

Plano father and son ran one of the largest fentanyl operations in the U.S., records show

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They descended on a two-story Carrollton rental house for a seemingly routine warrant, but once inside, DEA agents and local police found 13 spiral notebooks and 16 cell phones that would break open a major case.

Scribbled in the ledgers were the names of multiple drug trafficking associates, as well as the breadth of a massive operation: \$5.7 million in sales of fentanyl and other drugs over roughly a year and a half, federal court records show.

How fentanyl journeys from China to Mexico to North Texas

It was a lucky find. Dealers had a habit of destroying the ledgers after a month to avoid detection, agents said.

The related indictments filed in the Eastern District of Texas have formed one of the biggest fentanyl trafficking investigations in Texas, if not the nation. The plot began as early as 2017 and has grown with operations in Dallas, Farmers Branch, Garland, Grand Prairie, Carrollton, Plano, Richardson and Rockwall, court records show.

Since that fruitful November 2019 raid, DEA agents have rounded up and charged more than 100 defendants, a number of whom have agreed to cooperate, court records show.

The case's tendrils reach deep into North Texas suburbia, including Flower Mound, where in 2021 three high school students overdosed in a school bathroom.

Agents identified the man they say is responsible. Rafael Galindo Gallegos spent his days in Plano before fleeing to Mexico where he is harboring his compatriots on a fortified 10-acre ranch under armed guard, the feds say.

Father and son

Law enforcement officials say fentanyl has eclipsed other street drugs as the deadliest and most widely available drug in North Texas. Fentanyl, a synthetic opioid originally created as an anesthetic, is 50 to 100 times more potent than morphine. An amount the size of the tip of a sharpened pencil can be lethal.

About 900 Texans died from fentanyl-related overdoses in 2020, according to the Texas Department of State Health Services. That number jumped to about 1,650 people in 2021 — an increase of more than 80%, state health officials said.

Gallegos, 53, and his son, identified in court records as Rafael Galindo Gallegos Jr., 28, run the major smuggling operation from Durango, in northwest Mexico, for the powerful Sinaloa cartel that Ismael “El Mayo” Zambada Garcia and his longtime compadre, Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán, once headed, the feds allege.

In addition to bringing about 90 pounds of various drugs into the U.S. per week, Gallegos and his son are responsible for most of the deadly fentanyl pills smuggled into North Texas cities, the DEA said.

[How to use Narcan to reverse an opioid overdose, save a life](#)

Various operatives sell the powerful synthetic opioid out of North Texas drug houses and online via the dark web, where encrypted content provides users the cover of anonymity.

The Gallegos operation launders its considerable drug profits using cashier's checks, electronic money transfers and real estate and vehicle purchases, according to court records. Smugglers also hide bundles of cash in vehicles bound for Mexico, court records show.

Court filings detail another major component of the conspiracy: buying high-powered assault rifles in the U.S. and smuggling them into Mexico to give the Sinaloa cartel the firepower to battle police and rival cartels.

The U.S. attorney's office declined to discuss the case, saying it remains an active investigation.

Alleged ringleader

Cooperating witnesses identified Gallegos as the leader.

The DEA during its investigation seized 250,000 fentanyl pills from a storage unit Gallegos owned in Dallas and another 300,000 pills at his Plano stash house, court records said.

Agents say Gallegos is violent and dangerous. When a man was unable to pay his debts, Gallegos had his wife shot dead on a Dallas sidewalk after she dropped off her teen daughter at school, prosecutors said in a court filing.

EVIDENCE PRESENTED:

Defendant Has Failed to Rebut the Presumption.

