

Good morning, my name is Matthew Thomas. I am a career law enforcement officer, approaching my 29th year in this profession. I started with the Pinal County Sheriff's Office in Arizona in 1993 as a 20 year old young man. I have worked here at PCSO for my entire adult life, having been promoted through the ranks and different assignments to my current position as Chief Deputy, which is second in command to the Sheriff.

First, I would like to thank you for providing a means for law enforcement to give direct feedback on a subject that affects all of us as Americans. Over the three decades of service in the position of a deputy sheriff for the Pinal County Sheriff's Office, I have had a front row seat to how our country and society has changed. In my career, the majority of my assignments have been directly involved in the fight against illegal drugs. I have seen firsthand the effects of drugs on our citizens, our communities, our state and our country. Being an Arizona native, born and raised in Phoenix and spending my entire adult life as a law enforcement officer in this great state, I have no illusions of how much of a part our state plays in the supply of illegal drugs to our entire nation.

I have worked as an interdiction officer, working the roadways and highways to combat those individuals and organizations who are transporting illegal drugs. I have also worked undercover, infiltrating, countering and combating the same. Lastly, I have worked as a SWAT team member, leader and commander of our team, in which I have been involved in hundreds of cases involving illegal drugs. With all of this experience as a professional law enforcement officer, I have seen, up close and personal, the devastating effects of these drugs on our people. On a personal level, I grew up in a gang and drug infested area, having friends and relatives that were caught up in this same scourge. I tell you all of this, as I consider myself an expert in the area of illegal drugs and the negative effects it has had on our communities. It has also provided me with an unfettered view of these issues, and the real stories associated with this issue. These are people that I know, that I have watched grow up from kids into adults, and I have watched generations of a family be negatively affected by the drug problem.

The world of illegal drugs seemed to be very cyclic as I progressed through my career. Meaning that certain drugs have gained popularity, then slowly faded away as a new drug appeared, or as a previously popular drug made a resurgence. Some "drug problems" were worse than others, like when crack cocaine and crystal methamphetamines first hit the streets in the early part of my career. Then over the last decade, watching the opioid surge turn from a pill popping problem that transcended all socio demographic boundaries, into a full blown epidemic in our nation. Of course there are several factors that contributed to this explosion of these types of drugs being used, but the alarming thing was how deadly they have become.

During this same time frame of my career, I have had a front row seat to the expansion of the Mexican cartels and their grasp on the control of illegal drugs coming into our state and nation. This has turned into the perfect storm as it relates to the current opioid crisis, with the Mexican cartels having a society immediately to their north that has an insatiable appetite for these types of drugs, along with the ability to provide a drug packaged in such a way that it defeats our societal stigmas. I mean let's be honest, many Americans have issues with sticking a needle in their arm to get high, but wouldn't think twice about popping a pill.

This leads me to our current state. We have the Mexican cartels pumping what we refer to as "M 30"s, which are the illicit blue pills containing fentanyl that are often called "fake oxy" or fake oxycontin pills. These pills are manufactured by the cartels in Mexico, as they have direct connections with other countries for all of the precursor chemicals needed for manufacturing. These pills are now being

produced at a faster rate than ever, and of course have no quality control, oversight or approval process before being packaged and shipped to the United States for consumption. One of the main issues with these particular illegal drugs is that one pill may be a small dosage, leading to the desired high and the next pill may contain a lethal dosage, leading to a certain death. Our agency has seen teens die on their first time use. These were great kids with a good house, upbringing, stable life, but took a blue M-30 for the first time just to "relax" or "get some rest". Again the stigma not being attached to the use of these pills of being bad. Combine this with the fact that social media platforms are being used to discuss, arrange purchases, and deliver these drugs to our kids, and you have the problem we are seeing now. Almost on a weekly basis, we have a call into our office of a family member finding a loved one deceased. When you look at the age of the deceased, and see that they are anywhere from a teen to a younger adult, you can almost always bet that it was a fentanyl overdose. It is sad to say that for those of us in law enforcement, this has become a normal call. That should tell you exactly where we are with this epidemic. I have children as well, and this is one of the most concerning things I face as a parent right now. I am trying to ensure that my children understand how big of a problem this is, and how deadly these bad choices can be.

Law enforcement is frankly quite tired. We know the issues, because we see them first hand EVERY SINGLE DAY. Yet all we see are talking heads in leadership positions discussing or debating the issue, with little to no help in actually trying to solve the problem. I am hopeful that there are leaders such as you all, that are willing to take a stand, willing to listen to those of us who know this problem intimately, and choose to attack the problem head on.

Thank you, and please feel free to reach out if you need anything further.

Matthew Thomas
Chief Deputy, Pinal County Sheriff's Office
Office # 520-866-5133
Cell # 520-705-4423
Email: matthew.thomas@pinal.gov