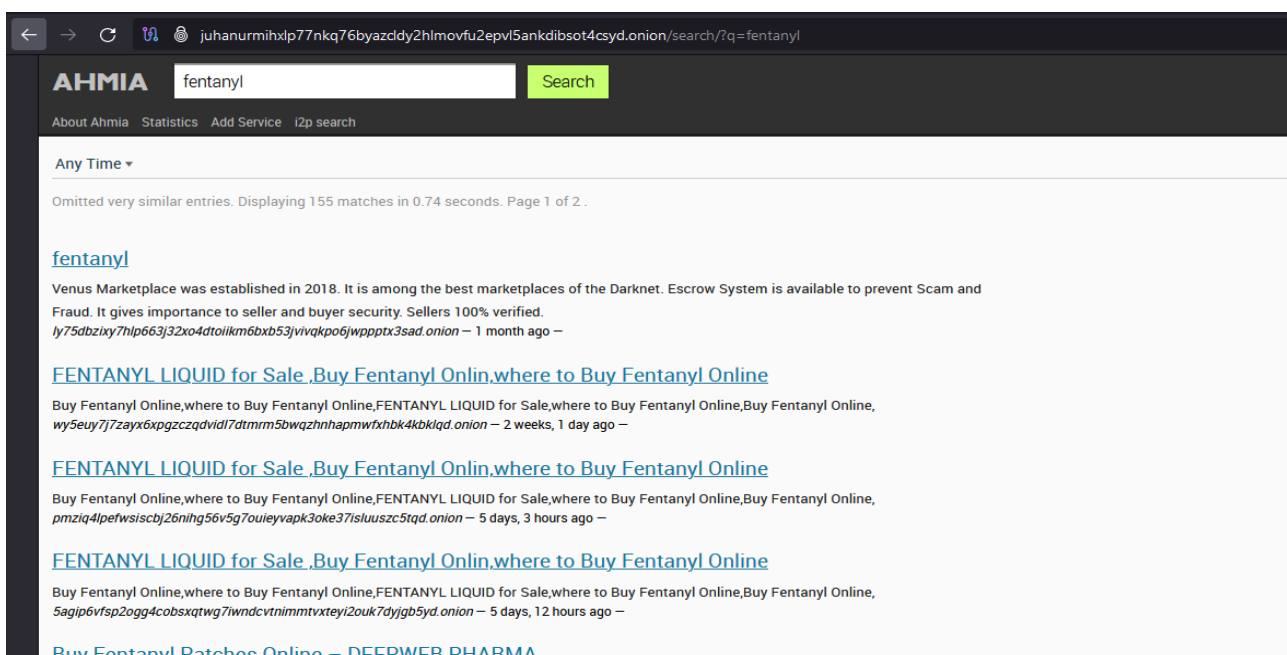
**Figure 5** The category 'Drugs' from The Hidden Wiki website which user can visit without Tor Browser.

<sup>23</sup> Chris Hoffman and Nick Lewis, "How to Access .Onion Sites (Also Known as Tor Hidden Services)," How-To Geek, October 10, 2016, <https://www.howtogeek.com/272049/how-to-access-.onion-sites-also-known-as-tor-hidden-services/>.

<sup>24</sup> Christopher Williams, "The Hidden Wiki: An Internet Underworld of Child Abuse," The Telegraph, October 27, 2011, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/internet/8851242/The-Hidden-Wiki-an-internet-underworld-of-child-abuse.html>.

While The Hidden Wiki features a catalog of websites offering a range of products including cocaine, marijuana, MSMD, and LSD, it is important to acknowledge that, for this research, fentanyl is not among the items available for purchase on these platforms. This discrepancy presents an initial challenge that potential users/customers may encounter in their pursuit of acquiring this product.

Among the array of search engines available for conducting research on the Dark Web, Ahmia emerges as a notable option and the second step that a fentanyl's buyer might follow. According to the portal's description, Ahmia specializes in scouring hidden services within the Tor network.



**Figure 6 Ahmia provided 155 matches with the world ‘fentanyl’.**

Among the search results, Dark Fox emerges as a marketplace within the Dark Web, offering a range of products spanning from narcotics to firearms and counterfeit currency. Notably, the associated email address for this domain, dark07fox@gmail.com, is identified as valid according to the email checker tool. There is also the possibility of contacting the owner of this market through its Telegram Account. The process of buying fentanyl on Dark Fox is like that of any typical online store. The user can readily specify the desired quantity of fentanyl and proceed to the checkout, where they will furnish personal details for the delivery and complete the transaction using Bitcoin as the payment method. This seamless purchasing process exemplifies the ease with which illicit substances can be bought within the clandestine realms of the Dark Web.

