



Testimony  
of

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Regarding a Hearing  
on

“The Thin Blue Line Protecting America from the Cartels”

Before the

U.S. Senate  
Committee on the Judiciary

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Chairman Grassley, Ranking Member Durbin, and distinguished Members of the Committee: I am privileged to address the remarkable and tireless work carried out by the dedicated men and women who comprise U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI). Their efforts play a crucial role in protecting our nation's security, public health, and economy from those who aim to exploit and harm our country, compromise our borders, and threaten our critical infrastructure. As the investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), HSI is committed to safeguarding the United States by identifying and dismantling those transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) that target our citizens, businesses, financial systems, and overall prosperity. Specifically, and to the topic of this hearing, my statements today will focus on HSI's comprehensive approach to combating those designated foreign terrorist organizations and other illicit drug cartels operating globally – the scope of the problem and the challenges faced by all federal agencies working with this priority mission – and the ways by which our domestic and international footprints and extensive collaborative initiatives work in a cohesive manner to ensure our success.

### **HSI's Mission and Scope**

HSI is the largest investigative agency within DHS. HSI is comprised of approximately 8,800 personnel across 243 domestic locations and more than 90 international locations, where we leverage more than 4,500 task force officers from various federal, state, tribal, territorial, local and international partners. HSI's mandate is to combat transnational crime in all of its forms including illicit drug trafficking, human smuggling, human trafficking, child exploitation, money laundering, and cybercrimes. The activities of drug cartels directly and significantly intersect with these mission areas, bringing them exorbitant profits but at the cost of death, violence, and suffering to Americans.

### **The Threat of Criminal Cartels**

Cartels recently designated as foreign terrorist organizations have existed for decades -- and as such have built incredibly sophisticated methods of trafficking illicit drugs, laundering profits, and conducting their criminal enterprise throughout the world. They have built networks to traffic drugs in our communities. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, over the past year there have been 77,677 overdose related deaths.

In response, during Fiscal Year (FY) 2024, HSI initiated over 7,000 drug trafficking investigations, made over 10,000 related arrests, and seized over 33,500 pounds of fentanyl, 764,000 pounds of cocaine, and approximately \$257 million in drug trafficking proceeds. In FY 2025, HSI has initiated over 4,300 new narcotics investigations, made over 6,000 drug arrests, and seized over 714,000 pounds of illegal drugs – including approximately 15,600 pounds of fentanyl<sup>1</sup>.

Despite recent decreases in the number of overdose deaths, fentanyl continues to have a devastating impact in the United States. The overwhelming majority of fentanyl encountered by law enforcement in the United States can be traced to Mexico, with precursor chemicals from the

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<sup>1</sup> These seizures include approximately 20,000 pounds of opioids, 16,000 lbs of fentanyl, 575,000 pounds of cocaine, 925 lbs of heroin, and 103,000 pounds of methamphetamine.

People's Republic of China. Precursor chemicals from China used to make illicit fentanyl are shipped via commercial carriers to Mexican cartels that oversee the production process. The fentanyl is then manufactured in Mexico and smuggled into the United States.

In response to the threat posed by cartels, President Trump signed Executive Order 14157, *Designating Cartels and Other Organizations as Foreign Terrorist Organizations and Specially Designated Global Terrorists* (January 20, 2025). The order directed the Secretary of State to make recommendations on designating certain cartels and criminal organizations as foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs). On February 20, 2025, the U.S. government designated the following drug trafficking cartels and transnational gangs as FTOs:

- Cártel de Sinaloa
- Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación
- Cártel del Noreste (Los Zetas)
- La Nueva Familia Michoacana
- Cártel de Golfo
- Cáteles Unidos
- Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13)
- Tren de Aragua (TdA)

Designating these groups as FTOs represents a strategic shift in U.S. government efforts against transnational organized crime. The designation added legal authorities to apply counterterrorism statutes<sup>2</sup> -- which prohibit material support to terrorism -- directly to cartel cases. The designation also made it easier to target illicit finances controlled by the FTOs by expanding seizure and forfeiture authorities. Attacking FTO finances amplifies efforts to dismantle their operations. The designation also streamlines coordination between the U.S. government and foreign partners, making it easier for HSI's special agents to coordinate with partner nations to facilitate arrests and extraditions.

### **International Efforts**

HSI special agents assigned to 93 attaché offices in 55 countries foster relationships with foreign law enforcement agencies to exchange information, support investigations, and facilitate enforcement actions and prosecutions. These collaborative operations have netted significant seizures and arrests. Since January 20, 2025, HSI-derived information shared with our Mexican law enforcement partners has resulted in the shutdown of over 16 clandestine laboratories and the seizure of more than 115,000 pounds of precursor chemicals, more than 450 pounds of methamphetamine, and over 1,800 fentanyl pills.

