



Heroin, Fentanyl, and Other Opioid Offenses in Federal Courts, 2021

SUMMARY NCJ 307497

FEBRUARY 2024

Arrests by the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) for fentanyl offenses exceeded those for heroin offenses for the first time in fiscal year (FY) 2021. During FY 2021, the DEA made 3,138 arrests for fentanyl, 2,591 arrests for heroin, and 676 arrests for other opioid offenses. From FY 2020 to FY 2021, there was a 36% increase in arrests made by the DEA for fentanyl and a 29% decrease in arrests for heroin.

Arrest Totals

The DEA reported an increase (1,528 arrests, or 6%) in total drug arrests from FY 2020 to FY 2021. Fentanyl arrests made up 11% of that total; heroin, 9%; and other opioids, 2%. The majority (55%) of drug arrests were for methamphetamine (33%) and cocaine (22%). Arrests for heroin, fentanyl, and other opioids increased from 4,830 in FY 2001 to a peak of 8,258 in 2015, then declined to 6,405 in FY 2021. Of the 6,405 total persons arrested by the DEA for opioids as the primary drug in FY 2021, 52% were ages 21 to 34, while 11% were age 50 or older and 5% were age 20 or younger. Males made up 80% and females 20% of persons arrested for opioids.

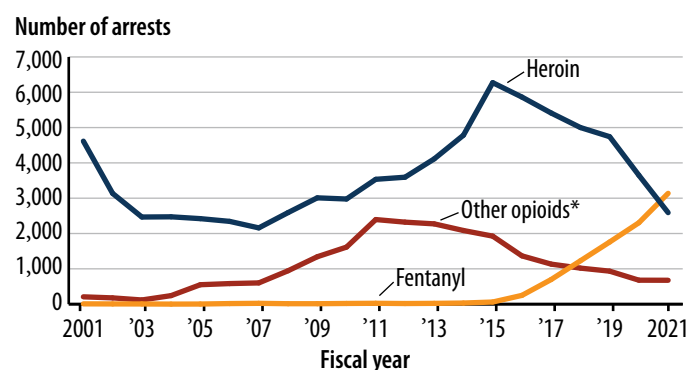
Sentencing Patterns

In FY 2021, 1,679 persons were sentenced for drug offenses involving fentanyl—a 45% increase from the number of persons sentenced for fentanyl in FY 2020. Most persons sentenced for heroin, fentanyl, and other opioids (97%) were sentenced for drug trafficking.

Males accounted for 82% of persons sentenced for a drug offense involving opioids in FY 2021 and females accounted for 18%. The majority (77%) of persons sentenced in FY 2021 for drug offenses involving heroin, fentanyl, or other opioids as the primary drug were Hispanic (39%) or black (38%), with white (21%); American Indian (1%); and Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Other Pacific Islander (1%) comprising the remainder.

Most (86%) persons sentenced for opioid-related drug offenses were U.S. citizens. Non-U.S. citizens comprised

Federal and state arrests by the Drug Enforcement Administration involving heroin, fentanyl, and other opioids, FY 2001–2021



*Includes oxycodone, hydrocodone, hydromorphone (Palladone), oxymorphone, opioid treatment pharmaceuticals, opium, and morphine.

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, based on data from the Drug Enforcement Administration, Defendant Statistical System, fiscal years 2001–2021.

14% of persons sentenced for a drug offense involving opioids, with 7% being citizens of Mexico, followed by 4% with citizenship in a Caribbean country.

Prison Terms

Of those individuals sentenced for an opioid-related offense, 89% received a prison term. Most persons sentenced for drug offenses involving heroin (89%) or fentanyl (87%) had a prior criminal history at sentencing and received a median prison term of 46 months. Persons sentenced for oxycodone received a median prison term of 26 months, and those sentenced for hydrocodone received a median term of 24 months. Among individuals sentenced for any opioid-related offense, 67% received a shorter sentence than the guideline range.

The full report (*Heroin, Fentanyl, and Other Opioid Offenses in Federal Courts, 2021*, NCJ 307497), related documents, and additional information about the Bureau of Justice Statistics are available on the BJS website at bjs.ojp.gov.