

STREET CORNER TO SOCIAL MEDIA:

How Illicit Drugs Have Swamped the Internet



Alliance to Counter Crime Online

“If it’s illegal IRL, it should be illegal to host it online.”

THE PROBLEM



At a time when more than 60,000 Americans die from drug overdoses each year, dangerous narcotics and fake pharmaceuticals are widely available for purchase on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.



Drug cartels selling banned narcotics and illegal pharmacies moving fake pharmaceuticals take advantage of social media’s convenience, anonymity, and large customer base.



With a few simple clicks on a social media platform, buyers can arrange for door-to-door delivery of illegal substances such as fentanyl or heroin and prescription painkillers like oxycodone.



Outdated laws mean tech firms can profit off this illegal activity and face scant liability.

THE SPECIFICS



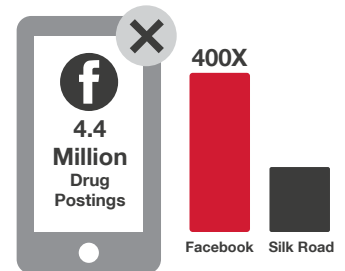
Drug sales on social media platforms fall into two major categories: **illegal narcotics** like heroin, cocaine and fentanyl sold by individuals and criminal syndicates, and **controlled substances** such as opioid painkillers sold without prescription by shady online “pharmacies.”



Drug dealers hawking illegal narcotics or fake “pharmacies” selling counterfeit medicine take advantage of social media algorithms to target vulnerable populations including recovering addicts, teenagers, and the elderly.



Illegal narcotics — The scale of drug dealing on surface web platforms dwarfs the trade that once took place on dark web sites like Silk Road and Wall Street.



Social media platforms have exponentially expanded the geographic territory available to dealers, enabling customers of virtually any age to buy drugs of any kind from a smartphone.



Controlled substances — Soaring costs for prescription drugs understandably push people to look for cheaper alternatives online. But there’s a huge risk to this! Of the 35,000 active online pharmacy websites, only about 5% comply with applicable laws and pharmacy standards. Counterfeit products sold online often are manufactured in unsafe conditions, contain little or no active ingredients, and/or are manufactured using dangerous and sometimes deadly substances.

Hundreds of online “pharmacies” purport to be in Canada, but the products they sell—including imitation heart medicine, insulin and steroids—are often made in and shipped from China and India. According to Interpol, some have been found to contain mercury, arsenic, rat poison and/or cement.



The Opioid Epidemic is fueled by both illicit narcotics like heroin, and controlled substances such as fentanyl, morphine and hydrocodone. According to the Centers for Disease Control, almost 450,000 Americans have died from opioid overdoses—both illicit and prescription—between 1998 and 2018. The opioid epidemic has unfurled in three distinct waves.

- In the **first wave**, doctors over-prescribed opioids that drug companies falsely claimed were non-addictive.
- The **second wave** began when government efforts to stop doctors from over-prescribing opioids drove users to seek street alternatives.
- In the **third (and current) wave** the trade shifted online. This phase has been marked by significant increases in overdose deaths caused by synthetic opioids—particularly illicitly manufactured fentanyl—that are sold across social media platforms.

LEARN MORE

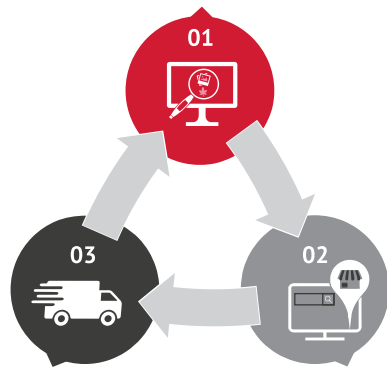
Find ACCO research and media coverage at www.counterincrim.org.



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HOW IT WORKS

Digitally mediated drug dealing occurs openly or in secret and private groups. Drug traffickers are increasingly using emojis and certain photographic images to indicate they are selling drugs. For instance, people looking for steroids can look for a photo depicting Nautilus equipment.



The shipping of illegal narcotics and controlled substances is unwittingly conducted by mainstream entities such as the U.S. Postal Service, UPS and FedEx.

Algorithms connect buyers and sellers faster than moderators can delete them. When sites do try and flag drug-related search terms and hashtags, new ones pop up quickly.

CURRENT LAW



In the United States, the Ryan Haight Online Pharmacy Consumer Protection Act of 2008 expressly prohibits the sale and purchase of controlled substances on the Internet.

Exemptions to this provision are (1) if the practitioner has conducted a prior in-person medical evaluation of the patient or (2) if the patient has had a qualified "telemedicine" encounter.

Section 230 of the 1996 Communications Decency Act (CDA230) grants liability immunity to any provider of "interactive computer service" for user-generated content.

Tech firms like Facebook and Google have used CDA230 in court to claim immunity for hosting illegal drug content.

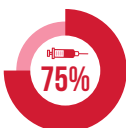
KEY FACTS AND FIGURES



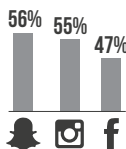
As a result of pressure from the US Drug Enforcement Administration and US Food and Drug Administration, Facebook and Instagram recently began publishing data on their enforcement of drug sales on their platforms.



In the last six months of 2019, Facebook claimed to "action" (i.e., flag, not necessarily remove) 16.7 million drug postings. Instagram reported actioning 1.3 million pieces of drug content in Q4 2019 and Q1 2020.



According to the National Institutes of Health, a full 75% of British teenagers say they have seen drugs for sale on Instagram.



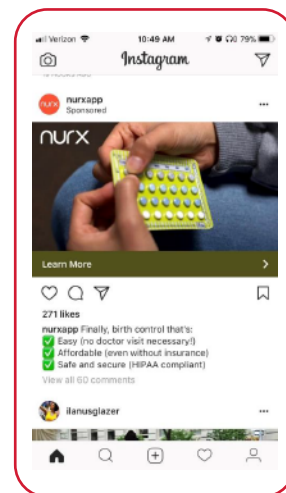
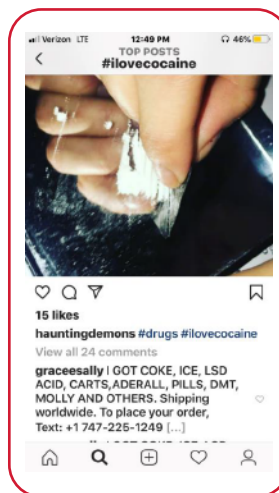
A study in the U.K. by the advocacy group Volteface found that of the teens who reported seeing drugs for sale on social media, 56% saw them being advertised on Snapchat, 55% on Instagram and 47% on Facebook.



The public and private economic costs associated with the opioid epidemic are staggering—more than \$1 trillion from 2001-2017 plus an estimated \$500 billion by the end of 2020.

ACCO'S MISSION

The Alliance to Counter Crime Online is a team of security experts, academics, NGO leaders, and citizen investigators who have come together to push organized crime and terror activity off Internet platforms.



PROPOSED LEGAL REFORM

It's time for Congress to reform CDA230 and explicitly strip out immunities for crime. By reforming CDA230, lawmakers could shift the responsibility for monitoring Internet platforms for illicit activity to tech firms, and regulate firms to hand over evidence of illegal activity to law enforcement. If this reform doesn't occur, current campaigns to improve user privacy could have the unintended consequence of making the Internet a safer place for criminals.

