

Drug Availability in Pennsylvania, 2017-2019



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BULLETIN



Philadelphia
Division



(U) This DEA Bulletin is based on preliminary reporting and may be subject to updating as additional information becomes available.

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Event

The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) Philadelphia Field Division (PFD) conducted a review of laboratory-analyzed drug seizures for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The resulting analysis of this data formed the basis for estimating the level of drug presence in Pennsylvania and highlighted trends in drug availability. In 2018, the PFD published an analysis of similar data for 1999-2016¹; this report expands the previous analysis and assesses significant changes in drug availability since 2016.

Significance

Laboratory-analyzed drug seizure data is submitted by federal, state, and local laboratories pursuant to seizure by a law enforcement agency and is compiled by the National Forensic Laboratory Information System (NFLIS)². Analysis of laboratory-analyzed drug seizure data is beneficial in identifying emerging trends in drug availability.

Details

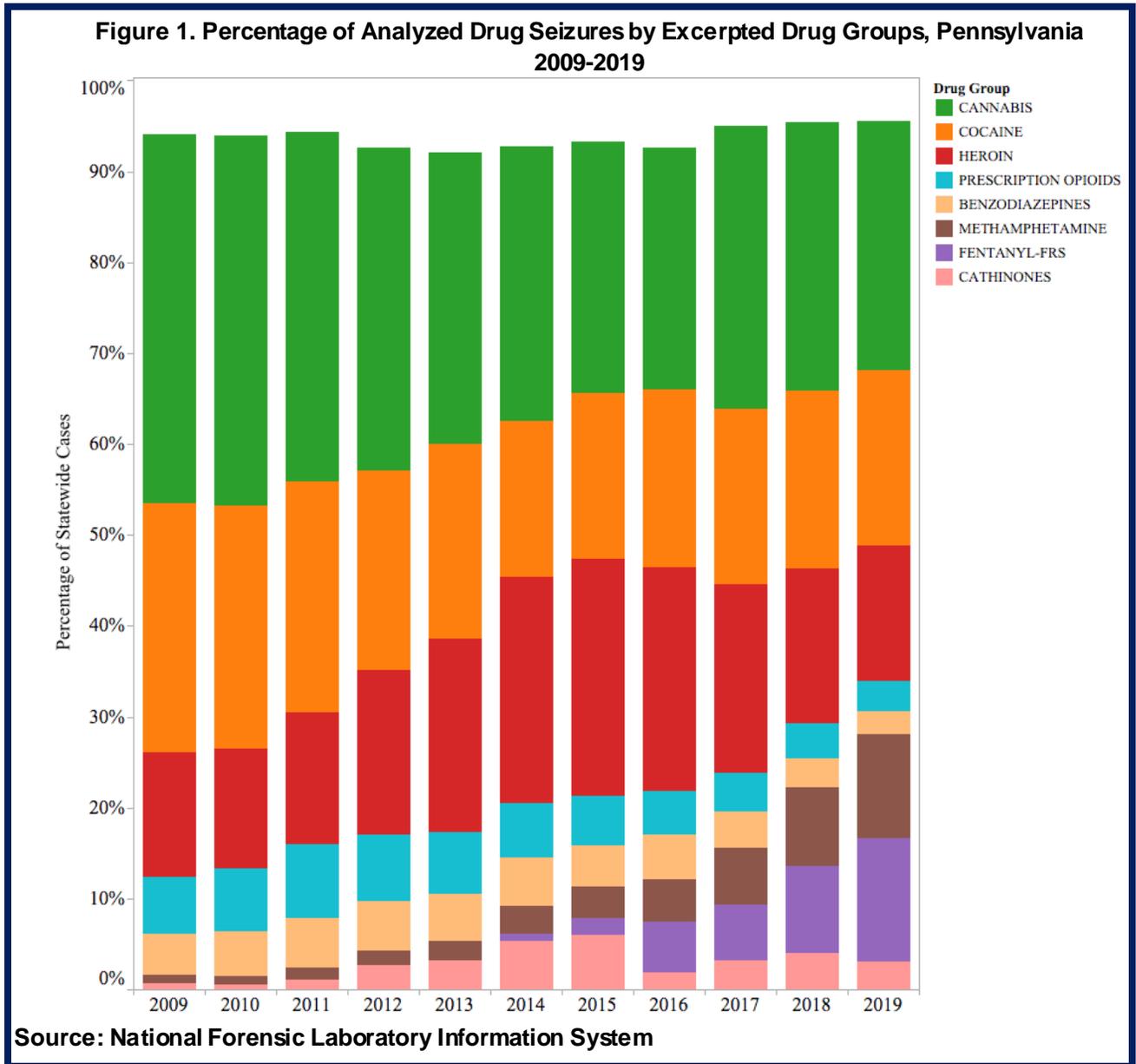
NFLIS was queried for the 25 drugs most frequently analyzed in Pennsylvania from 2017 through 2019 (analyzed time period). During that time period, 33 distinct compounds (controlled and non-controlled) were reported among the top 25.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of analyzed drug seizures by drug group for the period of 2009-2019 (data beyond the analyzed time period provided for visual trend analysis). Individually reported drugs were grouped into categories, to include benzodiazepines; cathinones/cannabinoids; fentanyl/fentanyl-related