The Government offered testimony from [REDACTED] Drug Enforcement Administration [REDACTED] has direct knowledge of the investigation. The Court found his testimony to be credible. [REDACTED] testified to the following:

[REDACTED] testified that Defendant is involved in a large-scale drug trafficking organization ("DTO") connected to a violent gang involved with the Sinaloa cartel. In the latter part of 2021, DEA Dallas agents and officers began investigating a large-scale Fentanyl DTO operating in the Eastern District of Texas and the surrounding DFW area. With the help of several cooperating witnesses, DEA Dallas identified Rafael Gallegos ("Gallegos") as the leader of the operation. Gallegos traffics about 40 kilograms of various drugs per week into the United States from Mexico. At Hearing relevant to his Fentanyl trafficking, [REDACTED] testified that DEA Dallas seized 250,000 Fentanyl pills from a storage unit in Dallas owned by Gallegos. DEA also seized 300,000 Fentanyl pills at Gallegos' "stash house" in Plano. In addition to trafficking drugs, Gallegos also transports firearms from the United States to Mexico for the Sinaloa cartel. The instant DTO is violent. Specifically, investigators linked Gallegos to the murder of a woman in Dallas shot dead on the sidewalk after she dropped her kids off for school in the morning. Her husband was unable to pay the debt he owed to Gallegos. Gallegos also ordered the killing of an individual who insulted his son. [REDACTED] testified that Gallegos is responsible for many other unsolved murders and kidnappings. Gallegos is currently a fugitive hiding in a secure compound surrounded by guards in Durango, Mexico with at least ten other individuals involved in the DTO.

Raquel Ramírez, 42, was gunned down in March 2010. The mother of two had just returned home from Bishop Lynch High School and was getting out of her SUV when a Ford Taurus drove up. Someone got out and walked up to her, then shot her multiple times. Police found the getaway car abandoned in a nearby parking lot. It had been bought days before with cash.

Detectives spoke to her family and friends as well as a prison inmate and others and determined it was related to the husband's drug debt. Ramírez's husband had been taken to Mexico several months before and assassinated, *The Dallas Morning News* reported in 2011.

Gallegos also ordered the killing of someone who insulted his son and is responsible for "many other unsolved murders and kidnappings," according to DEA agents.

Fentanyl from a Carrollton drug house killed 3 students, hospitalized 6, feds say.

Authorities say Gallegos fled to Mexico around 2011 to avoid capture by the North Texas feds and was followed there at some point by his son. He is now a fugitive "hiding in a secure compound surrounded by guards" in Durango with at least 10 other cohorts, some of whom are U.S. citizens living under his protection, a DEA agent said in court.

Gallegos encouraged his operatives to join him at his fugitive retreat to avoid capture and thus protect himself, agents said. And he offered to cover their travel expenses and provide safe passage to his ranch, according to court records.

Little is known about Gallegos' background or activities in Plano. Public records are sparse. He was married at one point to Leonor Lopez, a defendant in the criminal case, according to a senior law enforcement official.

The DEA in court records called Lopez, 64, a "top member" and "matriarch" of the Gallegos organization who laundered drug money and used her Garland house as a base of operations.

Lopez, 64, known as "Mama Rafa," remains in custody pending trial.

Her attorney declined to comment.

High-end cars and real estate

The son, Rafael Galindo Gallegos Jr., is identified in court records as an aspiring rap musician with a recording label who helps his father run the drug trafficking business.

The son was born and raised in North Texas, according to the senior law enforcement official.

Dallas County court records show Gallegos Jr. was arrested in November 2014 during a traffic stop on West Mockingbird Lane, near Love Field. He was charged with misdemeanor marijuana possession and another misdemeanor for having a loaded handgun in his Mercedes sedan. He pleaded no contest to a reduced charge and was given probation, court records show.

What to know about the synthetic opioid fentanyl and why it's dangerous

Driver's license records show father and son used a Dallas address: a house in the 3000 block of Rotan Lane in Northwest Dallas. A DEA agent testified that the senior Gallegos never put real estate properties or vehicles in his name.

The agent said the Gallegoses had associates purchase high-end vehicles for them as well as expensive real estate properties in California to launder their drug profits.

The DEA agent also said in court hearings that Gallegos is close to the top leaders of the Sinaloa cartel: El Mayo and El Chapo's sons, known as "Los Chapitos."

