



# 2018 Houston HIDTA Threat Assessment

Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP)  
Prepared by the Houston Investigative Support Center (HISC)  
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## SCOPE

The purpose of the Houston High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) Threat Assessment is to identify current and emerging drug-related trends within its 17-county region and deliver accurate and timely strategic intelligence to assist law enforcement agencies in the development of drug enforcement strategies. This assessment provides information on the nature and extent of illicit drug use in the Houston HIDTA, the primary drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) operating in the region, as well as the general activities and methods of these local, regional, and international DTOs.

This document fulfills statutory and grant requirements issued by the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) and has been approved by the Houston HIDTA Executive Board. It was prepared by the Houston Investigative Support Center, an Intelligence Initiative of the Houston HIDTA. The methodology used in the preparation of this threat assessment can be found in Appendix A on page 63.



### **Houston Investigative Support Center (HISC)**

The HISC is staffed by intelligence and support personnel from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Harris County Sheriff's Office, Houston Police Department, Homeland Security Investigations, Drug Enforcement Administration, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, and an array of other contractors. The HISC endeavors to provide strategic, organizational, and tactical drug intelligence to the Houston HIDTA law enforcement community that is accurate, relevant, and timely. In order to accomplish this mission, the HISC focuses on intelligence development, analytical case support, as well as information sharing and cooperation.

For further information, contact the HISC's Investigative Research Team (IRT) hotline at:

(713) 936-7424 M-F (8 AM - 5 PM)

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Executive Summary provides an overview of the drug threats, emerging trends, and intelligence gaps identified in the Houston HIDTA in 2017.

## Drugs Trafficked within the Houston HIDTA

### Overview of Primary Drug Threats

Methamphetamine continues to be the most significant drug threat in the region, a trend that has persisted for the past five years. Though a much lower percentage reported synthetic cannabinoids as their greatest drug threat, it has been ranked as the second highest drug threat for three consecutive years and is described as a persisting high-level threat in most Houston HIDTA communities. Other high-level drug threats include cocaine, marijuana, and prescription drugs. The threat level for prescription drugs is elevated due to the increased presence of synthetic opioids such as fentanyl and fentanyl analogs found in counterfeit pills. The use of heroin, while not as prevalent as other drug types, is considered to be a low-to-moderate threat, but one that is rising, particularly due to an increasing number of heroin seizures found to contain fentanyl. The heightened threat from synthetic opioids poses a danger not only to those who use drugs tainted with these lethal chemicals, but also to law enforcement and first responders who inadvertently may be exposed to them.

### Ranking of Major Drug Threats by Survey Respondents

Methamphetamine was ranked most frequently by survey respondents as posing the greatest drug threat (54%), followed by synthetic cannabinoids (13%). Marijuana and crack cocaine were each ranked as the greatest threat by 7%, and powder cocaine, heroin, and synthetic opioids such as fentanyl and fentanyl analogs were each ranked as the greatest threat by 6%. Controlled prescription drugs were ranked as the top drug threat by 1% of survey respondents. There were no survey respondents who ranked the other drug categories (ecstasy, synthetic cathinones such as “bath salts,” synthetic hallucinogens such as LSD or PCP or other drugs) as their top drug threat.

### Specific Drug-Related Trends

**Methamphetamine:** Methamphetamine remains the Houston HIDTA’s most substantial drug threat. Mexican drug traffickers have persisted in their efforts to flood the region’s illicit drug market with methamphetamine over the past year, leading to a further reduction in price. Because it is readily available as well as decreasing in cost, its use continues to rise in the region. Among adults, methamphetamine was reported to be among the top three drugs used as well as the primary drug that is trending upward in use. Crystal methamphetamine is the type that is most commonly encountered by law enforcement, but drug traffickers are increasingly transporting methamphetamine in liquid form (“suspended in solution”) due to a lower risk of detection. Methamphetamine in solution is concealed most frequently in areas of vehicles that are meant to contain fluids such as gas tanks and windshield wiper reservoirs. Methamphetamine is also being concealed in consumer products such as in food and beverage containers, posing a public health threat. Local domestic production is extremely minimal, although there are a growing number of conversion laboratories in Houston where methamphetamine is transformed from its liquid form into a solid, crystalline state using a fairly simplistic evaporation process involving fans and/or a heat source as well as acetone to facilitate the drying process. The full extent of conversion activity in the region is an intelligence gap.

**Synthetic Cannabinoids:** Synthetic cannabinoids, commonly referred to as “synthetic marijuana” or “Kush,” remain a high-level drug threat, used by a broad age range from teens to adults. The popularity of this drug type has endured because it is relatively inexpensive, easily accessible, and rarely shows up on standard drug tests due to its ever-changing chemical composition. Houston is a primary manufacturing and distribution center for synthetic cannabinoid products, sustaining a high level of availability throughout the region. Manufacturing of these products was also identified in Beaumont and Corpus Christi, but the level of activity in these cities and other areas of the HIDTA are unknown. In addition to being packaged as potpourri in glossy foil packets, synthetic cannabinoids have recently been found in bottles labeled as CBD oil in Houston area smoke shops. Use of synthetic cannabinoid products is linked to adverse health events requiring emergency care throughout the nation, including in the Houston HIDTA. For example, data provided by the Houston Fire Department’s Emergency Medical Services (EMS) indicates that from July through December, more EMS calls were related to synthetic cannabinoids than for any other illicit drug type.

**Cocaine:** Cocaine holds its position as one of the region’s most enduring, high-level drug threats. It is associated with mortality in Harris County more than any other drug type. Use of both powder cocaine and crack cocaine are prevalent and availability is moderate to high in most communities. Indicating possible increasing availability, drug investigators in Houston reported a higher number of seizures and larger amounts of cocaine seized in the past year. Cocaine seizure totals for the Houston HIDTA Initiatives have always been higher than for any other drug except marijuana and it is of note that there has been a large, upward trend in these totals of 571% since 2014. Regional cocaine seizures increased from 932 kilograms in 2014, to 1,140 kilograms in 2015, 4,476 kilograms in 2016 and up to 6,259 kilograms in 2017.

**Marijuana:** Marijuana legalization in a growing number of states has led to an increasing social acceptance of marijuana use, along with a decreased perception of risk. However, in actuality, the threat from this drug has not diminished, but continues to rise due to the increasing availability and popularity of highly-potent hydroponic marijuana, marijuana concentrates such as wax and oil, and marijuana edibles. In the Houston HIDTA, hydroponic marijuana has become the preferred form of the drug for those who can afford it. It is among the top three most commonly used drugs by teens and adults, and for teens, it was reported as trending upward in use. This trend is particularly concerning because of the known negative effects of marijuana on the developing brain. Highlighting the threat from marijuana in the region is the fact that more patients in Harris County seek treatment for problems related to marijuana use than for any other type of illicit drug. Compounding the problem, large-scale indoor hydroponic marijuana cultivation still occurs at high levels in the Houston area, sustaining a constant supply of this drug. Supplementing or perhaps even supplanting some local production, hydroponic marijuana and THC products are also increasingly being diverted from “legal” states such as Colorado and California, transported into the area on the region’s highways, and with rising frequency, through the mail.

**Fentanyl, Fentanyl Analogs & Other Synthetic Opioids:** Kilogram-level quantities of illicit fentanyl were seized in the region for the first time in 2017. The initial seizure in Houston consisted of one kilogram of fentanyl represented as heroin. Since that time, there has been a rapid rise in the number and size of seizures of illicit fentanyl and fentanyl analogs in the Houston area. Although many details related to fentanyl trafficking remain unknown, smaller amounts of fentanyl and fentanyl analogs are thought to have been purchased via the internet from China, entering the Houston HIDTA through the mail. Larger kilogram-level seizures are believed to be transported from Mexico by drug trafficking organizations. One seizure that occurred in June was particularly significant from a public safety standpoint: 80 milligrams of a white powder seized by the Houston Police Department field-tested positive for methamphetamine, but was later discovered to be the dangerous elephant tranquilizer, carfentanil. This small amount was reported by toxicologists to be equivalent to 4,000 lethal doses. Due to the extreme danger posed by fentanyl and fentanyl analogs such as carfentanil, the Harris County District Attorney’s Office no longer requires field-testing drugs, and officers have begun to carry naloxone (Narcan), an opioid antidote. While the number of deaths in Harris County linked to fentanyl and fentanyl analogs remains low, they have more than doubled from 25 in 2016 to 55 in 2017. The first three deaths from carfentanil toxicity were identified in the region, occurring in Harris, Galveston, and Brazoria counties. The source of the carfentanil in these deaths is unknown. Other synthetic opioids encountered include U-47700 and the newly identified research chemical U-49900. Kratom, an opioid-like drug that is not illegal, but has been linked to deaths across the country, may be gaining some popularity. According to investigators, Kratom users say its effects “feel like heroin.” It is of note that a Kratom manufacturing and distribution operation was identified in Fort Bend County.

**Controlled Prescription Drugs:** Misuse of controlled prescription drugs such as hydrocodone and alprazolam (“Xanax”) is widespread and their use is prevalent among both teens and adults. For teens, Xanax is particularly popular. Houston is a source city for bulk quantities of prescription drugs, supplying not only the region, but also other states. An abundant supply is obtained from diversion activities at Houston’s many illicit pill mills as well as through a high level of pharmacy burglaries and prescription fraud. Because diversion in Houston is so extensive, a trio of drugs commonly obtained through its corrupt clinics (hydrocodone, alprazolam, and carisoprodol) is actually known throughout the nation as the “Houston Cocktail.” The threat level from prescription drugs has greatly increased now that counterfeit pill production is on the rise in Houston. Fake hydrocodone and Xanax pills containing fentanyl and fentanyl analogs are increasingly being seized, as well as pills with synthetic opioids such as U-47700. The public health impact from these drugs is evident in Harris County. Prescription opioids and benzodiazepines were a factor in a higher number of deaths than any other drug except cocaine. The number of calls to the Texas Poison Center Network for controlled prescription drugs in the region remains the highest of all drug categories.

**Heroin:** Heroin remains a low-to-moderate drug threat, but one that is rising due to an emerging trend of multiple kilogram-level seizures of fentanyl represented as heroin as well as heroin mixed with fentanyl. Heroin has not historically been a primary drug of choice in the region and prescription opioid users have not largely turned to this drug as an alternative opiate source. The Houston HIDTA’s sustained high level of supply of controlled prescription opioids available at a relatively inexpensive price is believed to have sheltered the region to some extent from the national heroin epidemic. However, a rise in the number of deaths in Harris County in which heroin was a contributing factor as well as the increasing number of deaths from both heroin and fentanyl are concerning trends. Of the 146 deaths that were linked to heroin in 2017, 31 (21%) also listed fentanyl as a contributing factor. In comparison, of the 96 deaths attributed to heroin use in 2016, fentanyl was also listed as a factor in only two (2%) of those deaths.

**Ecstasy and other Illicit Drugs:** Ecstasy and other types of drugs such as PCP and LSD are lower-level threats. Of these drugs, use of ecstasy is reported with higher frequency and is available at moderate-to-high levels in most Houston HIDTA communities. Ecstasy is being produced in Houston in combination with other counterfeit pills. Most ecstasy tablets contain methamphetamine and caffeine, rather than MDMA as in the past and some contain synthetic cathinones (“bath salts”). Some seized tablets contained buprenorphine (an opioid), diazepam (a benzodiazepine) and methamphetamine. As with counterfeit pills, ecstasy tablets containing a cocktail of drug types may become an emerging trend.

## Drug Trafficking Organizations and Gangs

### Trends related to DTOs

**Houston HIDTA Initiative Investigations:** The Houston HIDTA Initiatives are currently investigating a total of 535 drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) and money laundering organizations (MLOs): 468 have been designated as DTOs and 67 are designated as MLOs in the Houston HIDTA's Performance Management Process (PMP) database. However, all of the MLOs are thought to also be involved in drug trafficking to varying degrees. Of these DTOs/MLOs, 31% operate at the local level. The other 69% have a broader scope with 23% operating on a multi-state level and 46% operating internationally. Cocaine was trafficked by the highest percentage (58%), followed by methamphetamine (30%), marijuana (25%), and heroin (15%). Controlled prescription drugs, ecstasy, and other drugs were trafficked much less frequently. As can be seen, most of these criminal organizations are involved in trafficking more than one drug type.

**Drug Trafficking Organizations:** Mexican DTOs pose the greatest threat, maintaining strong control over the Houston HIDTA drug market. A well-established network of family members, friends, and criminal associates such as gang members further their drug trafficking efforts on U.S. side of the border. Primary drug cartels operating in the region are the Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas, but others with a presence include, but are not limited to La Nueva Familia Michoacána, Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG or "New Generation" Cartel) and the Sinaloa Federation. To a lesser extent, Asian criminal organizations pose a threat due to their role in marijuana production and Middle Eastern DTOs are a threat due to their involvement in manufacturing and distribution of synthetic cannabinoid products. South American DTOs and other various groups are active in the region as well, but much less extensively than Mexican DTOs.

### Trends related to DTO Activities

**Drug Transportation:** The Houston HIDTA's major highways are used most frequently for drug trafficking activities, but alternative backroad routes and the use of the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway continue to be exploited by DTOs to circumvent the region's two inland Border Patrol checkpoints. Intelligence gaps exist regarding the use of maritime vessels, private aircraft, and railroads for drug trafficking. One of the most prominent and increasing drug transportation trends is the use of mail shipments to obtain high-grade marijuana and marijuana products from "legal" states as well as for synthetic drugs purchased online from China. The extent of the use of the mail is unknown, but thought to be high.

**Illicit Finance:** Bulk cash smuggling remains the primary method that Mexican DTOs use to move illicit drug proceeds back to their country of origin. Houston is well-known as a central collection point for currency obtained from drug trafficking activities conducted throughout the country. Seizures in the southern Houston HIDTA counties are substantial, often ranging from \$200,000 to \$500,000, but seizures of up to one million dollars are identified yearly.

**Human Smuggling:** Mexican DTOs are also using their well-developed drug trafficking infrastructure for human smuggling. Illegal immigrants are regularly transported from the border to the Houston area where they are housed until their smuggling fees have been paid. While in South Texas, they walk through heavy brush on remote ranches for days to avoid the region's two Border Patrol checkpoints. Some carry heavy backpacks of marijuana and many die from heat exhaustion or dehydration along the way. In Brooks County alone, 584 bodies were found between 2009 and 2017.

**Communications/Technology:** DTOs routinely use encrypted smartphone applications such as WhatsApp to safeguard their communications from law enforcement. Drug dealers are increasingly using social media platforms such as Snapchat, Facebook/Facebook Messenger, and Instagram for drug-related transactions. Drug investigators are hearing more about the use of the "dark web" for drug purchases, but the level of this activity remains an intelligence gap.

### Trends related to Gangs

**Gangs:** The threat from gangs is substantial, particularly in Houston. Harris County has the highest concentration of gang members in Texas with over 350 gangs and approximately 19,500 gang members. Most gangs are involved in drug distribution to some extent, and some gang members are involved in higher-level drug trafficking and human smuggling activities. Gangs are increasingly collaborating, allowing them to expand their scope to include a wider range of criminal acts. Officials are particularly concerned about the level of organized, violent gang-related crime in Houston and gang-on-gang murders that have killed innocent bystanders, including children caught in their crossfire.

## Outlook

Drug investigators in the Houston HIDTA will face more significant challenges than ever before in their counternarcotics work, mainly due to the rising threat from fentanyl. They will need to take extra precautions as part of their routine procedures, as they are increasingly likely to encounter dangerous synthetic chemicals in the coming year. It is quite probable that in addition to seizing fentanyl mixed with heroin or fentanyl-laced counterfeit pills, they will soon find fentanyl in combination with other drug types, including cocaine (as was reported in other states) or even methamphetamine. If these more commonly used drugs also become adulterated, related overdoses and deaths are imminent. It will be imperative for law enforcement to remain vigilant in their efforts to halt the influx of synthetic drugs to avert the public health crisis that other parts of the country are currently experiencing as a result of this emerging threat.



# HOUSTON HIDTA REGION

## Houston HIDTA Initiatives and Participating Law Enforcement Agencies

The Houston HIDTA was one of the original HIDTAs designated by the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) in 1990. It has eleven Enforcement Initiatives, two Intelligence Initiatives, and four Support Initiatives and its membership formally includes 48 local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies.

### Houston HIDTA Enforcement Initiatives

1. Fort Bend Enforcement Team (FBET)
2. Gangs and Non-Traditional Gang Squad (GANGS)
3. Houston Money Laundering Initiative (HMLI)
4. Houston Seaport Initiative
5. Major Drug Squads (MDS)
6. Methamphetamine Initiative Group (MIG)
7. Montgomery County Narcotics Enforcement Team (MOCONET)
8. Targeted Narcotics Enforcement Team (TNET)
9. Texas Coastal Corridor Initiative (TCCI)
10. Train, Airport, Rail, and Port (TARP)
11. Upper Texas Gulf Coast Initiative (UTGC)

### Houston HIDTA Intelligence Initiatives

1. Houston Investigative Support Center (HISC)
2. Narcotics Operation Control Center (NOCC)

### Houston HIDTA Support Initiatives

1. Drug Prevention Initiative (PI)
2. Management & Coordination (ADMIN)
3. Resource Initiative
4. Training Initiative

### Participating Law Enforcement Agencies

Federal Partners include: Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, Drug Enforcement Administration, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Homeland Security Investigations, Internal Revenue Service – Criminal Investigations, United States Attorney’s Office – Eastern District of Texas, United States Attorney’s Office – Southern District of Texas, United States Coast Guard, United States Customs and Border Protection, United States Marshal Service – Eastern District of Texas, United States Marshal Service – Southern District of Texas, United States Postal Inspection Service

State Partners include: Texas Department of Criminal Justice Office of the Inspector General, Texas Department of Public Safety, Texas Office of the Attorney General, Texas Air National Guard, Texas National Guard

Local Partners include: Austin County Sheriff’s Office, Brazoria County Sheriff’s Office, Corpus Christi Police Department, Dickinson Police Department, Fort Bend County District Attorney’s Office, Fort Bend County Sheriff’s Office, Galveston County Sheriff’s Office, Galveston Police Department, Harris County Constable’s Office Precinct 1, Harris County District Attorney’s Office, Harris County Sheriff’s Office, Houston Police Department, Humble Police Department, Ingleside Police Department, Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office, Kleberg County Sheriff’s Office, La Porte Police Department, League City Police Department, Missouri City Police Department, Montgomery County Constable’s Office Precinct 4, Montgomery County Sheriff’s Office, Nueces County Sheriff’s Office, Pasadena Police Department, Pearland Police Department, Portland Police Department, Richmond Police Department, Rosenberg Police Department, Sugar Land Police Department, Victoria County Sheriff’s Office, Walker County Sheriff’s Office, Webster Police Department

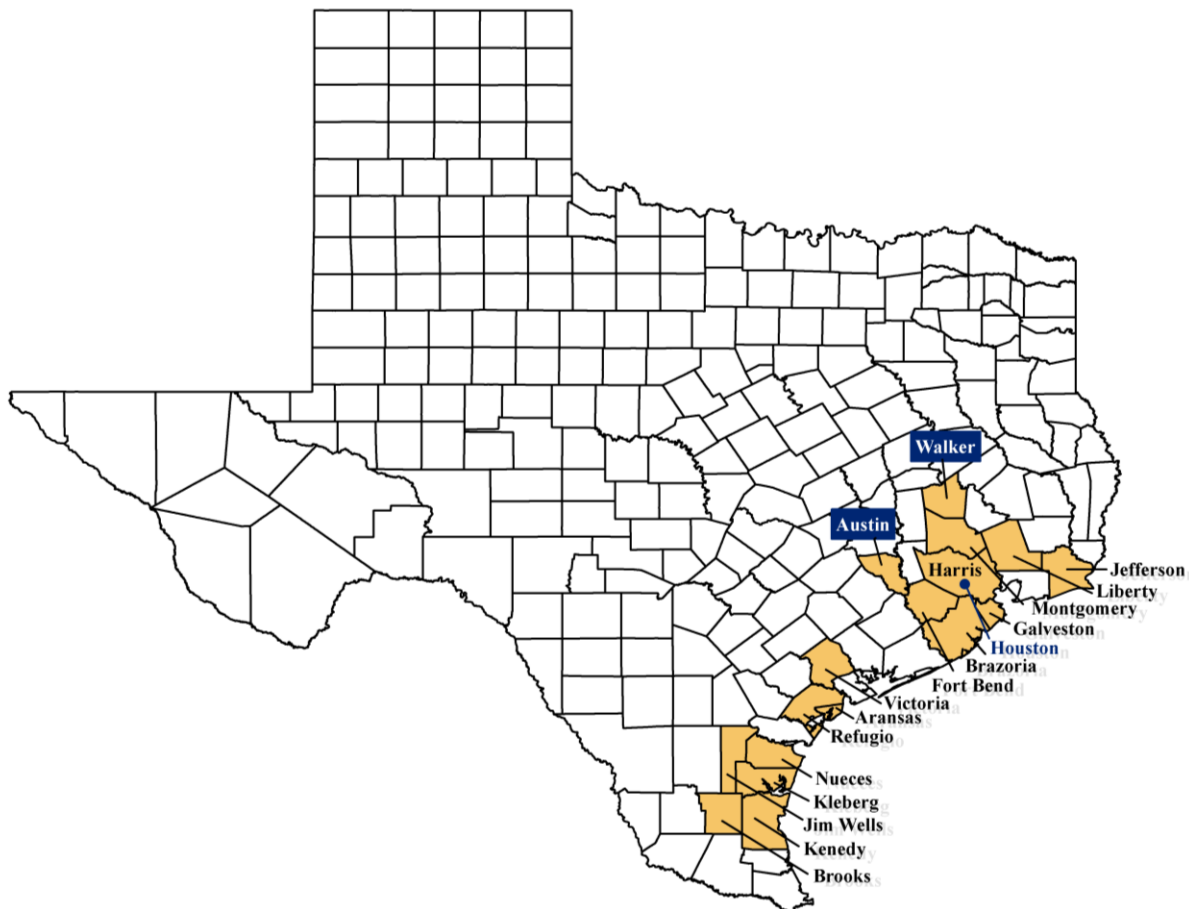
More information on the Houston HIDTA Initiatives can be found in Appendix B beginning on page 64.

## Houston HIDTA Counties

*The Houston HIDTA consists of 17 counties located near the Texas Gulf Coast. The Houston metropolitan area is quite expansive, with a population of over 6.8 million people. It ranks second in the nation in terms of population growth according to 2017 U.S. Census Bureau estimates.*

The Houston HIDTA includes 17 counties and encompasses 15,698 square miles within the state of Texas. It includes all but six of the counties along the Texas coastline. The total population of the Houston HIDTA exceeds 7.6 million people, more than one quarter of the population of the entire state. The counties within the Houston HIDTA are quite diverse in terms of size and population. On one end of the extreme, Harris County has a population of over four and a half million people. It is a densely-populated county which includes the city of Houston, the fourth largest city in the United States, in a land area of 1,703 square miles. Houston is the largest city in the Southern United States. On the other end of the spectrum, Kenedy County has a population of only 417 people with a land area of over 1,400 square miles.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

For the purpose of describing trends within the Houston HIDTA in this assessment, the area has been divided into three sections. The Northern Houston HIDTA includes Jefferson, Montgomery, Liberty, and Walker counties. The Central Houston HIDTA includes Harris, Galveston, Fort Bend, Brazoria, and Austin counties and the Southern Houston HIDTA includes Victoria, Refugio, Aransas, Jim Wells, Nueces, Kleberg, Kenedy, and Brooks counties. These counties can be seen on the map below.





# Demographics and Economics of the Houston HIDTA

## Demographics

Most of the population of the Houston HIDTA is concentrated in the Houston metropolitan area. The Houston metropolitan area includes Houston, The Woodlands and Sugar Land, Texas. It is the fifth most populous metropolitan area in the United States with over 6.8 million people and ranks 2<sup>nd</sup> in the nation in terms of population growth.<sup>1</sup> The city of Houston, which is the fourth largest city in the country and the largest city in Texas, is located within Harris County.<sup>2,3</sup> Houston has the third largest Hispanic population and the third largest Mexican population in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

Harris County is the most populous county within the Houston HIDTA and in Texas, and the third most populous county in the United States. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's most current 2017 estimate, the population of Harris County is 4,652,980.<sup>1</sup> Racially, the composition of Harris County is roughly 42% Hispanic, 31% Caucasian, 20% African American, and 7% Asian.<sup>1</sup> Emphasizing its diversity is the fact that over 90 different languages are spoken in the Houston area.<sup>2</sup> The northern portion of Fort Bend County that adjoins Harris County is considered to be part of the expanding metropolitan region of the Houston HIDTA. Its population is culturally diverse as well, consisting of approximately 35% Caucasian, 24% Hispanic, 21% African American, and 20% Asian.<sup>1</sup> Brazoria County is also varied in makeup, with a population consisting of 49% Caucasian, 30% Hispanic, 14% African American, and 7% Asian individuals.<sup>1</sup>

The population tends to be more homogenous in most of the Northern Houston HIDTA counties and in many of the counties in the Southern Houston HIDTA. For example, in the Northern Houston HIDTA, Montgomery and Liberty counties have Caucasian populations that are approximately 67%. In contrast, Brooks and Kenedy counties (Southern Houston HIDTA counties closest to the border) have a larger population of Hispanic individuals. Brooks County's population is approximately 90% Hispanic, and Kenedy County's population is 73% Hispanic. Other nearby Southern Houston HIDTA counties have similar demographics. For instance, the Hispanic population in Jim Wells County is 80%, and in Kleberg County it is 72%.<sup>1</sup>

## Economics

The Houston HIDTA counties are home to a wide variety of economic fields including, but not limited to energy, petrochemical, aeronautics, finance, medical, technical, and agricultural industries. Jobs in fields related to construction and oil and gas-related industries are prevalent throughout the region. In the most southern Houston HIDTA counties, there is a strong agricultural economic base.<sup>4</sup> The metropolitan region of the Houston HIDTA which include areas in Harris, Fort Bend, and Montgomery counties have an extremely diverse economic makeup. A wide variety of occupational opportunities exist in these more heavily-populated areas of the Houston HIDTA. For example, Houston has over 40 colleges and universities, and ranks high in its number of Fortune 500 companies, second only to New York City. Considered by many to be the Energy Capital of the World, Houston has over 5,000 energy-related firms. The Texas Medical Center is the largest medical center in the world and Houston hospitals rank among the best in the nation.<sup>2</sup>

There is a wide variance in annual household income in the Northern, Central, and Southern Houston HIDTA. The most populous counties (Harris, Fort Bend, and Montgomery) have the some of the highest income levels. Harris County residents have a median household income of approximately \$55,584. The median household income in Fort Bend County is \$91,152 and in Montgomery County, it is \$70,805. In most of the northern and southern Houston HIDTA counties, median household incomes are typically in the mid-to-upper \$40,000 range. However, in some of the southernmost and northernmost Houston HIDTA counties, the average household income falls below this level. For instance, in Walker County (the most northern Houston HIDTA county), the median household income is \$40,090. In Brooks and Kenedy counties in the southernmost Houston HIDTA, residents have significantly lower average household incomes. The median household income in Brooks County is \$24,913 and in Kenedy County, it is \$24,000.<sup>1</sup>

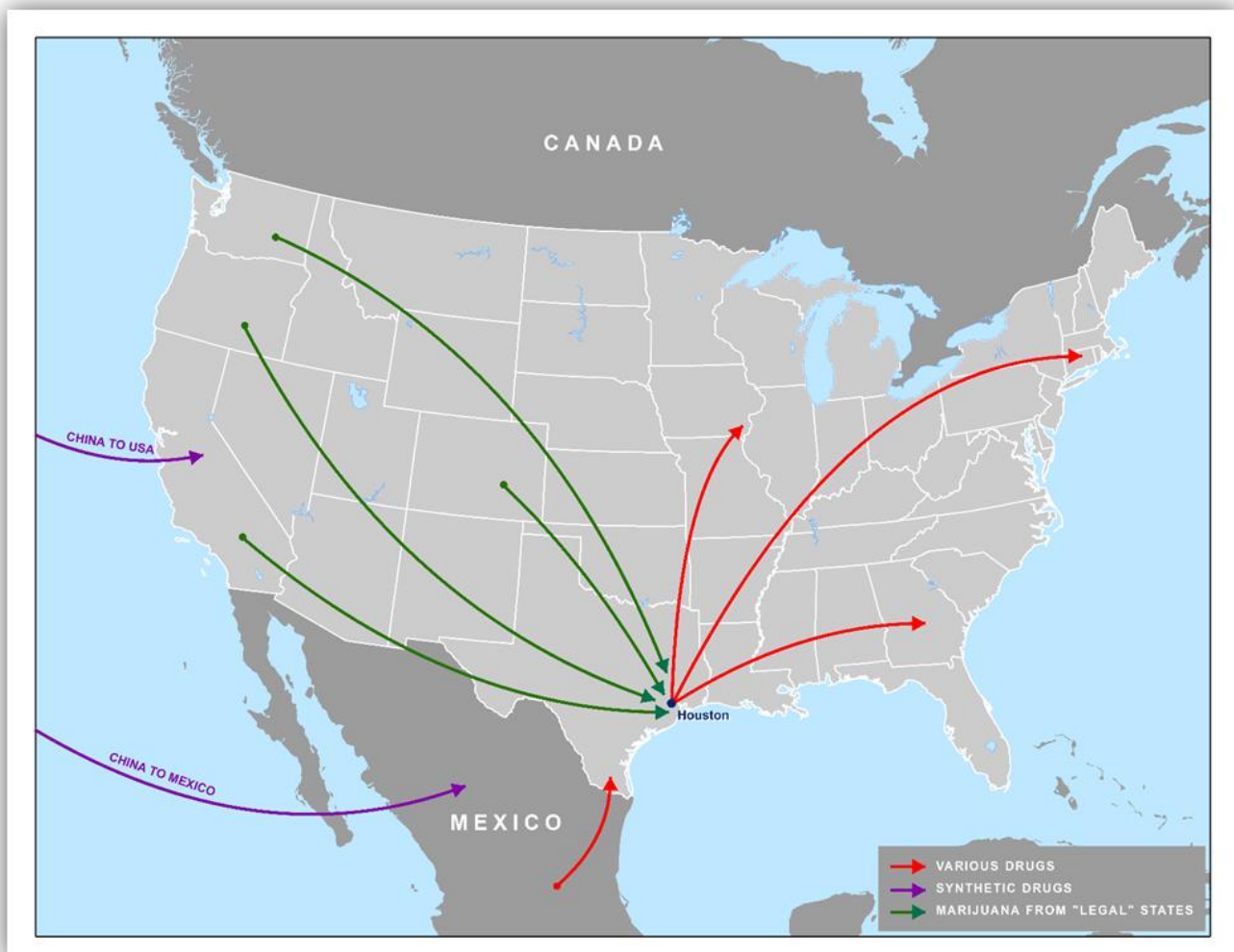
## Transportation Corridors within the Houston HIDTA

### Drug Transportation and Trafficking Routes

The Houston HIDTA is a major corridor for drug trafficking activities. Primary trafficking routes from Mexico run directly through the region. Mexican DTOs have developed extensive transportation networks, enabling them to smuggle drugs and illegal immigrants into and through the area as well as to destinations throughout the country. They are also involved in smuggling drug proceeds and weapons back through the Houston HIDTA to Mexico. Drugs trafficked into the Houston HIDTA most commonly enter the United States from border cities in Mexico such as Reynosa, Matamoros, and Nuevo Laredo. From there, drugs are moved northward through counties in South Texas toward larger cities such as Houston.