¹ (U) Drug Presence in Pennsylvania, 1999-2016, DEA-PHL-BUL-064-18, February 2018.

² (U) The DEA NFLIS collects results from drug chemistry analyses conducted by state, local, and federal forensic laboratories across the country. NFLIS provides analytical results of drugs seized by law enforcement and is a source of information for monitoring drug trafficking in the United States.

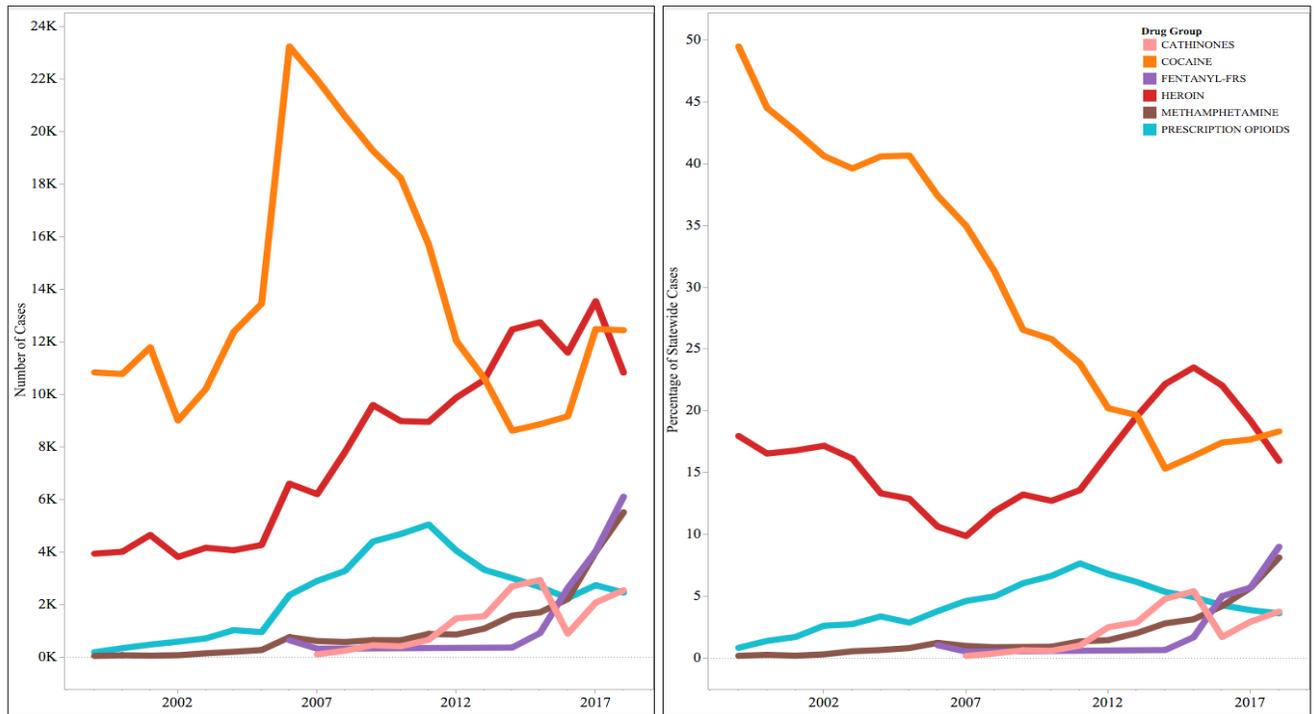
substances (FRS); and prescription opioids. For previously reported data updated to include 2017-2019, see Figure 3.



