

The real problem in Mexico is not fentanyl

By Marcela Del Muro and Marcos Vizcarra



In the United States, unregulated fentanyl production has had devastating consequences. But Mexico's response to its neighbour's health crisis has, among other things, distracted attention from its own crisis – widespread methamphetamine use.

In the morning press conference on January 7, 2025, President Claudia Sheinbaum stated that 'fentanyl is not really a problem in our country'. That is partly true. Along the northern border, overdoses have been reported in cities such as Tijuana and Mexicali, in the state of Baja California. These cases are mostly tied to cross-border drugs that contain fentanyl, but the primary substance is usually methamphetamine.

'We've seen users who overdosed and reported that they weren't opioid users at all, but rather cocaine or crystal meth users.

They overdosed because of the mix of substances,' explained Lourdes Angulo, director and founder of Verter, a non-profit based on Mexico's northern border that provides care for drug users.

Mexico's anti-drug programmes have largely relied on reactive, prohibition-driven approaches, targeting users instead of addressing the root causes of the issue. This has only fuelled illicit markets, as seizure data shows. According to the defence ministry, methamphetamine is the most frequently seized drug in the country. 'Money is being spent on ads to prevent fentanyl use, when what young people on the streets are actually using is crystal meth,' said researcher Angélica Ospina.

Martha Torres, director of the Sinaloa State Addiction Commission, agreed: 'On average, most patients test positive for methamphetamines.

Despite the presence of fentanyl, meth remains the drug with the greatest impact.' The same trend is confirmed nationwide by youth rehabilitation centres: eight out of ten patients in rehab are there because of meth, not opioids. Meth use is also affecting younger populations – the latest national survey on drug, alcohol and tobacco use documented cases among children as young as 10.

In 2025, a new survey is expected to shed more light on substance use in Mexico, with the goal of providing an evidence-based and educational perspective rather than leaning on prohibitionist policies. Experts consulted for this study stress that the findings should be used to strengthen community health centres, replace violent rehab facilities, expand access to drug-testing services, provide naloxone, and implement harm-reduction programmes in schools with clear, non-stigmatizing information.

'The problem in Mexico is not fentanyl. The real problem is the lack of a comprehensive public policy that tackles meth use with empathy and science,' said Torres.





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