*The expansive metropolitan city of Houston, with its close proximity to Mexico, is not only an extremely lucrative drug market, but it serves as a significant transshipment hub in the United States.*

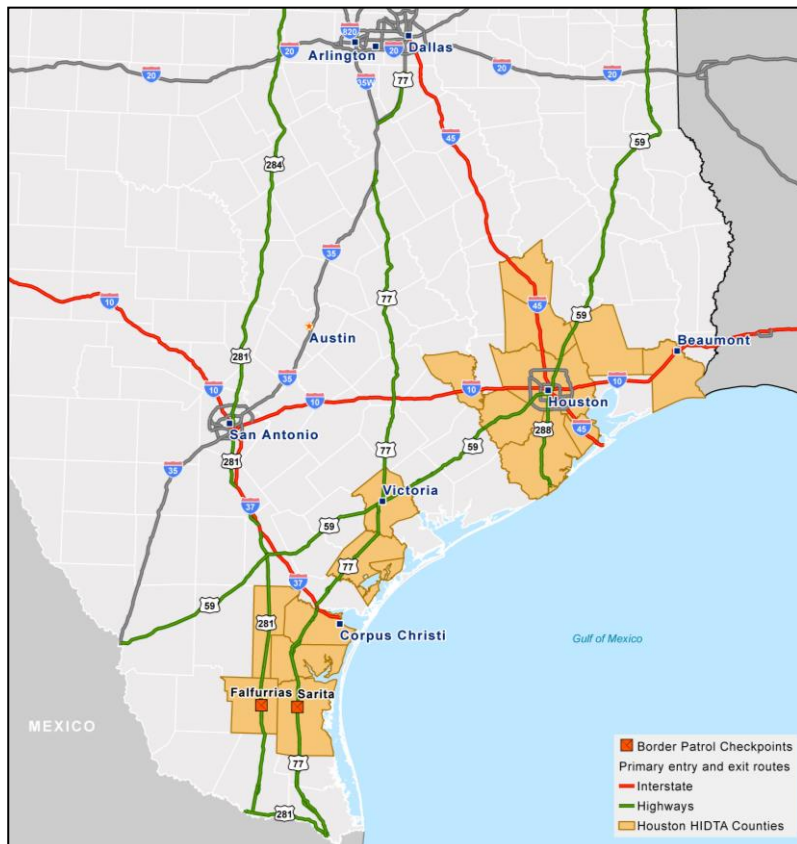
As well as being a profitable drug market for DTOs, the Houston metropolitan area serves as a centralized location for drug importation and distribution to other Houston HIDTA cities as well as to other locations in Texas and throughout the nation. Drug shipments are regularly transported from Houston to states to the north and east of the region. Numerous states throughout the nation are believed to be impacted by drugs coming from this large transshipment hub.



## Unique Geographic Features of the Houston HIDTA

The diverse geographic features of the Houston HIDTA provide many options for drug traffickers that facilitate their ability to conduct illicit activities without detection. It is an area of substantial international activity, serving as a primary gateway into and out of the United States by land with its proximity to the Mexican border, by sea with its location next to the Gulf of Mexico, and by air, housing one of the nation's largest and busiest international airports. More than 40 million passengers traveled through Houston's George Bush Intercontinental Airport in 2017, including more than 10 million international passengers traveling back and forth from destinations such as Central and South America as well as numerous other locations throughout the world.<sup>5</sup>

### LAND-BASED FEATURES



The region's highways are used most extensively for bulk transportation of drugs and currency and pose the greatest threat, although DTOs are also known to take full advantage of alternative transportation options such as back country roads, private ranch roads, the Houston HIDTA's railway system, public and private airports, and the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway with miles of remote coastline along the Padre Island National Seashore.

#### Major Roads and Highways

Primary entry routes into the Houston HIDTA from Mexico include U.S.-281, U.S.-77, and U.S.-59. Major exit routes to other areas of Texas and other states include I-45, U.S.-59, and I-10. The primary conveyance methods for drug trafficking include personal vehicles (passenger cars, trucks, and sports utility vehicles), as well as tractor trailers and commercial buses.

A larger version of this map is provided in Appendix C on page 68.

### U.S. Border Patrol Checkpoints

Two inland U.S. Border Patrol checkpoints in South Texas are among the most important geographic features within the Houston HIDTA. They are of great significance as a high number of large (multiple kilogram level) drug seizures in the region occur at these sites each year. These checkpoints are located quite close to the U.S.-Mexico border, approximately 70 miles north of the Hidalgo, Texas Point of Entry (POE). The checkpoints can be seen in the map above on U.S.-77 (Sarita Checkpoint in Kenedy County) and U.S.-281 (Falfurrias Checkpoint in Brooks County).

The Falfurrias Checkpoint is the busiest inland checkpoint in the nation for narcotics and human smuggling. Approximately 10,000 cars per day come through this three-lane checkpoint. In January of 2017, a \$33 million-dollar, state-of-the-art expansion of this important checkpoint was implemented as a new effort to stop the flow of drugs and illegal immigrants through the region. The new checkpoint will have eight lanes and will be equipped with enhanced technology to improve inspection capabilities. The anticipated completion date is the summer of 2018. It is being built next to the old checkpoint so construction will not affect current operations.<sup>6,7</sup>



## MARITIME FEATURES



A clear, sunny day at the park's southernmost boundary, near Mansfield Channel. Four-wheel drive is needed to reach this remote section of the park.  
NPS photo

Another unique geographical aspect of the Houston HIDTA is that it directly borders the Gulf of Mexico, and as such, the region's vast, remote coastline makes it a prime location for illicit activities. Drug traffickers and human smugglers are known to use the region's Padre Island National Seashore (PINS) and Gulf Intracoastal Waterway (ICW) as a means of circumventing the Sarita and Falfurrias Border Patrol checkpoints as they move northward through the Houston HIDTA with drug loads and/or illegal immigrants. The full extent of maritime-related drug trafficking activities along the Texas Gulf Coast remains an intelligence gap, but evidence of drug-related activity is identified every year. Indicators such as drug wash-ups of cocaine and marijuana are found, as well as a limited number of marijuana seizures from

small vessels (Mexican "lanchas") and vehicles encountered along the coastline. A photo of a cocaine wash-up found along the PINS coastline, provided by the National Park Service, is shown on the right. Evidence of human smuggling includes the discovery of abandoned rubber rafts as well as illegal immigrants found wandering through the PINS. More information about these geographic features of the Houston HIDTA is provided below.



### Padre Island National Seashore and the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway



The Padre Island National Seashore and the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway are shown on the map on the left. The ICW parallels the PINS and runs from Brownsville at the most southern border of Texas all the way to Florida.<sup>8,9</sup>

The Padre Island National Seashore is quite expansive. In fact, it is the longest stretch of undeveloped barrier island in the world. It consists of over 130,000 acres of dunes, sandy beaches and grasslands. It stretches for 70 miles, from just south of Corpus Christi in Kleberg County, all the way through Kenedy County, and, at its southernmost point, to the Port Mansfield Channel in Willacy County. The majority of its land area is in the Houston HIDTA in Kenedy County.<sup>10,11,12</sup> Larger maps depicting the PINS and ICW can be found in Appendix D on pages 69 through 72.

The Padre Island National Seashore provides an ideal environment for criminal organizations to conduct their illicit activities in seclusion for a number of reasons. Limited law enforcement resources are available to focus on the threat of maritime smuggling, due to the magnitude of drug trafficking and human smuggling occurring on Texas highways and the strong presence of law enforcement needed in these more traditional trafficking hot spots. Additionally, although vehicles are permitted to be driven on the PINS, there are many areas that are difficult to reach without a four-wheel drive or all-terrain vehicle (ATV), and accessibility of some areas of the PINS is dependent upon factors such as tide level or weather conditions. Therefore, a sizeable expanse of remote coastline in the region remains largely unmonitored by law enforcement on a regular basis, and DTOs are well aware of the opportunities that this provides to them.

*Note: The Houston HIDTA's location along the Gulf Coast presented some serious challenges in 2017, due to the massive impact of Hurricane Harvey. A substantial percentage of law enforcement resources were redirected toward disaster emergency response and recovery efforts. The widespread damage to infrastructure from high winds and flooding affected the majority of the Houston HIDTA and was unprecedented.*



## Major Seaports

The Houston HIDTA also contains numerous seaports such as the Port of Houston, Port of Corpus Christi, Port of Beaumont, Port of Galveston, Port of Texas City, Port of Port Arthur, Port of Freeport, and Port of Orange. In addition to these main ports, there are several other smaller ports, as well as a large number of bays and inlets in rural areas along the Texas Gulf Coast within the region. Significant intelligence gaps exist as to the scope of drug trafficking that may be occurring at these locations. Of these seaports, the Port of Houston is thought to pose the greatest drug-related threat and is described below.



### Port Houston - The International Port of Texas

Port Houston is a significant geographical landmark within the Houston HIDTA and well-known as the biggest container port on the Gulf Coast and in Texas. It is one of the largest seaports in the world and handles approximately two-thirds of all of the containerized cargo in the Gulf of Mexico. The size of the 52-mile long Houston Ship Channel is impressive, and more than 241 million tons of cargo move through this port each year, carried by more than 8,200 vessels and 223,000 barges. Port Houston is ranked first in the United States in foreign waterborne tonnage, U.S. import and export tonnage, and second in the U.S. in total tonnage. Taking advantage of the Port's 25-mile long terminal complex, DTOs have been known to conceal drugs inside of containers, hoping that their illicit goods will go undetected amongst the large volume of containerized cargo at busy locations such as Barbours Cut and Bayport terminals.<sup>13,14,15</sup>



## AVIATION-RELATED FEATURES

Houston is one of the few cities in the nation that has two airports within its city limits providing international service. Both the George Bush Intercontinental Airport (IAH) and Hobby Airport offer a large number of non-stop domestic and international flights.<sup>16</sup> Illicit drug and currency seizures occur every year, due to the constant presence of law enforcement routinely investigating this activity in these locations. The Houston HIDTA also has smaller international airports within its domain, such as the Conroe-North Houston Airport and the Corpus Christi International Airport in Nueces County.



The George Bush Intercontinental Airport is Houston's largest airport and the 8<sup>th</sup> busiest airport in the United States.<sup>17</sup> The high level of both domestic and international travelers coming and going each day from this busy airport, coupled with the massive number of passenger bags and cargo moved through this facility underscore the enormous challenge that law enforcement working there face in their attempts to stop the transport of illicit drugs and drug proceeds to and from the region. It certainly poses a substantial threat, although it is one in which law enforcement resources and attention are being focused.

While the scope of drug trafficking at commercial airports is fairly well-defined, the extent of the use of private aircraft for illicit activities in the Houston HIDTA remains an intelligence gap. In addition to numerous commercial airports, the Houston HIDTA contains over 100 smaller, rural airports as well as rural landing strips on private property throughout its 17-county area that could be exploited by drug traffickers. Drug trafficking and human smuggling via private aircraft have been identified in the Houston HIDTA in past years, but DTOs are less commonly encountered using this transportation method. It is important to note that this is not necessarily because it is not routinely occurring, but more likely because of limited law enforcement resources to regularly monitor for suspicious activities at smaller public and private airports.



# General Crime Trends in the Houston HIDTA

## Violent Crime in Houston

Violent crime in Houston is high and rising, according to law enforcement officials.<sup>18</sup> While the number of homicides in the city of Houston declined by 10.6% from 301 murders in 2016 to 269 in 2017, other types of violent crime, such as aggravated assaults are on the rise, increasing by 13.7%, from 12,487 in 2016 to 14,201 in 2017.<sup>19</sup> Much of this violent crime is believed to be linked to gang activity.<sup>20</sup>

Combating gang-related violence is one of Houston's top priorities. After the death of eleven children caught in gang-related crossfire in the city since December of 2016, the mayor of Houston pledged a million dollars to assist law enforcement in reducing this serious threat.<sup>21</sup> More information on gangs and gang-related violence can be found beginning on page 57 of this assessment.

### Turner pledges \$1M in police overtime pay to combat gang, gun violence

By Robert Downen Updated 7:47 pm, Friday, April 6, 2018



## Drug Abuse Violations in Houston and other Regions of the Houston HIDTA

Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) statistics show that the total number of drug abuse violations reported by the Houston Police Department decreased by 30%, from 9,993 in 2016 to 6,999 in 2017. The number of offenses for possession of controlled substances in Houston decreased by 31%, from 8,486 in 2016 to 5,870 in 2017.<sup>19</sup> This potential downward trend related to drug use seems like encouraging news; however, the usefulness of this data is complicated by a change in the City of Houston's marijuana policy in March of 2017. The Misdemeanor Marijuana Diversion Program went into effect "diverting all misdemeanor marijuana cases involving up to four ounces out of the criminal justice system and instead redirecting low-level drug offenders into a decision-making class" (four hours of drug education).<sup>22,23</sup> If offenders complete the course successfully, they are not ticketed, arrested, or required to appear in court.<sup>23</sup> It is probable that the sharp decline in drug abuse violations is most likely due, in part, to this change in policy since the number of arrests for possession of marijuana decreased by 52%, from 2,597 in 2016 to 1,257 in 2017.

Trends related to drug abuse violations for larger cities in other areas of the Houston HIDTA were varied. In the Northern Houston HIDTA, UCR statistics for the Beaumont Police Department showed that the total number of drug abuse violations increased by 13.5% from 651 in 2016 to 739 in 2017. In the Southern Houston HIDTA, the Corpus Christi Police Department's UCR statistics showed that drug abuse violations had decreased by 27% from 4,384 in 2016 to 3,210 in 2017. UCR statistics for the Victoria Police Department showed that drug abuse violations rose by 16% from 364 in 2016 to 421 in 2017.<sup>19</sup>

## Survey Results for Drug-Related Crime in the Houston HIDTA

2017 Houston HIDTA Law Enforcement Survey

Drugs and Crime

1. Which two drugs are most associated with crime in your jurisdiction?

- Powder Cocaine
- Crack Cocaine
- Methamphetamine
- Heroin
- Marijuana
- Controlled Prescription Drugs
- Synthetic Opioids (such as fentanyl or fentanyl analogs)
- Synthetic Cannabinoids ("synthetic marijuana")
- Synthetic Cathinones ("bath salts")
- Synthetic Hallucinogens (such as LSD, PCP, etc)
- Ecstasy
- Other Drug Type

Drug investigators participating in the annual Houston HIDTA drug threat survey were asked to choose the top two drugs most linked to crime in their jurisdiction. Consistent with responses provided in the previous year, the top two drugs selected most frequently were methamphetamine (80%) and crack cocaine (30%). Marijuana came in third in the ranking, selected by 25% of respondents, and synthetic cannabinoids ranked fourth, selected by 19%.



# OVERVIEW OF HOUSTON HIDTA DRUG THREATS

*Methamphetamine continues to maintain its stronghold as the top drug threat throughout the Houston HIDTA.*

## Survey Results: Top Drug Threat Positions

Drug investigators from Houston HIDTA counties as well as surrounding areas were asked to choose the greatest drug threat from twelve drug types, taking into consideration both the prevalence as well as the perceived harm from use of these drugs in their community. Sixty-nine (69) of 72 surveys were returned for a response rate of 96%. Drug types reported by survey participants as posing the greatest threat in 2017 were methamphetamine (54%), synthetic cannabinoids (13%), marijuana (7%), crack cocaine (7%), powder cocaine (6%), heroin (6%), synthetic opioids (6%), and controlled prescription drugs (1%).

From the list below, please choose the drug type that poses the GREATEST drug threat in your area. Choose only one drug type.

- Powder Cocaine
- Crack Cocaine
- Methamphetamine
- Heroin
- Marijuana (low-grade, high-grade/hydroponic, oil/wax, and edibles)
- Controlled Prescription Drugs (opioids, sedatives/anxiolytics, and stimulants)
- Synthetic Opioids (such as fentanyl and fentanyl analogs)
- Synthetic Cannabinoids ("synthetic marijuana")
- Synthetic Cathinones ("bath salts")
- Synthetic Hallucinogens (such as LSD, PCP, etc)
- Ecstasy
- Other Drug Type

Drug Type Reported As Greatest Drug Threat	Responses	%
Methamphetamine	37/69	54%
Synthetic Cannabinoids	9/69	13%
Marijuana	5/69	7%
Crack Cocaine	5/69	7%
Powder Cocaine	4/69	6%
Heroin	4/69	6%
Synthetic Opioids (fentanyl/fentanyl analogs)	4/69	6%
Controlled Prescription Drugs	1/69	1%

Methamphetamine has maintained its top position as the region's most unabatingly high-level threat for the past five years. The percentage of law enforcement choosing methamphetamine as the greatest drug threat has remained far higher than for other drug categories each year. Synthetic cannabinoids have ranked second for the past three years and are reported as a significant, persisting drug threat in most Houston HIDTA communities.

### Factors Included in Determining Overall Drug Threat

To gain a deeper understanding of the threat posed by various drug types in the Houston HIDTA, staff from the Houston Investigative Support Center (HISC) not only analyzed the results of the annual drug threat survey, but also conducted personal interviews with law enforcement and many other professional groups. They also analyzed public health and safety data and reviewed open source and law enforcement reporting on drug-related issues.

It is important to emphasize that although only one drug type is chosen as the greatest drug threat each year, there are many drugs that are considered to be very serious threats posing considerable problems in Houston HIDTA communities. These drugs are all worthy of the focus and attention of drug investigators, treatment and prevention professionals, medical personnel, and others committed to decreasing the negative consequences of illicit drug use. It is understood that often, it is not necessarily a single drug type, but a combination of drugs used on a regular basis that can contribute to addiction, overdose, and death as well as drug-related community problems such as property crime or violent crime.

Information on current trends for the most prominent drug threats reported during the 2017 data collection process for the Houston HIDTA is provided in the subsequent sections of this threat assessment. Additionally, a three-page summary outlining identified drug-related trends and intelligence gaps is provided in Appendix E on pages 73 through 75. The drugs most commonly used by teens and adults, as well as drugs "trending upward in use" as ranked by survey respondents is provided in Appendix F on pages 77 and 78.

## Methamphetamine



*The threat from methamphetamine remains extremely high. Methamphetamine has consistently been ranked as the region's greatest drug threat for the past five years.*

*Methamphetamine is predominantly encountered in the form of large crystal shards in the Houston HIDTA. In this photo, a methamphetamine conversion laboratory was seized by the Houston HIDTA Initiative FBET in which methamphetamine in solution was being transformed into the crystallized ("ice") form. These conversion laboratories are increasingly being discovered throughout the Houston metropolitan area.*

### Overall Assessment of Threat

Methamphetamine remains a high-level threat to the Houston HIDTA that shows no signs of diminishing. Methamphetamine is widely reported by law enforcement throughout the region's 17 counties as the primary drug threat. It has consistently been ranked by law enforcement as the greatest drug threat for the past five years. It is also reported as the drug most often associated with crime in the region.

### Forms of Methamphetamine

Crystal ("ice") methamphetamine is the type of this drug that is most commonly encountered, but it is also found less frequently in powder, tablet, and liquid form. When encountered in tablet form, the drug has generally been represented to buyers as ecstasy/MDMA, but in fact, the majority of seized ecstasy tablets test positive for methamphetamine and caffeine, according to Houston area crime laboratories. Methamphetamine is increasingly being seized in liquid form (suspended in solution) because drug traffickers are aware that the risk of detection is lower than transporting the drug in a solid state.

Common concealment locations for methamphetamine suspended in solution are places in vehicles that are used to hold liquids such as gas tanks and windshield wiper reservoirs. In addition to being concealed within vehicle reservoirs, methamphetamine in solution is also being concealed in consumer products such as food and beverage containers. A seizure made by the Houston HIDTA Initiative TCCI at the Sarita Checkpoint in June shows "liquid" methamphetamine that was being hidden inside cans labeled as Mexican Chongos Zamoranos, a dessert of made of milk, cinnamon, and sugar.<sup>24</sup>



Alarming, a very large quantity of methamphetamine in candy form was found in Houston, posing a potential public health hazard. In June, the Harris County Sheriff's Office seized nearly 600 pounds of methamphetamine-laced lollipops. Law enforcement caught drug dealers stealing these lollipops from a home of another drug dealer who was manufacturing them.<sup>25,26,27</sup> In another example of this concealment, the Houston HIDTA Initiative TNET seized candies sealed in Mexican packaging containing methamphetamine.

## Availability and Source, Use, Purity, and Price for Methamphetamine

**Source and Availability:** Most methamphetamine in the region is believed to come from Mexico rather than being locally produced. Investigators throughout the Houston HIDTA consistently reported that the drug market is saturated with methamphetamine. Over three-fourths (78%) of survey respondents reported high availability and an increase in availability was reported by 43% from agencies in 12 of the 17 Houston HIDTA counties.

**Use:** Drug investigators were asked to list the top three drugs most commonly used by adults on the drug threat survey. Methamphetamine was the most commonly selected drug type, with 75% of respondents reporting it among the top three, followed by powder cocaine (45%), and high-grade/hydroponic marijuana (36%). It was also ranked most frequently among the top drugs trending upward in use by adults, with 67% reporting that use of this drug type is on the rise. Methamphetamine was not frequently reported as one of the most commonly used drugs by teens.

**Price and Purity:** Staff from the Drug Enforcement Administration's South Central Laboratory reported that purity for methamphetamine is high (upper 90s). Drug investigators reported yet a further decline in price for methamphetamine over the past year. The average price reported was about \$7,000 to \$8,000 per kilogram in 2017. In 2016, the price was more variable, with similar low-end prices, but ranging up to \$10,000 per kilogram at the high end.

**Traditional Methamphetamine Production Laboratories:** Local methamphetamine production has continually decreased as Mexican methamphetamine has become increasingly available at higher levels throughout the Houston HIDTA. Investigators report that methamphetamine from Mexico is so inexpensive and easily accessible that it is no longer cost-effective for users to produce this drug. Illustrating this trend, only one survey respondent reported seizing a traditional methamphetamine laboratory in the past year. Even seizures of user-level Shake-n-Bake (One Pot Method) laboratories have become uncommon due to the ready availability of Mexican methamphetamine. As a result of this change, the mission of the Houston HIDTA Methamphetamine Initiative Group has changed over time. Although this Initiative is still available to assist in dismantling clandestine methamphetamine production laboratories, its mission is now primarily focused on investigating and dismantling higher-tier drug trafficking organizations who are transporting methamphetamine into the region from Mexico.

**Methamphetamine Conversion Laboratories:** Methamphetamine from Mexico is increasingly being transported to Houston in liquid form. Paralleling this trend, "conversion" laboratories are being discovered more frequently in the Houston area, although the full extent of this activity remains an intelligence gap. "Conversion" is a fairly simplistic process that requires few or no chemicals and limited equipment in comparison to traditional methamphetamine production. Methamphetamine suspended in solution is dried out to a solid crystalline form using a heat source, fans, and acetone to facilitate evaporation. Acetone is also used to remove impurities from methamphetamine to produce clearer crystals. Below are photos of a conversion laboratory seized by the Houston HIDTA Initiative FBET showing the stages from methamphetamine in liquid solution, to a soft, partially crystalized mixture, and then to the finished hardened crystalline or "ice" form. Drug investigators have reported that they sometimes see methamphetamine that is sold before it is fully-processed. They state that it appears wet and, in some cases, has an "oatmeal-like" appearance.





## Trafficking, Transportation, and Distribution of Methamphetamine

**Trafficking and Transportation:** Mexican DTOs regularly transport large quantities of methamphetamine from Mexico into and through the Houston HIDTA, primarily via passenger vehicles, tractor trailers, and commercial buses. They use a wide variety of concealment methods, ranging from those that are quite complex, such as creating sophisticated electronic compartments or other after-market alterations, to using natural voids in vehicles, to simply body carrying the drugs. As an example of this latter method, a Mexican national was arrested in September after he was found to be body carrying \$450,000 worth of methamphetamine and heroin while aboard a bus that was being inspected at the Sarita Checkpoint.<sup>28</sup>

Methamphetamine in solution is commonly transported in vehicle gas tanks or in containers of various types. The accompanying photo provided by the Houston HIDTA Initiative TCCI shows investigators siphoning “liquid” methamphetamine from a gas tank. The methamphetamine was found during an inspection at the Falfurrias Border Patrol checkpoint in May.



Methamphetamine was seized at Houston’s George Bush Intercontinental Airport in 2017. Some methamphetamine arrives in the area through the mail, but it is not a common type of drug being shipped using this method. There were no identified instances of methamphetamine transportation using maritime vessels, private airplanes or other methods in the Houston HIDTA in 2017.

**Distribution:** Gang members as well as a variety of independent dealers are the main groups distributing methamphetamine in Houston HIDTA communities. Those with a familial connection to Mexican DTOs, including some gang members, are heavily involved in both the trafficking and distribution of this drug. Prison gangs such as the Aryan Brotherhood of Texas are well-known for their involvement in the distribution of methamphetamine. Outlaw motorcycle gangs such as the Bandidos are also involved in the distribution of methamphetamine.<sup>29,30</sup>

## Public Health and Safety Threat from Methamphetamine

### Hospital Emergency Department and Treatment-Related Trends

As the drug market has become increasingly flooded with methamphetamine from Mexico, problems related to its use are becoming more transparent. For instance, staff at emergency departments (ERs) in Victoria and Nueces counties in the Southern Houston HIDTA reported methamphetamine as the primary drug for which patients are seeking emergency services. In Victoria, this is a newly emerging trend. For a number of years, synthetic cannabinoids were the main drug for which care was sought, but hospital staff said that now patients are coming to the ER for methamphetamine-related issues two to three times per day.

State-funded treatment services data obtained from the Texas Health and Human Services Commission clearly shows the widespread nature of the problems that methamphetamine is causing in Houston HIDTA communities. In 14 of 17 Houston HIDTA counties, methamphetamine was among the top three illicit drugs for which treatment was sought in 2017 (all but Fort Bend, Jim Wells, and Refugio). In four Houston HIDTA counties, treatment services related to methamphetamine use were provided more frequently than any illicit drug type. These counties included Galveston, Jefferson, Liberty, and Walker.

### Toxicity-Related Death Trends for Methamphetamine

The number and percentage of deaths in Harris County with methamphetamine as a contributing factor increased slightly from 93 deaths (15.1% of toxicity-related deaths) in 2016 to 104 (16.9% of toxicity-related deaths) in 2017. Note: Data for 2017 is preliminary. Further analysis of the toxicity-related death data provided by the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences can be found in Appendix G beginning on page 79.

## Seizure Trends for Methamphetamine

Overall Houston HIDTA seizure totals for methamphetamine increased by 19% from the previous year. See Appendix H on page 82 for a comparative analysis of methamphetamine seizure data for the Houston HIDTA Initiatives from 2016 to 2017.

## Summary of Trends and Intelligence Gaps for Methamphetamine

Summary of Trends and/or Intelligence Gaps related to Methamphetamine:

- The threat level for methamphetamine is very high. It is the Houston HIDTA's most prominent drug threat.
- There is an abundance of Mexican methamphetamine saturating the illicit drug market. Availability of this drug throughout the region is extremely high. As a result, the price for methamphetamine has continued to decline over the past year.
- Crystal methamphetamine ("ice") is the most common form encountered, but there has been a continued increase in seizures of methamphetamine suspended in liquid solution.
- The level of domestic methamphetamine production in the region is very low. However, more conversion laboratories are being encountered by law enforcement in the Houston area in which the methamphetamine is transformed from a liquid state to a solid, crystalline form. The full extent of "conversion" activity in the Houston HIDTA is an intelligence gap.
  - Note: Conversion laboratories are quite simplistic in comparison to traditional methamphetamine production laboratories and involve a fairly unsophisticated drying process using fans and/or a heat source. The methamphetamine is often combined with acetone and then heated to speed evaporation. Acetone is also used to assist in the removal of impurities to create clearer crystals.
- Survey respondents chose methamphetamine most frequently to be among the three most commonly used drugs by adults in the region. It was also reported to be the top drug trending upward in use by adults.
- Methamphetamine was also reported most frequently by survey respondents as the primary drug linked to crime.



Large seizures of drugs such as methamphetamine, cocaine, and marijuana regularly occur at the Houston HIDTA's two inland checkpoints located in South Texas near the Mexico border in Brooks and Kenedy counties. In the photo on the left, an inspection at the Falfurrias Checkpoint in Brooks County in May resulted in the seizure of over 250 pounds of methamphetamine in solution that had been hidden within a fuel tank of a Ford-250 truck.<sup>31</sup> In the photo on the right, a recent inspection of a charter bus at the Sarita Checkpoint in Kenedy County led to the discovery of almost 30 pounds of methamphetamine in cans of cheese found in an abandoned suitcase.<sup>32</sup>

## Synthetic Cannabinoids and Synthetic Cathinones

There are several kinds of synthetic drugs being used within the Houston HIDTA. The most well-known types include synthetic cannabinoids, often referred to as “synthetic marijuana,” “fake weed” or “Kush” and synthetic cathinones, generally referred to as “bath salts.” The threat from synthetic cathinones is low because their use is fairly minimal. The use of synthetic cannabinoids, however, is widespread. As such, they pose a high threat and will be the primary focus below. Other synthetic drugs such as phenethylamines (“synthetic LSD”) and synthetic opioids are discussed in separate sections of this assessment.

### Synthetic Cannabinoids



*Synthetic cannabinoids are ranked by drug investigators as the second greatest drug threat to the region for the third consecutive year.*

*The threat level from these drug products has remained persistently high, despite substantial efforts by law enforcement to curb their availability.*

Valiant attempts have been made by law enforcement to target the sources of supply of synthetic cannabinoid products in the Houston HIDTA. As an example of these efforts, the Houston Police Department’s Narcotics Division identified a major organization involved in the manufacturing and distribution of synthetic cannabinoid products in Houston, Corpus Christi, and Austin in April. Three arrests were made, along with the seizure of almost 600 pounds of synthetic cannabinoids (shown in the photo above).<sup>33</sup>

### Overall Assessment of Threat

Synthetic cannabinoids remain a high-level threat to the region, ranked as the second greatest drug threat for the third consecutive year. Their use continues to be a significant problem in most Houston HIDTA communities.

### Forms of Synthetic Cannabinoids



Synthetic cannabinoid products in the Houston HIDTA are commonly packaged in glossy, colorful foil packets with professional-looking graphics to entice prospective buyers. However, they are also sold in baggies and in cigars and cigarillos, similar to the way that marijuana is sold. Synthetic cannabinoids have also recently been found in Houston area smoke shops in bottles labeled as CBD oil for use in vaporizers.



### Availability, Use, and Price for Synthetic Cannabinoids

**Availability:** The supply of this drug is abundant and appears to be rising. The majority of survey respondents (81%) reported high or moderate availability of synthetic cannabinoids. High availability is pervasive, reported by agencies in 14 of the 17 Houston HIDTA counties. There was an increase in the percentage of respondents reporting high availability, from 52% in 2016 to 67% in 2017.

**Use and Price:** Synthetic cannabinoid use is widespread throughout the Houston HIDTA. Consumers of these drug products range from teens to older adults. Survey respondents reported synthetic cannabinoids to be among the top three drugs most commonly used by teens, ranking second only to marijuana. They also ranked it among the top drugs “trending upward” in use by teens, second only to hydroponic marijuana. Although survey respondents did not frequently rank synthetic cannabinoids among the top three drugs most commonly used by adults, it was ranked third among the drugs “trending upward” in use by adults, after methamphetamine and heroin.



## Availability, Use, and Price for Synthetic Cannabinoids (Continued)

There are a number of factors contributing to the sustained popularity of synthetic cannabinoids:

- Although synthetic cannabinoids are distinctly different from marijuana, inaccurate nomenclature (“fake weed,” “synthetic marijuana”) has perpetuated the myth that the two drug types are similar. Society’s declining perception of marijuana as a dangerous drug has been generalized to “synthetic marijuana” as well, leading many users to feel it is a safe and similar alternative drug. The green, leafy product looks similar to marijuana, adding to the confusion.
- Synthetic cannabinoids are also still sometimes referred to as “legal weed,” even though laws and ordinances have been passed making their sale and use unlawful. Significant efforts have been made to ban the sale of synthetic cannabinoid products in convenience stores, gas stations, and smoke shops, but some store owners do continue to have these items available for discreet “under-the-counter” sale.
- They are relatively inexpensive to purchase, making this drug option readily available to those in all socioeconomic classes. A small one gram baggie” can be purchased for about \$5. For a 10 gram packet, the price ranges from approximately \$30 to \$60. At the wholesale level, Houston area drug investigators reported that 10 gram packets sell for \$25-\$30 each with a minimum purchase of at least 50 bags.
- This drug type cannot be easily tested for in a standard drug screen due to numerous variations in the chemical composition of synthetic cannabinoids. This makes it appealing as a drug of choice for working class individuals and those on probation or parole who must submit to routine drug testing.
- Finally, and perhaps most significant, it remains highly available throughout the region, leading to easy accessibility. One of the prime factors contributing to the consistently high level of availability of this drug type is that Houston is a major manufacturing and distribution center for synthetic cannabinoid products.

## Source and Manufacturing of Synthetic Cannabinoid Products

Large-scale clandestine synthetic cannabinoid manufacturing operations are discovered each year in the Houston metropolitan area. Although their fancy packaging often looks quite professional, synthetic cannabinoid products are not being produced at legitimate business establishments. They are being made in warehouses, garages and/or residences of criminal entrepreneurs who have no regard for consumer health or safety, but are motivated solely by financial gain.

Synthetic cannabinoid chemicals in powder form are being shipped into the Houston area via the mail. Criminals order these chemicals online primarily from China.<sup>34</sup> After obtaining the chemicals, they dissolve the synthetic cannabinoid powder in acetone and spray the liquid onto ground-up organic material such as Damiana leaves. After drying, this hazardous concoction is either sealed into packets or packaged in baggies for street sale. Since there are no quality control checks or safety measures taking place in these operations, the amount and type of chemicals being used can vary from one package to the next. “Hot spots” can occur due to uneven spraying or absorption on the leafy material, leading to higher potency of some portions of the organic matter than others.