Utilizing Blockchair, a comprehensive blockchain explorer tool, we could investigate the Bitcoin wallet provided by the website. The findings revealed this wallet has been active since September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2022. Over the course of a year, it received a total of 0.79904096BTC, equivalent to approximately 16,074.02 USD at the time of the investigation. Intriguingly, in parallel, this wallet executed a series of transactions, promptly transferring the entire received cryptocurrency to various other wallets.

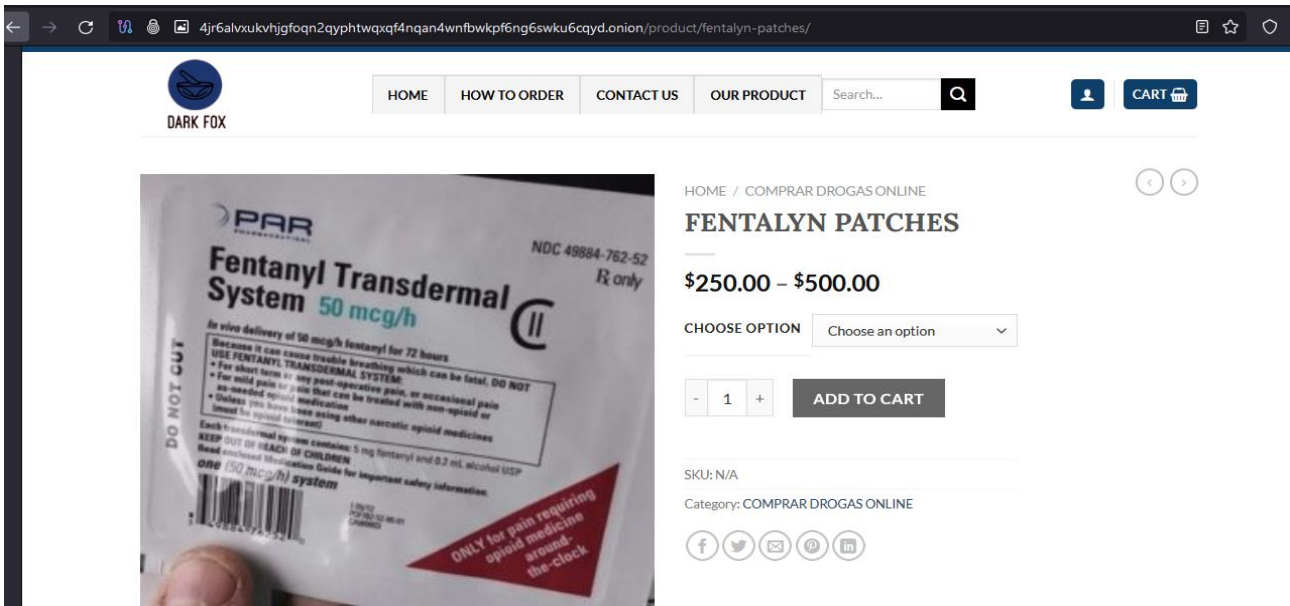


Figure 7 Ordering fentanyl patches on Dark Fox

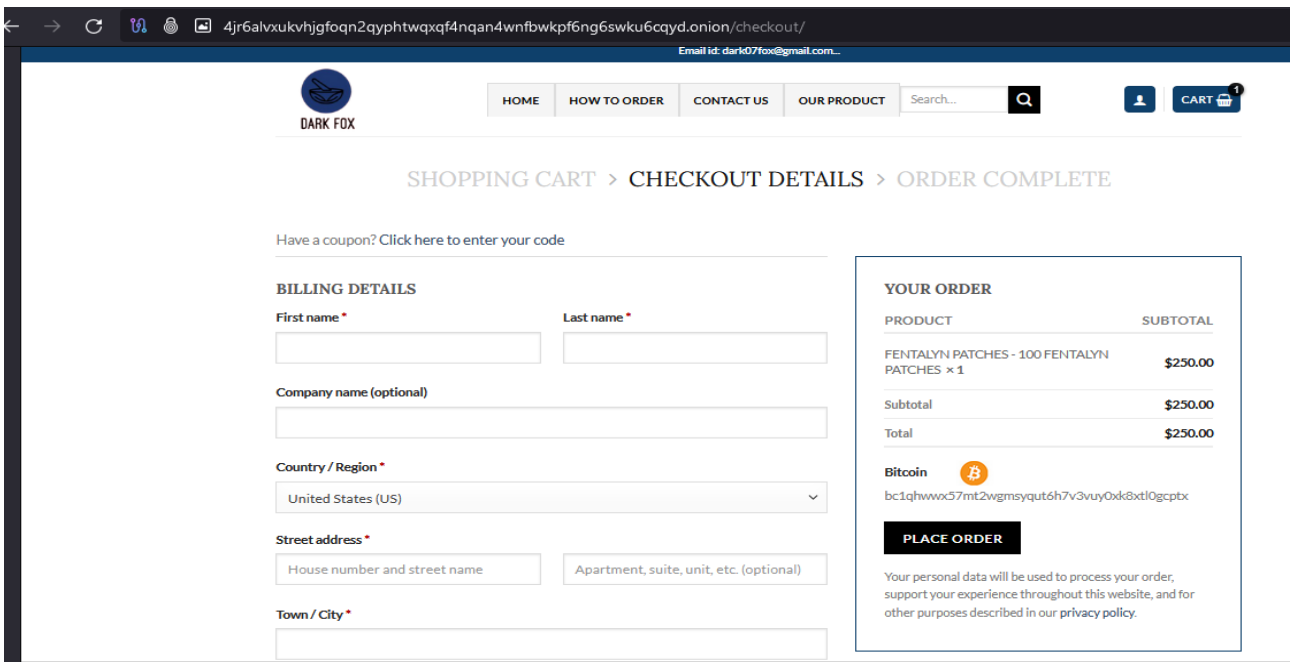


Figure 8 The procedure to finalize the order



info@blockchair.com

https://blockchair.com

16/09/2022 - 04/10/2023 (Part 1/1)

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WALLET STATEMENT

BITCOIN

\*\*\*\*\*

WALLET ADDRESS: [bc1qhwwx57mt2wgmsyqut6h7v3vuy0xk8xt10gcptx](https://blockchair.com/bitcoin/address/bc1qhwwx57mt2wgmsyqut6h7v3vuy0xk8xt10gcptx)

STATEMENT PERIOD: 16/09/2022 - 04/10/2023

