

BORDER MANAGEMENT TODAY

Issue 012 | January 2025

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Fighting the Opioid Epidemic at the Borders with Open-Source Intelligence

Borders are the frontlines of the fight against fentanyl and other synthetic drugs; it is there where the battle to detect, identify, and seize illicit drugs and materials used in the production of illicit synthetic narcotics is waged. The opioid epidemic fight is ultra-challenging in that it is fast-moving, continually evolving, and transnational with

sophisticated, well-financed adversaries.

Open-source intelligence (OSINT) has become essential in promoting international collaboration and driving more strategic, intelligence-driven operations for greater effectiveness in the fight to stem the opioid epidemic at the borders. OSINT is intelligence produced by

collecting and analyzing publicly accessible information (PAI) to support investigative practices. Access to OSINT enhances situational awareness by gathering and analyzing PAI from a variety of sources, such as social media, news reports, and government websites. By monitoring these sources, OSINT allows border security personnel to stay informed

about current events, emerging threats, and significant trends to guide informed operations based on the most up-to-date information available.

OSINT can provide many things, including strategic and tactical intelligence, situational awareness, indications and warnings, identity, and threat intelligence, illicit actor trusted traveler programs, and more. All of these are useful in the fight to stop illicit trading of drugs such as fentanyl, which has surged to unprecedented levels.

THE EVER-EXPANDING THREAT

Per the [Center for American Progress](#), internationally, an array of actors, both in the licit and illicit economies -- and predominantly in China and Mexico -- play a significant role in the production and trafficking of fentanyl. The illegal drug trade is a worldwide issue with many points of entry, and the illicit synthetic drugs market is highly dynamic with many substances and an ever-expanding array of precursors surfacing the market every year.

In June 2024, World Drug Day, the [United Nations agency tackling crime and drug abuse](#) (UNODC) reported on a spike in drug use as well as increased trafficking. The report stated that worldwide 60 million people consume opioids and that, in the decade leading up to 2022, there has been an increase in overdose deaths following the emergence of nitazenes -- a group of synthetic opioids potentially more dangerous than fentanyl -- in several high-income countries.

2013 was the beginning of what is referred to as the third wave of the opioid epidemic fueled by synthetic opioids, with fentanyl becoming the most common one linked to overdoses. According to [Harm](#)



[Reduction Journal](#), by 2017, the world entered a fourth wave. Marked by changes in opioid supplies and use, there has also been an increase in the co-use of methamphetamine on top of existing opioid usage.

The global nature of the opioid epidemic makes it necessary for a multipronged approach to intelligence gathering by agents responsible for intercepting narcotics. Advanced detection technologies can be used to bolster efforts, while also protecting personnel from the hazards associated with handling these illegal substances.

INTELLIGENCE GATHERING AND ANALYSIS AT SPEED AND SCALE

Big data is growing rapidly, [with 2.5 quintillion bytes of data generated every day in 2024](#) with 90% of this having been created in the last two years. When analyzed by border agents and other personnel, this information can provide necessary insights for combating the international drug trade. For instance, examining geolocation and telemetry data from advertising technologies can help identify potential drug transactions and monitor the

movements of individuals of interest. This data can play a key role in building a case for obtaining search warrants.

Among the challenges in implementing integrated border management strategies is the need for rapid identification, collection, and verification of all relevant data for risk assessment and management at borders. This information is spread across various sources and legacy systems, often isolated within different border security organizations, and is not always easily linked to a specific identity, particularly when multiple languages are involved, which is why many on the counternarcotics frontlines acknowledge that technology and data that is sourced in alternative ways are essential components of the solution. They need the ability to gather and analyze massive volumes of open-source data at faster-than-human speeds to make informed decisions as quickly as possible.

Border protection personnel and law enforcement are leveraging OSINT to identify and track shipments and narcotics activity and increasingly harnessing intelligence yielded from open sources worldwide.

OSINT has both local and global impact. Locally, it helps empower officers and agents to do more by giving them the tools to focus efforts. Globally, because OSINT is unclassified data, it can be used to support cross-border coordinated efforts for improved collaboration.

Additionally, OSINT can enhance border protection agency operational efficiency to support the legitimate flow of goods across borders. E-commerce has significantly increased the volume of goods shipped worldwide. In Fiscal 2023 alone, US border personnel faced the daunting task of screening [more than 1 billion parcels at its borders](#).

Ernst & Young Global Trade and Customs Leader Dan Dreyfus [has urged](#) the use of data and technology to boost productivity. “For example, information on cargo movements can be shared in real time between different countries, enabling customs and border agency officials to more accurately predict when cargo loads that require inspection or intervention are likely to arrive, allowing for more effective forecasting of staffing needs,” said Dreyfus in an interview.

OSINT BEST PRACTICES

OSINT has been in use for some time, which has revealed several best practices for its application in border protection operations:

- Minimize the onus on operational and frontline staff. The availability of OSINT solutions as a Software-as-

a-Service (SaaS) deployment means teams can avoid time-consuming and complicated software installs, patches and upgrades, and quickly start using the technology.

- Use a solution that is user-friendly and that, depending on the goals of the program, enables agencies to start using the technology in as little as 15 minutes after onboarding and training and makes it possible for properly trained users to flex and expand their expertise within hours.
- As narcotics trafficking involves communications and transactions taking place in numerous languages and scripts, look for the solution that includes multilingual comprehension for discovery and retrieval of relevant documents across hundreds of languages, with cultural context, and translation.
- Ensuring the use of OSINT in accordance with policy and privacy guidelines is vital. Make sure OSINT solutions can be tuned to match the legal and privacy framework of the organization, and adhere to data governance best practices, such as appropriate privacy regulations, international privacy laws such as [GDPR](#), and other federal and local laws.

A STRATEGIC FORCE-MULTIPLIER

OSINT use for counter narcotics has emerged as the force-multiplier enhancing the capabilities of agents and officers to analyze data quickly and at scale, far beyond human

capacity. With it, agencies gain unparalleled access to vast amounts of data, for comprehensive analysis, pattern recognition, and predictive analytics, empowering personnel with the situational awareness needed to mitigate trafficking at all levels of operations, and insights that enable more effective strategies for prevention, detection, and response.

As Senior Vice President and General Manager of Identity, Risk, and Border Programs, Mohamad El-Hamalawy oversees Babel Street's Large and Enterprise accounts within its Federal Civilian client base. He has over 25 years of experience spearheading numerous large-scale initiatives for the development and delivery of cutting-edge technology solutions for border, vetting, customs, risk and transnational challenges for the US and international clients.
