



TESTIMONY OF

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BEFORE

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on the Judiciary

ON

"The Biden-Harris Crisis: California Perspectives"

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San Deigo, CA

Chairman Jordan and Distinguished Committee Members, thank you for coming to San Diego to address the critically important public safety issue of border security.

My name is Mike Hestrin, and I am the elected District Attorney of Riverside County, serving in this role since 2015.

Riverside County, located to the east of Los Angeles County and north of San Diego County, is not on the U.S.-Mexico border, but it is significantly impacted by border issues, particularly drug trafficking and immigration. Due to its proximity to border-adjacent counties, Riverside County is heavily affected by the movement of drugs such as fentanyl. Several major freeways in Riverside County are known drug trafficking corridors, providing direct routes from the border to Southern California and beyond. Interstate 15, in particular, serves as a critical north-south corridor for traffickers moving illicit drugs from the border area through our communities and further into the United States.

To combat this threat, law enforcement agencies like the Riverside County Sheriff's Department and California Highway Patrol actively monitor these corridors and conduct interdiction operations. For example, on August 20, U.S. Border Patrol agents from the Newton-Azrak Border Patrol Station confiscated 81 pounds of cocaine during a traffic stop on Interstate 15 in Temecula.

The Newton-Azrak Border Patrol Station, located in Murrieta and overseen by the San Diego Sector Patrol, reported seizing 2,437 pounds of cocaine this fiscal year, an increase of 300 pounds from the previous year. Agents have also confiscated 3,627 pounds of methamphetamine, 31 pounds of heroin, and 475 pounds of fentanyl.

On a national level, data from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) shows that fentanyl seizures have risen dramatically. In Fiscal Year 2021, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) seized over 11,000 pounds of fentanyl, nearly double the amount seized in 2020. This trend has continued, with over 27,000 pounds seized in Fiscal Year 2024 — a 145% increase from 2021. This amount is enough fentanyl to kill six billion people, equivalent to killing every American 18 times over.

Fentanyl smuggling across the U.S.-Mexico border has profoundly impacted Riverside County, with significant increases in drug seizures. The state's southern border has become a critical entry point for fentanyl entering the U.S., largely driven by the Sinaloa and Jalisco New Generation Cartels, which dominate Mexican states adjacent to California. Although we know the quantity of fentanyl seized, the amount successfully entering the country remains unknown.

The devastating impact of fentanyl on Riverside County is clear. In 2016, the county had only two fentanyl-related deaths. Since 2020, these deaths have increased by 1,291%. Our office, in

Written Testimony of Michael A. Hestrin, Riverside County District Attorney

collaboration with local law enforcement agencies, investigates every fentanyl death as a potential homicide. Beginning in 2021, we were the first District Attorney's Office to file murder charges under the unique circumstances of charging second-degree homicide for a fentanyl-related death. One such case, *People v. Romero*, resulted in a conviction of second-degree murder with a sentence of 15 years to life.

Despite our efforts, fentanyl remains a pervasive public safety threat in Riverside County. Our office leads the state in prosecution efforts, with more than 30 fentanyl-related homicide charges filed since 2021. However, it is not enough to combat fentanyl locally, after it has already entered our communities, causing death and destruction. Fentanyl production begins in Mexico, where it is manufactured by the Sinaloa and Jalisco cartels in covert, unsanitary labs. The cartels are expanding their marketing of fentanyl to children via social media apps, counterfeit pill production, and lacing other illicit drugs. In 2021, four out of ten illicit pills contained fentanyl; that number has now risen to seven out of ten.

The Mexican drug cartels recently attempted a public relations campaign by calling for a ban on fentanyl in Mexico, including hanging banners in Sonora and Baja California. However, this is merely a distraction tactic. Ongoing seizures and fentanyl-related deaths show that production and trafficking into our communities has not ceased.

The failure to control illegal border crossings and address the influx of fentanyl into the U.S. is taking a devastating toll on Riverside County. We urgently need comprehensive federal action and robust initiatives to address this issue effectively. Stronger border policies and enhanced law enforcement measures are essential to curbing fentanyl trafficking, which is fueling a crisis across the country, particularly in Southern California and counties like Riverside County. This fight cannot be waged by local officials alone; we need resources and enforcement at the border to stop this lethal threat before it reaches our communities.