

UNCLASSIFIED



***2026***

**Atlanta-Carolinas HIDTA  
Drug Threat Assessment**

**June 2025**

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### About the Cover:

*Looking forward to the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our nation's declaration of independence in 2026, the Atlanta-Carolina's HIDTA continues to serve large portions of Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina, providing vital capabilities to combat the illegal drugs and associated violence brought into our communities – providing our citizens with opportunities to enjoy life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.*

## 2026 Threat Assessment Scope

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The scope of the 2026 *Atlanta-Carolinas High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (AC HIDTA) Threat Assessment* is to identify current and emerging drug-related trends within the AC HIDTA Area of Responsibility (AOR). Designed to deliver accurate and prompt strategic intelligence and to assist law enforcement agencies developing drug enforcement strategies, the *Threat Assessment* details the extent of illicit narcotic abuse and drug trafficking activities in the AOR. It identifies drug trafficking organizations, smuggling tactics, routes of transportation, and evolving trends. The AC HIDTA uses a Return-on-Investment (ROI) approach supported by qualitative and quantitative measurements. The *Threat Assessment* combines evidence-based strategic and tactical intelligence obtained, in part, from state and local agencies by use of a Drug Threat Survey. Unless otherwise noted, statistical data used in the *Threat Assessment* is current through the last full year of available data. This assessment fulfills statutory and grant requirements issued by the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) and was approved by the AC HIDTA Executive Board.

## Executive Summary

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The AC HIDTA Executive Board evaluates investigative efforts, develops strategies to guide initiatives' use of collocated task forces (comprised of state, local, tribal, and federal agency members), and proposes funding to support those initiatives. The Executive Board measures the AC HIDTA's success, in part, by its ability to nurture greater cooperation among external participating agencies resulting in measurable results. The Executive Board oversees the assignment of officers from multiple law enforcement agencies providing enhanced collaboration, resource, and information sharing. The AC HIDTA works under this direction to identify Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs) and Money Laundering Organizations (MLOs) posing the greatest threats in the AC HIDTA's Area of Responsibility (AOR). The AC HIDTA ranks major drug threats to the AOR in order of severity:

### Methamphetamine

The most significant drug threat to the AC HIDTA's AOR for 2026 will be methamphetamine. Mexican cartels will continue to dominate the smuggling and distribution of methamphetamine in crystal, powder, and liquid form to distributors in the AC HIDTA's AOR. Methamphetamine seizures increased in 2024, creating five-year general trend of an increasing threat.

### Cocaine

Kilogram seizures of cocaine fell slightly in 2024, to 955.5 kilograms. Cocaine seizures remain relatively steady, with a slow trending increase over the last five years. This trend is expected to continue with Mexican-based cartels as the primary source for cocaine smuggling in the AOR. However, the AC HIDTA expects Caribbean-based cartels to increase efforts to smuggle cocaine in 2026.

### Fentanyl

Fentanyl seizures in the AC HIDTA AOR dropped dramatically in 2024, for the first time since hitting the market in 2016. Fentanyl seizures still surpass those of heroin by 83%. Mexican cartels smuggle most of the fentanyl into the AC HIDTA's AOR, and DTOs continue to use fentanyl as an adulterant for heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine, and counterfeit pharmaceuticals.

### Heroin

Heroin seizures rose in the AC HIDTA's AOR in 2024 by 103%, reversing a four-year decline. Heroin is still a threat to the AC HIDTA's AOR, and the abrupt change in its presence could be attributable to several causes. The price of heroin continues to decline. DTOs continue to adulterate heroin with fentanyl and other additives increasing overdose rates. The supply and distribution of heroin is dominated by Mexican cartels.

### **Marijuana**

Marijuana is the most readily available drug in the AC HIDTA's AOR. The marijuana market continues to flourish with legalization in other states and changing ideologies driving local attitudes. Marijuana will continue to be routinely seized by local, state, tribal, and federal law enforcement agencies in abundant amounts.

### **Pharmaceuticals**

Counterfeit pharmaceutical pills are a dangerous threat to the AC HIDTA's AOR and will remain a driving force behind many of the area's overdoses. These counterfeit pills mimic legitimate pharmaceutical-grade prescription opioids, benzodiazepines, or stimulant amphetamines. Counterfeit pills will continue to be manufactured locally or purchased directly from illegal sources of supply.

Legitimate pharmaceutical abuse continues, but in lesser degrees than its counterfeit equal. Local agencies encounter legitimate pharmaceutical abuse more in rural areas as opposed to urban environments. When seen, quantities will continue to be small and found during investigations involving other drug types.

### **Drug Trafficking Organizations**

Mexican drug cartels will continue to dominate the import and wholesale distribution of illegal drugs in the AC HIDTA AOR for the foreseeable future. Smaller, localized DTOs will dominate the retail distribution of illicit drugs. The AC HIDTA identified 74 new DTOs in 2024. This is a 45% increase over 2023. The majority are poly-drug in nature, 24 are associated with cartels, 27 are associated with gangs, and 36 of the newly identified DTOs are known to be violent. None of the new DTOs are known to specialize in money laundering activities.<sup>1</sup>