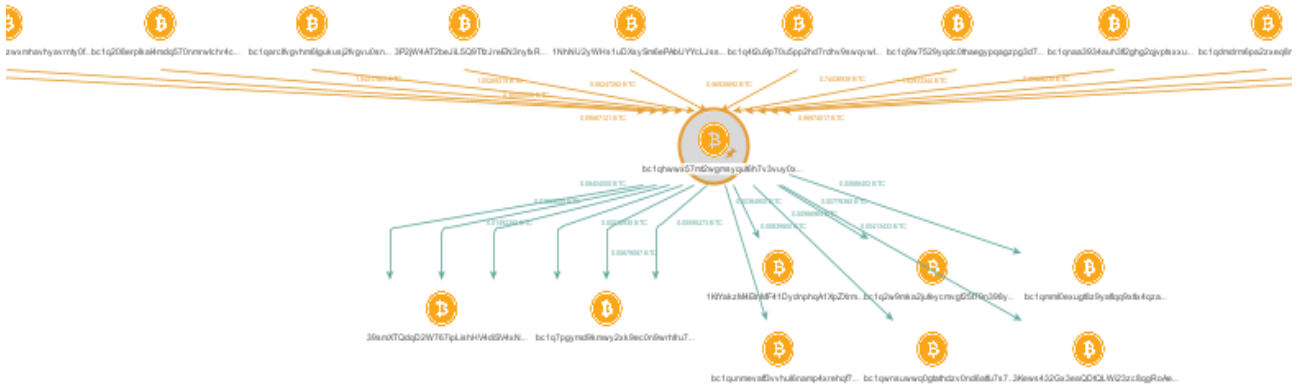
BTC BALANCE SUMMARY:

STARTING BALANCE (16/09/2022)	0.00000000 BTC	0.00 USD
TOTAL RECEIVED	0.79904096 BTC	16,074.02 USD
TOTAL SENT	0.79904096 BTC	16,089.04 USD
ENDING BALANCE (04/10/2023)	0.00000000 BTC	0.00 USD

**Figure 9 Analysis of the Bitcoin wallet provided by Black Fox.**

If we would like to investigate deeply these transactions, we could use Maltego, which is a powerful data visualization and link analysis tool used for mapping out relationships and connections between various data points across digital platforms, enabling users to gain comprehensive insights into complex networks and entities. Although the community edition used in this situation offers limited results, it still provides a preliminary glimpse into the inbound and outbound transactions associated with the wallet. This initial assessment lays the foundation for a more comprehensive understanding of the financial activities linked to the wallet and the illegal market, potentially unveiling crucial insights into the broader financial network.





