

# BORDER SECURITY REPORT

VOLUME 38  
SEPTEMBER / OCTOBER 2024

THE JOURNAL OF BORDER SECURITY AND TRANSNATIONAL CRIME FOR THE WORLD'S BORDER PROTECTION, MANAGEMENT AND SECURITY INDUSTRY POLICY-MAKERS AND PRACTITIONERS

## COVER STORY AI IN BORDER MANAGEMENT: IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

AI FOCUS  
SPECIAL

### SPECIAL REPORT



Swedish Kid Soldiers p.10

### AGENCY NEWS



A global review of the latest news and challenges from border agencies and agencies at the border. p.34

### SHORT REPORT



New plan to combat human trafficking launched in Brazil p.32

### INDUSTRY NEWS



Latest news, views and innovations from the industry. p.72

# OPEN-SOURCE INTELLIGENCE: ENHANCING ABILITIES IN THE “BORDERLESS” OPIOID EPIDEMIC BATTLE

*By Peter De Bie, Babel Street*

There's a deadly surge at the world's borders presenting imminent threat to the public -- it's the “borderless” opioid epidemic. Borders are the frontlines -- and often the last lines of defense -- in 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.

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.

For Customs and Border Protection (CBP) personnel, the opioid epidemic fight is ultra-challenging

in that it is fast-moving, continually evolving, and transnational with sophisticated, well-financed adversaries. Bad actors continue to exploit technology to further their criminal activities in the areas of recruitment, communication, illicit products, strategy and operations. Countering these efforts is daunting, and the opioid threat is growing more potent and life threatening as time goes by.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says there have been three distinct but interconnected waves of the opioid overdose epidemic. The first started in the 1990s with increased prescribing of opioids to treat pain. This was followed by a second wave beginning in 2010 characterized by heroin overdose deaths. The third wave of the opioid epidemic began in 2013, driven by synthetic opioids, with fentanyl emerging as the most prevalent opioid involved in overdoses during this third wave. And recent data suggest that there is a nascent fourth wave -- illicitly manufactured fentanyl that has been rapidly introduced into the illicit drug supply by drug dealers mixing it with other drugs.

**Supporting Information Analysis at Speed and Scale**

Opioids cross borders through a variety of vectors. From a practicality perspective, officers and agents cannot open every package. From a safety perspective, the physical act of opening cargo also poses



a very real and significant threat, as the handling of opioids in their concentrated form can cause death through contact or inhalation. CBP personnel and law enforcement are seeking to leverage alternative means to identify and track shipments and narcotics activity.

About five years ago, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) sounded the alarm, urging a multi-pronged integrated strategy comprising early warning and trend analysis with national forensic and counternarcotic capacity building and international law enforcement operations collaboration. UNODC says monitoring is paramount to understanding the synthetic drug market evolution to help inform both effective policy and response.

Further, UNODC advocates innovative investigative techniques, including the monitoring and disruption of the illicit manufacturing and online marketing, sales,

distribution and related financial flows via the Internet and dark web, to foster the collaboration and exchange of vital intelligence and information to facilitate a multilateral response.

Five billion people currently use the Internet, creating 2.5 quintillion bytes of online data every day. Properly examined, this information can provide the vital insight needed to combat the international drug trade. For example, analysis of advertising technology-based geolocation and telemetry data can be used to identify potential drug sales and track the movements from persons of interest. This information can potentially be used to build the case for search warrants.

Those on the counternarcotics frontlines recognize technology and data must be part of the solution. Open-source intelligence (OSINT) is increasingly playing a vital role in fostering international



collaboration and guiding more strategic intelligence-led operations for improved impact.

With it, CBP forces charged with stopping narcotics at the borders are enhancing their abilities to shore up means of detection, while safeguarding personnel from the dangers inherent in handling these illicit substances. Moreover, they are systematically “locking arms” with other nations to stem the tide of cross-border drug trafficking.

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 CBP 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. Collectively, this helps agents and officers do more by fortifying, enhancing and supporting the following areas:

- Tactical and strategic intelligence
- Situational awareness
- Indications and warning
- Identity and threat intelligence
- Illicit actor tactics, techniques and procedures

#### **Tracking Digital Trails Across Borders**

OSINT use for counter narcotics has been recognized as a force-multiplier, augmenting agent and officer capabilities to support data analysis at speed and scale beyond human capacity to identify patterns, predict trends, and provide insights for more effective prevention, detection, and response strategies.

OSINT has both a local and global significance. 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 greater impact. All too often, issues with information sharing often hinder a global coordinated and collaborative effort. Since OSINT leverages publicly available information that is non-classified, it eliminates this significant barrier to information sharing among agencies.

There has been much written in recent years on staffing shortages impacting CBP agencies and impeding the legitimate flow of goods across borders. Global Trade and Customs Leader at Ernst & Young, 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.

#### **Key Technology Considerations**

There are a few best practices for the application of OSINT technology in the CBP realm.

Look for solutions that 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 start using the technology – and realizing its benefits – quickly.

As with any software solution, usability is key. Depending on the goals of the program, agencies can expect to start using the technology in as little as 15 minutes after onboarding and training. Beyond this, properly trained users can learn to flex and expand their expertise within hours.

Narcotics trafficking involves communications and transactions taking place in numerous languages. This underscores the value of OSINT in 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 paramount. 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.

**Restricting the Physical and Digital Flow of the Opioid Drug Trade**

The illegal narcotics trade is a plague on communities worldwide, bringing with it crime, violence, and significant loss of life.



The pervasiveness of technology means that the same internet and digital platforms used by organizations and individuals to achieve legitimate economic gains are also in use by illicit drug traffickers. CBP and law enforcement agencies need to leverage these same technologies to mitigate both the physical and digital flow of the opioid trade across borders.

Using technology through the integration of PAI and OSINT has emerged as a quintessential force-multiplier for CBPs on the frontlines of this fight. With it, agencies gain unparalleled access to vast amounts of data, comprehensive analysis, pattern recognition, and predictive analytics, empowering personnel with the situational awareness needed to stay ahead of drug traffickers at all levels of operations.

OSINT is helping border agencies mount a more complete,

consistent, efficient, and robust risk assessment/threat identity capability using PAI/CAD across multiple mission sets. By detecting previously unknown delivery avenues or identifying facilities and transport vectors being used in trafficking, nations can enhance their effectiveness in breaking up traffic rings and in stemming the tide of opioid distribution, use and deaths.