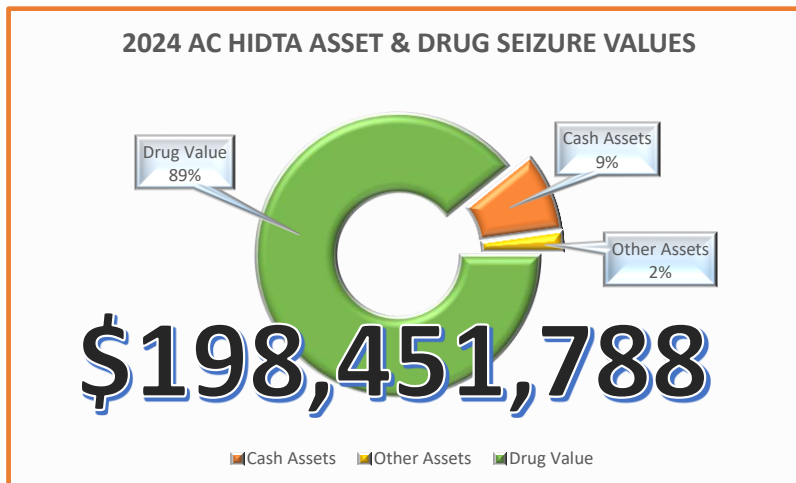
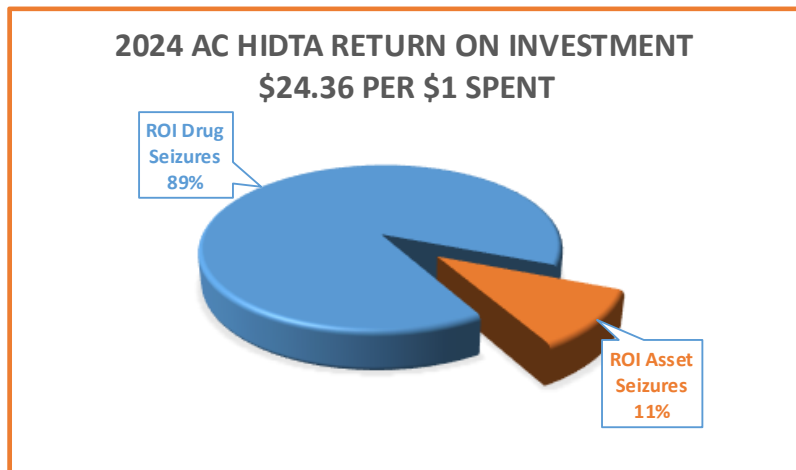
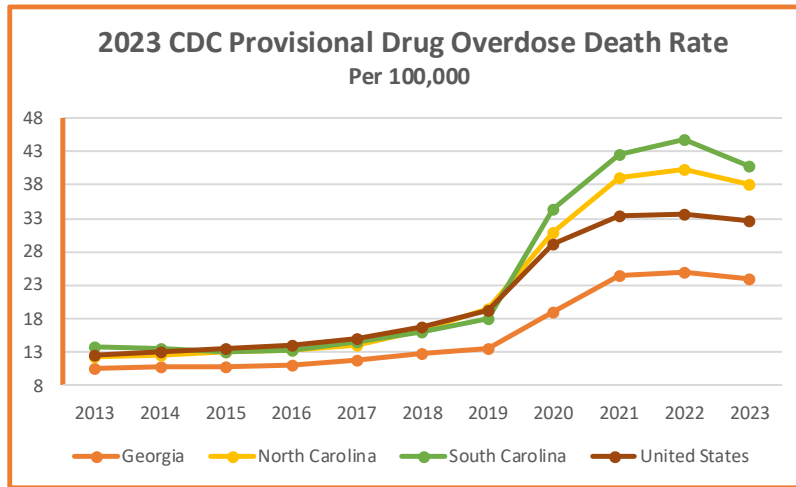
### **Money Laundering Organizations**

The AC HIDTA AOR remains a major transportation hub for the DTOs movement of illegal proceeds. Bulk shipments of physical currency are commonly located with narcotic and firearm seizures during search warrants. Intelligence gathering indicates DTOs are no longer allowing one person to be solely responsible for all the DTOs bulk currency but instead distribute the currency to multiple members. Many DTOs now prefer to handle money laundering within their organization rather than utilize full-time MLOs. DTOs and MLOs will continue to expand the use of electronic platforms for monetary transactions, legitimate Limited Liability Companies (LLCs), self-owned businesses, and real estate to launder proceeds from the sale of illicit drugs.

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<sup>1</sup> PMP only allows a single choice between DTO and MLO classification and initiative commanders must determine the primary function of the organization.

## 2024 Dashboard<sup>2</sup>



Drug Seizures

25,670 Kilograms

276,811 Dosage Units

Other Outputs

1,020 Arrests

460 Firearms Seized

1,008 Vaping Cartridges

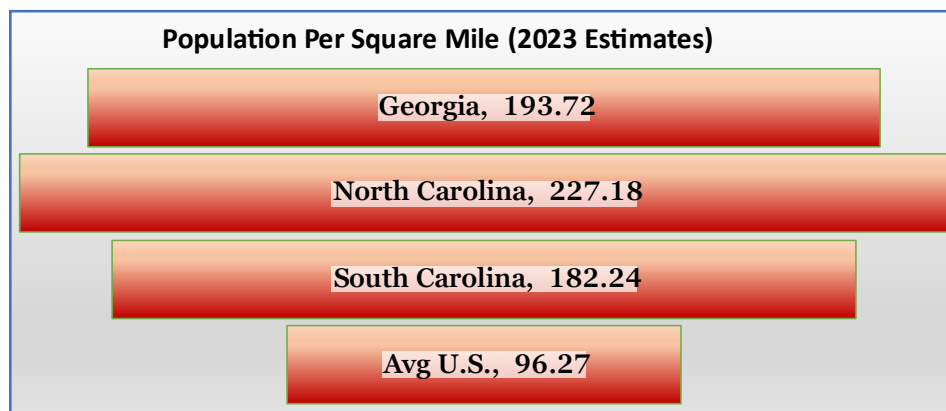
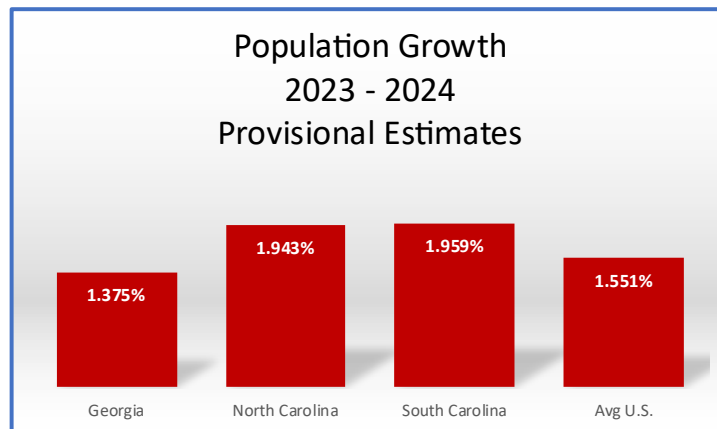
<sup>2</sup> PMP data as of 04/27/2025. CDC Wonder Overdose data as of 03/13/2025.

## AC HIDTA Region

The AC HIDTA'S AOR covers sizable portions of Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indian (EBCI) nation. Connected by key transportation corridors, the areas share many geographic and demographic features. While designated counties within the AOR focus on the major population centers of Atlanta, Raleigh, Asheville, Greensboro, Charlotte, and Columbia, enforcement efforts have far-reaching effects throughout each state, region, and nation.