**Figure 10 Inbound and outbound transactions of Black Fox market's Bitcoin wallet.**

Given the substantial number of 155 results on Ahmia in response to the key term 'fentanyl', limitations in space and time prevent a detailed report on any specific listings. However, this abundance of results further supports the initial hypothesis that buying fentanyl on the Dark Web is a relatively accessible endeavor.

Venus Marketplace, an onion domain, serves as a pertinent example, offering a range of illicit substances and facilitating transactions across four different cryptocurrencies. Citing other onion domains, Drug Store facilitates the sale of fentanyl liquid, providing its Bitcoin wallet for transactions, whereas MobiMax leverages the CryptonIQ plugin for secure payments. Additionally, Black Market, specializing in the sale of Fentanyl capsules of 30 mg, employs a Bitcoin plugin to safeguard the wallet and ensure transactional anonymity.

In terms of delivery times, typically, products reach destinations in the United States within 1-3 days, in Canada within a maximum of 3 days, and the rest of the world within 3-6 days or a standard working week. This information suggests a potential inference that certain stores affiliated with this online market may be operating within the United States.

It is paramount to acknowledge the inherent risks associated with engaging in such transactions within the Dark Web. Individuals behind these onion domains and illegal markets may possess malicious intent, seeking to compromise the data or defraud potential buyers. Moreover, it is crucial to consider the possibility of undercover operations, with some websites

posing as fake marketplaces established by law enforcement agencies aiming to infiltrate and dismantle networks of fentanyl sellers and buyers.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, fentanyl use throughout The United States has proliferated due to 1) the Chinese government's pragmatic and geopolitical view of the matter of counternarcotics operations and cooperation, 2) the ease of relocation to other countries (in this specific case, India) for drug production following growing stringency on behalf of the Chinese government, 3) reduced counternarcotics cooperation between the US and Mexico, and 4) ease of access to fentanyl across the Web, including on the Dark Web.

From these conclusions, we can make a series of predictions regarding the geopolitics and sale of fentanyl, namely:

- China's view of counternarcotics cooperation is unlikely to change unless such matters affect the Chinese domestic population and market. Although there is no sure evidence thus far that the fentanyl phenomenon is explicitly being used as 'revenge' for Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, Beijing will surely continue to disengage from cooperation with any country it perceives as not respecting the One-China policy. China, furthermore, may also weaponize fentanyl production for geopolitical leverage in the future (with The United States and other countries).
- Mexico will most likely continue to be a large transit point for drugs entering The United States. Nevertheless, the growing ability for consumers to order drugs online hints that dealers may increasingly ship drugs directly to The United States.
- Due to the ease and cost-effectiveness of production, locations for fentanyl production may expand beyond China and India to other countries with low capacity or willingness to engage in counternarcotics operations with The United States.
- The growing phenomenon and ease of access to drugs on the Internet indicates that there will be a proliferation of web-based black markets and that counternarcotics operations will move online.
- Due to the technological nature of online drug transactions, the most affected by this situation may be so-called 'digital natives', those who have grown up in the information age (usually individuals born after 1980).
- The examination of the Dark Web has underscored the gravity and peril associated with this clandestine sector of the internet, where access to black markets is distressingly facile. Therefore, it is imperative that security forces redouble their efforts in countering illicit activities within the Dark Web domain, not only by scrutinizing the

black markets themselves but also by probing potential individuals connected to these nefarious enterprises. Although the perpetrators of this illicit trafficking exploit cryptocurrency, concerted collaboration between local security forces, AML/KYC experts, and intelligence agencies holds promise in staunchly opposing this phenomenon.

- The efficacy and versatility of Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) in monitoring and unearthing the networks underpinning these illicit activities have been unequivocally demonstrated. It is recommended that training programs in OSINT, anti money laundering(AML), and customer due diligence (CDD) be expanded, alongside the establishment of specialized units equipped to combat illicit fentanyl trafficking. These units should be adept at uncovering any potential involvement of individuals, institutions, foreign governments, or terrorist organizations behind these activities. By fortifying our collective capacity in these domains, we stand better poised to confront and dismantle the intricate web of actors facilitating the illegal fentanyl trade, thereby safeguarding public health and security.



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