*These photos show a synthetic cannabinoid laboratory based out of an apartment that was seized by the Houston HIDTA Initiative MIG in August. Eighteen kilograms of organic matter containing the synthetic cannabinoid AMB-FUBINACA was confiscated from a bed frame in which it was being mixed.<sup>35,36</sup>*

## Transportation, Trafficking and Distribution of Synthetic Cannabinoids

**Transportation:** Synthetic cannabinoid products produced by drug trafficking organizations in Houston are sold within the greater Houston area and distributed to other regions of the Houston HIDTA and other states. Drug investigators in the Southern Houston HIDTA report that bulk quantities of synthetic cannabinoid products are being transported to cities such as Victoria and Corpus Christi from Houston via Texas roads and highways. On a positive note, at least one regional DTO will no longer be participating in this activity. In November, a man from Corpus Christi was sentenced to almost fifteen years in prison for running a synthetic cannabinoid enterprise that distributed these drugs throughout South Texas, using warehouses in both Houston and Corpus Christi to store his supply. This DTO leader had multiple prior convictions, including one in which he was arrested by the Victoria County Sheriff's Office for transporting four trash bags full of synthetic cannabinoids weighing 45 pounds, along with \$9,000 in currency.<sup>37,38</sup>

**Trafficking and Distribution:** Because the opportunity for financial gain is so immense, it is thought that a wide number of drug trafficking organizations of various types participate in this illicit activity in the Houston HIDTA. However, drug trafficking organizations identified as being involved in large-scale operations that included manufacturing and/or distribution of this drug type in the Houston area have been primarily of Middle Eastern descent. At the street level, synthetic cannabinoids are distributed by a variety of individuals and gang members in the region.

## Public Health and Safety Threat from Synthetic Cannabinoids

### Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Calls related to Synthetic Cannabinoids in Harris County

Because of their dangerous health effects, use of synthetic cannabinoids has become a serious public health threat throughout the United States. Individual reactions to synthetic cannabinoids are extremely variable, not only from user to user, but from one time to the next because of their ever-changing chemical composition. In fact, their use has been likened to playing a game of Russian Roulette. Synthetic cannabinoid users may experience the euphoric high they had hoped to achieve, but significantly less desirable responses such as paranoia, hallucinations, seizures, unconsciousness, and even death are also possible outcomes.<sup>39</sup>

Not only do individuals using these drugs pose a threat to their own well-being, they are a threat to others as well. They often become confused, highly agitated, and aggressive when using synthetic cannabinoids, posing a safety risk to family members and friends, law enforcement, and emergency medical personnel involved in assisting them in their drug-induced crises. When a particularly "bad batch" of synthetic cannabinoid product is introduced into the illicit drug market, large numbers of people requiring immediate emergency medical services have inundated the resources of health care personnel. Instances of this occur each year across the country, although none of these events were identified in the Houston HIDTA in 2017. As a prime example of such a crisis, in Illinois in the spring of 2018, at least 164 people experienced severe bleeding after using synthetic cannabinoids, resulting in at least four deaths. Testing indicated that some of the cases tested positive for a lethal ingredient often found in rat poison.<sup>40,41</sup>

Information provided by the City of Houston Fire Department's Emergency Medical Services (EMS) for July through December of 2017 affirms the health-related problems associated with use of this drug. Their data showed that "synthetic marijuana" was the illicit drug for which the highest number of drug-related EMS calls was documented during this six-month time period.

Drug investigators from the Baytown Police Department in Harris County have also described a high level of emergency calls received related to the use of this drug. Because of the severity of the problem, the City of Baytown, Baytown Police Department, and the Bay Area Council on Drugs and Alcohol collaborated with Texas Pictures to produce a video documentary called "The Last High." The video is available on YouTube with a caption that states: "This documentary explores the dangers of synthetic cannabinoids (Kush, Spice, etc.). With real-world footage and first-hand accounts from users, former users, counselors, first responders, law enforcement and others, this documentary tells of some of the terrible tragedies this drug can inflict on users and their families."<sup>42,43</sup>



"The Last High" can be viewed at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fbn7Rqw81BQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fbn7Rqw81BQ)

## Public Health and Safety Threat from Synthetic Cannabinoids (Continued)

### Toxicity-Related Death Trends related to Synthetic Cannabinoids in the Houston HIDTA

Within the Houston HIDTA, severe reactions to use of synthetic cannabinoids have resulted in death. An analysis of the toxicity-related death data that the HISC was able to obtain for the Houston HIDTA indicate that at least 11 deaths occurred in 2017 in which synthetic cannabinoids were listed as a contributing factor: Harris County (six deaths), Galveston County (one death), Brazoria County (three deaths), and Jefferson County (one death).

### Treatment Trends related to Synthetic Cannabinoids in Harris County

State-funded treatment facility data show a low percentage (less than 1 percent) of individuals seeking treatment for a primary problem with synthetic cannabinoids in Harris County. However, treatment providers in Houston reported that teens that are receiving services for problems related to marijuana use often have issues related to “synthetic marijuana” as well.

### **Seizure Trends for Synthetic Cannabinoids**

**Seizures:** Houston HIDTA seizure totals for synthetic cannabinoids increased by 152% from the previous year. See Appendix H on page 82 for a comparative analysis of synthetic cannabinoid seizure data for the Houston HIDTA Initiatives from 2016 to 2017.

## **Synthetic Cathinones (“Bath Salts”)**

### **Assessment of Threat**

Although a small number of deaths have occurred in recent years in the Houston HIDTA in which synthetic cathinones were listed as a contributing factor, this drug type is used with much less frequency than synthetic cannabinoids. Therefore, although these drugs are also quite dangerous, they pose a much lower level of threat. In Harris County, there were two deaths with synthetic cathinones listed as a factor in the cause of death in 2017, according to preliminary data provided by the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences.

Over half (55%) of survey respondents reported that availability of synthetic cathinones in the Houston HIDTA is low. Almost one-third (31%) reported that this drug is either not available or its availability is unknown. Because these drugs are generally encountered so infrequently, little is known about their use, price, transportation methods, trafficking and distribution in the region. As with synthetic cannabinoids, synthetic cathinones are imported into the region primarily from China.<sup>34</sup> Houston-area laboratories report that the most common synthetic cathinones they see are N-ethylpentylone or ethylone and when found, it is generally identified as a component of samples of “ecstasy” tablets that have been submitted for testing. The synthetic cathinones listed as a contributing factor in the cause of death in Harris County in 2017 were alpha-pyrrolidinopropiophenone (α-PPP) and N-ethylpentylone.

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*Synthetic cathinones (“bath salts”) are considered to be a much lower level threat in comparison to synthetic cannabinoids because they are used with much less frequency.*

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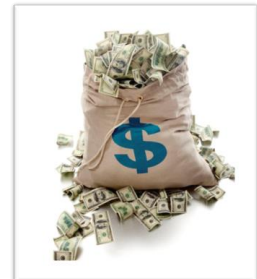
## Summary of Trends and Intelligence Gaps for Synthetic Cannabinoids and Synthetic Cathinones

Summary of Trends and/or Intelligence Gaps related to Synthetic Cannabinoids and Synthetic Cathinones:

- Synthetic cannabinoids are a persisting high-level drug threat whereas synthetic cathinones pose a low level of threat because their use is not as prevalent and they are less readily available in Houston HIDTA communities.
- Use of synthetic cannabinoids (often referred to as “Kush” or “synthetic marijuana”) is widespread, despite significant law enforcement efforts to curb the supply of this drug. The user group remains broad, including both teens and adults. Survey respondents reported synthetic cannabinoids to be among the top three drugs used by teens, ranking second only to marijuana. They also ranked it among the top drugs “trending upward” in use by teens, second only to hydroponic marijuana.
- The persistence of synthetic cannabinoid products as a popular drug of choice is connected to the misperception that it is similar to marijuana and because it is relatively inexpensive to purchase, readily available, and does not show up on standard drug tests due to its ever-changing chemical composition.
- Because of its extreme variation in chemical composition, use of synthetic cannabinoid products has been likened to playing a game of Russian Roulette, with effects ranging from a euphoric high to much less desirable outcomes such as paranoia, hallucinations, seizures, unconsciousness, and even death. Data from the City of Houston indicates that of emergency medical services (EMS) calls for problems with illicit drugs, the highest number was related to synthetic cannabinoids.
- Houston remains a primary manufacturing and distribution center for the production of synthetic cannabinoid products, contributing to the sustained, high level of availability throughout the region. Manufacturing of synthetic cannabinoid products was also identified in Beaumont and Corpus Christi, but the level of this activity in these areas or in other regions of the Houston HIDTA remains unknown.



Unfortunately, due to the highly lucrative potential profit margin, drug trafficking organizations will continue to be motivated to produce and sell synthetic cannabinoid products in the region for the foreseeable future. In a prominent example of this profitable activity, a Pakistani native living just outside of Houston in Sugar Land pled guilty to running a multi-million dollar “Kush” enterprise in November. It was alleged that he supplied \$14 million worth of synthetic cannabinoid products to retail stores in Houston. According to news reports, there was so much cash in this man’s home that “police were summoned to his son’s school because the boy was handing out \$20 and \$100 bills to classmates.”<sup>44</sup> This enterprise was considered to be one of the largest synthetic cannabinoid trafficking organizations in the country. A total of sixteen people were charged as a result of this four-year, multi-agency investigation in Houston.<sup>45</sup>





## Cocaine

*The threat from cocaine remains high. Both powder cocaine and crack cocaine are widely used and are available at moderate or high levels in most Houston HIDTA counties.*



*\$2.1 Million in cocaine seized at the Falfurrias checkpoint*



### **U.S. citizen caught smuggling more than \$5.8 million in cocaine**

Kingsville agents with the U.S. Border Patrol seized Wednesday nearly 185 pounds of cocaine valued at over \$5.8 million at the Sarita checkpoint.

*Substantial quantities of cocaine are seized at the Houston HIDTA's two inland Border Patrol checkpoints each year, as can be seen in the accompanying photos. In the photo on the left, approximately 65 pounds of cocaine worth \$2.1 million was seized at the Falfurrias Checkpoint during an inspection in June.<sup>46</sup> Over two dozen bundles of cocaine were concealed within the quarter panels of a pickup truck. In the photo above, almost 185 pounds of cocaine worth over \$5.8 million was seized at the Sarita Checkpoint in November. There were 32 bundles found in three suitcases in the trunk of a Mercedes.<sup>47,48</sup>*

### **Overall Assessment of Threat**

Cocaine holds its position as one of the Houston HIDTA's most long-standing, high-level drug threats. Although survey respondents ranked powder cocaine or crack cocaine less frequently as their primary drug threat than methamphetamine or synthetic cannabinoids, almost half (49%) ranked powder cocaine among their top three drug threats. Crack cocaine was ranked among the top three threats by approximately one-third (32%) of respondents.

### **Form and Availability of Cocaine**

Powder cocaine and crack cocaine both remain readily available throughout the Houston HIDTA. Ninety-three percent (93%) of survey respondents ranked the availability of powder cocaine as either high (55%) or moderate (38%). Ninety percent (90%) ranked the availability of crack cocaine as high (54%) or moderate (36%). There has been an increase in the percentage of survey respondents ranking the availability of powder cocaine as high, from 48% in 2016 to 55% in 2017. Similarly, for crack cocaine, the percentage ranking availability as high rose from 42% in 2016 to 54% in 2017. Over three-fourths (83%) of survey respondents reported that conversion of powder cocaine to crack is taking place in their communities. This is a fairly stable trend, and similar percentages are reported for conversion each year.

### **Use, Purity and Price for Cocaine**

**Use:** Both powder cocaine and crack cocaine use are prevalent among adults within Houston HIDTA communities. Survey results indicated that among the top three drugs used by adults, powder cocaine ranked second only to methamphetamine. Crack cocaine ranked fourth, after hydroponic marijuana. Neither powder cocaine nor crack cocaine was frequently reported among the top drugs used by teens in the region.

**Price:** Drug investigators varied in opinion as to whether the price for cocaine has decreased or remained the same. The price reported for a kilogram of cocaine ranged from as low as \$22,500 to \$29,000, with most investigators stating that the average price was between \$24,000 and \$26,000 in the Houston area. In comparison to average pricing information given in the previous year (\$27,500 per kilogram), it appears to have decreased. Drug investigators always mention in interviews that there are a multitude of factors that determine pricing, such as the type of relationship between the buyer and seller (new or established clientele), amount of drug purchased, etc.

## **Source, Transportation, Trafficking, and Distribution of Cocaine**

**Source:** Most of the cocaine within the Houston HIDTA enters the region from Mexico. It is likely that it originates from Colombia as the majority of the cocaine seized in the United States comes from this country.<sup>34</sup>

**Transportation:** Cocaine, as with other most other drug types, is predominantly transported into and through the area using the region's major highways and roads. Cocaine seizures identified in 2017 have included the use of passenger vehicles, 18-wheelers, and commercial buses. As in previous years, cocaine was also seized at Houston's George Bush Intercontinental Airport in 2017. Cocaine wash-ups discovered suggest that this drug is being transported using maritime vessels as well, although information about the extent and nature of this means of transportation is an intelligence gap in the Houston HIDTA. Some cocaine was shipped from the Rio Grande Valley to Houston in the past year, but cocaine is not one of the primary types of drugs seized via mail and mail delivery services.

**Trafficking and Distribution:** Mexican DTOs are by far the primary group trafficking cocaine in the Houston HIDTA. Other groups such as Colombian DTOs still remain involved, although to a much lesser degree. Additionally, some gang members have been reported to be involved in trafficking cocaine. At the retail level, cocaine is distributed by gang members and other street-level drug dealers in Houston HIDTA communities.

## **Public Health and Safety Threat from Cocaine**

### Toxicity-Related Death Trends for Cocaine in Harris County

Of all available public health and safety data, toxicity-related death data most prominently illustrates the immense threat from cocaine in the region. Far more people are dying from problems related to cocaine use than from other drug types in Harris County according to data provided by the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences. In 2017, there were 242 deaths in which cocaine was listed as a factor, or 39.4% of all toxicity-related deaths. This is similar to the number and percentage for the previous year. More information related to Harris County toxicity-related deaths can be found in Appendix G beginning on page 79.

### Treatment-Related Trends related to Cocaine Use in Harris County

In Harris County, the percentage of patients entering state-funded treatment services for a primary problem with cocaine/crack in 2017 was 12.1%, second only to alcohol (27.6%) and marijuana (27.6%). This is slightly down from the previous year's percentage of 14%. Further information on state-funded treatment admissions can be found in Appendix F beginning on page 76.

### Crime Trends related to Cocaine in the Houston HIDTA

Crack cocaine continues to be ranked by survey respondents to be among the top two drugs linked to crime in the Houston HIDTA, second only to methamphetamine. Highlighting this connection between cocaine and violent crime, in early January of 2018 in Jefferson County, eight people were charged with drug trafficking violations over the past five years involving either powder or crack cocaine. Discussing the indictment, the Beaumont Police Chief stated that the individuals indicted are "some of the most violent criminals that as a group, we have seen in a long, long time," "the ones committing the vast majority of violent crimes" in this city.<sup>49</sup>

## **Seizure Trends for Cocaine**

A DEA Intelligence Brief published in August indicates that Colombian cocaine production has increased significantly and is contributing to a rise in supply in the United States. The report forecasts that both cocaine supply and usage is likely to continue to expand in the near future.<sup>50</sup> Mirroring this national trend, Initiative seizure totals over the last several years suggest availability is also rising in the Houston HIDTA.

Cocaine seizure totals have always been higher than any other drug type except marijuana in the region, but in the past year, drug investigators in Houston reported more seizures as well as larger seizures of cocaine. The Houston HIDTA Initiatives' cocaine seizure totals illustrate this upward trend. Regional cocaine seizures have increased from 932 kilograms in 2014, to 1,140 kilograms in 2015, 4,476 kilograms in 2016 and up to 6,259 kilograms in 2017. The increase in this time span is 571%. Additional seizure statistics for the Houston HIDTA Initiatives can be found in Appendix H on page 82.



## Summary of Trends and Intelligence Gaps for Cocaine

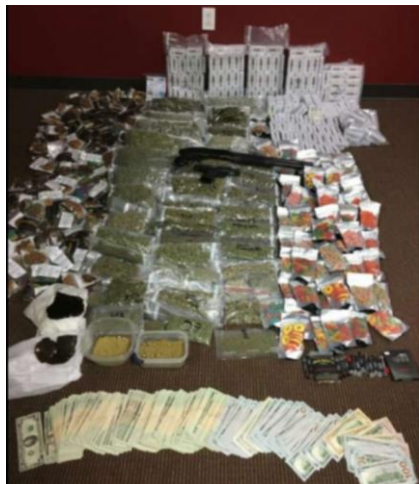
Summary of Trends and/or Intelligence Gaps related to Cocaine:

- Cocaine remains a long standing, high-level drug threat.
- Both forms of cocaine (powder cocaine and crack cocaine) remain readily available and their use is prevalent in most Houston HIDTA communities.
- Powder cocaine is among the top three drugs used by adults in the region, chosen by survey respondents more frequently than any other drug except methamphetamine.
- Preliminary Harris County death data indicate that cocaine was a contributing factor in more deaths than any other drug type, as was the trend in the previous year.
- Cocaine is second only to alcohol and marijuana as the drug for which patients from Harris County most frequently seek treatment services at state-funded facilities.
- Crack cocaine was reported by survey respondents as one of the top two drugs linked to crime in the region, second only to methamphetamine.
- Higher amounts of cocaine continue to be seized than any other drug type except marijuana in the region and, in 2017, drug investigators in Houston have reported more cocaine seizures as well as larger cocaine seizures. The Houston HIDTA Initiatives' regional cocaine seizure totals reflect this upward trend rising from 4,476 kilograms in 2016 to 6,249 kilograms in 2017.
- Cocaine is primarily transported into the Houston HIDTA via the region's highways using passenger vehicles, commercial buses and tractor trailers. Cocaine wash-ups found along the Gulf Coast each year indicate possible maritime smuggling, but intelligence gaps exist regarding the scope of this activity in the region.



*Cocaine is one of the most common drug types being transported from Mexico into and through the Houston HIDTA. Shown in this photo, the Houston HIDTA Initiative FBET seized 156 pounds of cocaine worth \$2.1 million from the cargo area of an 18-wheeler traveling on U.S. 59 North. Based on a bill of lading found inside the vehicle, this "cargo" was headed onward to the East Coast. The driver of the vehicle was found to be from Edinburg, a city in South Texas near the Mexican border.<sup>51</sup>*

## Marijuana



*Marijuana poses a high and rising drug threat due an influx of highly-potent hydroponic marijuana and marijuana concentrates being diverted from states in which this drug has been legalized.*



Drug investigators report that they are seeing more hydroponic marijuana, as well as marijuana concentrates (wax and oil) and marijuana edibles coming into the region from “legal” states such as California and Colorado. Shown in the above left photo, a seizure made by the Houston HIDTA Initiative MOCONET in March in Montgomery County included 10.6 pounds of hydroponic marijuana, 14 kilograms of marijuana-infused edibles, 11 ounces of marijuana wax, 302 marijuana-infused Vape pens, as well as two firearms and over \$11,000 in cash.<sup>52</sup> A similar seizure was made in Montgomery County in August. The Constable’s Office in Precinct One seized 11 pounds of hydroponic marijuana, 387 two-dose units of THC oil packaged for use in vapor cigarettes, 150 grams of THC oil, three grams of THC wax, and two LSD stamps.<sup>53</sup> Some of the vape cartridges with THC oil seized are shown in the above photo on the right.

### Overall Assessment of Threat

Marijuana is the most widely used illicit drug in the Houston HIDTA. Although recreational marijuana use remains illegal in Texas, there is a higher level of social acceptance of the use of this drug now that it has become legal to use in other states. Even though there is a growing perception of marijuana as a lower-level drug threat, in actuality, the threat from marijuana is high and rising. This is due to the increasing availability and popularity of hydroponic marijuana and marijuana concentrates containing much higher levels of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) than traditional, imported Mexican marijuana. This threat is particularly high for adolescents due to known negative effects on the developing brain from regular use.

### Form and Availability for Marijuana

**Form and Source:** The main forms of marijuana include low-grade marijuana imported from Mexico, commonly referred to by drug investigators as “dirt weed” or “reggie” and domestically-produced hydroponic marijuana, referred to as “hydro.” Other marijuana products include marijuana concentrates such as THC wax and oil, and THC-infused edibles. Hydroponic marijuana is produced in the region and an increasing amount of “hydro” is coming from states where it has been legalized, predominantly from California and Colorado. Concentrates and edibles generally originate from “legal” states, but there is a low level of production of these marijuana-related products in the region. Drug investigators reported seeing more products that are labeled as containing CBD (cannabidiol), another cannabis compound, but in most cases, these products had not been tested and therefore, their actual contents remain unknown. However, in May of 2018, new information was obtained by the Houston Police Department regarding these products. Investigators found that almost all of the CBD oil that they had purchased from smoke shops in Houston contained an illegal substance. The majority contained synthetic cannabinoids, but over 1,400 bottles contained THC.<sup>54</sup>

**Availability:** Ninety percent (90%) of survey respondents reported either moderate (26%) or high (64%) levels of availability of low-grade Mexican marijuana, similar to the previous year. For hydroponic marijuana, 87% of survey respondents reported either moderate (26%) or high (61%) levels of availability. There was an increase in respondents reporting high availability of hydroponic marijuana, from 42% in 2016 to 61% in 2017. Drug investigators reported that marijuana concentrates and THC-infused food products are also increasingly available. Seizures of “vape” cartridges containing THC oil, in particular, were noted as a rising trend.

## Use and Price for Marijuana

**Use:** Low-grade marijuana was reported most frequently by survey respondents as being among the top drugs used by teens, followed by synthetic cannabinoids, hydroponic marijuana and controlled prescription sedatives (Xanax). School police officers in the Houston area affirmed that marijuana is the most commonly used drug, and that use is occurring both in middle schools and high schools. Hydroponic marijuana was reported by the highest percentage of survey respondents as being the drug “trending upward” in use by teens. Hydroponic marijuana was among the top three drugs used by adults as well, chosen only less frequently than methamphetamine and powder cocaine by respondents. Drug investigators throughout the region continue to report that “hydro” is preferred to “reggie” for those who can afford it and many stated that hydroponic marijuana is the primary type of marijuana they see on the streets.

**Price:** The average price for imported marijuana in the Houston area is approximately \$400 to \$450 per pound. The price for hydroponic marijuana is much higher, selling for around \$2,200 to \$2,400 per pound. A gram of marijuana wax ranges from \$60 to \$100, a vape cartridge containing THC oil costs between \$40 and \$60, and edibles generally range between \$30 and \$50 each.

## Marijuana Production

**Overview of Marijuana Production:** Large-scale hydroponic marijuana production is taking place in the region, predominantly in Harris County as well as in surrounding counties either in or near the Houston metropolitan area such as Fort Bend, Montgomery, and Brazoria. Production of marijuana concentrates such as marijuana wax, hash oil, and THC-infused edibles occurs at lower levels, and is often found in conjunction with indoor marijuana grow houses. Outdoor marijuana cultivation is encountered in the rural, forested regions of the Houston HIDTA such as in Montgomery, Walker and Liberty counties and grow operations with thousands of marijuana plants are generally identified each year.

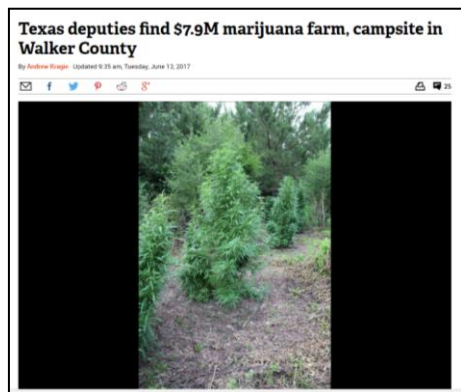
**Indoor Hydroponic Marijuana Production:** Hydroponic marijuana production is occurring at high levels in the Houston area. The indoor marijuana grow houses found in Houston are generally quite sophisticated, with elaborate systems for automated water and lighting, and electrical systems that have been modified to conceal high rates of energy consumption. Entire homes are often used for production, with different rooms designated for varying stages of the process. The average number of plants per home is between 100 and 300, but larger operations with more plants are still sometimes seized. The vast majority of these marijuana grow houses are operated by Asian individuals and groups, although persons of all demographic characteristics are involved in this illicit activity due to its potential for high profit with relatively low risk. Investigators continue to encounter repeat offenders due to minimal charges at the state level for this crime. Because of the close-knit, exclusive nature of Asian criminal groups, as well as limited law enforcement resources to direct specifically to investigate the extent of marijuana production, much about their activities remains an intelligence gap. Often those tending the grow houses are compartmentalized from the upper-level drug trafficking organization, and it is difficult for law enforcement to ascertain further information about DTO leadership, as well as details such as the financial aspects of these organizations.

General threats from hydroponic marijuana production include the destruction of real estate through water damage, electrical issues with resultant fires, as well as structural damage to houses. There are also potential health risks from mold in homes that have been used to produce marijuana. Criminal groups often conduct “drug rips,” stealing highly lucrative hydroponic marijuana from another organization’s grow operation, bringing violent crime and safety threats to areas in which marijuana production is occurring. Families are often shocked when they discover that this type of drug activity is occurring behind closed doors right there in their own neighborhoods. In the photo on the right, a grow house was found in a vacant two-story home located directly behind a high school in northwest Houston in June. More than 150 marijuana plants were seized by Precinct 5 Constables.<sup>55</sup>





## Marijuana Production (Continued)



**Outdoor Marijuana Cultivation:** As previously mentioned, outdoor grow operations in the region tend to be found in remote, densely forested areas near a water source. Unlike indoor marijuana grow operations in which Asian individuals and groups have primary involvement, Mexican nationals are generally associated with outdoor marijuana cultivation. Illegal immigrants typically monitor the plants at these sites, living in makeshift camps. Weapons such as shotguns and rifles are commonly found nearby, posing a safety risk for those who encounter them. It has been challenging for law enforcement to learn more about the scope of this illicit activity because illegal immigrants working at these locations generally flee when they arrive, and when they are apprehended, they are unable or unwilling to provide

information about who is running these operations at a higher level. In some instances, outdoor grow operations have been tied to Mexican cartels, but in most cases, higher-level involvement remains an intelligence gap. The accompanying photo show a large outdoor grow operation with 5,255 plants that was seized by law enforcement in Walker County in June. As is typical, a Hispanic man fled into a heavily-wooded area as they approached the site. A shelter near the plants indicated that the man had probably been living there. The street value of the marijuana plants was estimated at over \$7 million dollars.<sup>56,57</sup>

## Transportation, Trafficking, and Distribution of Marijuana

**Transportation:** Marijuana is regularly transported into and through the area using the region's major highways and roads. It is most commonly transported in passenger vehicles and tractor trailers. However, use of alternative transportation methods is also occurring. For example, marijuana was being transported via the railway system in Refugio County in May. Law enforcement encountered three illegal immigrants jumping off a train hauling scrap metal and found approximately 500 pounds of marijuana in an open box car.<sup>58,59</sup> This seizure is shown in the photo on the right.



Marijuana wash-ups are also discovered each year, suggesting that this drug is being transported using maritime vessels. The extent and nature of transportation via railroads and maritime routes are intelligence gaps in the Houston HIDTA. User amounts of marijuana are reported to be transported via commercial aircraft, but due to the bulkiness of this drug type, larger amounts would be difficult to conceal. The extent of the use of private aircraft for this purpose remains unknown, but user amounts of marijuana are routinely seized at the George Bush Intercontinental Airport in Houston.

An increasing trend is the shipment of hydroponic marijuana, marijuana concentrates and THC-infused edibles into the region via mail delivery services, although the full extent of this transportation method remains unknown. Sixty-eight percent (68%) of survey respondents reported that drugs are being shipped through the mail in their jurisdiction, second only to the use of passenger vehicles. Hydroponic marijuana shipments are primarily originating from California and Colorado, but packages are also coming into the area from Washington and Oregon. Of the THC products being encountered, an increase in seizures of THC vape cartridges was noted as a prominent trend in 2017. Although hydroponic marijuana is found in mail packages most frequently, imported Mexican marijuana is being sent from the Rio Grande Valley in South Texas to the Houston area at lower levels.



*These photos are of a seizure of hydroponic marijuana seized by the Houston HIDTA Initiative FBET that was being shipped into the Houston area via Priority Mail.*

## **Transportation, Trafficking, and Distribution of Marijuana (Continued)**

**Trafficking and Distribution:** Mexican DTOs are the primary organization involved in trafficking bulk amounts of low-grade marijuana from Mexico through South Texas and into and through the Houston HIDTA. Asian drug trafficking organizations are believed to be heavily involved in trafficking of hydroponic marijuana produced in the Houston area. The groups or individuals involved in trafficking hydroponic marijuana that originates from other states remain largely unknown. At the retail level, marijuana is distributed by a wide variety of gangs and individual drug dealers.

### **Public Health and Safety Threat from Marijuana**

#### Treatment Trends for Marijuana

As more states legalize marijuana, an increasingly relaxed public attitude towards the use of this drug is becoming apparent. Domestically-produced hydroponic marijuana along with a wide array of THC-infused products have become more readily available both on the open market in “legal” states, and unfortunately, also on the black market in states such as Texas. Choosing from a menu of available strains of hydroponic marijuana with exotic names and flavors has become “trendy,” among users, according to drug investigators.

A trend that may not be as outwardly evident, but is of great significance is that with the exception of alcohol, more individuals are seeking services at state-funded treatment facilities in Texas for problems related to the use of marijuana than for any other drug. In Harris County, alcohol and marijuana are tied in percentage as the top drug-related problem for which patients at state-funded treatment facilities are seeking care. At private treatment facilities in Houston, providers interviewed affirmed that cannabis use disorder is a primary reason for patient admissions, second only to alcohol-related issues. Additional state-funded treatment data can be found in Appendix F beginning on page 76.

#### Health Risks from Use of High-Potency Marijuana and Concentrated THC Products

##### THC Content of Marijuana Today

Another important trend is that the level of THC, the chemical that produces the characteristic “high” in marijuana, has risen dramatically in tested samples in the United States. The DEA reported that in 1995, the average THC potency of traditional leafy marijuana seizures was around four percent; in 2015, the average THC potency was nearly three times as high, with an average of 11 percent.<sup>34</sup> For marijuana produced in Colorado where it is legal for both medicinal and recreational use, the potency has been reported to be much higher. Most researchers agree that the marijuana of today is stronger than that of the past, but they differ in opinion as to exactly how much more potent it has become. A researcher from the University of Colorado who is leading one of the largest, long-term studies on marijuana has reported a THC content of around 25% at dispensaries across the state.<sup>60</sup> The THC in marijuana concentrates is even higher than in leafy marijuana seizures. The DEA reported that the average THC content of marijuana concentrate seizures (hash oil) has also increased significantly over the years. The average THC content in hash oil in 1995 was 13 percent. By 2015, it had increased to 55 percent and some hash oil seizures were found to have a THC content of over 90%.<sup>34</sup>

##### Marijuana Use in Adolescence

Potential health effects that may be associated with these highly potent drugs are largely unknown and continue to be studied. Although no actual deaths were identified as being attributable to marijuana use in the region, it appears probable that the increased potency of today’s marijuana is likely to equate to a greater drug threat to users. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), “higher THC levels may mean a greater risk of addiction if users are regularly exposing themselves to high doses.”<sup>61</sup>

There has been much debate on the relative safety of marijuana use, but one area in which a higher level of concurrence has been found is related to research on marijuana use in adolescence. According to NIDA, “people who begin using marijuana before age 18 are four to seven times more likely than adults to develop a marijuana use disorder.”<sup>61</sup> This is quite concerning given the increasing social acceptance of marijuana use reported among teens in the region. In a statement published by the American College of Pediatricians in April, it was reported that “marijuana is addicting and has adverse effects on the developing brain.”<sup>61</sup> “While approximately nine percent of users overall become addicted to marijuana, about 17% of those who start during adolescence and 25-50% of daily users become addicted.”<sup>62</sup>

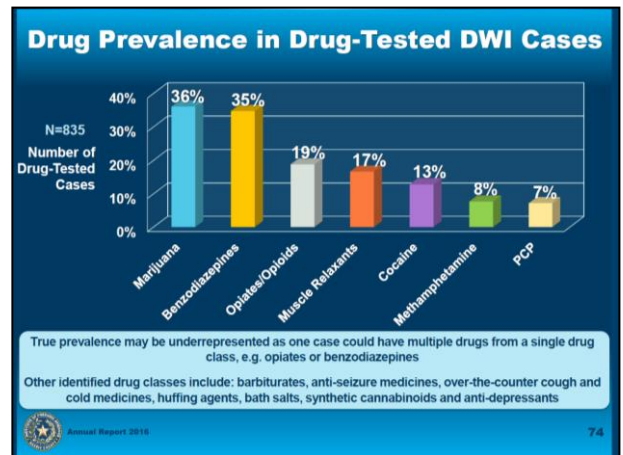
## Public Health and Safety Threat from Marijuana (Continued)

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) also issued a warning of rising risks to youth from loosening marijuana laws in February, reporting that “Marijuana is not a benign drug, especially for teens. Their brains are still developing, and marijuana can cause abnormal and unhealthy changes.”<sup>62</sup> Additionally, AAP states that:

“Adolescents who use marijuana can develop serious mental health disorders such as addiction, depression and psychosis. Marijuana causes dulled sensory awareness, motor control, coordination, judgment and reaction time, all of which can cause accidents involving teens who drive. Marijuana can impair lung function. It also causes decreased short-term memory and concentration, attention span and problem-solving skills, which can interfere with learning.”<sup>63</sup>

### Public Safety Risks related to Marijuana Use: Drugged Driving

It is quite likely that because marijuana is so commonly used in the Houston HIDTA, the level of driving while under the influence of this drug may also be high. Marijuana-related compounds such as active THC and THC metabolites are found in specimens tested as part of DWI cases each year in Harris County. Of cases in which testing for illicit drugs was performed in 2016, marijuana was the most common drug type, followed by benzodiazepines, as can be seen in the accompanying chart from the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences.<sup>64</sup> However, it is important to point out that illicit drugs are only tested for if an individual’s blood alcohol level is found to be less than 0.10. Therefore, the true percentage of DWI cases in which marijuana use may have been a factor remains unknown.



