

The Truth About Fentanyl Trafficking



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In February 2023, a 37-year-old woman was caught smuggling \$1 million worth of fentanyl and meth across the US-Mexico border into California in the fuel tank of her 2016 pickup truck. ¹ She wasn't an undocumented immigrant trying to sneak across the border. She was a US citizen entering through the Andrade Port of Entry. And this is the rule, not the exception.

For 20 years, drug-involved overdose deaths have been on the rise in the United States, with fentanyl being the number one contributor since 2016. Fentanyl is a potent and easy to manufacture synthetic drug that is often cut with other drugs like cocaine and Percocet. Fentanyl accounted for 71,238 deaths in 2021, a 23% increase from 2020. ² Republicans are blaming this sharp increase on what they call President Biden's "open border" policy, claiming that undocumented migrants are bringing fentanyl across the border. ³ They point to large fentanyl seizures by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) as proof of such policy failures. ⁴ But Republicans are once again ignoring the facts. Fentanyl is primarily being brought into the United States through legal ports of entry (official entrances) by US citizens. And seizures of large amounts of

fentanyl should not be derided but celebrated as the Biden Administration's actions to combat fentanyl trafficking are strong and getting stronger.

On Fox News, on Twitter, at Congressional hearings, and on the House Floor, Republicans have been accusing the Biden Administration's immigration policy for the spike in fentanyl deaths in the United States. In this memo, we set the record straight.

Fentanyl Trafficking Is an American Crime

Republicans want voters to think that undocumented immigrants are running across the border with backpacks full of fentanyl. ⁵ But here are the key facts:

- **United States citizens comprised 86% of fentanyl trafficking convictions in 2021.** ⁶ 1,322 of the 1,533 charged fentanyl trafficking offenders were US citizens. ⁷ Even the CATO Institute, a libertarian think tank, acknowledges this point. In fact, just 0.02% of people arrested by Border Patrol for illegally crossing possessed fentanyl. ⁸
- **More than 96% of fentanyl seizures along the border since the start of fiscal year 2023 have been at legal US ports of entry.** ⁹ Fentanyl is rarely carried over the border through the desert. It's being smuggled across legal points of entry inside seat cushions, car batteries, even inside the metal frame of a walker.
- **Fentanyl deaths have been on the rise for the past decade.** ¹⁰ Overdose deaths from fentanyl aren't new or a unique Biden Administration problem. Fentanyl deaths have been increasing since 2014, with significant increases during the Trump Administration. From 2016 to 2020, fentanyl deaths in the US increased by 191%, compared to a 25% increase from 2020 to 2021. ¹¹
- **90% of fentanyl seized by CBP was at U.S. border crossings into Arizona and California.** ¹² While Texas Republicans point to undocumented immigrants in their state as fentanyl drug smugglers and traffickers, almost all fentanyl seized by CBP was at legal points of entry in Arizona and California.

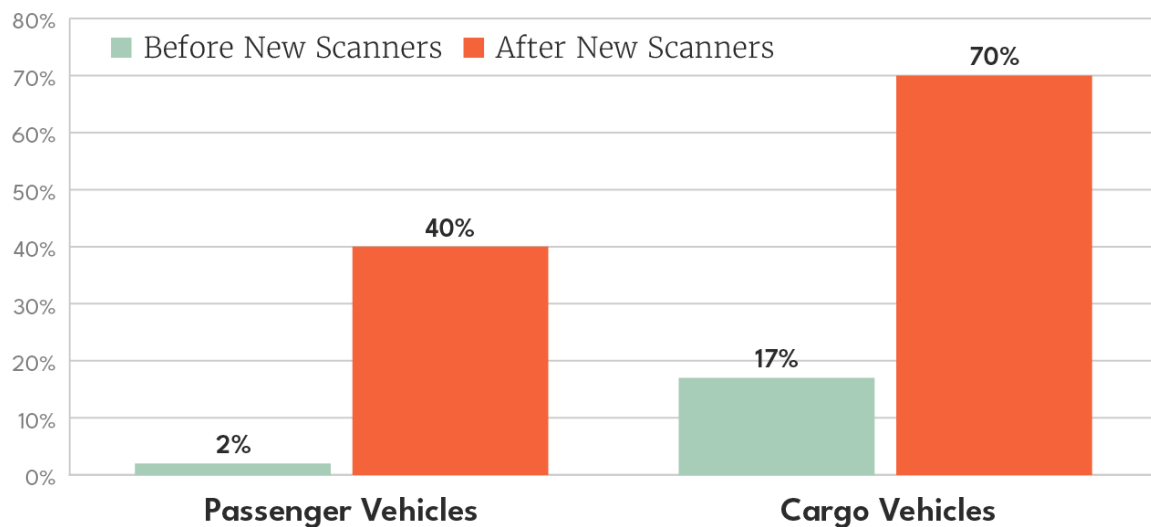
Biden Administration's Fentanyl Crackdown is Moving Light Years Ahead of Trump's