Consistent with previous reporting, the largest number of cases from 2017 to 2019 were found to contain cannabis, which represented ~25 percent of statewide cases in 2019—a slight decline from 2018 and 2017.

Cocaine-positive cases comprised ~18 percent of the statewide total in 2019, relatively stable from 2017, but a dramatic decrease from previous reporting of ~50 percent of cases in 1999 (used as a reference from previous reporting). Of interest, the *number* of analyzed cocaine cases was similar to that of 1999, however, the diversification of the drug supply in the intervening years decreased the overall statewide percentage of cocaine cases (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Number of Analyzed Drug Seizure Cases and Statewide Drug Percentages by Excerpted Drug Groups, Pennsylvania, 1999-2019



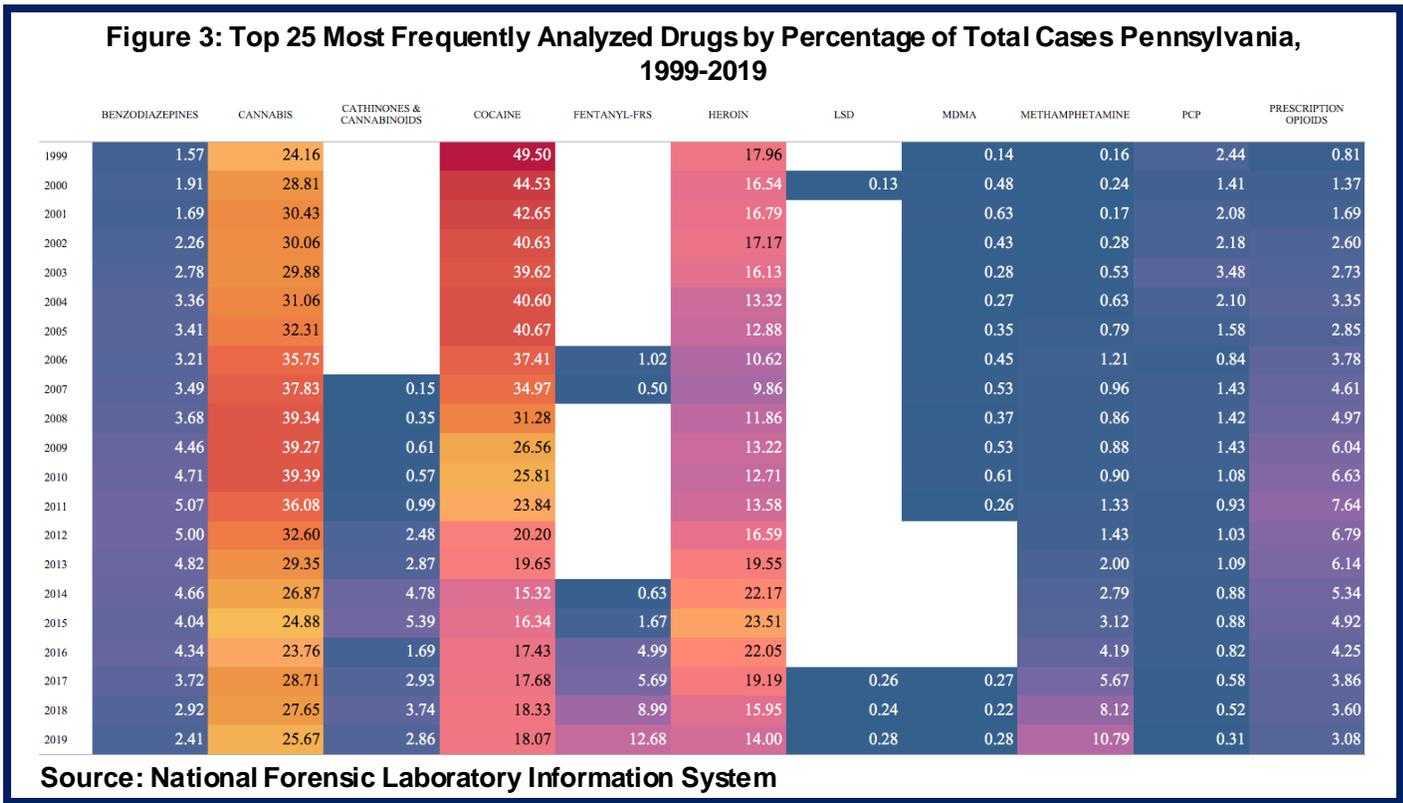
Source: NFLIS

Heroin-positive exhibits comprised ~14 percent of statewide cases in 2019; after continuous increases from 2007 through 2015, heroin positive cases began to decline in 2016. Concurrently, the presence of fentanyl/FRS in statewide analyzed cases rose from ~5 percent in 2016 to ~12 percent in 2019, representing an increase of more than 154 percent. The decline in heroin cases, and simultaneous increase in fentanyl cases, is directly tied to evolving production of fentanyl by foreign sources of supply and the aggressive interest by these sources in selling fentanyl in Pennsylvania to increase profits. As a result, the year-to-year increase in fentanyl-positive cases since 2016 is higher than any other year-to-year increase in the Top 25 for the entire 20-year period (see Figure 3).

Specific to fentanyl/FRS, several FRSs were noted in the top 25 most frequently analyzed drugs for the first time during the analyzed period, including furanyl fentanyl in 2017, 3-methylfentanyl and acetyl fentanyl in 2018, and valeryl fentanyl in 2019. Of note, none of the identified FRSs were present in the top 25 drugs for all three analyzed years, an indicator of the constant change in supply among illicitly produced fentanyl substances in response to implementation of government regulations and controls.

Methamphetamine-positive cases increased significantly during the analyzed period, comprising ~10 percent of statewide cases in 2019; methamphetamine-positive cases were less than 5 percent of the statewide cases in 2017. Of note, the number and overall percentage of methamphetamine-positive cases has increased every year since 2010. This

increase corresponds directly to the acceleration in methamphetamine production in Mexico³ that ultimately feeds the methamphetamine supply in Pennsylvania.