HSI's Transnational Criminal Investigative Units (TCIUs) greatly enhance the effectiveness of our international counternarcotics efforts. As a cornerstone of HSI's international operations since 2011, TCIUs are comprised of vetted foreign law enforcement officials and prosecutors who support some of HSI's most significant extraterritorial investigations and prosecutions targeting TCOs. HSI has established 18 TCIUs around the world, consisting of more than 650 vetted and trained law enforcement officers. In FY 2024, TCIU efforts worldwide resulted in

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<sup>2</sup> 18 U.S.C. §§ 2339A and 2339B

2,382 criminal arrests and the seizure of over \$24.7 million in illicit proceeds, 1,833 weapons, and over 372,000 pounds of narcotics.

### **Domestic Interdiction Efforts and Targeting Illicit Finance**

HSI's ability to conduct complex large-scale investigations represents one of DHS's best weapons for dismantling cartels. Part of HSI's mandate is to work across multiple levels of the organization at the same time. HSI targets cartels transportation networks via port of entry drug seizures, using cutting edge data analytics of shipping manifests, while also targeting their financial systems including black market and dark net financial schemes. We work these cases across jurisdictional borders to prosecute leadership level, multi-defendant criminal cases, dismantling cartel operations. This means we work day-in and day-out with our partners, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Drug Enforcement Administration, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, and hundreds of federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement partners to identify and investigate drug smuggling organizations.

This is not just limited to the movie style take-downs of go-fast boats filled with cocaine or seizure of duffle bags filled with millions of dollars. Drug cartels have diversified their money laundering networks from mostly bulk cash smuggling to international trade, to ensure criminal profits reach cartel leadership in their home regions. A trend that involves a rise of Chinese money laundering organizations (CMLOs) and partnerships developed through precursor chemical sales and other synthetic drug smuggling.

Mexican drug cartels increasingly rely on CMLOs to repatriate drug trafficking proceeds. CMLOs facilitate the placement, layering, and integration of illicit funds into the legitimate economy. They use methods such as bulk cash aggregation, wire transfers, shell companies, and trade-based money laundering to obscure the origin of the funds. This enables cartels to pay for precursor chemicals from China and recoup profits through the sale of goods in Mexico, all while minimizing detection risks.

CMLOs' sophisticated nature complicates efforts to trace and intercept illicit funds. However, HSI is adapting its investigative techniques, leveraging advanced financial analysis, and strengthening interagency and international partnerships to counter these complex laundering operations. Our ongoing efforts are crucial in targeting cartel leadership and disrupting their financial networks.

## **Homeland Security Task Forces**

President Trump's Executive Order 14159, *Protecting the American People Against Invasion* (January 20, 2025), calls for the establishment of a Homeland Security Task Force (HSTF) network. The purpose of the HSTFs is to eliminate criminal cartels, foreign gangs, and other TCOs throughout the United States. HSTFs will dismantle cross-border human smuggling and trafficking networks, end the scourge of human smuggling and trafficking—particularly offenses involving children—and ensure the use of all available law enforcement tools to faithfully execute the immigration laws of the United States. HSTFs will also prioritize investigations into fentanyl trafficking networks and criminal cartels.

Led jointly by HSI and the FBI, HSTFs will promote closer collaboration between federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement. Efforts are underway to establish HSTFs in every state, utilizing the infrastructure of the HSI-led Border Enforcement Security Task Forces (BESTs). Recently, BEST Milwaukee, in collaboration with state and federal partners, executed a multi-state operation resulting in the execution of 10 federal search warrants. This operation led to the seizure of drugs, weapons, and currency, and the arrest of 11 individuals, including two United States Citizens and nine Mexican Nationals. The operation targeted a large-scale money laundering and drug trafficking organization affiliated with the Sinaloa Cartel, operating in Milwaukee, WI, Sells, AZ, and across the United States. BESTs have a proven track record of success in eliminating barriers between federal and local investigations, closing the gap with international partners in multinational criminal investigations, and minimizing vulnerabilities that cartels exploit to breach our nation's borders. There are currently 115 BESTs across the United States, including Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

## **Conclusion**

HSI's unique border authorities and dynamic approaches to combating drug trafficking allow us to attack all aspects of transnational criminal organizations. HSI will continue to leverage its resources, expertise, and partnerships to protect our communities from the scourge of drug trafficking and human exploitation.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today, and for your continued support of our efforts to dismantle TCOs. I look forward to your questions.