### Population:

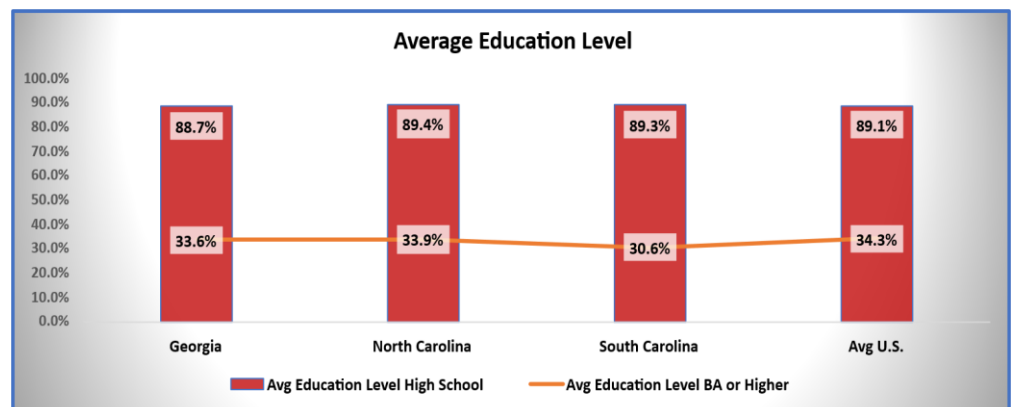
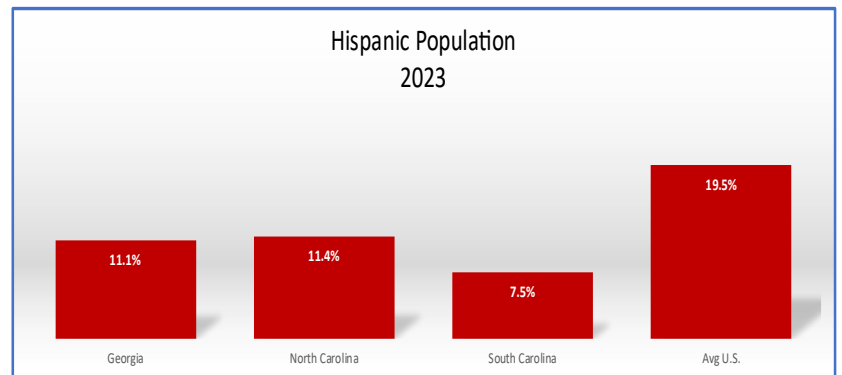
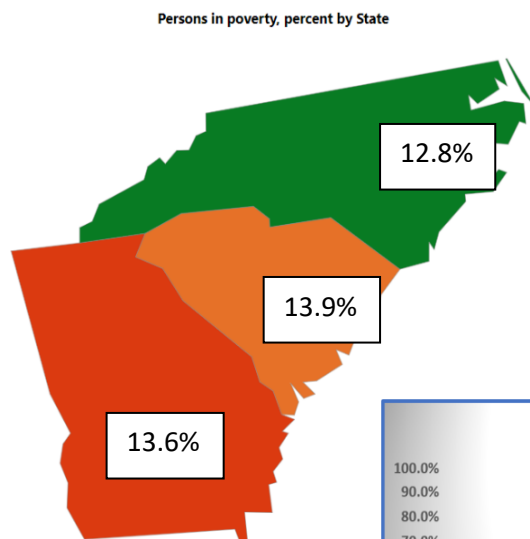
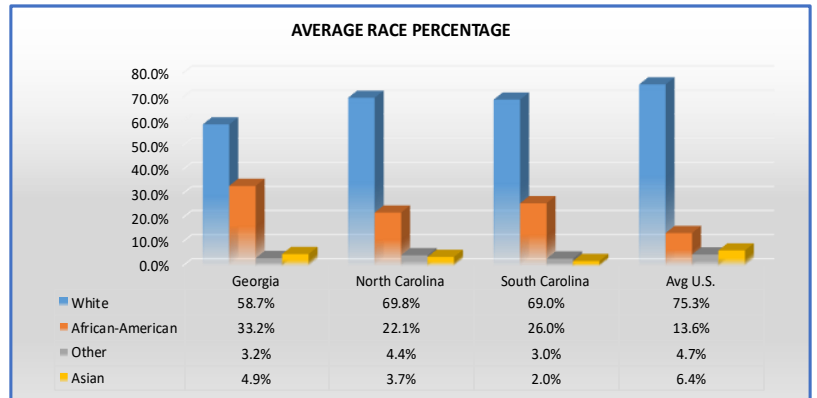
The states of Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina have a combined population estimate of more than 26.8 million residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). The AC HIDTA AOR remains one of the fastest growing regions in the nation with all three states ranking in the top fifteen for population growth from 2010 to 2022 (Ibid). Both the growth rate and population density exceed the national average.





## Demographics:

The three states have similar race, education, and poverty levels (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). South Carolina has a smaller Hispanic population than the other two states, but all three are lower than the national average. The poverty rate is slightly higher in the tri-state area than the national average of 11.1% with Georgia's poverty rate increasing over the last year.



## Geography:

The AC HIDTA conducts operations in multiple counties within Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina. From large cities and sprawling suburban areas to sparsely populated rural areas, there are geographic similarities with rich and versatile environments. Each state has extensive sections of the Atlantic coastline, agriculturally productive lowlands, and generous portions of the Appalachian Mountains.



Some key characteristics include (Infoplease, 2025):

	Georgia	North Carolina	South Carolina
Atlantic General Coastline (miles)	100	301	187
Atlantic Tidal Shoreline (miles)	2,344	3,375	2,876
Counties	159	100	46

### Topography:

The states of Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina have diverse topographies reflecting their geological history and climate. Georgia is divided into three main regions: the Blue Ridge Mountains in the north, the Piedmont plateau in the center, and the Coastal Plain in the south. The Blue Ridge Mountains are part of the Appalachian chain and have the highest elevation and relief in the state. The Piedmont plateau is a hilly region that slopes gently from the mountains to the fall line, where rivers drop to the lower Coastal Plain. The Coastal Plain is a flat, low-lying area covering a large portion of the state and includes marshes, islands, and beaches along the Atlantic Ocean (Ibid).

North Carolina has four major regions: the Coastal Plain, the Piedmont, the Mountains, and the Tidewater. The Coastal Plain is like Georgia's but has a narrower width and a distinct inner and outer section. The inner section is higher and has sandy soil, while the outer section is lower and has swampy soil. The Tidewater is a low-lying area along the coast that is influenced by tides and has many sounds, estuaries, and barrier islands. The Piedmont is a rolling upland that extends from the fall line to the base of the mountains. It has fertile soil and is the most populated region of the state. The Mountains are part of the Appalachian chain and include the highest peak east of the Mississippi River, Mount Mitchell (Ibid).