The Biden Administration has been proactive about securing our border and stopping the illegal flow of fentanyl and other drugs. Their actions on fentanyl are significantly tougher and more comprehensive than any previous administration, including Trump's.

- **In mid-March of 2023, the Biden Administration launched Operation Blue Lotus, a new coordinated operation among Customs and Border Protection (CBP), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Homeland Security Investigations, and federal, state, tribal, and local law enforcement to target the smuggling of fentanyl. In just its first week, Operation Blue Lotus seized over 900 pounds of fentanyl and made 18 arrests.** ¹³ Arrests should be considered a success, not an indication of failure.
- **The Biden Administration is installing new border technology called multi-energy portals at ports of entry to allow CBP to scan six times as much cargo per day.** These scanners will ramp up US inspection from 2% of passenger vehicles and 17% of cargo vehicles to 40% of passenger vehicles and 70% of cargo vehicles, greatly increasing their ability to detect fentanyl or other drugs. ¹⁴ Construction has already begun at some ports of entry, with the Biden Administration planning to install 123 new large-scale scanners by 2026.

 **THIRD WAY**

Biden Administration Increases Scanning Capacity at Border Crossings



Source: Miroff, Nick. "U.S. deploys powerful scanners at border to fight fentanyl smuggling." The Washington Post, 9 Mar 2023. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2023/03/09/united-states-arizona-border-fentanyl/>. Accessed 3 Apr 2023.

- **President Biden recently announced his Fiscal Year 2024 budget, and unlike the House Freedom Caucus’s budget, it increases investments in border security.** His budget includes \$25 billion for CBP and ICE, \$800 million more than last year’s budget. It includes funds for CBP to hire 350 more border patrol agents, 150 more CBP officers, \$535 million for border technology, and \$40 million for combatting fentanyl trafficking.

- **Some other notable steps** include working with couriers like FedEx to inspect more packages for drugs, stronger penalties to crack down on fentanyl trafficking, federal funding to make fentanyl testing strips easily accessible, and increased funding for regional efforts to disrupt drug trafficking organizations.¹⁵

Republicans Slash Funding to Fight Fentanyl

While House Republicans haven't released an official budget yet, it's likely they'll propose returning to Fiscal Year 2022 funding levels. This would likely mean significant cuts to CBP's budget and personnel as well as federally funded substance use treatment and prevention programs.

In a letter to House Appropriations Ranking Member Rosa DeLauro, the Department of Homeland Security detailed the impacts of these funding cuts. CBP would be forced to implement a hiring freeze and cut up to 1,000 CBP Officers and 1,400 Border Patrol Agents.¹⁶ Over \$640 million in border security technology would no longer be operational due to resource cuts.¹⁷ Agents would have to reduce vehicle inspections at ports of entry due to limited capacity, allowing more drugs like fentanyl to be smuggled into our country.

The Republican budget would also make significant cuts to substance use treatment and prevention programs, a very important tool in reducing overdose deaths. The State Opioid Response grant program would see their budget slashed by 22%, denying more than 29,000 people admission to opioid use disorder treatment.¹⁸ This would undoubtedly lead to a rise in fentanyl deaths.

Conclusion

Despite what Republicans want Americans to think, we do not have "open borders," and the Biden Administration and undocumented immigrants aren't the reason we have a fentanyl problem in our country. Fentanyl is primarily brought into the country by US citizens at official border crossings. The Biden Administration is proactively investing resources at these crossings to slow the flow of fentanyl. Republicans are just interested in fearmongering and grandstanding, not actually addressing the fentanyl crisis.

TOPICS

JUSTICE 45

ENDNOTES

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