### Medical Marijuana in Texas: First Dispensaries Open Their Doors



Marijuana has not been legalized in Texas for general recreational or medicinal use, but it has been legalized for use medicinally to treat individuals with intractable epilepsy through the Compassionate Use Act established by the Texas Legislature in 2015.

According to the Texas Department of Public Safety’s (DPS) website, The Compassionate Use Act “required DPS to create a secure registry of physicians who treat epilepsy for the purpose of prescribing low-THC cannabis to patients who have been diagnosed with intractable epilepsy. In addition, the bill requires DPS to license at least three dispensing organizations by September 1, 2017, should they meet the requirements. The license authorizes the organizations to cultivate, process and dispense low-THC cannabis to prescribed patients. As of December 15, 2017, the department had issued three dispensing organization licenses: Consortium Texas was licensed on September 1, 2017; Compassionate Cultivation was licensed on October 31, 2017; and Surterra Texas was licensed on December 15, 2017.”<sup>65</sup> The closest dispensary to the Houston HIDTA is located in Schulenburg, Texas in Fayette County. Cannabis being grown there is expected to be ready for harvest and distribution in December of 2018.<sup>66,67</sup>

### Seizure Trends for Marijuana

By volume, marijuana seizure totals are higher than for any other drug type. There was a significant increase both in the amount of marijuana as well as marijuana concentrates seized by the Houston HIDTA Initiatives in 2017. See Appendix H on page 82 for a comparative analysis of marijuana seizure data for the Houston HIDTA Initiatives from 2016 to 2017.



## Summary of Trends and Intelligence Gaps for Marijuana

### Summary of Trends and/or Intelligence Gaps related to Marijuana:

- The threat level for marijuana is high and rising. The popularity and use of hydroponic marijuana and marijuana concentrates with high levels of THC contributes to this drug's elevated threat level, particularly for adolescents due to its known negative effects on the developing brain.
- Hydroponic marijuana has become the preferred form of the drug for those who can afford it. Survey respondents reported both low-grade marijuana and hydroponic marijuana to be among the top three drugs used by teens and that hydroponic marijuana use is "trending upward" in use by adolescents. They also reported hydroponic marijuana among the top three drugs used by adults.
- Hydroponic marijuana production is still occurring at high levels in Houston. These operations are primarily run by Asian criminal groups and individuals, but due to their exclusive, close-knit nature, intelligence gaps exist regarding some aspects of their activity. In addition to this abundant source of supply, more high-grade marijuana, as well as marijuana concentrates and THC-infused edible products are being diverted from "legal" states such as California and Colorado. Even less is known about the DTOs involved in diversion in the region. The level of transportation of hydroponic marijuana and marijuana products using mail and mail delivery services continues to rise, although the full extent of this method remains unknown.
- Some production of marijuana wax and oil, as well as THC-infused edibles has been identified in conjunction with marijuana grow houses, but this activity appears to be limited due to the rising availability of these products through diversion from western states.
- Outdoor marijuana cultivation continues to take place in rural, forested counties in the region. These operations are typically fairly large in size and attended to by illegal immigrants who live at campsites near the marijuana plants. These operations are thought to be run by Mexican nationals, and in some cases, have been proven to be linked to Mexican cartels, but much information about these operations remain an intelligence gap because individuals working at these sites generally flee when law enforcement arrives and if apprehended, they are unable or unwilling to provide information about who is running these operations at a higher level.
- Marijuana is primarily transported into the Houston HIDTA via the region's highways using passenger vehicles, commercial buses, and tractor trailers as well as through mail delivery services. Marijuana wash-ups found along the Gulf Coast each year as well as occasional seizures from small vessels and vehicles along the shoreline indicate maritime smuggling is occurring. The extent of this activity is an intelligence gap.

### THC-A: An Emerging Drug Trend?



In April of 2018, drug investigators from the Corpus Christi Police Department in Nueces County made a seizure of this white crystalline substance, shown in the photo on the left. They reported it had a slight yellowish-tint. Despite its meth-like appearance, it field-tested negative for methamphetamine, but positive for THC. The arrested suspect reported that he had obtained the substance from the state of Washington. He called it "THC-A" and "crystalline" and said that it was a very pure form of THC. This drug is currently being tested at the Texas Department of Public Safety Crime Laboratory.<sup>68</sup> The Fort Bend County Precinct 3 Constables Office also reported encountering a white substance that tested positive for THC in 2018, shown on the right.<sup>69</sup>

## Opioids/Opiates

### Fentanyl and Fentanyl Analogs

Illicit fentanyl and fentanyl analogs are at the center of the national opioid epidemic and are believed to be responsible for a high number of drug-related overdoses and deaths across the country. They are being manufactured in China and possibly Mexico according to the Drug Enforcement Administration's National Drug Threat Assessment.<sup>34</sup> Over the past year, the threat from fentanyl and fentanyl analogs in the Houston HIDTA has increased significantly. There has been a rapid rise in the number and size of seizures involving these dangerous drugs in the Houston area:

1. Counterfeit controlled prescription drugs such as hydrocodone, oxycodone and alprazolam (Xanax) that contained fentanyl or fentanyl analogs
2. Kilogram-level amounts of fentanyl represented as heroin and/or mixed with heroin
3. Smaller amounts of fentanyl powder as well as fentanyl in liquid form in an eye dropper bottle
4. A small, but highly potent amount of carfentanil powder. Carfentanil is an elephant tranquilizer many times more lethal than fentanyl<sup>70</sup>



It is of great concern that it is no longer possible for drug users to know with any certainty what they are buying when they purchase illicit and pharmaceutical drugs in the Houston HIDTA. Even drug dealers are often unaware of what they are actually selling to their clientele.

### **Availability, Use, Price and Transportation for Fentanyl and Fentanyl Analogs**

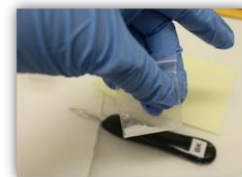
The misuse of prescription-grade fentanyl (i.e. fentanyl patches) is not new, but the presence of illicitly produced fentanyl and fentanyl analogs are an emerging drug threat in the Houston HIDTA. Significant intelligence gaps exist regarding availability, use, price, transportation, trafficking and distribution. Kilogram amounts of fentanyl seized are thought to have been smuggled from Mexico and some of the smaller amounts of powder seized are believed to have entered the region by mail from China. Illicit fentanyl and fentanyl analogs have primarily been encountered in relation to counterfeit prescription pills and heroin. Further information on these seizures will be discussed in the subsequent sections of this report on these drug types.

### **Seizures of Synthetic Opioids in Powder Form**



The use of the internet to obtain drugs by mail is a rising trend, and this trend includes the purchase of fentanyl. A notable example in June was the arrest of a man from Katy who was charged with possessing 102 grams of fentanyl that he had ordered from China. He was apprehended near the post office where he was attempting to pick up his package. Cocaine and heroin were also found in his apartment. The man was believed to be supplying these drugs to young people in the West Houston area.<sup>71,72,73</sup>

Also in June, narcotics officers from the Houston Police Department seized 80 milligrams of a powdery substance that originally field-tested positive for methamphetamine, but was later found to be carfentanil, shown in the photo on the right. This small amount of the drug is believed to be the equivalent of 4,000 lethal doses.<sup>74,75</sup> Due to the extreme danger posed to officers encountering fentanyl and fentanyl analogs, the Harris County District Attorney's Office allowed a change in policy, no longer requiring field testing for drug charges. In July, the Houston Police Department and Harris County Sheriff's Office, along with other agencies in Harris County discontinued drug testing in the field. Some officers have also begun carrying the overdose reversal drug Narcan (naloxone).<sup>76,77</sup>

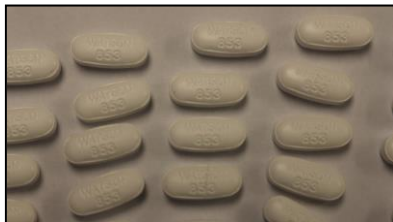


### **Public Health and Safety Threat from Fentanyl and Fentanyl Analogs**

There was a 120% increase in the number of deaths in which fentanyl and/or fentanyl analogs were a contributing factor in Harris County, from 25 in 2016 to 55 in 2017. At least three deaths from carfentanil toxicity occurred in the Houston HIDTA. These deaths occurred in Harris, Galveston and Brazoria counties. More toxicity-related death data can be found in Appendix G beginning on page 79.

## **Controlled Prescription Drugs: Opioids and other Misused Prescription Drugs**

*The threat level from controlled prescription drugs is high and continues to rise due to an increasing number of counterfeit pills found to contain dangerous substances such as fentanyl, fentanyl analogs or other synthetic opioids.*



Crime laboratories report that a large portion of the seized pills they receive for testing are now “fake” and that more hydrocodone, oxycodone, and alprazolam (Xanax) tablets contain dangerous chemicals such as fentanyl and fentanyl analogs. There has also been an increase in tablets containing U-47700, a synthetic opioid also referred to as “Pink,” as well as the identification of a new synthetic opioid called U-49900 in a fake Xanax pill that also contained furanyl fentanyl and U-47700. The images above show fake hydrocodone containing fentanyl on the left, fake hydrocodone containing U-47700 in the center photo, and a fake Xanax tablet containing fentanyl on the right, courtesy of the Houston Forensic Science Center.

### **Overall Assessment of Threat**

The misuse of controlled prescription drugs is one of the Houston HIDTA’s most serious and persistent drug threats. Although controlled prescription drugs have reportedly become harder to obtain in other areas of the country, this is not the case in Houston. Criminals remain heavily involved in diversion activities, using this large, metropolitan city’s numerous “pill mills,” burglarizing pharmacies, and engaging in prescription fraud to keep the illicit drug market saturated. Most recently, the region’s supply of pills is being augmented through an increasing trend of counterfeit pill production. Counterfeit pills have been found to contain a variety of highly dangerous substances, including fentanyl and fentanyl analogs, heightening this drug threat.

### **Forms and Use of Controlled Prescription Drugs**

The illicit use of controlled prescription drugs is so prevalent in the region that the combination of hydrocodone (an opioid), alprazolam (a benzodiazepine), and carisoprodol (a muscle relaxant) regularly obtained through Houston’s pill mills is well-known throughout the country as the “Houston Cocktail.”

Hydrocodone and alprazolam remain the two most commonly misused prescription drugs. Since hydrocodone became a Schedule II drug, other pain medications in a less restrictive class have risen in popularity including Ultram (tramadol) and Tylenol with codeine. Stronger opioids such as oxycodone are also used, but with much lower frequency. Dilaudid (hydromorphone) remains a popular drug in the Northern Houston HIDTA in Jefferson County, although not widely used in other areas. Prescription stimulants (Vyvanse, Adderall, Ritalin, etc.) are used at lower levels. The city of Houston has been called “Syrup City” due to a high level of recreational use of prescription-grade cough syrup containing codeine and promethazine.”<sup>78</sup> However, most seizures of cough syrup in the region today no longer consist of a codeine/promethazine mixture, but contain only promethazine.

### **Other Forms of Opioids in Pill Form**

#### **U-47700/U-49900**

Synthetic opioids such as U-47700 and U-49900 have emerged as newer types of opioids found in counterfeit pills. These “research chemicals” are generally purchased through the internet from China. Little is known about their use in the region, but the Houston HIDTA made its first seizure of U-47700 powder in 2017. According to the Houston Forensic Science Center, there has been an increase in fake pills submitted for testing that contained U-47700 in the past year.

## Other Forms of Opioids in Pill Form (Continued)

### Kratom



“Kratom” is an herbal, opioid-like drug made from the leaves of a tree found in Africa and Southeast Asia. In the United States, Kratom can be purchased as dried tea leaves, as a powder, as capsules, and in liquid and resin form. It is used by some individuals as a natural method of relieving pain and reducing the side effects of opioid withdrawal. Due to concerns about its abuse and safety, in August of 2016, the DEA announced its intent to temporarily place the chemicals in Kratom (mitragynine and 7-hydroxymitragynine) into Schedule I. However, two months later in October, it withdrew its intent to schedule Kratom due to a large number of public comments against this action.<sup>79</sup> In November, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued a public health advisory

stating that “evidence shows that Kratom has similar effects to narcotics like opioids, and carries similar risks of abuse, addiction, and in some cases, death.”<sup>80</sup>

Kratom may be gaining some popularity in the Houston area. It has been mentioned by treatment professionals as a drug used by some patients as an alternative to opioids over the past few years and recently, the Houston HIDTA Initiative FBET identified a group of individuals involved in the manufacture and distribution of Kratom capsules. FBET investigators stated that Kratom users have told them that its effects “feel like heroin.” A photo of the Kratom capsules along with the professional-looking packaging being used to market this substance is shown above. The extent of the use of Kratom in the region is an intelligence gap.

## Source, Availability and Price of Controlled Prescription Drugs

### Source and Prescription Drug Diversion

**Source:** Houston is the main source for controlled prescription drugs in Houston HIDTA counties, although some also enter the area from Mexico. This city is an epicenter for diversion activities, supplying not only the drug market in the region, but also other nearby states with large quantities of controlled prescription drugs. Diversion is such a major issue that there are at least two different agencies in Houston with task forces that focus solely on the reducing this threat: The Drug Enforcement Administration and the Houston Police Department (HPD sponsors the Houston HIDTA Diversion Squad).

**Diversion:** The most common methods of prescription drug diversion include use of the city’s large number of corrupt doctor’s offices and associated pharmacies (“pill mills”), prescription fraud, and pharmacy burglaries and robberies. Pharmacy burglaries and robberies are associated with a significant amount of property crime, compounding this drug threat. Thieves often use pry bars and sledge hammers to gain access, creating extensive damage.<sup>81</sup> News reports of pharmacy burglaries in the Houston area, such as is shown in the photo on the right, are commonplace.<sup>82</sup>

Data obtained from the Houston Police Department Burglary and Theft Division indicated that there were 61 pharmacy burglaries that involved theft of prescription drugs in the City of Houston in 2017. However, these figures do not even begin to adequately encompass the full extent of this activity as many burglaries are also occurring in the greater Harris County area and surrounding counties.

**Availability:** Due to the high level of diversion, controlled prescription drugs in Houston remain readily available. Overall, for the Houston HIDTA, survey respondents reported either high (53%) or moderate (28%) availability for controlled prescription opioids and the majority (80%) reported that availability had not changed from 2016. For controlled prescription benzodiazepines, there was a similar trend reported, with most survey respondents reporting high (58%) or moderate (32%) availability, and over three-fourths (78%) reporting that availability had remained the same from 2016.





## Source, Availability and Price of Controlled Prescription Drugs (Continued)

**Price:** Houston HIDTA diversion investigators reported that the street-level price for hydrocodone in Houston is \$6 to \$8 per pill. The street-level price for Xanax in Houston is \$3 to \$5 per pill. For “locally pressed” fake Xanax pills, the price is as low as \$1 to \$2 per pill. In other areas of the Houston HIDTA, hydrocodone prices are higher than in Houston. For instance, in Galveston, hydrocodone is approximately \$8 to \$10 per pill and Xanax is \$5 to \$10 per pill. If they are fake-pressed, they sell for \$2 to \$4. In Corpus Christi in Nueces County, the price for hydrocodone is \$8 to \$10 per pill and Xanax is \$3 to \$5 per pill. Tramadol is reportedly the most popular prescription pill being sold on the streets in Corpus Christi and it sells for \$2 per pill. In Beaumont, the average price for hydrocodone and Xanax ranges from \$3 to \$6 per pill. Prices for higher-strength opioids such as oxycodone and hydromorphone (Dilaudid) command higher prices. Houston HIDTA diversion investigators reported a price of \$10 per milligram, or approximately \$20 to \$30 per pill. In Nueces County, oxycodone is also priced by milligram, averaging about \$15 to \$20 per pill. Dilaudid is most popular of these higher strength opioids in the northern Houston HIDTA, closest to the border of Louisiana. Its price in Beaumont is \$30-\$40 per pill.

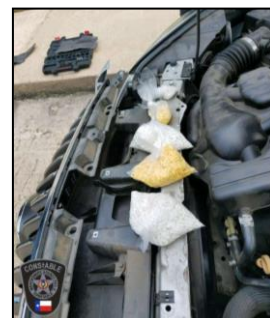
## Transportation, Trafficking and Distribution of Controlled Prescription Drugs

**Transportation:** Drug traffickers collect bulk amounts of pills in Houston from diversion activities and distribute them both locally and regionally. Seizures of large quantities of pills are not uncommon in the Houston HIDTA. For example, in June, a local drug dealer from a west Houston suburb was charged after investigators seized 16,000 Xanax pills, along with hydrocodone and a variety of other drugs such as cocaine, marijuana, and marijuana-based products (THC oil and edibles) from his home.<sup>83</sup>



Bulk quantities of pills are also routinely transported from Houston to other regions of the Houston HIDTA and surrounding areas. In August, a seizure of a massive amount of pills diverted from Houston was made near Bryan, a town just northwest of the Houston HIDTA. A total of 53 pounds of Xanax was seized, along with 13 pounds of hydrocodone.<sup>84</sup>

Houston drug traffickers regularly transport pills to neighboring states such as Louisiana as well where they are able to obtain a higher price for them. For instance in May, the Lafayette Police Department arrested a woman from Houston with 11 kilograms of cocaine and 1,853 oxycodone pills.<sup>85</sup> Louisiana residents also regularly travel to the Houston area to obtain controlled prescription drugs from pill mills and then transport them back to their home state either by vehicle or by mailing them. In July, two Louisiana men were arrested in Montgomery County on U.S. 59 with 748 grams of Xanax hidden inside the hood of their car.<sup>86</sup>



**Trafficking and Distribution:** A wide variety of individuals and organized criminal groups are involved in prescription drug diversion and trafficking in the region ranging from medical doctors to gang members, due to the constant demand and significant potential profit margin from this activity.<sup>87</sup> Gang members from Houston have been identified as having extensive involvement in pharmacy burglaries and robberies throughout the nation to obtain bulk amounts of controlled prescription drugs to sell on the illicit drug market. Houston area gang members have been arrested in relation to pharmacy burglaries in at least 25 states. At the street level, controlled prescription drugs are also primarily distributed by gang members, as well as a multitude of other individuals residing in communities

throughout the region. Most teens using prescription drugs are still believed to be obtaining them from friends and relatives or from medicine cabinets in their own homes.



## Public Health and Safety Threat from Controlled Prescription Drugs

The public health impact from the misuse of controlled prescription opioids and benzodiazepines in the Houston HIDTA is clearly evident:

**Opioids and benzodiazepines are the top two drug types for which the Texas Poison Center Network receives exposure calls throughout the Houston HIDTA.** Of all drug-related exposure calls to the Texas Poison Center Network in 2017, the highest number of exposure calls statewide was for alprazolam (Xanax) with 2,624 calls, followed by hydrocodone with 1,554 calls, tramadol with 1,441 calls, and codeine with 1,248 calls. In Harris County, this same pattern can be seen. The highest number of exposure calls was for alprazolam (280), followed by hydrocodone (182), tramadol (164) and codeine (161). In fact, this trend is consistent throughout the Houston HIDTA, with alprazolam and hydrocodone ranking highest for number of exposure calls in most Houston HIDTA counties. See Appendix I beginning on page 83 for more information on top drug-related exposure calls.

**Prescription opioids and benzodiazepines are a contributing factor in a high number of toxicity-related deaths in Harris County.** Preliminary 2017 data from the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences indicate that cocaine was listed as a contributing factor in the highest number of toxicity-related deaths in Harris County. Prescription benzodiazepines/sedatives ranked second-highest and prescription opioids ranked third-highest. Further information comparing toxicity-related deaths in Harris County from 2016 to 2017 can be found in Appendix G beginning on page 79 of this assessment.

**Treatment providers in Harris County report that a rising number of patients are seeking services for prescription opioid addiction.** Data from state-funded treatment facilities for 2017 shows that patients entering services for problems with prescription opioids accounted for approximately 6% of all admissions statewide, similar to the 2016 percentage of 6.2%. For Harris County, admissions related to prescription opioids rose from 5.3% in 2016 to 7.6 % in 2017, and admissions related to benzodiazepines/sedatives rose from 2.2% to 2.6% of admissions. Appendix F beginning on page 76 provides further state-funded treatment facility data. Staff from a large treatment facility in Houston interviewed for this assessment stated that top admissions continue to be for problems with alcohol and then marijuana, but that the number of admissions related to prescription opioid use ranked third highest and is still on the rise. Hydrocodone was reported as one of the main drugs for which patients were having addiction issues, often in combination with benzodiazepines.

## Counterfeit Prescription Pills and Production in Houston

Adding to the already ominous public health threat from controlled prescription opioids and benzodiazepines is a rise in the number of counterfeit pills being pressed in the Houston area that contain even more dangerous substances. The identification of fake pills containing a cocktail of drug types is a rising trend. Of greatest concern is the increasing number of fake hydrocodone and alprazolam tablets that contain fentanyl, fentanyl analogs or other synthetic opioids. It is known that at least some of these counterfeit pills are being pressed in the Houston metropolitan area. In May, the DEA seized a large drug production laboratory at a home in Richmond in a neighborhood southwest of Houston in Fort Bend County<sup>88,89</sup> At this residence, agents seized “half a kilogram of powdered fentanyl, 10 kilos of oxycodone pills laced with fentanyl, half a kilo of crystal methamphetamine, 5 kilos of Adderall pills laced with meth, 6 kilos of Xanax pills laced with meth, four commercial pill press machines used to manufacture the fraudulent prescription pills, three handguns and a semi-automatic rifle” according to a news source.<sup>90</sup> The organization involved in this counterfeit pill production operation was selling the pills online through the dark web and shipping them to purchasers through the mail. There were thousands of buyer reviews on their website.<sup>90</sup>



## Seizure Trends for Controlled Prescription Drugs

Data for the Houston HIDTA Initiatives showed a 254% increase in the total seizure amounts of controlled prescription drugs from 2016 to 2017, due to a very large rise in the amount of alprazolam (Xanax) seized. Total pharmaceuticals seized increased from 54 kilograms in 2016 to 192 kilograms in 2017. Of the 2017 total, 152 kilograms were alprazolam seizures. More information for Houston HIDTA Initiative seizures can be found in Appendix H on page 82.

## Summary of Trends and Intelligence Gaps for Controlled Prescription Drugs and Other Synthetic Opioids

Summary of Trends and/or Intelligence Gaps related to Controlled Prescription Drugs and other Synthetic Opioids:

- The threat level for controlled prescription drugs is high and rising due to the widespread use of hydrocodone and alprazolam (Xanax) in the region, coupled with an increase in counterfeit production of these pills. Fake hydrocodone, Xanax, and oxycodone pills containing dangerous fentanyl and fentanyl analogs are increasingly being seized in Houston, as well as pills with other synthetic opioids such as the research chemical U-47700.
- A new synthetic opioid called U-49900 emerged on the drug market in Houston in the past year. It was identified in a fake Xanax pill that also contained U-47700 and a fentanyl analog. Counterfeit pills containing a cocktail of dangerous drugs are increasingly being identified and this is considered to be a rising trend.
- Kratom, a legal drug that is being watched by the DEA as a “drug of concern” is being used in Houston. Users report it has effects that are similar to heroin. A Kratom manufacturing and distribution operation has been identified in the Houston area.
- The public health impact from controlled prescription drugs and other synthetic opioids in Harris County is evident. Prescription opioids and benzodiazepines were a contributing factor in a higher number of toxicity-related deaths than any other drug types except cocaine. The number of deaths linked to fentanyl and fentanyl analogs in Harris County remains low, but it is significant that they have more than doubled from the previous year. Exposure calls to the Texas Poison Center Network for prescription drugs (particularly for alprazolam and hydrocodone) are higher than for any drug type.
- The Houston HIDTA’s first seizure of carfentanil, a powerful elephant tranquilizer and fentanyl analog was made in Houston in June. Although it was only 80 milligrams, a toxicologist reported that this amount is equivalent to 4,000 lethal doses. Sadly, the first three deaths from carfentanil toxicity were also identified in the region in Harris, Brazoria, and Galveston counties. The source of the carfentanil remains unknown. Due to the extreme officer safety risk from fentanyl and fentanyl analogs, officers in Harris County are no longer required to conduct drug testing in the field and some are now carrying naloxone (Narcan), an opioid antidote.
- Availability of controlled prescription drugs remains high. There is a seemingly endless supply of these drugs being obtained from diversion activities at Houston’s many illicit “pill mills,” as well as through a high level of pharmacy burglaries and prescription fraud. Houston remains a primary source city for bulk quantities of controlled prescription drugs, supplying not only the region, but also other nearby states.



*The Houston HIDTA Initiative TNET seized a counterfeit pill production operation in Houston in August. These photos show the pill presses and die molds that were being used for making fake prescription pills such as Xanax and hydrocodone. Drug investigators report that counterfeit pills often have a crumbly consistency, due to their lack of the protective waxy coating found on prescription-grade pills. Because of the danger associated with potential exposure to fentanyl and/or fentanyl analogs, narcotics officers now wear personal protective equipment as a safety precaution at suspected drug labs.*

## Heroin

*Heroin remains a low-to-moderate, but rising drug threat. It is not a primary drug of choice, but use has increased in the region. Multiple kilogram-level seizures of fentanyl represented as heroin as well as seizures of heroin mixed with fentanyl have significantly elevated the threat level from this drug type over the past year.*



### Overall Assessment of Threat

Heroin is a low-to-moderate drug threat in most Houston HIDTA counties. The region's historically low level of heroin use, coupled with a sustained high level of supply of controlled prescription opioids available at a relatively inexpensive cost is thought to have kept most individuals who are addicted to prescription pain medications from turning to heroin as an alternate opiate source. Heroin is seized with much less frequency than drugs such as methamphetamine, cocaine and marijuana, and therefore, most drug investigators in the region report heroin to be a lower threat priority than these other drug types. However, an emerging trend of multiple kilogram-level seizures of fentanyl being represented as heroin as well as heroin mixed with fentanyl has caused a major shift in the perception of threat, heightening it considerably.

*Note: Fentanyl has also been found in cocaine in other states, but this trend has not been identified in the Houston HIDTA.<sup>91</sup> Because of the higher rate of use of powder cocaine and crack cocaine, an emergence of cocaine-laced fentanyl could be devastating to Houston HIDTA communities. If the methamphetamine supply were to become adulterated with fentanyl, the threat would be even worse.*

### Forms of Heroin

Most of the heroin seized in the region is black tar heroin, and to a lesser extent, brown powder heroin. Drug investigators are seeing more brown powder heroin than before and sometimes see a whitish-colored heroin referred to on the streets as "China White." Most of this light-colored heroin is thought to be black tar heroin cut with other substances, but it is possible that some could be a form of white heroin being produced in Mexico. The increase in powder heroin may be a marketing strategy employed by drug dealers due to the popularity and higher price that can be obtained for this form of the drug in other areas of the country. In addition to these more common forms, the Brazoria County Crime Laboratory reported a seizure of fake oxycodone tablets comprised of a combination of heroin, codeine, hydrocodone, and papaverine.<sup>92</sup>

### Availability, Use and Price for Heroin

**Availability:** Drug investigators in the Houston area say that in general, heroin is more available than it was in the past and kilogram-level quantities can be more readily obtained. Overall for the region, most survey respondents reported low (32%) to moderate (35%) availability of heroin, similar to 2016. High availability of heroin was reported by 26% of survey respondents, including those from Harris, Galveston, Fort Bend, Montgomery, Jefferson, Aransas, Nueces, San Patricio, Wharton, and Calhoun counties. An increase in heroin availability was reported by 33%, and included respondents from Austin, Harris, Galveston, Fort Bend, Brazoria, Montgomery, Jefferson, Orange, Nueces, San Patricio and Aransas counties.

**Use:** Heroin was not ranked among the top three drugs most commonly used by teens or adults in the region, but slightly over one-third (36%) of survey respondents reported it to be one of the top drugs trending upward in use by adults, second only to methamphetamine (reported by 75% of respondents as rising in use). Investigators reported higher rates of heroin use in Southeast Harris County in Pasadena, West Harris County in Katy, as well as in Fort Bend, Montgomery, Galveston, Nueces, and Aransas counties.

**Price:** The Houston HIDTA's Heroin Squad reported that the price for black tar heroin is \$18,000 to \$22,000 per kilogram and \$450 to \$750 per ounce. For brown powder heroin, it is \$33,000 to \$38,000 per kilogram and \$900 to \$1,100 per ounce. The price for the "China White" heroin that is believed to come from Mexico is known to be even more expensive. It was reported by the Houston HIDTA Initiative FBET to be \$1,600 per ounce. Although the Heroin Squad did not have a current price for this "China White" heroin from Mexico, they reported that a white heroin of unknown origin had recently sold for \$2,000 per ounce or approximately \$55,000 to \$65,000 per kilogram on the Houston drug market.

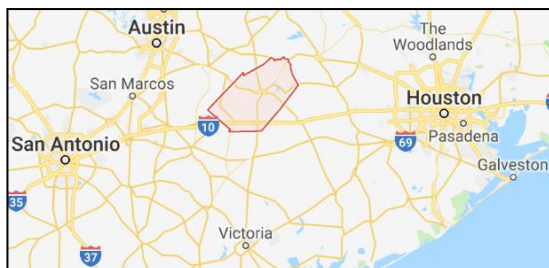


## Source, Trafficking and Distribution of Heroin

**Source, Trafficking and Distribution:** The vast majority of the heroin encountered in the Houston HIDTA comes from Mexico. Mexican DTOs are the primary wholesale traffickers of heroin and some Hispanic gangs are also involved in the trafficking of large quantities of this drug. Distribution at the retail level is conducted by gang members and individual drug dealers.

**Transportation:** Mexico has increased its production of heroin, taking advantage of this financial opportunity to meet the strong demand for the drug in the United States. As a result, Mexican drug traffickers are transporting more heroin across the Southwest Border.<sup>34</sup> The Houston HIDTA is not considered to be a primary destination point for heroin coming from Mexico, but it is believed to be a major transportation hub for further distribution to areas of the country such as the East Coast where a higher price can be obtained. However, because of the increasing amount of heroin being moved into and through the Houston HIDTA, it is likely that higher quantities of heroin are also staying in the region than in the past.

Heroin seizures occur less frequently in the region than other drug types so the various ways it is being transported through the area are less well-known. When heroin seizures are identified, this drug is typically transported in vehicles using major highways. DEA reporting indicates that “heroin transiting the Houston area is increasingly being concealed in vehicle batteries.”<sup>34</sup> One instance of this concealment was identified in the Houston HIDTA in April. Four bundles of black tar heroin worth \$1.5 million dollars were seized by the Kleberg County Sheriff’s Office on U.S. Highway 77 in South Texas. The heroin was found within a sport utility vehicle’s batteries.<sup>93</sup> This seizure is shown in the photo above. A very large seizure of 35 kilograms of black tar heroin occurred in Fayette County on Interstate 10 in March. Although this county is outside of the Houston HIDTA (shown in the red box on the map below), many large drug seizures made on this major highway in Fayette County are destined for Houston. This heroin seizure, worth \$6.4 million dollars, was concealed inside wooden blocks in a tool box in the bed of a truck.<sup>94,95</sup>



## Public Health and Safety Threat from Heroin

It is important to point out that while an increase in availability of heroin, as well as a rise in its use was reported by drug investigators in some areas, in general, its overall availability and rate of use in the region still remains far lower than for other drug types. Therefore, the relative impact of these increases remains unknown. However, some concerning public health trends have been identified that warrant attention.