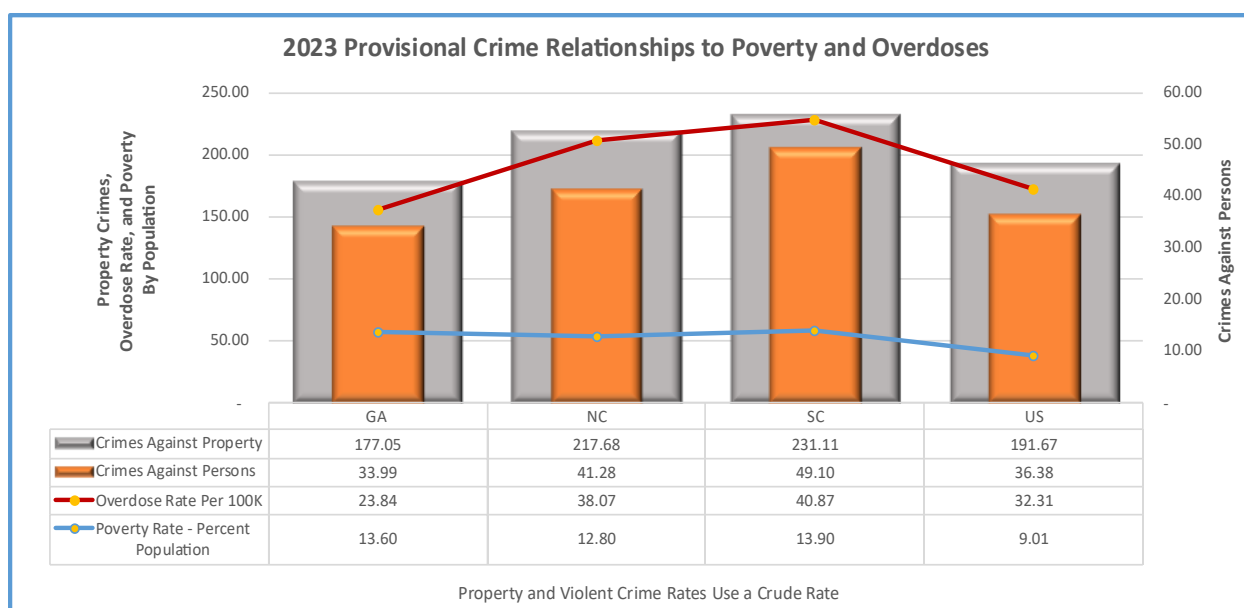
South Carolina has three main regions: the Coastal Plain, the Sandhills, and the Blue Ridge Mountains. The Coastal Plain covers two thirds of the state and has a wide inner section and a narrow outer section. The inner section has sandy hills and pine forests, while the outer section has salt marshes and sea islands. The Sandhills are a belt of ancient sand dunes that separate the Coastal Plain from the Piedmont. They have poor soil and are mostly covered by scrub vegetation. The Blue Ridge Mountains are a small area in the northwest corner of the state that are part of the Appalachian chain with rugged terrain and high elevations (Ibid).

### Crime Statistics and Trends:

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) tracks crime statistics in the United States with the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) system. Crime statistic reporting remains voluntary, and inconsistencies persist. Not all jurisdictions report crimes to the FBI and not all follow the same reporting guidelines. States in the AC HIDTA's AOR report at the following rates: Georgia – 75%;

North Carolina – 83%; South Carolina – 100% (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2025). These numbers reflect an increase over 2023 reporting figures.

The most recent published National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) crime statistic data by the FBI is completed through 2023 and is published through the FBI's Crime Data Explorer (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2025). Cross referencing the FBI's NIBRS with overdose data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and poverty levels from the Census Bureau shows a direct correlation between crime and overdose rates. A new trend is showing the poverty rate beginning to mirror the overdose and crime rates potentially indicating a link between the three indices.<sup>3</sup>



### Transportation Nodes or Corridors:

One of the busiest transportation hubs in the world covers the AC HIDTA AOR with a complex network of interstates, state highways, seaports, railways, and airports which provide fast access to most of the nation's population. Key transportation elements include:

INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL:	Georgia	North Carolina	South Carolina
<b>USCBP Ports of Entry<sup>4</sup></b>	3	5	5

<sup>3</sup> Data correlated from 2023 FBI NIBR Crime Data; 2023 U.S. Census Bureau Quickfacts; CDC Wonder, 2023 (accessed 11/02/2024)

<sup>4</sup> USCBP (<https://www.cbp.gov/contact/ports>); 11/08/2024

AIR TRAVEL:	Georgia	North Carolina	South Carolina
Public/Private Airports <sup>5</sup>	470	498	209
Airport Passenger Enplanements (2023) <sup>6</sup>	52,142,046	35,977,656	6,672,844

- With a terminal complex encompassing more than 6.8 million square feet, Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport (ATL) has been the busiest airport in the world for 23 out of 24 years since 1998. ATL averages 286,000 passengers a day and generates an economic impact of \$34.8 billion (City of Atlanta, 2025).
- The Charlotte-Douglas International Airport is the second busiest airport in the AC HIDTA's AOR and ranks as 7<sup>th</sup> busiest airport in the world for air traffic, averaging nearly 58.8 million passengers in 2024 (CLT Airport, 2025).
- The AC HIDTA's AOR is within a two-hour flight for 80% of the U.S. population (City of Atlanta, 2025).

GROUND TRANSPORTATION: <sup>7</sup>	Georgia	North Carolina	South Carolina
Public Highway Miles (2022)	125,762	108,285	77,208
Annual Miles Driven (2022)	128,871,000	119,381,000	58,998,000
Major Interstate Route Numbers (partial listing)	I-16, I-20, I-24, I-75, I-85, I-95	I-26, I-40, I-73, I-74, I-77, I-95	I-20, I-26, I-77, I-85, I-95

- The U.S. Postal Service (USPS) and multiple private companies (e.g., FEDEX, UPS, ODFL) keep extensive Less-Than-Load (LTL) shipping lines in the AC HIDTA's AOR.<sup>8</sup>
- DTOs extensively use established package delivery services to supplement their own transportation efforts.<sup>9</sup>

RAIL TRAVEL: <sup>10</sup>	Georgia	North Carolina	South Carolina
Freight Railroads	28	21	12
Miles of Track	4,633	2,751	2,258

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.globalair.com/airport/state.aspx>; 03/06/2025

<sup>6</sup> USDOT Bureau of Statistics (<https://www.bts.gov/browse-statistical-products-and-data/state-transportation-statistics/state-transportation-numbers>); 11/08/2024

<sup>7</sup> USDOT Bureau of Statistics (<https://www.bts.dot.gov/state-transportation-infrastructure>); 03/06/2025

<sup>8</sup> Less-than-truckload, also known as less-than-load (LTL), is a shipping service for small loads or quantities of freight—between 150 and 15,000 pounds.

<sup>9</sup> AC HIDTA investigative experience.