Ovidio Guzmán was arrested in January in Mexico, and the U.S. has asked for his extradition. He is accused of helping oversee nearly a dozen methamphetamine labs in Sinaloa and conspiring to distribute cocaine and marijuana.

El Chapo's brother, Aureliano Guzmán Loera, better known as "El Guano," is "responsible for vast amounts of fentanyl to the U.S.A., including North Texas," said Arturo Fontes, former FBI agent and president of Fontes International Solutions, a security consulting firm. "The Gallegoses are big players for Guano — they are his representatives, so to speak, in the Dallas area."

Fentanyl's deadly consequences prompt Texas schools to step up drug awareness

Investigators listened in April 2022 to recorded phone calls in which a cooperator placed a fentanyl pill order directly with Gallegos, according to court records.

Gallegos told the man he would sell him 50,000 pills for \$90,000, court records show. The deal, set up by agents, was to go down in a Dallas Kroger parking lot at night. Gallegos' courier arrived and was arrested.

Gallegos also is an arms trafficker, the DEA says.

AK-47s and sniper rifles

Agents in 2019 raided a North Texas storage unit and found a cache of guns that were slated to be sent to Mexico, the DEA said.



These weapons were seized on Aug. 5, 2019, from a storage unit on Indian Trail in Dallas used by the drug organization. DEA officials say the members bought guns in the U.S. with drug proceeds and shipped them south into Mexico for the Sinaloa cartel. (Justice Department)

One of the ledgers they seized from the Gallegos organization contained a written inventory of firearms including Glock handguns, ammunition, targets, eye and ear protection, sniper rifles and AK-47s.

“The other part of their money-making scheme is to supply the Sinaloa cartel with large volumes of firearms and ammunition and training gear, such as Barrett .50 caliber sniper rifles and AK-47s and handguns such as Glocks and Berettas,” a lead DEA agent said in 2020 during court testimony.

The Gallegos organization smuggled about 150 firearms from the U.S. to Durango, the agent said.

“And those firearms were handed over to the Sinaloa cartel to continue this ongoing drug war and fight law enforcement and rival cartel members,” the agent said.

One of Gallegos’ alleged gun dealers bought “numerous, high-powered firearms” some of them “powerful enough to pierce through armored vehicles,” according to a detention hearing.

U.S. prosecutors said the Mexican government has “expressed its desire” to extradite that man and “prosecute him for firearms trafficking in Mexico.”

“One drug ledger showed that in only one week, [the] defendant had trafficked \$1.3 million in firearms. Further, the serial numbers from numerous gun boxes found in Defendant’s house match the serial numbers of guns found at crime scenes in Mexico,” court records said.

‘Matriarch’

The COVID-19 pandemic raged across Texas just when the DEA investigation picked up steam, and agents had to temper their expectations.

But by mid-2020, they had arrested several members of a North Texas family who they said were key players.

Lopez, believed to be Gallego’s ex-wife, has family in Mexico and crossed the border more than 160 times, prosecutors said. Several of Lopez’s family members in North Texas also are indicted in the case, according to court records.

[‘Nobody cared’: North Texas school ignored concerns about fentanyl, pills, mother says](#)

One of the defendants in the case is accused of selling drugs to high school students in the Rockwall area.

Another moved into a house near Plano East High School, from which he graduated. His neighbors began complaining about heavy “foot traffic and drug activity.” A DEA agent testified that many of the suspect’s clients were high school and college students.



Leonor Lopez (Dallas County sheriff)

Some of the alleged conspirators were barely adults when they were arrested.

Eduardo Chávez, special agent in charge of the Dallas DEA, said drug traffickers like Gallegos don't care if kids overdose on the pills.

"It's almost as if you're disassociated with the human consequences of your actions," Chávez said. "It comes down to power and ego."

Kevin Krause. Kevin has worked for The Dallas Morning News since 2003. He covers federal criminal courts and has been a journalist for 30 years. Kevin is a multiple recipient of the Stephen Philbin Award for excellence in legal reporting. Kevin earned a BA from Boston University.

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