### Toxicity-Related Death Trends for Heroin

The number of deaths in which heroin was listed as a contributing factor in Harris County remains lower than for cocaine or prescription drugs such as opioids or benzodiazepines, but as can be seen in the table on the following page, it has been slowly, but incrementally rising for a number of years. Additionally, the percentage of deaths increased more substantially in the past year, rising from 15.6% of toxicity-related deaths in 2016 to 23.7%\* in 2017.

Perhaps of greatest concern is that of the 146 deaths\* that were associated with heroin use in 2017, 31 or 21% also listed fentanyl as a contributing factor. In stark contrast, in 2016, of the 96 deaths where heroin was a contributing factor, only two (2%) also listed fentanyl as an additional factor. See Appendix G on page 79 for further information on toxicity-related deaths in Harris County for 2017. (\*2017 data is preliminary at this time.)



## Public Health and Safety Threat from Heroin (Continued)

Deaths in Harris County with Heroin Listed as a Contributing Factor: 2009 to 2017

YEAR	NUMBER OF DEATHS WITH HEROIN AS A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR	TOTAL NUMBER OF TOXICITY-DRUG RELATED DEATHS	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL TOXICITY-DRUG RELATED DEATHS
2009	18	500	3.60%
2010	20	521	3.83%
2011	30	447	6.71%
2012	32	460	6.95%
2013	41	451	9.09%
2014	73	450	16.22%
2015	80	550	14.55%
2016	96	617	15.56%
2017*	146	615	23.74%

NOTE: This information was compiled by the Houston Investigative Support Center (HISC) using data provided by the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences (HCIFS). The data for 2017 is preliminary. These figures are not considered to be official HCIFS statistical data.

### Treatment Trends Related to Heroin

Although heroin is not among the primary drugs for which patients are seeking treatment services, there has been a rise in admissions for problems related to this drug. Data from state-funded treatment facilities show that the percentage of patients seeking treatment for problems with heroin has increased statewide from 13.5% of admissions in 2016 to 16.7% in 2017. Data specifically for Harris County shows a trend of rising admissions as well, increasing from 5.9% in 2016 to 8.9% in 2017. Staff from private treatment facilities in Houston that were interviewed for this assessment did not report heroin to be among the top three drugs for which services were being sought, but at one of the larger treatment facilities, it was reported that there has been a continued increase in young adults being admitted for problems with heroin use. More information on state-funded treatment admissions can be found in Appendix F on page 76.

### Emergency Room Trends for Heroin

Local hospital emergency rooms in the largest cities in the Houston HIDTA (Houston, Beaumont, Corpus Christi, and Victoria) were called to determine the drug types for which patients were most frequently seeking medical services. Of those that responded, heroin was not reported as one of the main drugs, except in Corpus Christi. In Corpus Christi, the primary drug type for which people are seeking emergency room care is methamphetamine, followed by opioids and opiates, including heroin. It was reported that patients have been seen daily over the past six months for problems related to heroin use as well as for the use of fentanyl patches that have been “cooked off and then injected.” In Houston, a physician who works at a large public hospital reported that people are not seen as often for problems related to heroin as for drugs such as PCP (phencyclidine), synthetic cannabinoids, cocaine, and amphetamines, but that there has been a rise in both acute heroin intoxication and withdrawal cases in the past year. Treatment with low doses of naloxone (Narcan), the opioid reversal drug, has been successful so he believes it is unlikely that the heroin being used was laced with fentanyl.

### Texas Poison Center Network Trends for Heroin

The number of heroin-related exposure calls reported to the Texas Poison Center Network in Harris County remains low in comparison to other drug types. In 2016, there were 13 calls and this number rose to 19 calls in 2017. Most of the heroin-related exposure calls in Harris County in 2017 were in the 20 year and older age group (17 of the 19 calls). The number of heroin-related exposure calls for other Houston HIDTA counties were very low and all were in the 20 year and older age group. After Harris County, the highest number of calls was in San Patricio County (4 calls), followed by Fort Bend and Jim Wells counties (3 calls each), Montgomery and Nueces counties (2 calls each), and Galveston and Victoria counties (1 call each).

### Seizure Trends for Heroin

Heroin seizure trends support reporting by Houston area drug investigators of increasing availability of larger quantities of this drug. Seizure totals for the Houston HIDTA Initiatives rose by 83% from the previous year. See Appendix H on page 82 for a comparative analysis of heroin seizure data for the Houston HIDTA Initiatives from 2016 to 2017.

## Summary of Trends and Intelligence Gaps for Heroin

### Summary of Trends and/or Intelligence Gaps related to Heroin:

- The threat level for heroin is low-to-moderate, but is rising due to a newly emerging trend of multiple kilogram-level seizures of fentanyl represented as heroin as well as heroin seizures that were found to be mixed with fentanyl.
- Mexican drug trafficking organizations are the source of most of the heroin found in the Houston HIDTA. Black tar heroin is the most common type encountered. Brown powder heroin is found to a lesser, but possibly increasing extent. A lighter-colored heroin referred to on the streets as “China White” is also available at lower levels and is believed to originate from Mexico as well. The kilograms of fentanyl represented as heroin and heroin mixed with fentanyl that were seized in the region are thought to be have been transported into the Houston area by DTOs from Mexico, but this remains under investigation.
- Drug investigators report that heroin is more available than it was in the past and higher quantities are more easily obtainable. Much of the heroin transiting into and through the area from Mexico is believed to be destined for states in which there is a greater demand and where a higher price can be obtained for this drug type, but it is likely that an increasing quantity of this drug is also staying in the Houston HIDTA region than in the past.
- Although heroin has never been a primary drug of choice in the Houston HIDTA, a rise in the use of this drug has been reported in some areas. In general, however, its overall availability and rate of use in the region still remains lower than for other drug types. Therefore, the relative impact of these trends remains unknown.
- A rise in the number of deaths in Harris County in which heroin was a factor, as well as an increase in the number of deaths linked to both heroin and fentanyl are concerning trends. Although there have been fewer deaths with heroin as a contributing factor in Harris County than for cocaine or prescription drugs, it is of significance that of the 146 deaths (\*preliminary data) that were linked to heroin in 2017, 31 or 21% also listed fentanyl as a contributing factor. In sharp contrast, in 2016, of the 96 deaths attributed to heroin, only 2 (2%) also listed fentanyl as a factor.



*The Houston HIDTA Initiative TNET seized 14 pounds of black tar heroin in April of 2018, shown in the photo on the far left. They also seized Mexican candy in sealed packages that turned out to be heroin. This is the first time that this Initiative has encountered heroin in candy form. From a public health standpoint, the threat from heroin is elevated due to the discovery of this dangerous concealment method.*



## Ecstasy and Other Drugs

### Assessment of Threat

Ecstasy and other illicit drugs such as PCP and LSD remain fairly low-level drug threats. These drugs are generally not the focus of major investigations so less is known about these substances. They are available, but not used with the same level of frequency in the region as the previously discussed drug types.

### Forms, Availability, Use and Price

Ecstasy is generally found as small tablets of various colors and shapes, as shown in the photograph above. It is used primarily as a recreational party drug by teens and young adults. It is available in most Houston HIDTA communities at moderate (43%) to high (26%) levels, according to survey respondents. In Houston, ecstasy tablets sell for approximately \$5 per pill. The level of availability and use for PCP and LSD are less well-known. PCP is often found in small vials such as in travel-size mouthwash containers or vanilla extract bottles. PCP users reportedly smoke regular cigarettes, as well as marijuana and synthetic cannabinoid cigarettes that have been dipped in this substance. PCP is readily available in the Northern Houston HIDTA in Jefferson County, and in Harris and Galveston counties in the Central Houston HIDTA. Beaumont drug investigators reported that PCP-dipped cigarettes sell for \$10 each and for a vanilla extract-sized bottle, the price is about \$40. LSD is most commonly found as hits on blotter paper and is typically used experimentally by younger people. The price for LSD was reported to be \$10 per hit. The most common type of LSD is “synthetic LSD,” (phenethylamines), but staff at Houston area laboratories said they are starting to see “traditional” LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide) again.

### Source, Manufacturing, Transportation, Trafficking and Distribution

Clandestine pill production in Houston includes not only fake prescription pills, but also the creation of other popular pills in demand on the illicit drug market such as ecstasy tablets. The photo on the right shows a pill press die mold in the shape of “Hello Kitty” that was likely used for this purpose. It was seized from a counterfeit pill production operation in Houston in August in which fake hydrocodone and Xanax were also being made. Staff at Houston area crime labs concur that most ecstasy tablets generally contain methamphetamine and caffeine. Some tablets were found to contain synthetic cathinones (“bath salts”). Less seizure samples actually contain MDMA as in the past. Some ecstasy tablets were found to contain buprenorphine (an opioid) and diazepam (a benzodiazepine) as well as methamphetamine. As with counterfeit prescription pills, ecstasy tablets containing a cocktail of drug types may become an emerging trend. Asian criminal groups have been known to be involved in wholesale ecstasy trafficking, but other groups are also involved in this activity. Various gangs and individuals are involved in ecstasy distribution in Houston HIDTA communities.



### Seizure Trends

Seizure statistics for the Houston HIDTA Initiatives show a decrease in seizure totals for ecstasy. See Appendix H on page 82 for a comparative analysis of ecstasy seizure data for the Houston HIDTA Initiatives from 2016 to 2017.

#### Summary of Trends related to Ecstasy and Other Illicit Drugs in the Houston HIDTA:

- The threat level for ecstasy and other illicit drugs such as PCP and LSD is relatively low.
- Due to clandestine pill production, the chemical composition of ecstasy tablets is variable. Most ecstasy tablets are found to contain methamphetamine and caffeine, some still contain MDMA as in the past, and others contain synthetic cathinones (“bath salts”) such as N-ethylpentylone or ethylone.
- While most of the LSD found in the region is “synthetic LSD” (phenethylamines) rather than actual lysergic acid diethylamide, staff at Houston area laboratories reported that they are now beginning to see regular LSD again.

# DRUG TRAFFICKING AND MONEY LAUNDERING ORGANIZATIONS IN THE HOUSTON HIDTA

## Overview

*Mexican drug trafficking organizations account for the majority of the identified DTOs in the Houston HIDTA, due to the proximity to the U.S.-Mexico border.*

The Houston HIDTA is a heavily-used corridor through which Mexican cartels move their drug products northward and bulk cash proceeds southward, with Houston as a central transshipment hub for their drug trafficking-related activities. Due to the proximity to the U.S.-Mexico border, the majority of the drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) investigated by the

Houston HIDTA Initiatives are groups with some type of connection to Mexico. Trusted DTO associates, as well as prison gang members and some street gang members assist Mexican drug trafficking organizations in their illicit endeavors, facilitating the flow of drugs regionally as well as to other states. Some also act as couriers, transporting currency from the sale of these drugs back to Mexico. Drug distribution in Houston HIDTA communities is typically conducted by local gang members and individual drug dealers. Some local, regional, and international drug trafficking organizations are also involved in drug production such as marijuana cultivation, methamphetamine conversion, and the manufacture of synthetic cannabinoid products and counterfeit pills.

Most DTOs operating in the Houston HIDTA are considered to be poly-drug distributors, providing a combination of drug types to consumers based on popular demand and the potential for maximum financial gain.<sup>96</sup> Marijuana, cocaine, and methamphetamine are the most commonly seized drugs in the region. Large seizures of these three drug types are regularly made at the region's two inland Border Patrol checkpoints, as well as on major roads and highways throughout the Houston HIDTA. Of the DTOs investigated by Houston HIDTA Initiatives, cocaine was trafficked by the highest percentage (58%), followed by methamphetamine (30%), marijuana (25%) and heroin (15%). Controlled prescription drugs, ecstasy and other drugs were trafficked much less frequently. At the retail level, street gangs and individuals sell a wide variety of drug types in Houston HIDTA communities.

<b>All DTOs/MLOs Being Investigated by the Houston HIDTA Initiatives</b>	
Characteristics	
Total DTOs/MLOs	535
Mexican/Hispanic	458
African American	106
Caucasian	80
Colombian	15
Asian	13
Venezuelan	8
Central American	8
Middle Eastern	7
Cuban	2
Dominican	2
Other Categories (1 each)	9
Total Members (Leaders)	7,684 (725)
Average DTO Size	15.7
Multi-Ethnic	165
Gang-Related	81
Violent	58
Poly-Drug	190
Money Laundering Activities	67+
Federal Case Designations	
OCDEF	62
CPOT	19
RPOT	5
PTO	67
*Data Obtained from PMP, Queried March 29, 2018	

The Houston HIDTA Initiatives are currently investigating a total of 535 drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) and money laundering organizations (MLOs). Thirty-one percent (31%) of these DTOs/MLOs operate on the local level. The other 69% have a broader scope with 23% operating on a multi-state level and 46% operating internationally.

Of these 535 DTOs and MLOs, 468 organizations were specifically identified as DTOs and 67 were identified as MLOs. Newly identified DTOs/MLOs in 2017 included 47 local DTOs/MLOs, 24 multi-state DTOs/MLOs, and 61 international DTOs/MLOs. This is a total of 132 new organizations being investigated. The breakdown of newly identified DTOs and MLOs is provided below:

- 43 local DTOs and 4 MLOs
- 22 multi-state/regional DTOs and 2 MLOs
- 51 international DTOs and 10 MLOs



# International Drug Trafficking Organizations

## Mexican Drug Trafficking Organizations: The Houston HIDTA's Most Significant DTO Threat

Mexican drug trafficking organizations operate more extensively throughout the Houston HIDTA than any other type of DTO and pose the highest threat. The Gulf Cartel (or more accurately, various fractions of what was once called “The Gulf Cartel”) controls drug trafficking plazas in Tamaulipas, the region of Mexico that is in closest proximity to the South Texas Border.<sup>97</sup> As can be seen in the map below from the DEA’s 2017 National Drug Threat Assessment, this cartel dominates the drug market in the Houston HIDTA.<sup>34</sup> According to interviews with law enforcement throughout the region, as well as results from the Houston HIDTA annual drug threat survey, the Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas are the two most commonly encountered DTOs in Houston HIDTA drug investigations. Other DTOs reported to have a presence in the region include, but are not limited to the Sinaloa Federation and Michoacán-based DTOs such as the La Nueva Familia Michoacána and the New Generation Jalisco Cartel (Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación or CJNG).

Emphasizing the stronghold that Mexican DTOs have in the Houston HIDTA, not only are cartels directing drug trafficking operations in this region from their base in Mexico, cartel members have actually been apprehended near Houston. For example, in 2016, Los Zetas leader “Kiko” Trevino, nephew of Miguel Trevino (Z40) was arrested in Baytown, located just 25 miles away.<sup>98,99</sup> The extent to which cartel members’ relatives and associates reside in the region is an intelligence gap, but it is believed to be high. Strategically placing DTO operatives in this large metropolitan city has afforded them an even deeper level of control of the drug market. It has also provided them with an ideal staging location for further drug distribution to other areas of the United States. Houston is known to be used extensively as a transshipment hub.

**Figure 2. Areas of Influence of Major Mexican TCOs.**  
 FDO - Division | DO - District Office | RO - Resident Office



Source: DEA

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## Other Drug Trafficking Organizations Posing a Substantial Threat in the Houston HIDTA

Although to a much lesser degree than Mexican DTOs, other drug trafficking organizations also pose a threat in the Houston HIDTA. Asian drug trafficking organizations are known for their involvement in large-scale hydroponic marijuana cultivation in the Houston area. Middle Eastern drug trafficking organizations have been identified for significant involvement in the manufacturing and/or distribution of synthetic cannabinoid products (“Kush”). Some South American DTOs are also active in the region. For example, members of a drug trafficking and money laundering organization who were from Colombia and Puerto Rico, but living in Houston were recently arrested for distribution of kilogram-level quantities of heroin through Southeast Texas to the New Orleans, Louisiana area from 2014 to 2017.<sup>100</sup>

## Membership Characteristics and General Affiliations of International Drug Trafficking Organizations

Characteristics of international DTOs/MLOs being investigated by the Houston HIDTA Initiatives are shown in the tables below. Data in these tables was obtained from the Houston HIDTA’s Performance Management Process (PMP) database. The table on the left shows characteristics for all international DTOs/MLOs being investigated by the Houston HIDTA Initiatives. The table on the right shows only the newly identified international DTOs/MLOs in 2017. Trends for MLOs are described in combination with DTOs rather than separately in this assessment. Note: There is no option in PMP to describe money laundering activities for DTOs and so the totals in the tables related to money laundering do not accurately reflect the level of this activity.

Drug investigators believe that most of their investigations are connected at some level to Mexican drug cartels. As can be seen, the vast majority of the international DTOs/MLOs being investigated by the Houston HIDTA Initiatives are Mexican nationals or individuals of Hispanic descent. At least 34 of these international investigations are *definitively* linked to high-level drug trafficking organizations, substantiated by their status as Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force (OCDETF) cases. Fifteen (15) involve Consolidated Priority Organization Targets (CPOTs), one involves a Regional Priority Organized Target (RPOT), and 41 involve Priority Target Organizations (PTOs).

Although PMP data provides some information to assist in describing the overall threat from DTOs in the region, it is not adequate to fully illustrate the magnitude of the threat from high-level drug trafficking organizations. While the Houston HIDTA Initiatives opened three new OCDETF cases in 2017, data provided by the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Southwest Region indicates that there were a total of 20 new OCDETF cases opened in Houston HIDTA counties in 2017 in the Southern and Eastern Districts of Texas.<sup>101</sup>

All International DTOs/MLOs Being Investigated by the Houston HIDTA	
Characteristics	
Total International DTOs/MLOs	244
Mexican/Hispanic	259
African American	22
Caucasian	21
South American	18
Central American	6
Middle Eastern	5
Asian	3
Other Ethnicities	4
Total Members (Leaders)	3,892 (345)
Average DTO Size	17.36
Multi-Ethnic	96
Gang-Related	29
Violent	18
Poly-Drug	74
Money Laundering Activities	43+
OCDETF	34
CPOT	15
RPOT	1
PTO	41

\*Data Obtained from PMP, Queried April 16, 2018

International DTOs/MLOs Newly Identified by the Houston HIDTA in 2017	
Characteristics	
Total International DTOs/MLOs	61
Mexican/Hispanic	68
Caucasian	10
African American	9
Central American	4
South American (Colombian)	2
Other Ethnicities (Canadian)	1
Total Members (Leaders)	300 (76)
Average DTO Size	6.16
Multi-Ethnic	31
Gang-Related	3
Violent	2
Poly-Drug	13
Money Laundering Activities	10+
OCDETF	3
CPOT	0
RPOT	1
PTO	3

\*Data Obtained from PMP, Queried April 16, 2018

## A Primary Characteristic of Houston HIDTA DTOs: Strong International Connections

The proximity of the Houston HIDTA to Mexico affords a wealth of opportunities to drug traffickers to establish and maintain significant drug sources of supply. The following case examples highlight how strong Mexican connections\* (\*cartels in Mexico as well as cartel associates such as Mexican nationals residing in the Houston HIDTA) facilitate importation of bulk quantities of a variety of types of drugs into and through the region.

- In March, two Mexican nationals living in Houston were sentenced to life in prison for their leadership roles in a heroin trafficking organization. According to a press release by the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of Texas, these two brothers "ran a large-scale heroin distribution network that spanned more than eight years. During that time, they distributed more than 30 kilograms of heroin to a large number of distributors based throughout Texas to include Houston, Galveston, Dallas and Fort Worth."<sup>102</sup> They used a residence in Houston as a base to stash and process the heroin before distribution. Six other members who also resided either in Houston and Galveston were also sentenced.
- In July, a 45-year old man from Conroe in Montgomery County was sentenced to 188 years in federal prison by the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of Texas for trafficking cocaine and conspiring to launder money. His cocaine source of supply lived in Mexico at the time. As part of the investigation, this man told a confidential source "that he moved large amounts of cocaine (25-100 kilograms at a time) and that he had a very well-connected drug supplier who could make such large deals happen." The man was specifically convicted for his involvement in the transportation of two loads of cocaine totaling 101 kilograms. He used his car dealership to launder drug proceeds, and also provided used vehicles to his drug supplier to transport drugs to other parts of the United States.<sup>103</sup>
- In August, a 31-year old Houston man was sentenced by the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of Texas to 25 years in federal prison for his role in "a drug trafficking organization that imported methamphetamine and cocaine from Mexico through the Brownsville ports of entry. The narcotics were concealed within car batteries or in sealed candy bags. Based out of Matamoros, Mexico, the drug trafficking organization would then have the narcotics transported to Houston for distribution to others."<sup>104</sup> This man was apprehended at the Sarita Checkpoint in the Houston HIDTA on a return trip from Mexico.
- In December, a 33-year old Houston man was sentenced by the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of Texas to thirty years in prison for his role as a supervisor overseeing the operations of a drug trafficking organization that was found to have brought at least 62 kilograms of methamphetamine, 18 kilograms of cocaine, 20 pounds of marijuana and a half a pound of heroin from Mexico for distribution in Houston and Beaumont as well as to other parts of the United States. As part of this OCDETF investigation, it was found that this man had been dealing directly with a confirmed member of the Knights Templar Cartel from Mexico to obtain the drugs.<sup>105</sup> A 45-year old illegal immigrant from Mexico living in Houston was also sentenced. He had been receiving the shipments of methamphetamine from Mexico in liquid solution and was converting it to a crystalline form at a location in Houston.<sup>106</sup>

## General Activities and Methods of International DTOs

### Conveyance and Concealment Trends

As mentioned previously, Mexican DTOs primarily use the region's major roads and highways for their illicit activities, although they also exploit alternative transportation methods, particularly as a means of circumventing the two inland Border Patrol checkpoints in the southern portion of the Houston HIDTA. General transportation trends are summarized in the text box on the right. A wide range of conveyance methods are used for drug trafficking activities including personal vehicles such as passenger cars, trucks, and sports utility vehicles and commercial vehicles such as tractor trailers and charter buses. Marine vessels, trains, airplanes and the U.S. mail and mail delivery services are also methods employed by DTOs to transport drugs into the region.

Local, regional and international DTOs use a wide variety of concealment techniques, constantly changing the ways in which they attempt to hide drugs and money to evade law enforcement. Natural voids continue to be popular locations in vehicles. Sophisticated, after-market compartments created in vehicles are also regularly encountered, challenging even the most skilled interdiction agents. Additionally, body carrying of drugs and currency is still reported as a common method of concealment.

### General Drug Transportation Trends in the Houston HIDTA:

- The Houston HIDTA's highways are the predominant method employed by DTOs for the transport of drugs, currency, and illegal immigrants. Significant seizures are regularly made on major roadways and at the region's two inland Border Patrol checkpoints.
- Backroad routes and maritime vessels along the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway continue to be used by DTOs to circumvent the checkpoints. The extent of maritime smuggling remains unknown, but marijuana and cocaine wash-ups found each year and occasional drug seizures from small vessels are indicators that DTOs are continuing their use of this method.
- There has been a rise in the use of mail delivery services, as well as the region's highways to import marijuana and marijuana products from "legal" states into the Houston HIDTA region.
- Drugs and currency are smuggled through the region's large, commercial airports. Use of private aircraft for drug trafficking also occurs, but its extent remains an intelligence gap.



*A popular natural void used to conceal drugs is the quarter panels of trucks. In this example, over 65 pounds of cocaine worth \$2.1 million dollars were found in a truck's quarter panels after an inspection at the Falfurrias Checkpoint in June.<sup>107</sup> The photo on the far left shows this common method of concealment.*

*The trend of transporting methamphetamine in solution into the region has led to an increased prevalence of the use of areas of vehicles designed to hold liquids such as gas tanks and windshield wiper reservoirs as well as a variety of containers meant to hold consumer products. In this seizure made by the Houston HIDTA Initiative TCCI, methamphetamine in solution was being concealed in Mexican Auto Zone "Desengrasante" (Degreaser) jugs.*



*Drug traffickers continually find unique, innovative and unusual ways to conceal the drugs that they transport into the region. Inspections of the toilets of commercial buses at both the Falfurrias and Sarita checkpoints led to large cocaine seizures in the past year. In May of 2017, 15 bundles of cocaine (over 44 pounds) were found in the bus commode at the Sarita Checkpoint, wrapped in black tape. In January of 2018, at the Falfurrias Checkpoint, another 15 bundles of cocaine was found in a bus toilet.<sup>108,109</sup>*



## Illicit Finance Trends



Photo by Allen D. Fisher

### **KPD seizes \$1 million**

*Bulk cash smuggling is the main method that Mexican DTOs use to move drug proceeds, due to the Houston HIDTA's proximity to Mexico.*

*Mexican drug traffickers are involved not only in transporting bulk quantities of drugs into and through the Houston HIDTA, but they are also regularly found to be using the region's highways to transport their drug-related proceeds back to Mexico. This seizure of \$1,071,503 was made by the Kingsville Police Department in Kleberg County on U.S. Highway 77 in January of 2018. The driver, a Mexican national, had hidden the currency inside the mattress of the sleeping compartment of his 18-wheeler.<sup>110</sup> This courier was found to have connections to the Gulf Cartel.<sup>111</sup>*

## Bulk Cash Smuggling in the Houston HIDTA: The Primary Method used by Houston HIDTA DTOs

Bulk cash smuggling remains, by far, the most predominant method that Mexican DTOs are using to transport drug trafficking proceeds back to Mexico, and the Houston HIDTA is a major thoroughfare for this activity. Houston is a central collection point for currency obtained from Mexican drug trafficking activities throughout the nation. After consolidation in Houston, larger quantities of cash are transported southward toward the Texas-Mexico border via private and commercial vehicles using major highways and back roads. Multiple vehicles are often used to limit exposure to interdiction operations by law enforcement. From Houston to Mexico, seizures generally range from \$200,000 to \$500,000, but even larger amounts up to one million dollars (as shown above) are being seized now that Mexico repealed its banking laws limiting the amount of U.S. currency that can be deposited in Mexican banks.

## Other Illicit Finance Methods used within the Houston HIDTA

Money services businesses (wire transfers), banks (structuring), and cash intensive businesses (front companies) were reported most frequently by survey respondents as other methods of illicit finance being used by DTOs investigated in the region. Use of prepaid cards and purchase of real estate and other tangible assets are also methods being employed by drug trafficking organizations.

According to the Houston HIDTA Money Laundering Initiative (HMLI), South American DTOs tend to use wire transfers and the Black Market Peso Exchange instead of bulk cash smuggling to move illicit drug proceeds, due to the much farther distance to their country of origin. Both Mexican and South American DTOs are also involved in various types of trade-based money laundering activities.

Middle Eastern DTOs operating in the region were also found to be using wire transfers and structuring using the banking system. As a recent example, an associate of a Middle Eastern DTO involved in a multi-million dollar "Kush" (synthetic cannabinoid) manufacturing and distribution ring in the region was sentenced in November for assisting the organization by "running an unlicensed business that wired more than \$200,000 of drug proceeds to accounts in Jordan."<sup>112,113</sup> This Middle Eastern DTO was also making regular bank account deposits in increments under \$10,000 in order to avoid scrutiny. Less is known about the illicit finance methods used by Asian DTOs due to the closed, exclusive nature of members of this type of drug trafficking organization. Much about the activities of Asian DTOs remains an intelligence gap for this reason.

## Emerging Trend: Use of Cryptocurrency for Dark Web Purchases

Criminal groups are increasingly exploring other options for financial drug-related transactions. Drug investigators are beginning to hear more about the use of cryptocurrencies such as bitcoin to purchase drugs like synthetic cannabinoids and synthetic opioids from China on darknet websites. To what extent local, regional or international DTOs may be exploiting these avenues to buy or sell drugs remains an intelligence gap. Attorney General Jeff Sessions stated that "darknet vendors are pouring fuel on the fire of the national drug epidemic."<sup>114</sup> Because of this rising threat, a new federal task force called the Joint Criminal Opioid Darknet Enforcement Team (J-CODE) has been established to focus specifically on online opioid trafficking.<sup>115</sup>

## Communication & Technology Trends



*The use of smartphones and applications that offer encryption capabilities or other privacy features enhances the ability of DTOs to conceal their criminal activities, creating investigative challenges for law enforcement.*

*In addition to carrying multiple “throw away” or “burner” phones, most local, regional and international DTOs also have smartphones. Cellphone applications that offer an increased level of privacy and safeguard communications are now widely used.*

Drug investigators in the region report that *Whats App* is used extensively by drug traffickers and drug dealers. This smartphone application can be used for sending and receiving text messages, photos, and videos, as well as voice calls, and it is highly popular because encryption is a standard feature.<sup>116,117</sup> Some of the other smartphone applications that were also reported to be used for drug-related communications are *Facebook Messenger* and *Blackberry Messenger* which also employ encryption, *Snapchat*, an application in which chat sessions and pictures automatically “disappear” after a set time period and *Instagram*, a photo and video sharing social networking service that has a feature allowing for disappearing images, videos and messages.<sup>118,119,120</sup>



## Other DTO Activities: Human Smuggling

Mexican DTOs make a large percentage of their income through drug trafficking, but they are also involved in human smuggling. They take full advantage of their strong, well-established drug trafficking infrastructure to facilitate this highly profitable activity. Human smuggling is occurring at extremely high levels in the southernmost Houston HIDTA counties closest to the U.S.-Mexico border. The Houston HIDTA counties most severely impacted include Brooks, Kenedy, Jim Wells, and Kleberg counties. Law enforcement agencies in these counties are burdened on a regular basis with issues such as pursuits and bailouts. Most southern Houston HIDTA counties are affected to some extent as human smugglers routinely bring illegal immigrants northward from the border toward cities such as Houston where they are housed until their transport fees have been paid. The conditions they face in these “human stash houses” are often deplorable. Some of the less fortunate are not freed upon arrival, but instead, become victims of human trafficking.<sup>121</sup>



Human smuggling is often identified during inspections at the region’s two inland Border Patrol checkpoints, as well as during traffic stops on major roads and highways. At the Falfurrias Checkpoint in Brooks County, large numbers of illegal immigrants are often found hidden in the back of commercial vehicles passing through the region. For example, in November of 2017, 26 people were found in the back of a rental truck during an inspection at the Falfurrias Checkpoint.<sup>122</sup> In January of 2018, also at this checkpoint, 57 immigrants were found locked in the back of an 18-wheeler.<sup>123</sup> In order to avoid law enforcement detection, human smugglers often force illegal immigrants to walk for days through the brush

on remote ranches to circumvent these checkpoints. Many are ill-prepared to traverse through this region on foot, particularly in the hot summer months with very little food or water. Some are given heavy backpacks of marijuana to carry as part of their payment for transport. The journey is treacherous and illegal immigrants often perish due to dehydration or heat exhaustion. In Brooks County, 52 bodies were recovered just in the past year. Illustrating the magnitude of this long-standing problem, from 2009 through 2017, a total of 584 bodies have been found on the ranches in this county.<sup>124</sup> According to Sheriff Benny Martinez of Brooks County, “They die because these callous human smugglers have no regard for human life. These people are just cargo to them. If they fall behind for any reason, these smugglers abandon them and leave them for dead.”<sup>125</sup> The resources of law enforcement in Brooks County are heavily taxed responding to emergency calls to locate and rescue these people, but even if they are able to find them, sadly, it is often too late.

# Regional and Multi-State Drug Trafficking Organizations

## Membership Characteristics and General Affiliations of Regional and Multi-State DTOs

There are a large number of drug trafficking organizations in the Houston HIDTA that operate at a regional and/or multi-state level. The Houston HIDTA Initiatives are currently investigating over 100 different organizations, making it challenging to give a description that encompasses this wide range of DTOs and their activities. The demographics of these DTOs are diverse, mirroring the region's multi-ethnic population. However, similar to trends for international DTOs, there are a larger percentage of regional DTO members that are of Hispanic descent (shown in the PMP tables below). Drug investigators report that it is often easier for these members to establish drug-related connections in the region due to long-standing family ties and personal acquaintances in Mexico.

All Multi-State/Regional DTOs/MLOs Being Investigated by the Houston HIDTA	
Characteristics	
Total Multi-State/Regional DTOs/MLOs	126
Mexican/Hispanic	84
African American	45
Caucasian	18
Asian	5
South American	4
Central American	2
Middle Eastern	1
Total Members (Leaders)	855 (169)
Average DTO Size	8.13
Multi-Ethnic	31
Gang-Related	15
Violent	10
Poly-Drug	41
Money Laundering Activities	12+
OCDETF	20
CPOT	2
RPOT	1
PTO	10

\*Data Obtained from PMP, Queried April 16, 2018

Multi-State/Regional DTOs/MLOs Newly Identified by the Houston HIDTA in 2017	
Characteristics	
Total Multi-State/Regional DTOs/MLOs	24
Mexican/Hispanic	20
African American	10
Caucasian	7
South American (Colombian)	1
Total Members (Leaders)	129 (32)
Average DTO Size	6.71
Multi-Ethnic	13
Gang-Related	4
Violent	2
Poly-Drug	10
Money Laundering Activities	2+
OCDETF	0
CPOT	0
RPOT	0
PTO	0

\*Data Obtained from PMP, Queried April 16, 2018

## Activities and Methods of Regional/Multi-State DTOs

Because regional drug trafficking organizations have such a wide array of attributes within the Houston HIDTA, several distinctly different DTOs will be exemplified in this section highlighting what is known about their membership characteristics, activities and/or methods.