<sup>10</sup> Association of American Railroads (<https://www.aar.org/states/>); 03/06/2025

<b>Annual Tons of Cargo Terminated in State</b>	<b>61.1 M</b>	<b>37.8 M</b>	<b>29.3 M</b>
<b>Amtrak Passenger Routes</b>	4	6	4

- Georgia has the largest rail network in the Southeast supplying direct rail access to the Mid-Atlantic, Northeast and Midwest regions of the United States. (Georgia Department of Transportation, 2025).

<b>SEA TRAVEL:</b>	<b>Georgia</b>	<b>North Carolina</b>	<b>South Carolina</b>
<b>Seaports</b>	Savannah; Brunswick	Wilmington; Morehead City	Charleston; Georgetown
<b>Inland Ports</b>	Appalachian Regional Port; Bainbridge; Northeast Georgia Inland Port	Charlotte Inland Port	Port Greer; Port Dillon

- The state of Georgia is served by two deepwater ports. The Port of Savannah is the largest single-terminal container facility in North America. The Port provides immediate access via I-16 (East/West) and I-95 (North/South) to key cities and manufacturing points throughout the U.S. (Georgia Ports Authority, 2025). Most of the nation's population may be reached within a one or two-day drive. The Port of Brunswick is the fastest growing bulk import/export port in the South Atlantic.
- South Carolina boasts the deepest harbor on the East Coast and continues to expand operations to meet an increasing demand. The harbor is 52 feet deep and allows the world's largest ships to dock at the facility in Charleston. The South Carolina Port Authority reports an annual economic impact of \$87 billion for the state (South Carolina Port Authority, 2024).
- The two deep water ports in North Carolina, Wilmington and Morehead City, move more than 5,000 containers weekly, shipping over four million tons of cargo annually. The North Carolina ports also boast the highest container truck gate<sup>11</sup> and crane productivity on the U.S. East Coast (North Carolina Ports Authority, 2025).
- Six inland port facilities operate in the tri-state area which speeds the distribution of cargo containers deeper inland. South Carolina operates Inland Port Greer and Inland Port Dillon which are intermodal rail facilities delivering the benefits of a coastal marine terminal many miles inland (South Carolina Ports Authority, 2023). The Piedmont Triad Inland Terminal (PTIT) in Greensboro, and the Charlotte Inland Port (CIP) are in North Carolina. The Appalachian Regional Port, Bainbridge Terminal, and planned Blue Ridge Connector are in Georgia. Inland ports allow containers to be trucked for shorter distances

<sup>11</sup> Port container truck gates are the process of properly allowing cargo containers to enter and exit the port facilities.

and staged at intermodal yards, where they are loaded onto trains moving hundreds of containers in a single trip. Each container moved by rail offsets 600 roundtrip highway miles (Georgia Ports Authority, 2023). These freight consolidation points for import and export of cargo drastically increase the amount of traffic these areas can accommodate, lowers business costs, and decrease truck traffic resulting in decreased emissions (Economic Development Corporation of Catawba County, 2025).



*Figure 1 – Port of Wilmington, NC*

*Photo from <https://ncports.com/port-facilities/port-of-wilmington/>*

# Drug Threats

## Overview

**Methamphetamine:** Methamphetamine continues as the top drug threat in the AC HIDTA AOR. The Mexican cartels' (e.g., Sinaloa Cartel, Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generacion (CJNG) and Cartels Unidos) continuous production and smuggling of methamphetamine in crystal, powder, and liquid forms provides for an abundance of the highly profitable drug. The AC HIDTA seized more than 4,917 kilograms of methamphetamine in 2024. Methamphetamine in high dose is known to result in death from stroke, heart attack, or organ failure. Overdoses in the AC HIDTA AOR attributed to methamphetamine continue at alarming rates and are often compounded by adulterating it with fentanyl. In 2024, the AC HIDTA AOR experienced a provisional number of 1,463<sup>12</sup> fatal methamphetamine overdoses (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2025). AC HIDTA anticipates the final number of fatal overdoses may be much higher.

**Cocaine:** The AC HIDTA AOR remains a primary hub for cocaine trafficking and distribution on the East Coast. In 2024, AC HIDTA seized more than 944 kilograms of cocaine and almost 11 kilograms of crack cocaine. This is an approximately 14% decrease from the 2023 seizure data. However, 2024 cocaine seizures were approximately 30% higher than those experienced in 2022. Furthermore, cocaine pricing remained consistent with 2023 pricing with only a slight increase, which indicates a robust supply and demand expected to continue into 2026.

**Fentanyl:** Fentanyl is readily available, in powder, pill, and brick form throughout the AC HIDTA AOR. DTOs continue to use fentanyl as an adulterant with heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine, and a variety of counterfeit pharmaceuticals. Provisional overdose data indicate a decrease in fentanyl-related deaths in 2024, compared to 2023.<sup>13</sup> Fentanyl drug seizures in 2024 correspondingly declined as well to 106.582 kilograms. Even with the decline in fentanyl-related deaths and seizures, it is predicted fentanyl will remain a major threat for the AC HIDTA AOR.

**Heroin:** Heroin seizures rose by approximately 49.18% from 2023 to 2024. In 2023, data shows 28.9865 kilograms of heroin seized in the AOR, whereas in 2024, 58.9301 kilograms were seized. This is in direct contradiction to the steady decline seen over the last several years. The price of heroin is roughly between \$17,000 to \$36,000 per kilogram. DTOs continue to adulterate heroin with fentanyl as well as other dangerous additives, increasing the overdose rates. Mexican cartels continue to dominate the supply network and distribution of heroin.

**Marijuana:** Marijuana is the most available and abused drug in the AC HIDTA AOR. Concerted efforts across the nation to decriminalize, destigmatize, and normalize the use of marijuana and its analogs have been very effective. Users come from all demographics, and social status and much of the marijuana originates from out of state. Increased use of alternative consumption

<sup>12</sup> MCD - ICD-10 Codes: T43.6 (Psychostimulants with abuse potential). Noted that methamphetamine overdose does not have a specific ICD Code, but T43.6 is primarily used for this classification.

<sup>13</sup> Provisional data provided by county and state medical examiner offices.

methods make marijuana use more attractive to users who may have originally steered away from its usage.

**Pharmaceuticals:** Pharmaceutical prescription drug categories of misuse (primarily opioids, benzodiazepines, and stimulants) are observed less frequently than their illicit counterparts due, in part, to a reduction in the total number of prescribed controlled substances throughout the AC HIDTA AOR. When they are encountered, the quantities of legitimate pharmaceuticals are relatively small, and are often no more than user amounts. Frequently, legitimate pharmaceuticals are seized in association with investigations and arrests involving other drug types like marijuana.

