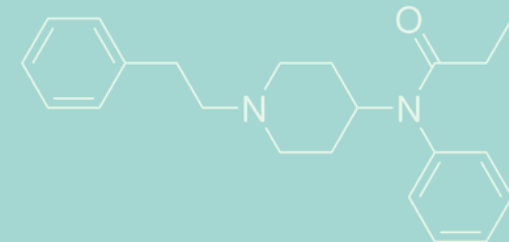


Fig. consumidor

C<sub>22</sub>H<sub>28</sub>N<sub>2</sub>O



Illustration: @el\_dante\_aguilera



N-(1-(2-feniletil)-4-piperidinil)-N-fenil-propanamida

## An overview of the effects of fentanyl use in Mexico

By Marcela Del Muro y Marcos Vizcarra

**The year 2025 began with a new campaign against substance use in Mexico, with a particular focus on fentanyl. On the radio, a deep, solemn voice warns: ‘Fentanyl kills you; a united family gives you life.’**

The campaign seeks to construct and reinforce the stereotype of the so-called ‘addict’, an image often shaped and spread by governments and businesses. This narrative erases the complex realities that lead a minority of people to problematic psychoactive substance use.

In a country marred by violence, where survival often means gruelling working hours, public policy tends to criminalize the weakest links in criminal networks – the ones who profit the least from illicit activities – while ignoring the broader social and public health issues that affect thousands across Mexico.

Anti-drug campaigns carry slogans such as:

- ‘Fentanyl wrecks your body. Staying active makes you strong.’
- ‘Fentanyl hooks you from the first hit. Real friends protect you.’
- ‘Once fentanyl is in your system, it numbs you, makes you lose interest in daily life, and fills you with anxiety, paranoia and aggression.’
- ‘Over time, fentanyl twists your body – your arms, hands, fingers, even your neck – and robs you of motor control.’
- ‘Say no to drugs; choose happiness instead.’



**Public campaign**  
**«Aléjate de las drogas. Fentanilo»**



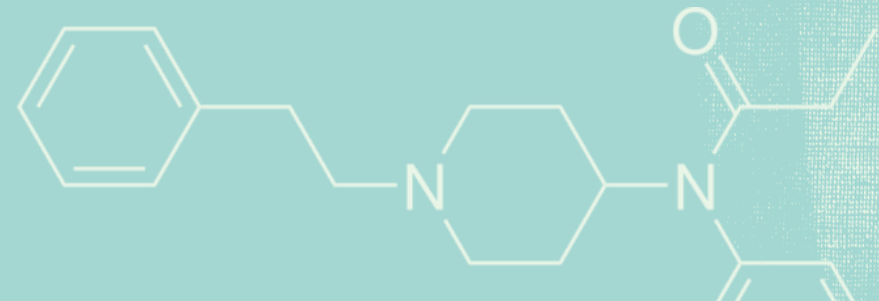
According to Claudia Rafful Loera, an expert in mental health, substance use and harm reduction, these campaigns 'show a very binary view of what the world and people who use substances can be like'. Such portrayals create stigma that discourages people with problematic substance use from seeking help. 'From a health-based model of substance use, people may choose to use substances, but once it becomes a problem, it is considered a health issue – not a matter of choice,' she explains.

In Mexico, it is civil society organizations dedicated to risk and harm reduction that provide real support to people struggling with substance use; saving lives, especially along the US border. For the past six years, these organizations have received no federal funding. The stigma and criminalization of users are also evident in the difficulty of accessing naloxone, the medication that reverses opioid.

overdoses. In Mexico, it is classified as a psychotropic substance, making it extremely hard to obtain.

'The community's perception of these programmes is that we are helping people who don't want to help themselves, who don't want a happy life. All the support goes to organizations that work on prevention, but always from an abstinence-only perspective: either you use [drugs] or you don't. We don't see prevention that way; for us, harm reduction is also prevention – we prevent deaths,' says Lourdes Angulo, director of Verter, a Baja California organization that promotes public health and human rights among vulnerable communities.

In the face of daily stigmatizing campaigns on the radio or plastered on billboards across our cities, it is important to recognize that:



- **Medical fentanyl and illegally manufactured fentanyl are not the same.** Illegally produced fentanyl is unregulated, often adulterated with other substances, and has caused thousands of overdose deaths worldwide.
- **Legal fentanyl does not destroy the body:** it is an opioid widely used for pain management and has been safely prescribed for decades in medical settings.
- Fentanyl is not instantly addictive, though many cancer patients have developed dependence. It is, however, highly addictive and **requires close medical supervision.**
- While it numbs the body, it does not erase interest in daily life or automatically cause anxiety. What must be understood is that this drug **should only be administered under medical guidance.**

- It does not gradually rob people of motor control. Many cancer patients rely on fentanyl to live with dignity and less pain.

Governments and businesses can help address fentanyl use in Mexico by supporting risk and harm reduction strategies – approaches backed by decades of evidence – instead of relying on stigmatization.





### **ABOUT THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE**

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime is a global network with over 700 Network Experts around the world. The Global Initiative provides a platform to promote greater debate and innovative approaches as the building blocks to an inclusive global strategy against organized crime.

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