### Houston's Fifth Ward Circle Gang: Multi-State Pharmacy Burglary Ring



Houston's Fifth Ward Circle gang is an example of a multi-state drug trafficking organization that has expanded its criminal operations from a local level to include areas not only throughout the state of Texas, but across the nation. Members of this gang are particularly well-known for their extensive involvement in pharmacy burglaries. This gang has been linked to pharmacy burglaries in twenty-five states. Through these burglaries, these career criminals amass large quantities of controlled prescription drugs from various locations and bring them back to the Houston area for illicit street sale. They typically operate in three-to-six man crews, and are extremely adept in their break-ins. They can be in and out of a pharmacy in approximately two minutes, making it difficult for law enforcement to apprehend them. They tend to target smaller, independent pharmacies that may not have enhanced security systems, often using crow bars as their modus operandi to break out drive-in windows or entering through the roof. Businesses are left with significant monetary losses from the theft of bulk amounts of controlled prescription drugs as well as extensive property damage.<sup>126,127,128,129</sup> Given the widespread activity of this gang, it is not surprising that Texas ranked first nationally in pharmacy burglaries in 2016 (the most recent obtainable data).<sup>130</sup>





## The Southwest Cholos: A Poly-Drug Trafficking, Human Smuggling and Human Trafficking Organization



Another Houston gang that has extended its reach from the local to regional level is the Southwest Cholos. This gang has over 800 members.<sup>126</sup> Gang investigators report that some members of this primarily Hispanic gang formed connections with Mexican DTOs, leading to their involvement in drug trafficking and human smuggling in the region in addition to local drug distribution.<sup>126</sup> Most recently, members of this local Houston gang have also been found to be involved in human trafficking. In November, 23 members of this gang and their associates were indicted for their participation in these activities, as well as firearms trafficking and identity theft. Drug-related charges were for this gang's participation in methamphetamine and heroin trafficking, but investigators with the Houston HIDTA Initiative GANGS report that this DTO has also been known to traffic cocaine and marijuana. Although this gang bases their operations out of Southwest Houston, they traveled back and forth to the South Texas-Mexico border regularly conducting their illicit activities. Members involved in human smuggling used stash houses that they controlled throughout the region. As human traffickers, Southwest Cholos members lured women into the country, telling them that they could work in a restaurant to pay off their smuggling fees. Instead, they were forced to work as prostitutes in the gang's brothels in Houston and Mexico. This DTO committed acts of violence against the women and threatened to harm their families if they refused.<sup>131,132</sup>



### Regional Drug Traffickers of High-Grade Marijuana and Marijuana Products Diverted from "Legal" States

The Houston HIDTA Initiative MOCONET investigated a multi-state DTO involved in obtaining large amounts of hydroponic marijuana, marijuana wax, THC oil in vape cartridges, and THC-infused edibles for distribution in Harris, Montgomery, Walker, and Trinity counties. The reach of this DTO spanned several states including Colorado, Washington and Oregon. Members of this DTO would fly from Texas to these "legal" states on domestic airlines and then make large purchases from marijuana dispensaries. Employees of these dispensaries were fully aware of the final destination of the purchased marijuana products. DTO members would then transport the drugs back to Texas in rental cars or ship them using U.S. Priority Mail to various stash houses in the greater Houston area. In total, MOCONET seized 16 kilograms of high-grade marijuana, 17.8 kilograms of edible THC, 663 THC-infused vape pens, 426 grams of marijuana wax, 5.8 grams of psychedelic mushrooms, 22.1 grams of cocaine, 100 vials of steroids, a small amount of methamphetamine, as well as 29 firearms and \$52,699 in drug proceeds. MOCONET received national recognition for this investigation, receiving the HIDTA Award for Outstanding Marijuana Investigative Effort at an Awards Ceremony in Washington, D.C. in February of 2018.<sup>133,134</sup>

### A Regional-Level DTO Manufacturing and Distributing Synthetic Cannabinoid Products in Three Texas Cities

The Houston Police Department's Narcotics Division is making targeted efforts to take down organizations involved in the manufacture of dangerous synthetic cannabinoids to decrease the availability of these poisonous chemicals on the streets. In April, after a six-month long investigation, three members of a regional drug trafficking organization that was manufacturing and distributing synthetic cannabinoid products in Houston, Austin, and Corpus Christi were taken into custody. Just under 600 pounds of synthetic cannabinoids worth \$2.5 million dollars was seized. Most of the synthetic cannabinoid product seized was found in an unfurnished home that was being used solely for the purpose of manufacturing this drug. Another ten pounds of "Kush" that had already been packaged for sale was seized from various associated storage units.<sup>135,136</sup>





## Local Drug Trafficking Organizations

### Membership Characteristics and General Affiliations of Local Drug Trafficking Organizations

As with regional and multi-state drug trafficking organizations, the Houston HIDTA has a high number of local DTOs with widely varying characteristics. Members of local DTOs being investigated by the Houston HIDTA Initiatives consist of numerous ethnicities, paralleling the overall demographics of the region's population. PMP tables showing the characteristics of local DTOs currently being investigated by the Houston HIDTA Initiatives, as well those for newly initiated investigations in 2017 are shown below.

All Local DTOs/MLOs Being Investigated by the Houston HIDTA	
Characteristics	
Total Local DTOs/MLOs	165
Mexican/Hispanic	115
Caucasian	41
African American	39
Asian	5
South American (Colombian)	1
Central American	1
Other Ethnicities	8
Total Members (Leaders)	2,937 (211)
Average DTO Size	19.08
Multi-Ethnic	38
Gang-Related	37
Violent	30
Poly-Drug	75
Money Laundering Activities	12+
OCDETF	8
CPOT	2
RPOT	3
PTO	16

\*Data Obtained from PMP, Queried April 16, 2018

Local DTOs/MLOs Newly Identified by the Houston HIDTA in 2017	
Characteristics	
Total Local DTOs/MLOs	47
Mexican/Hispanic	28
African American	11
Caucasian	8
Asian	3
Central American	1
Other Ethnicities	2
Total Members (Leaders)	233 (71)
Average DTO Size	6.47
Multi-Ethnic	9
Gang-Related	10
Violent	8
Poly-Drug	22
Money Laundering Activities	4+
OCDETF	1
CPOT	1
RPOT	1
PTO	3

\*Data Obtained from PMP, Queried April 16, 2018

### Activities and Methods of Local DTOs

Local drug trafficking organizations conduct their operations in cities throughout the Houston HIDTA region. However, many of these DTOs are found in more populous cities such as Corpus Christi, Victoria, Beaumont, and Houston where they have access to a larger consumer base. Some of the local DTOs that have been arrested in these cities in the past year are highlighted below, showing the exceptional work that law enforcement in the region are doing to combat the drug threat in their communities.

#### Corpus Christi (Nueces County): Local DTO involved in Trafficking Synthetic Cannabinoids, Methamphetamine and Other Drugs is Taken Down



Drug investigators in Corpus Christi report that synthetic cannabinoids and methamphetamine are the top two drug threats in this city. A joint investigation targeting these threats conducted by the Corpus Christi Police Department (CCPD) and federal law enforcement partners ultimately led to the January 2018 sentencing of five members of a local DTO that referred to themselves as "Team GoHard" in online social media. All members were residents of Corpus Christi and two were known gang members. This DTO would frequently rent hotel rooms to conduct their drug-related transactions, moving from place to place to evade narcotics officers.

In the course of the investigation, numerous search warrants were served at several residences and area hotels between May 2016 and May 2017. Seizures at these locations included synthetic cannabinoid products, methamphetamine, heroin, crack cocaine, and marijuana, along with suspected drug ledgers and weight scales.<sup>137,138</sup>

According to the CCPD Blotter, authorities also seized “a virtual arsenal of legal and illegal firearms” from the home of one of the gang members. These included “semi-auto assault type rifles, shotguns, handguns, and improvised firearms, sometimes known as “zip-guns,” along with over 1,000 rounds of ammunition.”<sup>139</sup> Other seized items were several silencers, five sets of body armor, homemade breaching tools (rams), ski masks and gas masks. The discovery of these items caused investigators to believe that this DTO had likely been involved in other crimes in the city, such as robberies, drive-by shootings, home invasions or other acts of violence.<sup>140</sup>



#### Victoria (Victoria County): Local DTOs involved in Poly-Drug Trafficking and other Organized Criminal Activity



Drug investigators in Victoria report that methamphetamine is their top drug threat, followed by synthetic cannabinoids and cocaine. The Victoria County Sheriff's Office's Special Operations Unit investigated several local drug trafficking organizations involved in distributing these drugs in their community in the past year. As examples of their efforts to reduce the drug threat, deputies dismantled one drug enterprise in the city in October. They arrested three individuals and seized various amounts of synthetic cannabinoids, methamphetamine, marijuana, and Xanax, as well as firearms and over \$8,000 in drug proceeds.<sup>141</sup> In February of 2018, the Sheriff's Office took down a local drug and burglary ring, arresting ten people. Deputies seized marijuana, methamphetamine and Xanax as well as recovering numerous stolen guns and other valuable items the local DTO had obtained from burglaries in at least two counties.<sup>142,143</sup> Local drug investigations in Victoria have led to the discovery of much higher-level drug organizations operating in this city. In May, the Sheriff's Office raided two residences and two local tire shops in an investigation that focused on a criminal organization with ties to a Mexican cartel. They made nine arrests that included charges of organized criminal activity and money laundering, seizing four pounds of cocaine, \$50,000 in cash, 10 vehicles and 400 tires.<sup>144,145</sup>

#### Beaumont (Jefferson County): Local DTOs involved in the Distribution of Crack Cocaine

Although drug investigators in Beaumont state that methamphetamine is the greatest drug threat, crack cocaine has posed a significant threat for years and has been linked to a high level of violence in this city. Law enforcement has worked tirelessly to shut down crack houses operating in the area. Two long-standing local criminal organizations involved in this illicit activity were finally dismantled in 2017, resulting in numerous arrests. Between 2016 and 2017, thirteen members of a family-operated drug trafficking organization were convicted for their role in the distribution of crack cocaine. Information presented in court revealed that this family and their associates had been openly distributing crack cocaine from their home for over a decade. In that time period, the Beaumont Police Department had received over 2,000 calls for service to the neighborhood in which this family lived, with 139 calls specifically related to their crack house. These thirteen individuals were charged with both drug and firearms violations. One of the members received a sentence of life in federal prison for his role in this drug trafficking conspiracy.<sup>146,147</sup> Another key success for Beaumont area investigators in combating this threat occurred in January of 2018 when eight local residents were charged with federal drug trafficking violations for their roles in a local cocaine distribution ring in North Beaumont. According to the indictment, from December 2012 to December 2017, members of this group brought powder cocaine into the area from Houston, manufactured crack cocaine in local residences, and then sold both powder cocaine and crack cocaine in their homes. The organization carried firearms for protection from rivaling drug dealers.<sup>148</sup> The Beaumont Police Chief stated that, “I cannot remember a more violent group of criminals that we've ever encountered in this city.”<sup>149</sup> Celebrating this victory against violent crime, he said, “This is one of the most important investigations for the Beaumont Police Department in recent years.”<sup>149</sup>

Efforts to reduce the threat from methamphetamine in Beaumont are showing signs of success as well. In April of 2018, a 40-year old Houston man was arrested for his role in a drug trafficking organization that manufactured and distributed thousands of pills containing a mixture of methamphetamine. He and seven other members of this DTO trafficked methamphetamine in the Beaumont and Houston areas from 2013 until June of 2017.<sup>150</sup> Not surprisingly, Beaumont Police Department drug investigators interviewed for this assessment reported that most of the ecstasy tablets they see in the area test positive for methamphetamine.

## The Houston Metropolitan Area

With a population of over 6.8 million people, the Houston metropolitan area is a substantial drug market that holds great appeal for local DTOs as a prime location for their illicit operations. Literally hundreds of local drug trafficking organizations are thought to exist within the Houston metropolitan area for this reason. DTOs realize that their activities may be more likely to go undetected due to their ability to hide in plain sight in this big city. Houston's "pill mills" are a prime example:

### **Houston Pill Mills**

There are a large number of "pill mills" in Houston in which controlled prescription drugs are amassed in large quantities for later street sale. Diversion experts report that as soon as one closes, another opens up in its place, creating great frustration for those involved in investigating this type of criminal activity. Drug investigators with the Houston HIDTA Initiative TARP investigated at least one local drug trafficking organization in Houston that was involved in this activity in the past year. A group consisting of six members was involved in running a "rogue" pain management clinic. In the course of this investigation, it was found that the supposed doctor at this medical establishment was, in fact, a stripper who had stolen the identity of a physician. Groups of people were rounded up each day to go to this unusual clinic which opened at 7:00 am and closed by 1:00 pm. After arriving at the clinic, patients would each be shown to a room where their vital signs would be taken by a medical assistant. They would then be taken to yet another room where they would be questioned about their medical reason for the visit. Finally, they were sent back to the waiting room and eventually received a prescription for controlled prescription drugs such as hydrocodone at the clinic's reception window. From there, these "patients" would take their prescriptions to a local pharmacy to receive their pain medications. After obtaining their prescription drugs, they would give the pills to this DTO's "recruiter" who would provide the pills to a dealer to be sold in the illicit drug market in Houston. "Patients" were paid \$60 each for their participation in this "pill mill" scheme. Ultimately, the fake doctor and her business partner were arrested and the clinic was shut down. Investigators seized \$3,000 in cash as well as over 150 grams of hydrocodone tablets.<sup>151</sup>

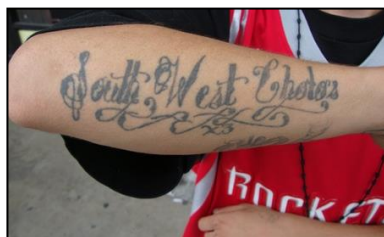
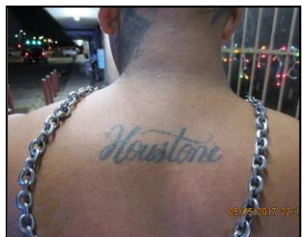


### **Rising Trend: Social Media and Internet-Based Drug Deals**

Drug investigators report that the days of initiating local drug deals on street corners have been largely replaced by the use of modern technology. Drug dealers can now easily use social media platforms on their smartphones such as Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook/Facebook Messenger, and Whats App to send photos of drugs to prospective buyers, and then text to negotiate the sale and meeting location for the transaction. They prefer to use applications with encryption features like Whats App and those in which messages disappear shortly after they have been viewed such as Snapchat to protect the privacy of their drug deals. Voice over Internet Protocol (VOIP) using Skype was also reportedly used for drug-related communications.

Additionally, as synthetic drugs have gained popularity, purchases of these products are increasingly being made from internet websites. Investigators are hearing more about "dark web" internet sales using cryptocurrency such as bitcoin. However, because of the difficulty of investigating darknet drug markets, little is known about the extent of the use of these sites in the Houston HIDTA.

## GANGS IN THE HOUSTON HIDTA



Although not all local drug trafficking organizations involve gang members, most gang members are involved in drug-related activities to some extent, in addition to a multitude of other crimes. Therefore, because of the sheer number of active gang members just in the Houston metropolitan area alone, a discussion of the considerable threat they pose in the Houston HIDTA is warranted.

### Gangs and Drug Distribution

The distribution of drugs in local Houston HIDTA communities remains one of the main sources of income for gang members. Street gangs, prison gangs, and outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMGs) are all actively involved in some level of drug distribution in the region. Seventy-eight percent (78%) of survey respondents reported drug distribution by gangs in their communities, with 58% reporting high or moderate levels. Prison gang members and some street gang members have been able to establish Mexican drug connections and are involved in higher-level drug trafficking activities and/or human smuggling.

### Gangs in Houston

All Houston HIDTA counties are impacted in some way by the criminal activities associated with gangs. Gangs pose an immense threat in Houston. The Texas Department of Public Safety's 2017 Gang Threat Assessment indicates that "Harris County contains the highest concentration of identified and suspected gang activity in Texas."<sup>152</sup> In the Houston area, there are over 350 gangs and approximately 19,500 gang members. Houston's largest gang, the Hustone Tango Blast has over 3,000 members. Various sets of Bloods and Crips also have high memberships in the Houston area. The 52 Hoover Gangster Crips are the most active gang with over 1,900 members. The 59 Bounty Hunters are another of the largest and most active gangs.<sup>153</sup> Other gangs in Houston with a significant presence include, but are not limited to the Southwest Cholos, La Primera, and the 5<sup>th</sup> Ward Circle. Harris County also has the highest percentage of Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) members in Texas, a gang that is well-known for its extreme acts of brutality.<sup>152</sup>

### Gangs in Corpus Christi

Corpus Christi is another city with a relatively large number of gang members in the Houston HIDTA region. There are over 4,000 suspected gang members and the city is renowned for its prison gangs.<sup>154</sup> The Mexican Mafia, Texas Syndicate, Raza Unida, the Aryan Brotherhood of Texas and Tango Blasts (Corpitos) are some of the predominant prison gangs that live and operate in this southern region of the Houston HIDTA.<sup>152</sup> With their close proximity to the border, members of these prison gangs have developed relationships with associates in Mexico, but they also have ties to gang members in Houston. As intermediaries, they facilitate the flow of drugs through the region, transporting drugs to Houston as well as providing protection at drug stash houses in Corpus Christi.<sup>154</sup>

### Gang Dynamics

There has been an increase in gang unification and a corresponding rise in organized violent gang-related crime. Members of different gangs are working cooperatively in "cliques," setting aside their gang rivalries to conduct criminal activities that are profitable for all involved. In describing gang relationships, they say "It's all about the green." By merging together for a common purpose, gangs can combine resources and broaden their criminal enterprises. Now not only are they engaged in traditional endeavors such as drug trafficking and distribution, but they have expanded their scope to include a wide array of new "business opportunities." Many of the activities that they are engaging in to augment their income involve high levels of violence.<sup>155</sup>



## Gang Violence



Officials in Houston are very concerned about the rising level of gang-related violence and are increasing their efforts to combat this threat. In addition to conducting violent crimes such as home invasions and aggravated robberies, gangs in Houston are also committing a significant number of homicides. The Houston Police Department's Gang Murder Squad reported that of the 269 murders in 2017, 56 or 21% were gang-related. These murders are often gang-on-gang shootings related to rivalry, but they also include murders associated with gang-related crime.<sup>156</sup> Tragically, in some instances, those killed have been innocent bystanders, including children. In fact, in April of 2018, it was reported that eleven children had been killed in gang-related crossfire in Houston in the past 16 months.<sup>157</sup>

### Ongoing Anti-Gang Efforts in Houston

#### Houston Law Enforcement Violent Crime Initiative

In June, Houston was chosen as one of twelve cities nationwide to receive funding from the U.S. Department of Justice to combat gun crime, drug trafficking and gang violence. These resources are intended to assist law enforcement in cities with serious violent crime problems to increase their capacity to reduce this threat by augmenting "investigative and prosecutorial efforts and enhance collaborative training and community outreach efforts."<sup>158,159</sup> With this financial assistance, Houston officials formed the Houston Law Enforcement Violent Crime Initiative. This Initiative is comprised of ten different agencies that are combining investigative resources to aggressively pursue and prosecute violent offenders in this city.<sup>160</sup>

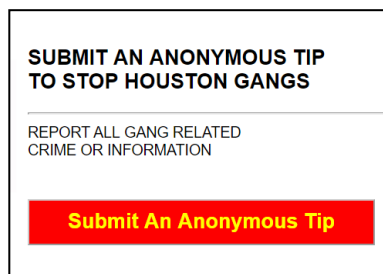


#### Texas Anti-Gang Initiative



In 2017, Texas Governor Abbott allocated additional funding to be directed to the Texas Anti-Gang Center (TAG) in Harris County to assist in reducing the level of gang violence. The TAG was established in 2012 and houses local, state, and federal agencies and staff from the Houston District Attorney's Office in one central location.<sup>161,162</sup> Due to its collaborative approach to gang investigations, it has proven to be a valuable community resource in combating the threat from gangs. The Houston HIDTA supports information sharing and unified efforts among gang investigators at the TAG in Houston by co-locating one of its Initiatives at this center (the Houston HIDTA Initiative GANGS), as well as a liaison analyst from the Houston Investigative Support Center. Because of the success of the Houston TAG, four new TAG centers have subsequently been created, strategically placed in the other regions of the state.<sup>152</sup>

#### StopHoustonGangs.org Website



The StopHoustonGangs.org website is another important tool that is used to address the growing threat from gangs in Harris County. Through this website, citizens are empowered to assist in fighting gang-related crime in their own neighborhoods by anonymously reporting tips on gang activity. The StopHoustonGangs.org website provides a wealth of information to help the public identify Houston gangs, including their signs and symbols, clothing and colors, hand signs, tattoos, and graffiti. In addition to



increasing public awareness of the threat from gang violence and other gang-related criminal activity, this website has proven to be a powerful resource for gang investigators. As of May 16, 2018, there had been 909,548 visitors to the website, with 3,696 leads provided, resulting in 825 gang-related arrests.<sup>163</sup>

## Summary of Trends and Intelligence Gaps for Drug Trafficking Organizations and Gangs

### Summary of Trends and/or Intelligence Gaps related to DTOs and DTO Activities:

- Mexican DTOs maintain strong control over the Houston HIDTA drug market and pose the greatest threat. The main cartels operating in the region are the Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas. Other cartels with a presence include but are not limited to Michoacán-based cartels (i.e. La Nueva Familia Michoacána and the Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación or “CJNG”) and the Sinaloa Federation. To a lesser extent, Asian criminal organizations are a threat in the Houston area due their involvement in large-scale hydroponic marijuana production. Much about the criminal activity of Asian DTOs remains an intelligence gap due to their close-knit, exclusive nature. Middle Eastern DTOs also pose a threat due to their role in the manufacturing and/or distribution of synthetic cannabinoid products in Houston. South American DTOs and other groups are active in the region, but their presence is much less prominent than Mexican DTOs.
- Mexican DTOs have a well-established network of family members, friends, and criminal associates including gang members who reside in the Houston HIDTA. These associates, with their higher level of familiarity of the terrain in the region and their strong U.S. connections, further their drug trafficking efforts on this side of the border.
- Bulk cash smuggling and human smuggling are other illicit activities in which Mexican DTOs are heavily involved in the region. Quantities of cash being smuggled typically range from \$200,000 to \$500,000 but amounts of \$600,000 to one million dollars are also seized by law enforcement each year. Human smuggling is rampant in the most southern Houston HIDTA counties such as Brooks, Kenedy, and Jim Wells.
- The Houston HIDTA’s highways are the predominant method used by DTOs for the transport of drugs, currency, and illegal immigrants. Significant seizures are made regularly on major roadways and at the region’s two inland Border Patrol checkpoints. Alternate modes of transportation such as use of backroad routes and maritime vessels along the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway are used to varying degrees to circumvent these checkpoints. Due to the vast expanse of remote coastline and limited law enforcement resources to routinely monitor this area for drug-related activity, the scope of maritime smuggling remains unknown. Other intelligence gaps include the extent of the use of private aircraft and the railway system for drug trafficking. U.S. mail and mail delivery services are being used to import marijuana and marijuana products from legal states as well as synthetic drugs from China. The overall level of this activity is unknown, but is believed to be rising.
- DTOs are regularly using smartphone applications that employ encryption features such as *WhatsApp* to safeguard their communications. Social media platforms such as Snapchat, Facebook/Facebook Messenger, and Instagram are increasingly being used to conduct local drug deals. Drug investigators are hearing more about the use of the “dark web” to make drug purchases, but the extent of this activity remains unknown.

### Summary of Trends related to Gangs and Gang Activities in the Houston HIDTA:

- The threat from gangs in the Houston HIDTA is substantial. Harris County has the highest concentration of gang members in Texas with over 350 gangs and approximately 19,500 gang members. Gangs are engaged in a wide array of criminal activities that negatively impact Houston HIDTA communities. Most gangs are involved in drug distribution to some extent, and some gang members are involved in higher-level drug trafficking and human smuggling activities as well. Gangs are increasingly working together, expanding their scope to include a wider range of criminal acts. Officials are particularly concerned about the high level of organized, violent gang-related crime in Houston and gang-on-gang murders that have killed innocent bystanders, including children caught in their crossfire.

# COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS FOR DRUG USE PREVENTION

## Houston - Harris County Office of Drug Policy Substance Abuse Prevention Coalition



The Houston HIDTA serves as part of an important multi-disciplinary team dedicated to finding effective solutions to Houston's drug use issues. This coalition, led by Houston Crackdown, a division of the City of Houston Mayor's Office of Public Safety and Homeland Security, has broad representation, merging behavioral health professionals, law enforcement officials, and those in the treatment realm. Coalition members work in partnership to increase awareness of drug trafficking, substance abuse, and community drug trends.<sup>164</sup>

The Houston HIDTA co-sponsors the Annual Community Drug Awareness Day Conference each year in conjunction with the Houston-Harris County Office of Drug Policy and its partners. This event provides a unique opportunity for professionals who work in a variety of different fields such as law enforcement, medicine, treatment, and substance use prevention to share information and establish and/or strengthen connections for future collaborative efforts.



## Fort Bend Community Prevention Coalition



The Houston HIDTA also closely collaborates with other community-based prevention organizations such as the Fort Bend Community Prevention Coalition. With this coalition, the Houston HIDTA co-sponsors the annual Fort Bend Drug Symposium each year. In 2017, Ed Shemelya, an expert from HIDTA's National Marijuana Initiative was a distinguished guest who spoke about the unintended negative consequences of marijuana legalization. Other important topics discussed at this conference included trends related to synthetic drugs, problems related to underage drinking, and community prevention strategies.



## Stop Drugs Initiative



The Houston HIDTA launched the Stop Drugs Initiative in September of 2015. This project involved the creation of six community-specific websites designed to form a stronger partnership between the general public and law enforcement in reducing the threat from illicit drugs in the

Houston HIDTA. In May of 2016, officials with the Houston HIDTA unveiled new websites for Fort Bend, Walker, and Wharton counties, raising the total number of community websites to nine.

Analysts from the Houston Investigative Support Center serve as administrators for the websites, regularly reviewing tips and when possible, verifying and augmenting the information provided by conducting analytical research. By developing comprehensive intelligence packets for investigators, they provide added value to the original tips and assist in furthering leads, ultimately improving the probability of successful investigations of drug-related activity in the Houston HIDTA.<sup>165</sup>

**Affiliated StopDrugs Websites**

Below find links to other affiliated StopDrugs websites:

- <https://www.StopDrugsCorpusChristi.org>
- <https://www.StopDrugsFortBendCounty.org>
- <https://www.StopDrugsHouston.org>
- <https://www.StopDrugsJeffersonCounty.org>
- <https://www.StopDrugsMontgomeryCounty.org>
- <https://www.StopDrugsPasadena.org>
- <https://www.StopDrugsVictoriaCounty.org>
- <https://www.StopDrugsWalkercounty.org>
- <https://www.StopDrugsWharton.org>



## Harris County Drug Court Foundation's STAR Program

The success of the Harris County Drug Court Foundation's STAR Program highlights how collaborative efforts between those working in the criminal justice system and the treatment and recovery profession can effect positive change in communities. This program has transformed the lives of non-violent, repeat drug offenders, providing a pathway to a better future, while reducing the cost to society of continuing drug abuse and possible future crimes.<sup>166,167</sup>

- With members of the judicial, prosecutorial, defense, probation, and treatment teams working together across four dockets, over 600 individuals have graduated from the STAR program.
  - In 2016, 86.5% of STAR graduates remained sober and only 5.4% reoffended. In 2017, 89.8% of the graduates remained sober with 0.0% reoffending.

**Want to learn more about what makes STAR a success?**



**Watch this video on their website: [www.justex.net/Courts/Drug/Adult/default.aspx](http://www.justex.net/Courts/Drug/Adult/default.aspx)**



## OUTLOOK

Mexican drug trafficking organizations will retain their stronghold in the Houston HIDTA, using its major highways as a primary drug transportation corridor. The Houston metropolitan area with its population of over six million people will remain a substantial drug market, as well as a major transshipment hub. Mexican DTOs will continue to gain a higher level of operational control through their well-established and growing network of family members, friends, and criminal associates including gang members who facilitate drug trafficking efforts on the U.S. side of the border. Through these relationships, Mexican DTOs are strategically poised to maintain a steady flow of drugs into and through the region, assuring a substantial income that will motivate them to persist in their illicit endeavors for the foreseeable future.

In order to avoid law enforcement scrutiny at the Houston HIDTA's two inland U.S. Border Patrol checkpoints in South Texas, Mexican DTOs will continue to exploit alternative transportation methods to move drugs, currency, and illegal immigrants through the area. The propensity for DTOs to explore other transportation options will become even greater in the coming year upon completion of a more robust Falfurrias Checkpoint with additional lanes and improved detection capabilities in Brooks County. Methods likely to be used more frequently to circumvent this checkpoint include backroad routes, ranch roads, rural airports, the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway and the remote coastline of the Padre Island National Seashore.

Mexican DTOs will remain committed to supplying the region with traditional drugs such as cocaine, marijuana, methamphetamine and heroin. Increased production of cocaine in Colombia has provided Mexican DTOs with renewed access to larger quantities of this drug. Therefore, they will increase cocaine trafficking activities to meet the high demand for cocaine in the Houston HIDTA. Conversely, DTOs will further decrease the amount of Mexican marijuana they produce and traffic due to a competing, stronger demand for domestically-produced marijuana. Regional DTOs have already positioned themselves to meet this demand, supplying high-grade marijuana and marijuana products to the Houston HIDTA that they obtain from "legal" states. This type of diversion activity is expected to continue its upward trend, with a corresponding rise in the use of mail services for this purpose. Asian DTOs will also maintain their role in sustaining the hydroponic marijuana supply, continuing large-scale production in the Houston area.

As their highest priority, Mexican DTOs will focus on trafficking drugs that they can produce in their own country in order to maximize their profits. The Houston HIDTA drug market will remain flooded with methamphetamine, leading to yet a further expansion of its use. An increase in heroin availability can be expected as well, although much of the heroin transiting through the area will be directed to areas of the country where this drug is in greater demand and a higher price can be obtained. Law enforcement should also expect Mexican DTOs to increasingly transport heroin mixed with fentanyl as well as pure fentanyl into and through the region due to the lucrative profit margin and popularity among illicit drug users. The exposure threat to drug investigators, as well as to heroin users, will escalate over the next year. It is also highly probable that an even more perilous threat may emerge in the near future due to the identification of cocaine laced with fentanyl in some states. The potential trend of fentanyl in the region's cocaine supply would be devastating due to the high rate of use of both powder cocaine and crack cocaine, coupled with an already high mortality rate from this drug type. If fentanyl emerges in the region's methamphetamine supply, the threat will be even more disastrous.

In addition to multiple kilogram-level quantities of illicit fentanyl being supplied by Mexican DTOs, smaller amounts of fentanyl, fentanyl analogs and other synthetic drugs will continue to be shipped through the mail from China. The chemicals obtained from these mail shipments will increasingly be used in counterfeit pill production in the Houston area because the sale of fake hydrocodone and Xanax tablets is so profitable for criminal organizations. For the same financial reasons, Middle Eastern DTOs and other criminal entrepreneurs in Houston will continue to receive shipments of synthetic cannabinoids to maintain production of "Kush" to meet the insatiable demand for the extremely risky, but cheap high offered by this drug.

The overall drug threat in the Houston HIDTA has become exponentially elevated due to synthetic drugs, especially now that traditional drugs have been found to be adulterated with and/or replaced by deadly fentanyl and fentanyl analogs. Concerted, collaborative law enforcement efforts to halt the influx of these drugs into Houston HIDTA communities are more imperative now than ever before to mitigate a potential public health and safety crisis.

# APPENDIX A

## Methodology

The Houston Investigative Support Center (HISC), a Houston HIDTA Initiative sponsored by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and funded by the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), produces this annual threat assessment to identify drug trafficking trends for use by law enforcement in the Houston HIDTA to assist them in planning counterdrug strategies. This assessment is based on a detailed analysis of the best available intelligence and public source information. Data was obtained from interviews, use of detailed survey instruments, the Performance Management Process (PMP) database, open source reports, threat assessments, and statistics from other agencies. This data was collected throughout the year, but the most extensive interviewing and survey collection period was conducted from October 2017 through February 2018 to ensure timeliness and appropriateness of the assessment. Trends reported in the assessment were verified with drug investigators contributing the information before final approval and dissemination to ensure accuracy. Participation by law enforcement in the drug threat survey was high with a 96% return rate (69 of 72 surveys returned). Agencies from the 17 Houston HIDTA counties as well as those from surrounding counties participated in the survey.