**Overdose Reporting:** Poly-drug abuse is perhaps one of the leading contributors to overdose fatalities. Inconsistent counterfeit drug formulation combined with inconsistent user administration can have unintended consequences and complicate attempts to revive patients. Detection and coding these events have become more difficult with each overlapping drug category reflected separately in the data corresponding to an individual death. General classification of drug types is used because the DTOs are constantly changing analogs to skirt legalities. This makes identifying specific threats more challenging. Overdose mortality data is often imperfect or delayed. Data reporting and accuracy varies by area and can result in an underestimation of actual drug overdose deaths. Comprehensive, correct, and timely drug mortality data remains a critical component when formulating practical strategies to battle the overdose epidemic.

**Transportation:** Few innovations remain available for transportation and smuggling of illegal substances or drug proceeds. Many “new” transportation methods are simply a recycling of earlier methods. The AC HIDTA’s AOR transportation networks include some of the world’s busiest airports, interconnected interstate and state highways, multiple passenger and cargo rail routes, and six seaports. These networks provide excellent opportunities to smuggle massive quantities of drugs to the southeastern region of the United States. DTOs continue to prefer small shipments of narcotics transported by motor conveyance (e.g., passenger vehicles, tractor-trailers) to avoid potentially large losses if interdicted. The DTOs frequently use commercial common carriers limiting exposure to highway interdiction efforts.



# Methamphetamine

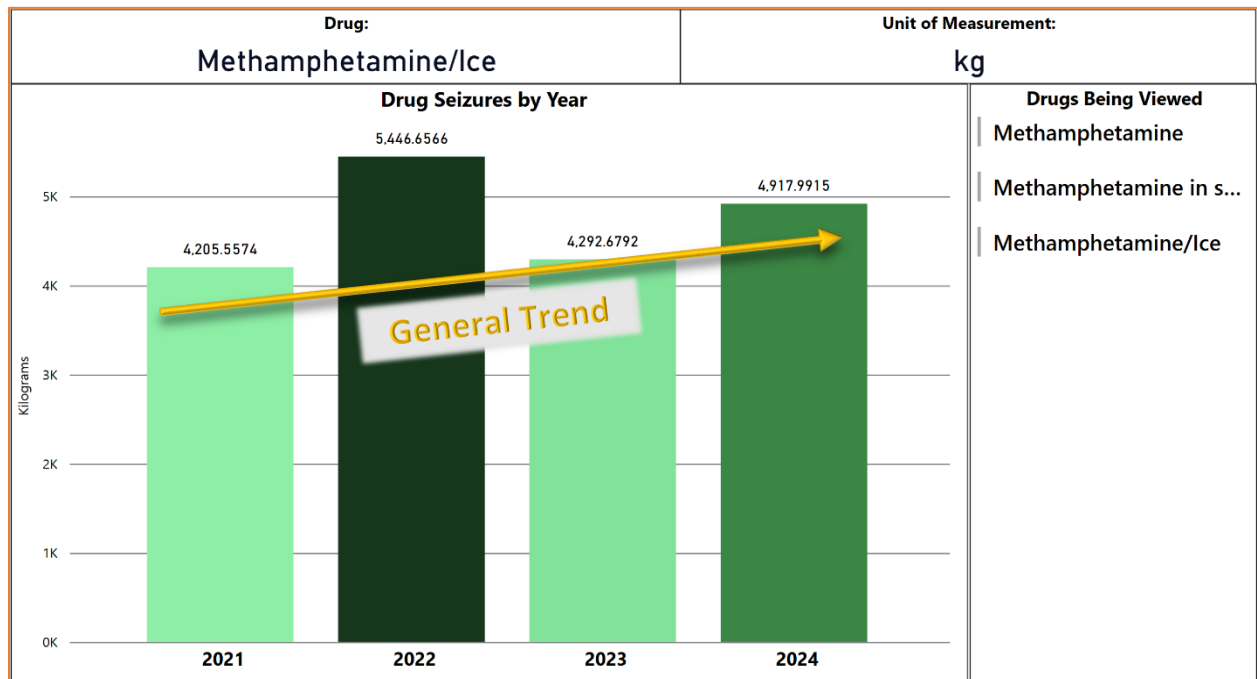
## Availability

Surveys of over forty state-wide law enforcement agencies across the AC HIDTA AOR confirm methamphetamine remains the greatest drug threat, and it continues to be readily available for distribution and purchasing.

In 2024, the AC HIDTA AOR experienced a 14% increase in methamphetamine seizures compared to a 21% decrease in 2023. In early 2024, the AC HIDTA received intelligence indicating Mexico-based cartels were limiting methamphetamine supplies in the United States. By limiting supplies, cartels hoped the price and demand of methamphetamine would increase. Although short lived, the AC HIDTA did experience a slight increase in the price and demand of methamphetamine. In addition, counter-drug efforts conducted by military/law enforcement entities in Mexico contributed to the price increase anomaly. However, prices have since readjusted and remain at historic lows.



Figure 2 - AC HIDTA Task Force Group 2 Seizure of Methamphetamine Conversion Lab



### Developing Trend

*Local agencies and AC HIDTA Initiatives report an increasing number of seizures including colorful methamphetamine crystals. The colors appear to be an attempt to entice younger individuals to start buying and using.*



Figure 3 - Colored Methamphetamine

### Use

Methamphetamine can be consumed, smoked, snorted, or injected; however, the method of smoking is still the preferred method among consumers. Methamphetamine users cover most age groups with 26 to 34 years of age the most likely to use. Half of all users initiate use prior to age 20 (Guerin & Kim, 2021).

### Price

In 2024, the price of methamphetamine in the AC HIDTA AOR remains at historic lows. In Georgia, the price of one kilogram of methamphetamine ranged between \$2,000 and \$2,500. While in North and South Carolina the price averaged between \$8,000 to \$8,500 per kilogram. Prices have slightly increased in North and South Carolina since 2023. Currently, pricing ranges from \$2,500 to \$8,000 per kilogram, \$300 to \$800 per ounce and \$35 to \$75 per gram.

### Transportation

In 2024, the AC HIDTA continued to see an increase in the use of postal carriers transporting methamphetamine, as well as rental cars to transport across multiple states. Traditional transportation methods, such as private motor vehicles and commercial freight carriers were also utilized.