Similar to previous reporting, prescription opioid-positive cases continued to decline, and represented ~3 percent of statewide cases in 2019. Oxycodone and hydrocodone prescribing has declined steadily in Pennsylvania since 2016, thereby reducing the amount of prescription opioids available for potential diversion into the illicit drug market.⁴ Of interest, the prescription opioid tramadol, first reported in the top 25 drugs in 2015, comprised ~35 percent of prescription opioid-positive cases, a significant increase from ~14 percent in 2017. Tramadol has emerged as a prescribing alternative to oxycodone and hydrocodone, and law enforcement sources report an increase in tramadol in the illicit drug market.⁵

As previously reported, substances categorized as synthetic cathinones and cannabinoids were first reported in the top 25 most frequently analyzed drugs in 2007, and have remained amongst the top 25 drugs at varying levels since that time. During the analyzed period, seven distinct cathinone/cannabinoid substances were reported, although only one substance (5-Fluoro-ADB) was present in the top 25 during all three analyzed years. The production of these substances occurs in foreign locations, similar to FRS, and evolves rapidly as governments institute regulations to control newly identified substances that cause harm.

³ (U) National Drug Threat Assessment, DEA-DCT-DIR-007-20, December 2019⁴ (U) Updating the Prescription Opioid Threat, DEA-BUL-073-19, May 2019

⁴ (U) Updating the Prescription Opioid Threat, DEA-BUL-073-19, May 2019

⁵ (U) DEA Philadelphia Field Division Investigative Reporting, 2019

Other drugs of interest in the top 25 most frequently analyzed drugs during the analyzed period included phencyclidine (PCP), a constant presence in the top 25 since 1999, although at low levels (average of 1.35 percent of statewide cases from 1999-2019). Of note, lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) was noted in the top 25 drugs each year during the analyzed period (average of .5 percent of statewide cases), after previously disappearing from the top 25 in 2000. Similarly, 3,4-methylenedioxy-methamphetamine (MDMA) re-emerged in the top 25 drugs in all three analyzed years (less than .3 percent of statewide cases), after dropping out of the top 25 in 2012.

Assessing drug availability through laboratory-analyzed seizures identifies emerging trends in drug availability, which is especially critical as drug production and sources of supply continue to evolve at a rapid pace. Such analysis also corroborates other data sources and law enforcement information to assist in a comprehensive understanding of the drug threats to the Commonwealth.

(U) This product was prepared by the DEA Intelligence Program - Philadelphia Field Division. Comments and questions may be addressed to the Indicator Programs Section at: DEA.IntelligenceProducts@usdoj.gov. For media/press inquiries call (202) 307-7977.
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