Numerous agencies contributed intelligence to make this threat assessment a valuable product for use in developing counterdrug strategies. Information on drug-related trends was obtained from the Houston HIDTA Initiatives, as well as law enforcement agencies throughout the Houston HIDTA counties and surrounding region. Staff from the Houston Investigative Support Center also interviewed individuals and groups outside of the law enforcement profession in order to create a broad, comprehensive report. For example, information was elicited from counselors in the treatment and prevention fields, medical professionals in hospital emergency rooms and emergency medical services (EMS) settings, scientists in forensic science crime laboratories and medical examiner's offices. Information was also obtained from state agencies such as the Texas Department of State Health Services for Texas Poison Center Network data, and the Texas Health and Human Services Commission for state-funded treatment services data.

# APPENDIX B

## Description of the Houston HIDTA Initiatives

The Houston HIDTA has eleven Enforcement Initiatives, two Intelligence Initiatives, and four Support Initiatives. Initiative membership formally includes 48 local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies. A brief description of each of these Initiatives is provided below.

### THE ENFORCEMENT INITIATIVES:

#### 1. Fort Bend Enforcement Team (FBET)

The Fort Bend Enforcement Team (FBET), sponsored by the Fort Bend County Sheriff's Office, is charged with investigating drug traffickers in Fort Bend County, a rapidly growing county just south of Houston that is considered to be part of the greater Houston metropolitan area. Initially, this Initiative dealt primarily with open-air drug markets. FBET has largely driven those markets underground and has enlarged its focus to include mid-level drug trafficking organizations. Because the target-rich Interstate Highway 59 runs through Fort Bend County, FBET is actively involved in Domestic Highway Enforcement (DHE) efforts on this busy corridor. This Initiative makes large drug and currency seizures from its DHE activities each year.

#### 2. Gangs & Non-Traditional Gangs Squad (GANGS)

The Houston HIDTA Initiative GANGS, sponsored by the Houston Police Department, is co-located at the Texas Anti-Gang Center (TAG). This Initiative focuses its efforts on identifying, monitoring, disrupting and dismantling the activities and membership of gangs in the greater Houston area. Their task is daunting as more than 350 gangs, several with national and international connections, operate as DTOs in the Houston area. These gangs are responsible for much of the drug trafficking and violent crime in Houston. Gangs with multi-state operations are a major focus of their investigations.

#### 3. Houston Money Laundering Initiative (HMLI)

The Houston Money Laundering Initiative (HMLI), sponsored by Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), is a co-located, multi-jurisdictional task force established to intercept narcotics trafficking profits through the identification, arrest, and prosecution of money launderers and their organizations. This Initiative also analyzes intelligence data to reveal new trends and methods of money laundering to aid in investigative efforts. HMLI has five, distinct, yet interactive entities that provide the necessary resources to achieve its goals.

#### 4. Houston Seaport Initiative (SEAPORT)

The SEAPORT Initiative, sponsored by Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), was established to address the gaps in intelligence and enforcement that exist in identifying, disrupting and dismantling drug trafficking organizations operating in the port and maritime environment. This Initiative focuses specific emphasis on illicit activities involving the Houston Seaport. Its typical cases involve worldwide shipping container investigations.

## **5. Major Drug Squads (MDS)**

The Major Drug Squads Initiative (MDS), sponsored by the Drug Enforcement Administration's Houston Division, is comprised of five investigative squads and one intelligence squad that focus their investigative resources on disrupting and dismantling transnational drug trafficking organizations. MDS uses various investigative techniques to accomplish its objectives and relies heavily on the ability to target DTOs' communication networks. This ability allows MDS to identify the DTO hierarchy and cells operating in the Houston HIDTA. The targeted DTOs parallel the DEA Priority Target System OCDETF-CPOT strategy.

## **6. Methamphetamine Initiative Group (MIG)**

The Methamphetamine Initiative Group (MIG), sponsored by the Texas Department of Public Safety's Regional Office in Houston, was originally formed in response to the rise of clandestine methamphetamine laboratories throughout the Houston HIDTA. This Initiative was the first of its kind in Texas and continues to be the premier support group that deals with the dismantlement of clandestine labs. Officers assigned to the Initiative have specialized training and equipment to handle the disposal of hazardous lab materials. Now, because of legislative changes and other factors making it much more difficult to manufacture methamphetamine in large-scale labs, along with the rise in Mexican methamphetamine super labs controlled by Mexican DTOs, the primary mission of the Initiative has changed from dismantling clandestine labs to investigating high-level drug trafficking organizations involved in transporting methamphetamine, as well as other drugs, from Mexico.

## **7. Montgomery County Narcotics Enforcement Team (MOCONET)**

The Montgomery County Narcotics Enforcement Team (MOCONET) is sponsored by the Montgomery County Sheriff's Office. The mission of MOCONET is to investigate DTOs transporting, manufacturing and distributing illicit drugs into and through Montgomery and Walker counties. Initiative participants focus on bulk currency smuggling as well as narcotics interdiction on roadways in the North Houston area. This Initiative also provides coverage and enforcement for the Conroe-North Houston Regional Airport which now serves as an international Point of Entry (POE). Through its co-location and coordination with U.S. Customs and Border Protection, MOCONET fills a critical gap in intelligence on aerial smuggling in various private airports throughout the South Texas region.

## **8. Targeted Narcotics Enforcement Team (TNET)**

The Targeted Narcotics Enforcement Team (TNET), sponsored by the Houston Police Department, consists of four enforcement groups that target local and regional organizations that traffic drugs into and through the Houston HIDTA. With investigators continuously developing confidential sources along the Texas-Mexico border, the group is able to target major DTOs before their illicit drug products arrive in Houston.

## **9. Texas Coastal Corridor Initiative (TCCI)**

The Texas Coastal Corridor Initiative (TCCI) is sponsored by the Drug Enforcement Administration's Corpus Christi Resident Office. This Initiative focuses its investigative efforts on the importation and distribution of bulk quantities of drugs from Mexico into the United States. TCCI focuses its investigative resources on three important fronts: 1) identification and targeting of drug trafficking organizations operating in the South Texas area; 2) collection and dissemination of intelligence data acquired from arrestees at the two inland Border Patrol checkpoints in Brooks and Kenedy counties, as well as developing drug investigations from that information; and 3) collection, dissemination, and coordination of investigation information emanating from money seizures in this region of the Houston HIDTA.



## **10. Truck, Air, Rail and Port Initiative (TARP)**

The Truck, Air, Rail and Port Initiative (TARP), sponsored by the Houston Police Department is the only multi-agency interdiction unit operating within the Houston area that focuses on public transportation modes and commercial shipping. TARP has four different enforcement squads, comprised of personnel who are specially trained and experienced in identifying couriers of DTOs who transport drugs and illegal proceeds. Two of the four squads specifically address public transportation interdiction with investigators targeting large and small airports, national bus routes, border bus routes/facilities, passenger rail, rental vehicle companies, parcel/package transport companies and commercial shipping. A third squad primarily targets hotels and motels frequented by DTO members. The fourth TARP squad is the Diversion Squad. This squad specifically addresses the threat from pharmaceutical diversion activities and is involved in investigations involving Houston's numerous "pill mills" as one of its primary functions.

## **11. Upper Texas Gulf Coast Initiative (UTGC)**

The Upper Texas Gulf Coast Initiative (UTGC), sponsored by the Drug Enforcement Administration's Houston Division/Galveston Resident Office, focuses on drug trafficking activities in four Texas coastal counties in or near the Houston HIDTA including Galveston, Brazoria, Matagorda, and Chambers. UTGC investigations target organizations ranging from community-level drug trafficking groups to the highest level DTOs. For example, the Initiative directs multi-jurisdictional Priority Target Organization (PTO) and Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force (OCDEF) investigations, with emphasis on identifying connections to Consolidated Priority Targets (CPOT) and Regional Priority Organization Targets (RPOTs). UTGC's responsibilities also include investigating drug trafficking activities involving four major seaports.

### **THE INTELLIGENCE INITIATIVES:**

#### **1. Houston Investigative Support Center (HISC)**

The Houston Investigative Support Center (HISC), sponsored by the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Houston Field Office, is the focal point of all intelligence developed by the other Houston HIDTA Initiatives. Its mission is to deliver accurate and timely strategic, organizational, and tactical intelligence on drug-related criminal activity within the Houston HIDTA. As part of this mission, the HISC produces an annual Houston HIDTA Threat Assessment as well as other specialized intelligence reports and bulletins that are used by its Executive Board in planning counterdrug strategies. The HISC also provides administrative oversight for the StopDrugs websites. Analysts at the HISC regularly review tips and when possible, verify and augment the information provided through these websites by conducting analytical research. They develop comprehensive intelligence packets for investigators, providing added value to original tips, and assisting in furthering leads that ultimately improve the probability of successful investigations of drug-related activity in the Houston HIDTA.

#### **2. Narcotics Operations Control Center (NOCC)**

The Narcotics Operations Control Center (NOCC), sponsored by the Houston Police Department, is a deconfliction unit established to coordinate narcotics operations for all agencies involved in drug-related law enforcement operations in the Houston area to promote officer safety and prevent agency overlap or conflict in investigations.

## **THE SUPPORT INITIATIVES:**

### **1. Drug Prevention and Awareness Initiative (PI)**

This Initiative was designed to present a concerted and collaborative drug prevention and awareness effort. It was developed in response to concerns identified in the Threat Assessment related to teen drug use and overdoses. Managed directly out of the Director's Office, it involves a partnership with the DEA Demand Reduction Unit and various community coalitions in the area, merging behavioral health professionals, law enforcement officials, and professionals in the treatment realm. Members work together to increase awareness of drug trafficking, substance use, and community drug use trends, while also working toward breaking the cycle of addiction and incarceration.

### **2. Management and Coordination (ADMIN)**

This is the management and coordination Initiative of the Houston HIDTA. The Director and his staff, on behalf of the Executive Board, provide oversight and leadership to HIDTA Initiatives, and serve as intermediaries between the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) and the Executive Board. The Initiative oversees fiscal operations, coordinates the intelligence function, provides information technology leadership and support, conducts Initiative reviews, coordinates training, and prepares the Annual Report, Strategy, and Initiative Proposals for the Board.

### **3. Resource Initiative**

The Resource Initiative, also managed by the Director's Office, is designed to facilitate greater efficiency and cost savings in the research and acquisition of critical technical equipment and service contracts that affect all Houston HIDTA Initiatives.

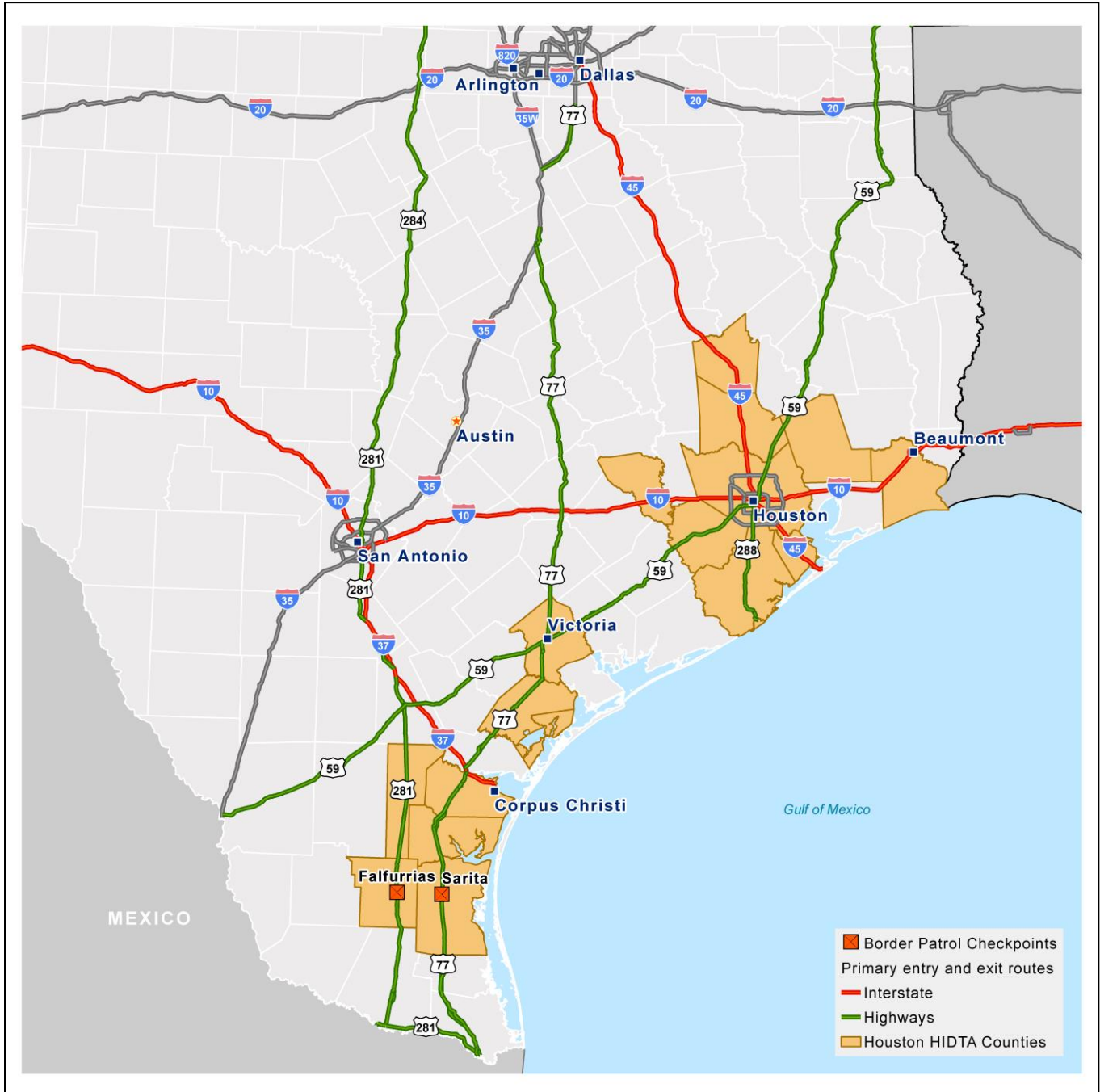
### **4. Training Initiative**

The Training Initiative includes a state-of-the-art training center located at the Houston HIDTA Director's Office. Through this Initiative, the Houston HIDTA has been able to offer many high-value training programs to federal, state and local law enforcement and civilian personnel in the region at no cost to the students or their respective agencies. The Houston HIDTA training facility is equipped with 25 laptop computers for participants to use during training and will seat 50 or more attendees. The Training Initiative uses other training venues for larger audiences.



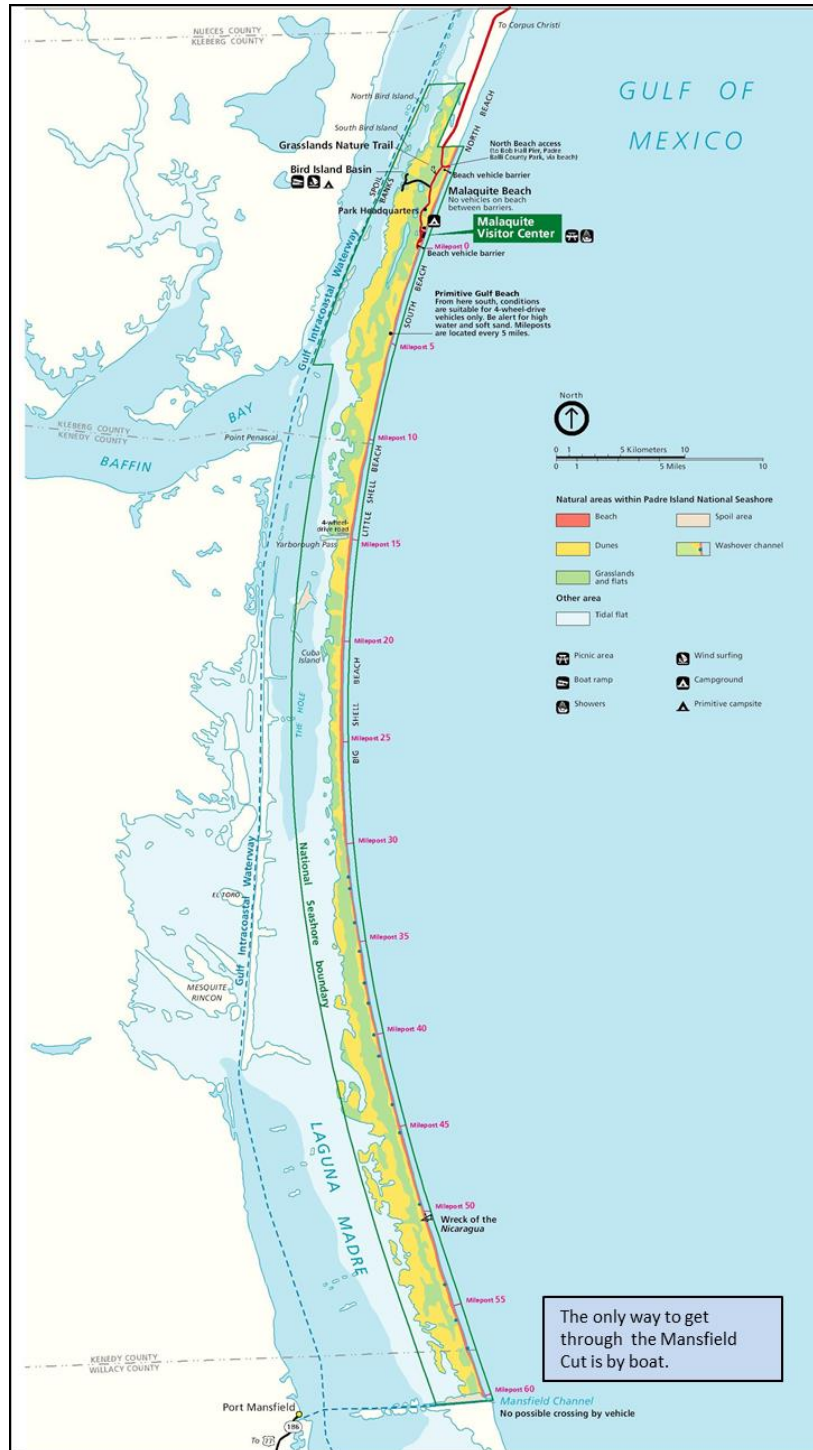
# APPENDIX C

## Map of the Houston HIDTA



# APPENDIX D

## Maps of the Padre Island National Seashore and Gulf Intracoastal Waterway



National Park Service Map Showing the Padre Island National Seashore and the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway<sup>168</sup>



Region of Intracoastal Waterway: Kenedy County to Aransas County



Region of Intracoastal Waterway: Aransas County to Matagorda County



Region of Intracoastal Waterway: Brazoria County to Jefferson County



# APPENDIX E

## Drug-Related Trends and Intelligence Gaps in the Houston HIDTA

This document summarizes the key findings of the 2018 Houston HIDTA Threat Assessment, highlighting the most substantial drug threats, emerging drug trends, and intelligence gaps identified in the region over the past year.

### **Methamphetamine: The Houston HIDTA's Greatest Drug Threat**

Methamphetamine has maintained its position as the greatest drug threat for the past five years and this trend still shows no signs of diminishing. In fact, because it is so readily available at a relatively low price, use of this drug continues to become more widespread. Methamphetamine was reported most frequently to be among the top three drugs used by adults as well as being identified as the main drug "trending upward" in use. In addition to potential public health consequences such as rising rates of addiction, methamphetamine was reported more often than any other drug type for its association with crime in the region. Because Mexican DTOs produce large quantities of methamphetamine quite inexpensively, they obtain a sizeable profit from the sale of this drug. As such, they will sustain their efforts to flood the market to meet the region's strong demand. High levels of methamphetamine in Houston HIDTA communities have led to yet a further reduction in its price in the past year.

Crystal methamphetamine or "ice" is the most commonly used form of methamphetamine. However, Mexican DTOs are increasingly trafficking "liquid methamphetamine" (i.e. methamphetamine suspended in solution) because they are aware that the risk of detection is lower than transporting the drug in its solid state. Law enforcement commonly finds methamphetamine in liquid form concealed in areas of vehicles that are meant to contain fluids, such as gas tanks and windshield wiper reservoirs. It is also routinely found in a variety of jugs and other containers labeled as common consumer products, posing a public safety threat.

Houston continues to be a primary destination point for methamphetamine from Mexico. In this large, metropolitan city, drug investigators are increasingly encountering conversion laboratories set up in residential homes and apartments where methamphetamine is being transformed from its liquid state into a solid, crystalline form and prepared for distribution. Unlike traditional methamphetamine production laboratories that require some level of chemistry skill, conversion is a fairly simplistic evaporation process using fans, a heat source, and acetone to speed the drying process. While conversion is a rising trend in the region, domestic production has sharply declined due to the high level of Mexican methamphetamine available at a much lower cost than could be attained by making this drug locally. The full extent of conversion activity in the Houston HIDTA is an intelligence gap.

### **Synthetic Cannabinoids ("Kush"): A Persisting High-Level Drug Threat**

Although methamphetamine is considered to be the greatest drug threat by a far higher percentage of survey respondents than any other drug type, synthetic cannabinoids have consistently been ranked as the second greatest drug threat for the third consecutive year. Use of synthetic cannabinoids is pervasive throughout the region, encompassing an age range from teens to older adults. For teens, respondents ranked synthetic cannabinoids among the top three most commonly used drugs as well as one of the primary drugs that is "trending upward" in use. Factors contributing to their continued popularity include their relatively inexpensive cost, ready availability, and a low probability that these substances will show up on standard drug tests due to their ever-changing chemical composition. Risks associated with their use are considerable. Negative effects can include paranoia, hallucinations, seizures, and even death. Treatment providers report that patients often have extreme difficulty overcoming addiction to this drug.

Despite robust law enforcement efforts to reduce the supply of synthetic cannabinoids, including seizures of hundreds of pounds of Kush in the Houston area in the past year, its availability remains high. Criminals producing these packets of "poison on leaves" remain highly motivated to continue their illicit business pursuits, due to the significant profit potential. Houston continues to be a central manufacturing hub for bulk quantities of synthetic cannabinoid products, supplying not only the Houston HIDTA, but other states as well. Manufacturing of synthetic cannabinoid products has also been identified in other cities in the region, such as Beaumont and Corpus Christi, but the level of this activity in these cities, as well as in other parts of the Houston HIDTA remains an intelligence gap.

The public health and safety threat from synthetic cannabinoid use cannot be overstated. Those involved in producing these products may include any variety of chemical substances in their mixture and as a result, using them has been compared to playing a game of Russian Roulette. In one prominent example in Illinois in the spring of 2018, at least 164 people developed uncontrollable bleeding after using synthetic cannabinoids believed to contain an ingredient found in rat poison. Particularly "bad batches" of these dangerous drugs have led large numbers of individuals to concurrently seek emergency medical services in the Houston HIDTA as well, inundating the resources of first responders and hospital staff. Data from the Houston Fire Department's Emergency Medical Services (EMS) indicates that from July through December, more EMS calls were related to the use of synthetic cannabinoids than for any other illicit drug type.



## **Marijuana: A High and Rising Threat from High-Potency Marijuana and Marijuana Concentrates**

Marijuana legalization in a growing number of states has led to an increasing social acceptance of its use and a decreased perception of threat. However, in actuality, the threat from this drug has not diminished, but is in fact, heightened due to the rising popularity and availability of highly potent domestically-produced hydroponic marijuana and marijuana concentrates. Hydroponic marijuana has become the preferred form of the drug for those who can afford it and choosing from a menu of available strains with exotic names and flavors has become “trendy” among users. Survey respondents reported hydroponic marijuana to be among the top three most commonly used drugs by both adults and teens and for teens, both hydroponic marijuana and marijuana concentrates were among the top three drugs “trending upward” in use.

These adolescent drug use trends are particularly troubling due to marijuana’s known negative effects on the developing brain. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), “people who begin using marijuana before age 18 are four to seven times more likely than adults to develop a marijuana use disorder.” NIDA also states that “higher THC levels may mean a greater risk of addiction if users are regularly exposing themselves to high doses.” In Harris County, the percentage of individuals seeking treatment services for problems associated with marijuana use is already high. Treatment providers in Houston reported that, with the exception of alcohol, more people are seeking services for problems related to marijuana use than for any other drug. Unfortunately, current marijuana use trends are only likely to lead to an escalation of this situation in the future.

There is an abundant supply of hydroponic marijuana in the region to meet the growing demand. Asian DTOs continue to be active in large-scale hydroponic marijuana cultivation throughout the Houston metropolitan area. Supplementing local production, high-grade marijuana, marijuana concentrates and edible THC-infused products are increasingly being diverted from “legal” states such as California and Colorado, transported into the area on the region’s highways, and with rising frequency, through the mail. The full extent of the use of mail for this purpose remains unknown, but it is thought to be substantial.

## **Cocaine: Enduring High-Level Threat Linked to More Deaths in Harris County than any Other Drug Type**

Both powder cocaine and crack cocaine are readily available at moderate to high levels and cocaine use remains prevalent throughout the region. In fact, survey results indicated that powder cocaine ranked second only to methamphetamine as being among the top three most commonly used drugs by adults. Powder cocaine was also ranked by almost half (49%) of survey respondents to be among their top three drug threats.

Cocaine use poses a serious public health threat. In Harris County, it continues to be a contributing factor in the cause of death more frequently than for any other drug type. The percentage of patients entering state-funded treatment services for a primary problem with cocaine/crack in Harris County in 2017 was 12.1%, second only to alcohol (27.6%) and marijuana (27.6%). The public safety threat is also appreciable. Crack cocaine was reported as one of the top two drugs linked to crime in the region, second only to methamphetamine.

Each year, more powder cocaine is seized in the region than any other drug except marijuana and over the past year, drug investigators in the Houston area reported more cocaine seizures as well as larger cocaine seizures. Regional cocaine seizure totals for the Houston HIDTA Initiatives illustrate an upward trend, from 932 kilograms seized in 2014, to 1,140 kilograms in 2015, 4,476 kilograms in 2016, and to 6,249 kilograms in 2017. As can be seen, the increase is significant, rising 571% in this time span. Increased availability may result in even more deaths from this drug. Perhaps one of the largest potential threats from cocaine is that in other states, cocaine has been found to be laced with fentanyl. This emerging trend has not been identified in the Houston HIDTA, but the impact of popularly used drugs such as cocaine or methamphetamine being mixed with fentanyl could be devastating.

## **Fentanyl, Fentanyl Analogs and other Synthetic Opioids: A Very Dangerous Emerging Drug Threat**

Although fentanyl or fentanyl analogs have not been found in the cocaine or methamphetamine supply in the Houston HIDTA, these dangerous chemicals were found in heroin as well as in other forms in Houston. Initially, one kilogram of fentanyl represented as heroin was seized in early 2017. Since that time, there has been a rapid rise in the number and size of seizures of fentanyl and fentanyl analogs. Smaller seizures entered the Houston area through the mail from China, potentially involving use of the dark web, although intelligence gaps exist in this area. Fentanyl was also found in counterfeit pills. Larger kilogram-level seizures of heroin mixed with fentanyl and seizures of pure fentanyl were believed to be transported into the region by DTOs from Mexico, but this remains under investigation. The Houston Police Department also seized 80 milligrams of a white powder that field-tested positive for methamphetamine, but was later discovered to be the extremely potent elephant tranquilizer, carfentanil. Due to the lethal danger posed by exposure to fentanyl and fentanyl analogs, the Harris County District Attorney’s Office no longer requires field-testing, and law enforcement personnel have begun to carry naloxone, an opioid antidote. The number of deaths in Harris County linked to fentanyl and fentanyl analogs remains low, but it is significant to note that they have more than doubled from 25 in 2016 to 55 in 2017. The first three deaths from carfentanil toxicity were identified in the Houston HIDTA, occurring in Harris, Galveston, and Brazoria counties. The source of the carfentanil in these deaths remains unknown.

## **Controlled Prescription Drugs: High and Rising Threat Due to Presence of Fentanyl in Counterfeit Pills**

The threat level for controlled prescription drugs is high and rising due to the widespread use of hydrocodone and alprazolam (Xanax), coupled with an increase in counterfeit production of these pills. Counterfeit pills containing a cocktail of dangerous drugs are a rising trend. Of utmost concern, fake hydrocodone, Xanax and oxycodone pills containing fentanyl and fentanyl analogs are increasingly being seized in Houston, as well as pills with other synthetic opioids such as U-47700. The public health impact from the illicit use of controlled prescription drugs is quite evident. In Harris County, prescription opioids and benzodiazepines were a contributing factor in a higher number of deaths than for any other drug except cocaine. Throughout the region, the number of exposure calls to the Texas Poison Center Network for controlled prescription drug-related issues was highest of all drug categories. In most of the Houston HIDTA counties, the highest number of calls was specifically related to alprazolam and hydrocodone. Additionally, staff from private treatment facilities in Houston reported a rise in the number of admissions for problems related to opioid use.

Houston remains a source city for bulk quantities of controlled prescription drugs, supplying not only the region, but also neighboring states. This city is a major hub for diversion activities through its numerous "pill mills," as well as a high level of pharmacy burglaries and prescription fraud. Controlled prescription drugs being obtained through pharmacy burglaries and robberies pose a considerable threat due to associated property crime and violent crime.

## **Heroin: Low-to-Moderate Drug Threat but Significantly Elevated Due to Seizures Containing Fentanyl**

Heroin use is rising in some areas of the Houston HIDTA, but its overall popularity is much lower than for other drug types. Therefore, it remains a less substantive drug threat. However, the recent emerging trend of kilogram-level seizures of fentanyl being represented as heroin and heroin mixed with fentanyl has considerably heightened this threat. Not only does it raise the risk to heroin users, it also poses significant hazards for law enforcement seizing drugs containing this dangerous substance. Fortunately, prescription opioid users in the region have not largely turned to heroin as an alternative opiate source. The Houston HIDTA's sustained supply of pills such as hydrocodone available at a relatively low price is believed to have continued to shelter the region to some extent from the national heroin epidemic.

As Mexican DTOs persist in their efforts to supply heroin to parts of the United States where it is in high demand, more heroin is inevitably transiting through the Houston HIDTA. While most of the heroin is believed to be destined for East Coast states where a higher price can be obtained, it is also likely that more heroin is staying in the region than in the past. Because its use is less prevalent than other drugs, the relative impact of increasing availability and use of heroin in the region remains unknown. However, there are some concerning public health trends that warrant attention. There has been a rise in the number of deaths in Harris County linked to heroin use, as well as an increase in the number of deaths in which both heroin and fentanyl were used. In 2016, 15.6% (96 out of 617) drug-related deaths were found to be linked to heroin. In 2017, preliminary data show that this percentage rose to 23.7% (146 out of 615 deaths). Of the 146 deaths that were linked to heroin in 2017, 31 (21%) also listed fentanyl as a contributing factor. In sharp contrast, of the 96 deaths attributed to heroin use in 2016, fentanyl was also listed as a factor in only two (2%) of those deaths.

## **DTOs and Gangs: Mexican DTOs Pose the Highest Threat; Gang Violence is Rising in Houston**

Mexican DTOs, particularly the Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas, maintain strong control over the Houston HIDTA drug market and pose the greatest threat. Their well-established network of family members, friends, and criminal associates including gang members facilitate drug trafficking and human smuggling efforts on the U.S. side of the border. Mexican DTOs and their associates are also heavily involved in bulk cash smuggling, regularly transporting currency in quantities of up to one million dollars through the region each year. Some South American DTOs are also active, but their level of drug trafficking is far less extensive than Mexican DTOs. Asian criminal organizations pose a relatively high threat due to their involvement in large-scale hydroponic marijuana production in Houston, and Middle Eastern DTOs are a threat due to their prominent role in the manufacture and/or distribution of synthetic cannabinoid products.

The Houston HIDTA's major highways are used most extensively for drug trafficking activities, but alternative backroad routes and the use of the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway along with its vast expanse of remote coastline continue to be exploited by DTOs to circumvent the region's two inland Border Patrol checkpoints. A new Falfurrias Checkpoint with improved detection capabilities and additional lanes that is anticipated to be completed next year may cause DTOs to increasingly explore alternative transportation options. At this time, intelligence gaps exist regarding the extent of the use of maritime vessels, private aircraft and rural airports, railways and mail delivery services for drug trafficking activities.