### Forecast

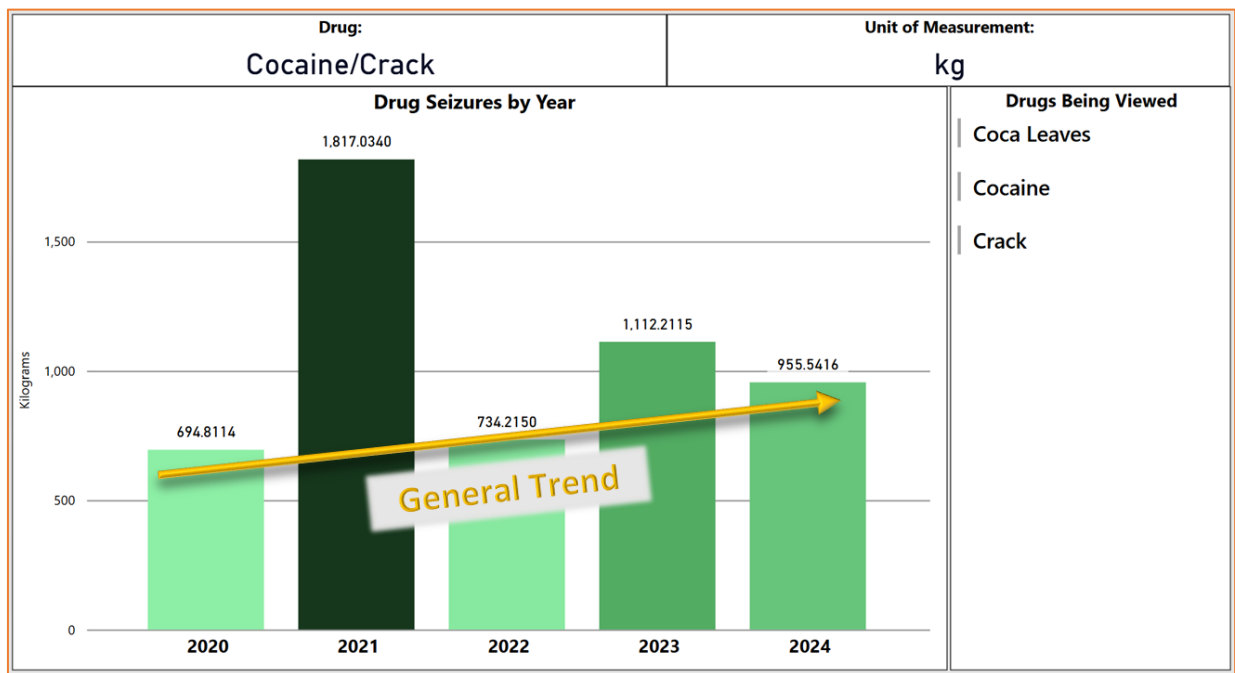
The AC HIDTA anticipates methamphetamine will continue to be the primary drug threat in 2026. In addition, the AC HIDTA predicts methamphetamine prices will significantly increase in 2025, as supply and demand are impacted with increased border security. Methamphetamine will continue to be smuggled in powder, crystal, and especially in liquid form where it can easily be converted into a bulk commodity once inside the AC HIDTA AOR.

# Cocaine



## Availability

Cocaine availability will continue an upward trend into 2026. The AC HIDTA 2024 seizure data reports seizing over 955 kilograms of cocaine/crack. Even when anomalies such as occurred in 2021 are excluded, cocaine seizures provide a clear indication DTOs will continue to move cocaine through the AC HIDTA AOR. The most common form of cocaine seized was Cocaine HCL with crack cocaine being observed more often in North Carolina. North Carolina had two notable seizures accounting for over 80 percent of the crack cocaine seizures for the AC HIDTA.

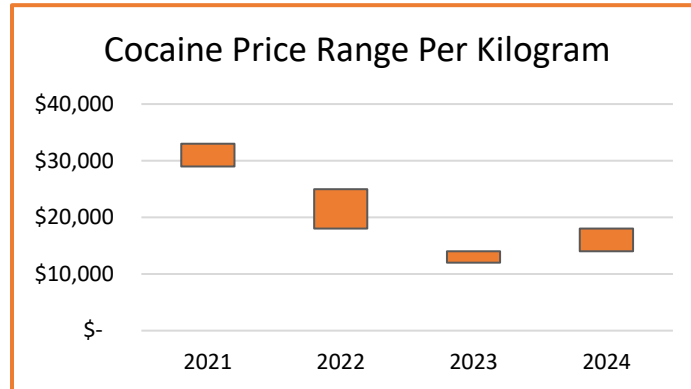


## Use

Powder cocaine users are typically in the 26 to 40-year-old age demographic, and crack cocaine users tend to be from 41 to 55-years-old. Poly-drug use is still commonly reported in the AC HIDTA region with cocaine typically accompanying various other drugs to include marijuana and fentanyl.

### Price

Cocaine pricing began trending down in the AC HIDTA region in 2021, when a kilogram of cocaine was reported between \$29,000 to \$33,000. The price drop continued throughout 2022, when a kilogram of cocaine sold for \$18,000 to \$25,000. In 2023, cocaine pricing plummeted to \$12,000 to \$14,000 a kilogram. In 2024, cocaine prices showed a slight increase with a kilogram ranging from \$14,000 to \$18,000. Although prices have trended slightly higher than in 2023, this data still suggests the AC HIDTA region has a large supply and demand for cocaine.



### Transportation

Mexican DTOs are predominately responsible for the transportation, wholesale, and retail distribution of cocaine throughout the AC HIDTA AOR. Street-level distributions and trafficking are delegated to smaller multi-state and local organizations. The AC HIDTA region remains a major hub for distributing cocaine throughout the region and across the Eastern Seaboard. DTOs integrate the shipment of cocaine with other drugs for transport in traditional motor vehicles (e.g., tractor-trailers and passenger automobiles). DTOs use elaborate constructed hidden compartments inside motor vehicles and transported equipment. Other methods of bulk shipment are also used such as shipping containers onboard maritime vessels, with a destination of either of the two major seaports in the region, Charleston, SC, or Savannah, GA.

### Forecast

The AC HIDTA anticipates the demand for cocaine to remain consistent in 2026. The supply will likely remain high to meet the demand throughout the region and is expected to be used in poly-drug settings. DTOs will continue to lace cocaine with fentanyl because of higher profitability which will contribute to non-fatal and fatal overdoses.



