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PRESS RELEASE

Drug Enforcement Administration arrests for fentanyl surpass arrests for heroin for first time

WASHINGTON – Arrests by the Drug Enforcement Administration for fentanyl offenses exceeded those for heroin offenses for the first time in fiscal year 2021, according to a new Bureau of Justice Statistics report, *Heroin, Fentanyl, and Other Opioid Offenses in Federal Courts, 2021*. During FY 2021, the DEA made 3,138 arrests for fentanyl, 2,591 arrests for heroin and 676 arrests for other opioid offenses. From FY 2020 to FY 2021, there was a 36% increase in arrests made by the DEA for fentanyl and a 29% decrease in arrests for heroin.

The DEA also reported an increase (1,528 arrests, or 6%) in total drug arrests from FY 2020 to FY 2021. Fentanyl arrests made up 11% of that total; heroin, 9%; and other opioids, 2%. The majority (55%) of drug arrests were for methamphetamine (33%) and cocaine (22%).

Arrests for heroin, fentanyl and other opioids increased from 4,830 in FY 2001 to a peak of 8,258 in 2015, then declined to 6,405 in FY 2021. Of the 6,405 total persons arrested by the DEA for opioids as the primary drug in FY 2021, 52% were ages 21 to 34, while 11% were age 50 or older and 5% were age 20 or younger. Males made up 80% and females 20% of persons arrested for opioids.

In FY 2021, 1,679 persons were sentenced for drug offenses involving fentanyl—a 45% increase from FY 2020.

“Beyond the overall increase in fentanyl sentences from FY 2020, looking at regional patterns in FY 2021, sentences imposed for drug offenses involving heroin, fentanyl and other opioids made up a larger share of drug sentences imposed in northeastern states than in other regions,” said Kevin M. Scott, Ph.D., BJS Acting Director. “Most persons sentenced for heroin, fentanyl and other opioids (97%) were sentenced for drug trafficking.”

Males accounted for 82% of persons sentenced for a drug offense involving opioids in FY 2021 and females accounted for 18%. The majority (77%) of persons sentenced in FY 2021 for drug offenses involving heroin, fentanyl or other opioids as the primary drug were Hispanic (39%) or black (38%), with white (21%); American Indian (1%); and Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (1%) comprising the remainder.

Most (86%) persons sentenced for opioid-related drug offenses were U.S. citizens. Non-U.S. citizens comprised 14% of persons sentenced for a drug offense involving opioids, with 7% being citizens of Mexico, followed by 4% with citizenship in a Caribbean country.

Of those individuals sentenced for an opioid-related offense, 89% received a prison term. Most persons sentenced for drug offenses involving heroin (89%) or fentanyl (87%) had a prior criminal history at sentencing and received a median prison term of 46 months. Persons sentenced for oxycodone received a median prison term of 26 months, and those sentenced for hydrocodone received a median term of 24 months. Among individuals sentenced for any opioid-related offense, 67% received a shorter sentence than the guideline range.

These and other findings are from BJS’s Federal Justice Statistics Program, which collects data from the U.S. Marshals Service, DEA, Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, Executive Office for U.S. Attorneys, Federal Bureau of Prisons and U.S. Sentencing Commission.

[Heroin, Fentanyl, and Other Opioid Offenses in Federal Courts, 2021](#), written by BJS Statistician Mark Motivans, Ph.D.; related documents; and additional information about BJS’s statistical publications and programs are available on the BJS website at bjs.ojp.gov.

About the Bureau of Justice Statistics

The Bureau of Justice Statistics of the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs is the principal federal agency responsible for collecting, analyzing and disseminating reliable statistics on crime and criminal justice in the United States. Kevin M. Scott, Ph.D., is the acting director. More information about BJS and criminal justice statistics can be found at bjs.ojp.gov.

About the Office of Justice Programs

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