The threat from gangs is tremendous, particularly in Houston. Harris County has the highest concentration of gang members in Texas with over 350 gangs and approximately 19,500 gang members. Most gangs are involved in drug distribution, to some extent, and some members with close connections to Mexican DTOs participate in higher level drug trafficking activities. Various gangs are increasingly collaborating, expanding their scope to include a wider range of criminal acts. Officials are particularly concerned about the rising level of organized, violent gang-related crime in Houston and gang-on-gang murders that have killed innocent bystanders, including children caught in their crossfire.

## APPENDIX F: TREATMENT AND DRUG USE DATA

### Comparison of State-Funded Treatment Facility Admission Statistics for 2016 and 2017

Data for this analysis was provided by the  
Texas Department of Health and Human Services Commission

#### Comparison of State-Funded Treatment Data for 2016 and 2017: **STATEWIDE**

MAIN DRUG TYPES	2016 PERCENTAGE OF INDIVIDUALS ADMITTED FOR PRIMARY PROBLEMS WITH DRUG TYPE (STATEWIDE)	2017 PERCENTAGE OF INDIVIDUALS ADMITTED FOR PRIMARY PROBLEMS WITH DRUG TYPE (STATEWIDE)	CHANGE
ALCOHOL	25.4%	24.4%	DECREASE
MARIJUANA	22.5%	22.0%	DECREASE
METHAMPHETAMINE/AMPHETAMINE	19.6%	18.7%	DECREASE
HEROIN	13.5%	16.7%	INCREASE
COCAINE/CRACK	8.2%	7.7%	DECREASE
PRESCRIPTION OPIOIDS/OPIATES	6.2%	6.0%	DECREASE
BENZODIAZEPINES/SEDATIVES	2.0%	2.1%	INCREASE

#### Comparison of State-Funded Treatment Data for 2016 and 2017: **HARRIS COUNTY**

MAIN DRUG TYPES	2016 PERCENTAGE OF INDIVIDUALS ADMITTED FOR PRIMARY PROBLEMS WITH DRUG TYPE (HARRIS COUNTY)	2017 PERCENTAGE OF INDIVIDUALS ADMITTED FOR PRIMARY PROBLEMS WITH DRUG TYPE (HARRIS COUNTY)	CHANGE
ALCOHOL	28.8%	27.6%	DECREASE
MARIJUANA	31.3%	27.6%	DECREASE
COCAINE/CRACK	14.2%	12.1%	DECREASE
METHAMPHETAMINE/AMPHETAMINE	7.6%	9.1%	INCREASE
HEROIN	5.9%	8.9%	INCREASE
PRESCRIPTION OPIOIDS/OPIATES	5.3%	7.6%	INCREASE
BENZODIAZEPINES/SEDATIVES	2.2%	2.6%	INCREASE

# Drug Use Trends in the Houston HIDTA for Adults

Statistical Data from the Houston HIDTA Drug Threat Survey

Drug types most frequently reported by survey respondents to be among the top three drugs used by adults:

RANKING	DRUG TYPE	SURVEY RESPONSES	PERCENTAGE
#1	Methamphetamine	52/69	75%
#2	Powder Cocaine	31/69	45%
#3	High-Grade/Hydroponic Marijuana	25/69	36%
#4	Crack Cocaine	24/69	35%
#5	Synthetic Cannabinoids	16/69	23%
#5	Heroin	16/69	23%
#6	Controlled Prescription Opioids	11/69	16%
#7	Controlled Prescription Sedatives	9/69	13%
#8	Low Grade Marijuana	6/69	9%
#9	Don't Know	4/69	6%
#10	Marijuana Concentrates (wax, oil)	2/69	3%
#10	Synthetic Opioids (such as fentanyl and fentanyl analogs)	2/69	3%
	Synthetic Cathinones ("bath salts")	0/69	0%
	Synthetic Hallucinogens (such as LSD, PCP)	0/69	0%
	Ecstasy	0/69	0%
	Controlled Prescription Stimulants	0/69	0%
	Marijuana Products (edibles)	0/69	0%
	Other Drugs	0/69	0%

Drug types most frequently reported as "trending upward" in use in the adult population included:

RANKING	DRUG TYPE	SURVEY RESPONSES	PERCENTAGE
#1	Methamphetamine	46/69	67%
#2	Heroin	25/69	36%
#3	Synthetic Cannabinoids	18/69	26%
#4	High-Grade/Hydroponic Marijuana	17/69	25%
#5	Powder Cocaine	15/69	22%
#6	Controlled Prescription Opioids	14/69	20%
#7	Crack Cocaine	11/69	16%
#8	Synthetic Opioids (such as fentanyl and fentanyl analogs)	9/69	13%
#9	Controlled Prescription Sedatives	7/69	10%
#10	Marijuana Concentrates (wax, oil)	6/69	9%
#11	Marijuana Products (edibles)	4/69	6%
#11	Don't Know	4/69	6%
#12	Ecstasy	3/69	4%
#12	Low Grade Marijuana	3/69	4%
#13	Synthetic Cathinones ("bath salts")	2/69	3%
#14	Controlled Prescription Stimulants	1/69	1%
#14	Synthetic Hallucinogens (such as LSD, PCP)	1/69	1%
	Other Drugs	0/69	0%



# Drug Use Trends in the Houston HIDTA for Teens

Statistical Data from the Houston HIDTA Drug Threat Survey

Drug types most frequently reported by survey respondents to be among the top three drugs used by teens:

RANKING	DRUG TYPE	SURVEY RESPONSES	PERCENTAGE
#1	Low Grade Marijuana	40/69	58%
#2	Synthetic Cannabinoids	36/69	52%
#3	High-Grade/Hydroponic Marijuana	34/69	49%
#4	Controlled Prescription Sedatives	27/69	39%
#5	Controlled Prescription Opioids	14/69	20%
#6	Ecstasy	9/69	13%
#7	Marijuana Concentrates (wax, oil)	8/69	12%
#8	Methamphetamine	6/69	9%
#9	Controlled Prescription Stimulants	5/69	7%
#9	Powder Cocaine	5/69	7%
#10	Don't Know	4/69	6%
#11	Marijuana Products (edibles)	2/69	3%
#11	Crack Cocaine	2/69	3%
#11	Heroin	2/69	3%
#12	Synthetic Hallucinogens (such as LSD, PCP)	1/69	1%
#12	Synthetic Opioids (such as fentanyl and fentanyl analogs)	1/69	1%
	Synthetic Cathinones ("bath salts")	0/69	0%
	Other Drugs	0/69	0%

Drug types most frequently reported as "trending upward" in use in the teen population included:

RANKING	DRUG TYPE	SURVEY RESPONSES	PERCENTAGE
#1	High-Grade/Hydroponic Marijuana	35/69	51%
#2	Synthetic Cannabinoids	25/69	36%
#3	Marijuana Concentrates (wax, oil)	22/69	32%
#4	Controlled Prescription Sedatives	15/69	22%
#4	Methamphetamine	15/69	22%
#5	Low Grade Marijuana	14/69	20%
#6	Controlled Prescription Opioids	13/69	19%
#7	Marijuana Products (edibles)	8/69	12%
#7	Don't Know	8/69	12%
#8	Ecstasy	7/69	10%
#9	Crack Cocaine	4/69	6%
#9	Heroin	4/69	6%
#10	Synthetic Cathinones ("bath salts")	3/69	4%
#10	Powder Cocaine	3/69	4%
#11	Synthetic Hallucinogens	2/69	3%
#11	Controlled Prescription Stimulants	2/69	3%
#11	Synthetic Opioids (such as fentanyl and fentanyl analogs)	2/69	3%
	Other Drugs	0/69	0%

## APPENDIX G

### Houston Investigative Support Center Analysis of Harris County Toxicity-Related Death Data

NOTE: This information was compiled by the Houston Investigative Support Center (HISC) using data provided by the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences (HCIFS) as of April 3, 2018. Some 2017 cases were still pending and therefore, data for this year is preliminary. The information provided in these tables is not considered to be official HCIFS statistical data. Rather, it is meant to be used as an indicator of current trends in order to assess the overall threat from various drug types in the Houston HIDTA.

Ranking of Drug Types by Prevalence in Preliminary 2017 Toxicity-Related Death Data for Harris County

DRUG TYPE	NUMBER OF DEATHS IN WHICH DRUG TYPE WAS LISTED AS A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR IN THE CAUSE OF DEATH  TOTAL DRUG TOXICITY-RELATED DEATHS FOR 2017=615  Preliminary Data	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL TOXICITY- DRUG RELATED DEATHS    Preliminary Data
Cocaine	242/615	39.35%
Benzodiazepines/Sedatives*	162/615	26.34%
Prescription Opioids**	156/615	25.37%
Heroin	146/615	23.74%
Ethanol	136/615	22.11%
Methamphetamine	104/615	16.91%
Fentanyl and Fentanyl Analogs	55/615	8.94%
Phencyclidine (PCP)	29/615	4.72%
Synthetic Cannabinoids	6/615	0.98%
Synthetic Opioid U-47700	5/615	0.81%
Synthetic Cathinones	2/615	0.33%
MDMA	2/615	0.33%
Marijuana/THC	0/615	0.00%

\*Note: Drugs included benzodiazepines and other sedative drugs. However, hypnotic drugs (sleeping pills) like zolpidem or the antihistamine diphenhydramine (Benadryl) were not included even though these drugs have a sedative effect. Drugs listed in the cause of death that were included are: alprazolam, "benzodiazepines," clonazepam, diazepam, etizolam, lorazepam, nordiazepam, phenobarbital, and temazepam.

\*\*Note: Fentanyl was not included in the "prescription opioid" category since it is not able to be determined if fentanyl in the cause of death was prescription-grade fentanyl or illicit fentanyl. Some of the deaths in this category do include fentanyl, but only if another prescription opioid was also listed as a contributing factor in the cause of death. Prescription pain medications listed in the cause of death that were included are: buprenorphine, codeine, hydrocodone, hydromorphone, methadone, morphine, oxycodone, oxymorphone, "opioids/opiates," pentazocine, propoxyphene, and tramadol.

Comparison of 2016 and Preliminary 2017 Harris County Toxicity-Related Death Data  
for Two of the Most Commonly Used Controlled Prescription Drugs: Hydrocodone and Alprazolam (Xanax)

DRUG	NUMBER OF DEATHS IN WHICH DRUG WAS A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR IN 2016	NUMBER OF DEATHS IN WHICH DRUG WAS A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR IN 2017  Preliminary Data	CHANGE
HYDROCODONE	73/617 = 11.83%	65/615 = 10.57%	DECREASE
ALPRAZOLAM	113/617 = 18.31%	110/615 = 17.89%	DECREASE

# Comparison of 2016 and Preliminary 2017 Toxicity-Related Death Data by Drug Type for Harris County

## Comparison of 2016 and 2017 Toxicity-Related Death Data for **Methamphetamine**: INCREASE

YEAR	NUMBER OF DEATHS IN WHICH METHAMPHETAMINE WAS A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR IN HARRIS COUNTY	TOTAL NUMBER OF TOXICITY-DRUG RELATED DEATHS	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL TOXICITY-DRUG RELATED DEATHS
2016	93	617	15.07%
2017*	104* (*Preliminary Data)	615*	16.91%*

## Comparison of 2016 and 2017 Toxicity-Related Death Data for **Cocaine**: INCREASE

YEAR	NUMBER OF DEATHS IN WHICH COCAINE WAS A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR IN HARRIS COUNTY	TOTAL NUMBER OF TOXICITY-DRUG RELATED DEATHS	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL TOXICITY-DRUG RELATED DEATHS
2016	237	617	38.41%
2017*	242* (*Preliminary Data)	615*	39.35%*

## Comparison of 2016 and 2017 Toxicity-Related Death Data for **Heroin**: INCREASE

YEAR	NUMBER OF DEATHS IN WHICH HEROIN WAS A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR IN HARRIS COUNTY	TOTAL NUMBER OF TOXICITY-DRUG RELATED DEATHS	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL TOXICITY-DRUG RELATED DEATHS
2016	96	617	15.56%
2017*	146* (*Preliminary Data)	615*	23.74%*

## Comparison of 2016 and 2017 Toxicity-Related Death Data for **Prescription Opioids/Opiates**: DECREASE

YEAR	NUMBER OF DEATHS IN WHICH PRESCRIPTION OPIOIDS/OPIATES WERE A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR IN HARRIS COUNTY	TOTAL NUMBER OF TOXICITY-DRUG RELATED DEATHS	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL TOXICITY-DRUG RELATED DEATHS
2016	176	617	28.52%
2017*	156* (*Preliminary Data)	615*	25.37%*

## Comparison of 2016 and 2017 Toxicity-Related Death Data for **Benzodiazepines/Sedatives**: DECREASE

YEAR	NUMBER OF DEATHS IN WHICH BENZODIAZEPINES/SEDATIVES WERE A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR IN HARRIS COUNTY	TOTAL NUMBER OF TOXICITY-DRUG RELATED DEATHS	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL TOXICITY-DRUG RELATED DEATHS
2016	174	617	28.20%
2017*	162* (*Preliminary Data)	615*	26.34%*

## Comparison of 2016 and 2017 Toxicity-Related Death Data for **Fentanyl/Fentanyl Analogs**: INCREASE

YEAR	NUMBER OF DEATHS IN WHICH FENTANYL OR A FENTANYL ANALOG WAS A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR IN HARRIS COUNTY	TOTAL NUMBER OF TOXICITY-DRUG RELATED DEATHS	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL TOXICITY-DRUG RELATED DEATHS
2016	25	617	4.05%
2017*	55* (*Preliminary Data)	615*	8.94%*

## Comparison of 2016 and 2017 Toxicity-Related Death Data for **Phencyclidine (PCP)**: INCREASE

YEAR	NUMBER OF DEATHS IN WHICH PHENCYCLIDINE WAS A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR IN HARRIS COUNTY	TOTAL NUMBER OF TOXICITY-DRUG RELATED DEATHS	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL TOXICITY-DRUG RELATED DEATHS
2016	11	617	1.78%
2017*	29* (*Preliminary Data)	615*	4.72%*

## Comparison of 2016 and 2017 Preliminary Toxicity-Related Death Data by Drug Type for Harris County (continued)

Comparison of 2016 and 2017 Toxicity-Related Death Data for **Synthetic Cannabinoids**: DECREASE

YEAR	NUMBER OF DEATHS IN WHICH SYNTHETIC CANNABINOIDS WERE A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR IN HARRIS COUNTY	TOTAL NUMBER OF TOXICITY-DRUG RELATED DEATHS	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL TOXICITY-DRUG RELATED DEATHS
2016	7	617	1.13%
2017*	6* (*Preliminary Data)	615*	0.98%*

Comparison of 2016 and 2017 Toxicity-Related Death Data for **Synthetic Cathinones**: DECREASE

YEAR	NUMBER OF DEATHS IN WHICH SYNTHETIC CATHINONES WERE A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR IN HARRIS COUNTY	TOTAL NUMBER OF TOXICITY-DRUG RELATED DEATHS	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL TOXICITY-DRUG RELATED DEATHS
2016	3	617	0.48%
2017*	2* (*Preliminary Data)	615*	0.33%*

Comparison of 2016 and 2017 Toxicity-Related Death Data for **Phenethylamines (Synthetic LSD)**: SAME (NONE)

YEAR	NUMBER OF DEATHS IN WHICH PHENETHYLAMINES (SYNTHETIC LSD) WAS A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR IN HARRIS COUNTY	TOTAL NUMBER OF TOXICITY-DRUG RELATED DEATHS	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL TOXICITY-DRUG RELATED DEATHS
2016	0	617	0.00%
2017*	0* (*Preliminary Data)	615*	0.00%*

Comparison of 2016 and 2017 Toxicity-Related Death Data for **Synthetic Opioid U-47700**: SAME

YEAR	NUMBER OF DEATHS IN WHICH SYNTHETIC OPIOID U-47700 WAS A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR IN HARRIS COUNTY	TOTAL NUMBER OF TOXICITY-DRUG RELATED DEATHS	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL TOXICITY-DRUG RELATED DEATHS
2016	5	617	0.81%
2017*	5* (*Preliminary Data)	615*	0.81%*

Comparison of 2016 and 2017 Toxicity-Related Death Data for **MDMA/Ecstasy**: SAME

YEAR	NUMBER OF DEATHS IN WHICH MDMA/ECSTASY WAS A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR IN HARRIS COUNTY	TOTAL NUMBER OF TOXICITY-DRUG RELATED DEATHS	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL TOXICITY-DRUG RELATED DEATHS
2016	2	617	0.32%
2016*	2* (*Preliminary Data)	615*	0.33%*

Comparison of 2016 and 2017 Toxicity-Related Death Data for **Marijuana/THC**: SAME (NONE)

YEAR	NUMBER OF DEATHS IN WHICH MARIJUANA/THC WAS A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR IN HARRIS COUNTY	TOTAL NUMBER OF TOXICITY-DRUG RELATED DEATHS	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL TOXICITY-DRUG RELATED DEATHS
2016	0	617	0.00%
2017*	0* (*Preliminary Data)	615*	0.00%*

Comparison of 2016 and 2017 Toxicity-Related Death Data for **Ethanol**: DECREASE

YEAR	NUMBER OF DEATHS IN WHICH ETHANOL WAS A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR IN HARRIS COUNTY	TOTAL NUMBER OF TOXICITY-DRUG RELATED DEATHS	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL TOXICITY-DRUG RELATED DEATHS
2016	146	617	23.66%
2017*	136* (*Preliminary Data)	615*	22.11%*



## APPENDIX H: 2017 HOUSTON HIDTA Initiative Seizure Trends

**Cocaine:** There was an increase in powder cocaine seized in the region by Houston HIDTA Initiatives from 4,475.6172 kg in 2016 to 6,258.7942 kg in 2017. Note: \*In 2016, an additional 2,500 kg of cocaine was seized internationally for an overall cocaine seizure total of 6,975.6172 kg. \*\*In 2017, an additional 4,064 kg was seized internationally for an overall cocaine seizure total of 10,322.7942 kg. Crack cocaine seizure totals decreased from 2.4566 kg in 2016 to 1.6594 kg in 2017.

DRUG	UNIT	2014	2015	2016	2017	TREND
Powder Cocaine	kg	932.3260	1,139.7896*	4,475.6172*	6,258.7942**	INCREASE
Crack Cocaine	kg	5.3146	1.0880	2.4566	1.6594	DECREASE

**Methamphetamine:** Methamphetamine seizure totals for the Houston HIDTA Initiatives have increased from the previous year, from 1,172.1011 kg in 2016 to 1,398.7785 kg in 2017. Seizures of methamphetamine in solution continue to rise, although the extent of the increase is not able to be determined. \*Methamphetamine in solution was added as a new PMP category in 2017.

DRUG	UNIT	2014	2015	2016	2017	TREND
Total Methamphetamine	kg	717.371	610.4662	1,172.1011	1,398.7785	INCREASE
Ice Methamphetamine	kg	127.7040	221.0310	281.8263	65.0588	DECREASE
Methamphetamine	kg	505.0330	290.7800	672.1498	887.5817	INCREASE
Methamphetamine Oil	kg	84.634	98.6552	218.1250	69.9280	DECREASE
Methamphetamine in Solution*	Kg	N/A	N/A	N/A	376.2100	N/A

**Marijuana:** Seizure data for the Houston HIDTA Initiatives showed a very large increase in total marijuana seizures from 9,605.9613 kg in 2016 to 19,223.0634 kg in 2017. Significant increases were seen in all marijuana categories except outdoor plants. (\*No outdoor grow operations were found in the PMP database for the Initiatives in 2017, but a 5,255 plant seizure occurred in Walker County.) Hashish, THC liquid (oil) and THC resin (wax) have continued to increase greatly from 6.5055 kg in 2016 to 27.6785 kg in 2017. Seizures of marijuana edibles are now being seized by Houston HIDTA Initiatives. 2.198 kg were seized in 2017.

DRUG	UNIT	2014	2015	2016	2017	TREND
Total Marijuana	kg	91,694.193	27,172.9231	9,605.9613	19,223.0634	INCREASE
Marijuana/Cannabis	kg	77,881.3090	14,254.1088	8,365.4520	13,699.4912	INCREASE
Hydroponic Marijuana (including indoor plants)	kg	3,313.5653	2,793.1903	1,240.5093	5,523.5722	INCREASE
Marijuana Plants (Outdoors)	kg	10,499.320	10,125.6240	0	0*	SAME
Hashish, THC Liquid and Resin	kg	4.0850	0.9814	6.5055	27.6785	INCREASE

**Synthetic Cannabinoids:** Data for the Houston HIDTA Initiatives showed a significant increase in seizure totals in the past year for synthetic cannabinoids from 154.2551 kg in 2016 to 388.1998 kg in 2017. (\*Note: In 2014 and 2015, Houston HIDTA Initiatives had extremely large seizures that were over 100 kg each.)

DRUG	UNIT	2014	2015	2016	2017	TREND
Synthetic Cannabinoids	kg	1,837.3590*	2,373.9100*	154.2551	388.1998	INCREASE

**Heroin:** Seizure data for the Houston HIDTA Initiatives showed a large increase in the total amount of heroin seized from 131.7826 kg in 2016 to 240.6222 kg in 2017. \*Note: \*An additional 1,092 kg was seized in 2014 from an international seizure for a total of 1,153.5220 kg for the year.

DRUG	UNIT	2014	2015	2016	2017	TREND
Heroin	kg	61.5220*	165.2250	131.7826	240.6222	INCREASE

**Controlled Prescription Drugs:** Houston HIDTA Initiatives data showed a very large increase in the total amount of controlled prescription drugs seized, from 54.259 kg in 2016 to 191.891 kg in 2017. The increase is attributed to a much larger quantity of alprazolam (Xanax) seized. \*Seizure totals decreased for codeine from 108.625 gallons in 2016 to 64.237 gallons in 2017. However, 149.540 gallons of promethazine (without codeine) was seized in 2017 that is not reflected in the table below.

DRUG	UNIT	2014	2015	2016	2017	TREND
Prescription Drugs	kg	186.30	37.934	54.259	191.891	INCREASE
Codeine	gal	278.55	122.013	108.625	64.237*	DECREASE

**Fentanyl:** \*Fentanyl was added as a separate category due to emergence of illicit fentanyl in the Houston HIDTA in 2017.

DRUG	UNIT	2014	2015	2016	2017	TREND
Fentanyl*	kg	0.0010	0.0026	0.000	38.9326	INCREASE

**Ecstasy:** Seizure data for the Houston HIDTA Initiatives showed a large decrease in total ecstasy seized from 27.069 kg in 2016 to 9.8873 kg in 2017. \*Note for 2014: There was one very large ecstasy seizure in March of this year.

DRUG	UNIT	2014	2015	2016	2017	TREND
Ecstasy	kg	504.2935*	10.9798	27.069	9.8873	DECREASE

## APPENDIX I

### 2017 Texas Poison Center Network Statewide Statistical Data Illicit and Pharmaceutical-Related Drug Exposure Calls by Drug Type

Statewide Exposure Calls for Illicit and Pharmaceutical Drugs in 2017 (vs 2016)

Of drug-related exposure calls to the Texas Poison Center Network, controlled prescription drugs ranked highest in the number of calls in both 2016 and 2017. Alprazolam topped the list, followed by hydrocodone, tramadol, and codeine for both years. Of illicit drugs, methamphetamine ranked highest in number of calls, followed by cocaine.

MAIN DRUG TYPES	NUMBER OF EXPOSURE CALLS AGE: <20 YEARS IN 2017 (versus 2016)	NUMBER OF EXPOSURE CALLS AGE: > 20 YEARS IN 2017 (versus 2016)	TOTAL NUMBER OF EXPOSURE CALLS IN 2017 (versus 2016)	CHANGE IN TOTAL EXPOSURE CALLS FROM 2016 TO 2017
ALPRAZOLAM (XANAX)	733 (682)	1,891 (1,879)	2,624 (2,561)	INCREASE
HYDROCODONE (NARCOTIC PAIN MED)	343 (379)	1,211 (1,330)	1,554 (1,709)	DECREASE
TRAMADOL (NON-NARCOTIC PAIN MED)	366 (412)	1,075 (1,090)	1,441 (1,502)	DECREASE
CODEINE	414 (407)	834 (829)	1,248 (1,236)	INCREASE
METHAMPHETAMINE	55 (54)	479 (534)	589 (588)	INCREASE
COCAINE	61 (53)	419 (399)	480 (452)	INCREASE
MARIJUANA	202 (189)	249 (248)	451 (437)	INCREASE
OXYCODONE (NARCOTIC PAIN MED)	52 (65)	292 (294)	344 (359)	DECREASE
HEROIN	21(21)	244 (294)	265 (315)	DECREASE
SYNTHETIC CANNABINOIDS	63 (102)	138 (191)	201 (293)	DECREASE
MORPHINE (NARCOTIC PAIN MED)	24 (38)	141 (123)	165 (161)	INCREASE
MDMA	50 (38)	106 (82)	156 (120)	INCREASE
BUPRENORPHINE/SUBOXONE (NARCOTIC PAIN MED USED TO TREAT ADDICTION)	39 (35)	86 (84)	125 (119)	INCREASE
"OPIOID" (UNKNOWN TYPE)	16 (24)	90 (128)	106 (152)	DECREASE
METHADONE (NARCOTIC PAIN MED)	12 (13)	84 (109)	96 (122)	DECREASE
HYDROMORPHONE/DILAUDID (NARCOTIC PAIN MED)	9 (13)	85 (54)	94 (67)	INCREASE
LSD	42 (54)	33 (25)	75 (79)	DECREASE
FENTANYL	5 (2)	60 (66)	65 (68)	DECREASE
TAPENTADOL (NARCOTIC PAIN MED)	4 (2)	21 (21)	25 (23)	INCREASE
SYNTHETIC CATHINONES	3 (3)	18 (11)	21 (14)	INCREASE
PENTAZOCINE (NARCOTIC PAIN MED)	2 (3)	10 (14)	12 (17)	DECREASE
BUTORPHANOL (NARCOTIC PAIN MED)	3 (1)	7 (6)	10 (7)	INCREASE
PROPOXYPHENE (NARCOTIC PAIN MED)	3 (8)	2 (9)	5 (17)	DECREASE
MEPERIDINE (NARCOTIC PAIN MED)	2 (2)	2 (5)	4 (7)	DECREASE

## 2017 Texas Poison Center Network Statistical Data Illicit and Pharmaceutical-Related Drug Exposure Calls by Drug Type for Harris County

Pain medications topped the list as the type of drug for which the Texas Poison Center Network received the most drug-related exposure calls in Harris County in 2017. A similar trend was seen in 2016. The illicit drug with the highest number of exposure calls was cocaine, followed by marijuana.

### Exposure Calls for Illicit and Pharmaceutical Drugs in **Harris County** in 2017 (vs 2016)

MAIN DRUG TYPES	NUMBER OF EXPOSURE CALLS AGE: <20 YEARS IN 2017 (versus 2016)	NUMBER OF EXPOSURE CALLS AGE: > 20 YEARS IN 2017 (versus 2016)	TOTAL NUMBER OF EXPOSURE CALLS IN 2017 (versus 2016)	CHANGE IN TOTAL EXPOSURE CALLS FROM 2016 TO 2017
ALPRAZOLAM (XANAX)	55 (76)	225 (180)	280 (256)	INCREASE
HYDROCODONE (NARCOTIC PAIN MED)	34 (48)	148 (158)	182 (206)	DECREASE
TRAMADOL (NON-NARCOTIC PAIN MED)	38 (30)	126 (139)	164 (169)	DECREASE
CODEINE	48 (45)	113 (92)	161 (137)	INCREASE
COCAINE	6 (4)	55 (48)	61 (52)	INCREASE
MARIJUANA	16 (15)	27 (19)	43 (34)	INCREASE
MDMA	13 (4)	28 (19)	41 (23)	INCREASE
OXYCODONE (NARCOTIC PAIN MED)	3 (5)	31 (24)	34 (29)	INCREASE
METHAMPHETAMINE	1 (7)	23 (34)	24 (41)	DECREASE
BUPRENORPHINE/SUBOXONE (NARCOTIC PAIN MED USED TO TREAT ADDICTION)	5(4)	18 (13)	23 (17)	INCREASE
HEROIN	2 (0)	17 (13)	19 (13)	INCREASE
SYNTHETIC CANNABINOIDS	6 (10)	12 (19)	18 (29)	DECREASE
MORPHINE (NARCOTIC PAIN MED)	1 (3)	14 (15)	15 (18)	DECREASE
HYDROMORPHONE/DILAUDID (NARCOTIC PAIN MED)	2 (2)	10 (7)	12 (9)	INCREASE
FENTANYL	1 (0)	11 (5)	12 (5)	INCREASE
LSD	4 (3)	6 (0)	10 (3)	INCREASE
METHADONE (NARCOTIC PAIN MED)	1 (1)	9 (9)	10 (10)	SAME
"OPIOID" (UNKNOWN TYPE)	2 (1)	7 (6)	9 (7)	INCREASE
SYNTHETIC CATHINONES	2 (0)	1 (2)	3 (2)	INCREASE
MEPERIDINE (NARCOTIC PAIN MED)	2 (1)	1 (0)	3 (1)	INCREASE
TAPENTADOL (NARCOTIC PAIN MED)	1 (0)	1 (1)	2 (1)	INCREASE
PENTAZOCINE (NARCOTIC PAIN MED)	0 (0)	1 (2)	1 (2)	DECREASE
PROPOXYPHENE (NARCOTIC PAIN MED)	0 (1)	0 (0)	0 (1)	DECREASE
BUTORPHANOL (NARCOTIC PAIN MED)	0 (0)	0 (1)	0 (1)	DECREASE
OXYMORPHONE (NARCOTIC PAIN MED)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	SAME

## Drug Types with the Highest Number of Exposure Calls in 2017 Statewide and for Houston HIDTA Counties

Controlled prescription drugs ranked highest for the number of drug-related exposure calls placed to the Texas Poison Center Network in the Houston HIDTA in 2017. Alprazolam (Xanax) was the drug for which the Texas Poison Center Network received the most exposure calls in Houston HIDTA counties, as well as throughout the state. Hydrocodone was the drug for which there was the second highest number of exposure calls. Tramadol, another prescription pain medication was also listed in numerous Houston HIDTA counties as a drug for which there were a high number of calls.

Top Three Drug Types for Exposure Calls related to Illicit and Pharmaceutical Drugs in 2017

STATEWIDE AND BY HOUSTON HIDTA COUNTY	DRUG TYPE FOR WHICH THERE WAS THE HIGHEST NUMBER OF EXPOSURE CALLS IN 2017	NUMBER OF EXPOSURE CALLS	DRUG TYPE FOR WHICH THERE WAS THE SECOND HIGHEST NUMBER OF EXPOSURE CALLS IN 2017	NUMBER OF EXPOSURE CALLS	DRUG TYPE FOR WHICH THERE WAS THE THIRD HIGHEST NUMBER OF EXPOSURE CALLS IN 2017	NUMBER OF EXPOSURE CALLS
STATEWIDE	ALPRAZOLAM	2,624	HYDROCODONE	1,554	TRAMADOL	1,441
HARRIS	ALPRAZOLAM	280	HYDROCODONE	182	TRAMADOL	164
NUECES	ALPRAZOLAM	83	CODEINE	32	HYDROCODONE TRAMADOL	28 28
MONTGOMERY	ALPRAZOLAM	48	HYDROCODONE	36	TRAMADOL	23
JEFFERSON	ALPRAZOLAM	47	HYDROCODONE	34	TRAMADOL	22
FORT BEND	HYDROCODONE	41	ALPRAZOLAM	39	TRAMADOL	26
VICTORIA	ALPRAZOLAM	37	HYDROCODONE TRAMADOL	13 13	METHAMPHETAMINE	11
BRAZORIA	ALPRAZOLAM	24	HYDROCODONE	18	TRAMADOL	13
GALVESTON	HYDROCODONE	22	ALPRAZOLAM	17	TRAMADOL	15
JIM WELLS	ALPRAZOLAM	19	HYDROCODONE	6	COCAINE	4
KLEBERG	ALPRAZOLAM	9	CODEINE TRAMADOL	3 3	COCAINE	1
LIBERTY	ALPRAZOLAM	8	TRAMADOL	6	HYDROCODONE CODEINE	3 3
WALKER	HYDROCODONE	5	ALPRAZOLAM	4	TRAMADOL METHAMPHETAMINE	3 3
REFUGIO	ALPRAZOLAM	3	TRAMADOL	2	FENTANYL HYDROCODONE MARIJUANA	1 1 1
AUSTIN	METHAMPHETAMINE CODEINE	3 3	ALPRAZOLAM	2	HYDROCODONE OXYCODONE OPIOID UNKNOWN COCAINE	1 1 1 1
ARANSAS	HYDROCODONE TRAMADOL	1 1	None	None	None	None
BROOKS	ALPRAZOLAM HYDROCODONE TRAMADOL	1 1 1	None	None	None	None
KENEDY	None	None	None	None	None	None



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