Figure 4 - Cocaine seized by AC HIDTA

# Fentanyl

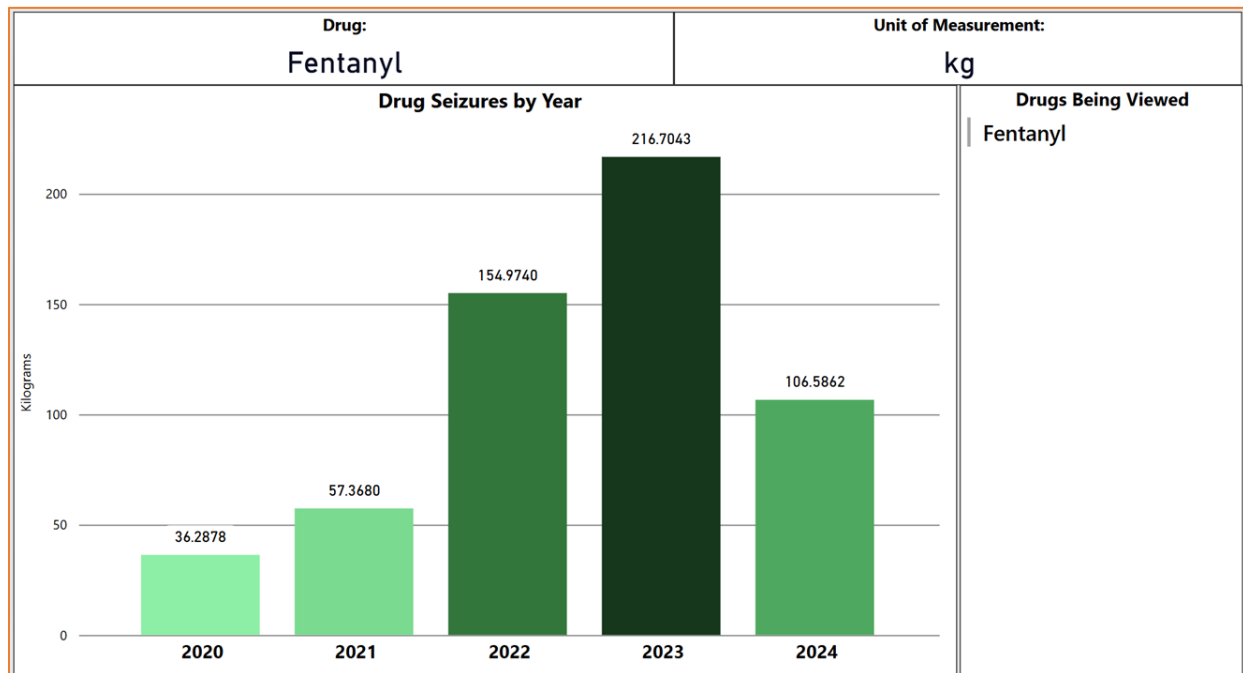


## Availability

Fentanyl is easily obtained throughout the AC HIDTA AOR in powder, pill, and brick form. Fentanyl is often colored either white, purple, red, blue, pink, brown, and blue to either identify the producer or possibly entice younger users. Fentanyl is routinely used as an adulterant making it increasingly difficult to encounter methamphetamine, cocaine, heroin, and counterfeit pharmaceuticals that have not been laced with varying amounts of fentanyl. Additionally, other narcotics are now found mixed into fentanyl, increasing its effects as an adulterant. For example, a strong sedative used in veterinary services, xylazine, is often mixed with fentanyl. When mixed, the concoction results in prolonged and enhanced effects increasing the risk of overdose and fatalities.

The amount of fentanyl seized by the AC HIDTA declined in 2024, compared to 2023. In 2023, a total of 217 kilograms and 404,644 dosage units were seized compared to 107 kilograms and 239,751 dosage units in 2024. While encouraging, the potency of fentanyl keeps it as a top threat to the AC HIDTA AOR.

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## Use

Provisional data indicates in 2024, Georgia experienced 976 fentanyl-related deaths, compared to 1,457 in 2023, representing a 33% decrease (Garrish & Karpf, 2025). North Carolina experienced 1,749 fentanyl-related deaths, compared to 3,343 in 2023, representing a 48% decrease (NC Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) Toxicology, 2025). For South Carolina, 2023 and 2024 overdose data are unavailable due to a continued backlog. The decrease in overdose fatalities in GA and NC correlates with increasing administration of naloxone (Narcan®), increased tolerance, and public awareness. In 2024, the AC HIDTA AOR specifically encountered the following fentanyl analogues: Para-fluorofentanyl, 4-Fluorofentanyl, Carfentanil, and Acetyl Fentanyl.



Figure 5 – Multiple colors of fentanyl seized by GBI Southeastern Regional Drug Enforcement Office in 2024.

## Intelligence Gap

*2024 data obtained from Georgia Bureau of Investigation's (GBI) Division of Forensic Sciences (DoFS), individual GA County medical examiners offices, and North Carolina's Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) is considered preliminary and likely to increase as more deaths are certified. 2024 data obtained from South Carolina Department of Health and Environment Control (DHEC) has not been published to date.*

## Price

The price of fentanyl in the AC HIDTA AOR is relatively stable. The average price during the 3rd quarter of 2024 for a gram of fentanyl was \$100. This is comparable to the same time frame in 2023. Prices for one-ounce quantities averaged from \$1,100 to \$1,400, which is a slight decrease from 2023 data. Individual pill prices ranged from \$1.50 to \$3.50, decreasing from 2023 data; however, kilogram prices averaged between \$28,000 to \$35,000, increasing from 2023 data. It is too soon to predict how increasing border security and international pressure on supplier nations will affect prices moving into 2026.

## Transportation

The Sinaloa Cartel and Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generacion (CJNG) are responsible for smuggling most of the fentanyl into the United States. The Mexico-based cartels import high-quality fentanyl from source countries like China. Fentanyl consignments are then transported onboard tractor-trailers, passenger vehicles, or shipped via parcel.

Cartel members and associates are using social media applications such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat, along with encrypted platforms including WhatsApp, Telegram, Signal, Wire, and Wickr, to sell pills and powders falsely advertised as harmless items. The AC HIDTA found no notable emergent concealment methods in 2024. High-potency drugs like fentanyl allow for smaller shipment quantities which provide more opportunities for unusual concealment methods. Recent examples of concealment include inside vehicle engines, in paint buckets, fire extinguishers (holding up to 6 kilograms each), and children's toys. DTO's often package Fentanyl with cellophane and stamps like cocaine bricks.



*Figure 6- Multi-colored fentanyl pills seized by AC HIDTA Group 2 in 2024*

### Forecast

Fentanyl will remain a significant threat to the AC HIDTA AOR for the foreseeable future. The AC HIDTA expects to see a decrease in overdose fatalities given the increasing availability of naloxone (Narcan®). However, those numbers are subject to change as requests for pure fentanyl increase and cartels use fentanyl as a cutting agent for a variety of drugs and as an adulterate for counterfeit pharmaceuticals. Mexican cartels will continue to explore alternative methods of marketing fentanyl (e.g., coloring fentanyl) to increase profits and expand their user base. Should efforts to tighten border security and cut off the base supply of fentanyl to the Sinaloa and CJNG cartels be successful, the AC HIDTA predicts other smaller cartels may attempt to fill any distribution gaps.

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*Figure 7- Blue Pills typically known as "M-Box 30's" – containing fentanyl; seized by AC HIDTA Group 2 in 2024.*

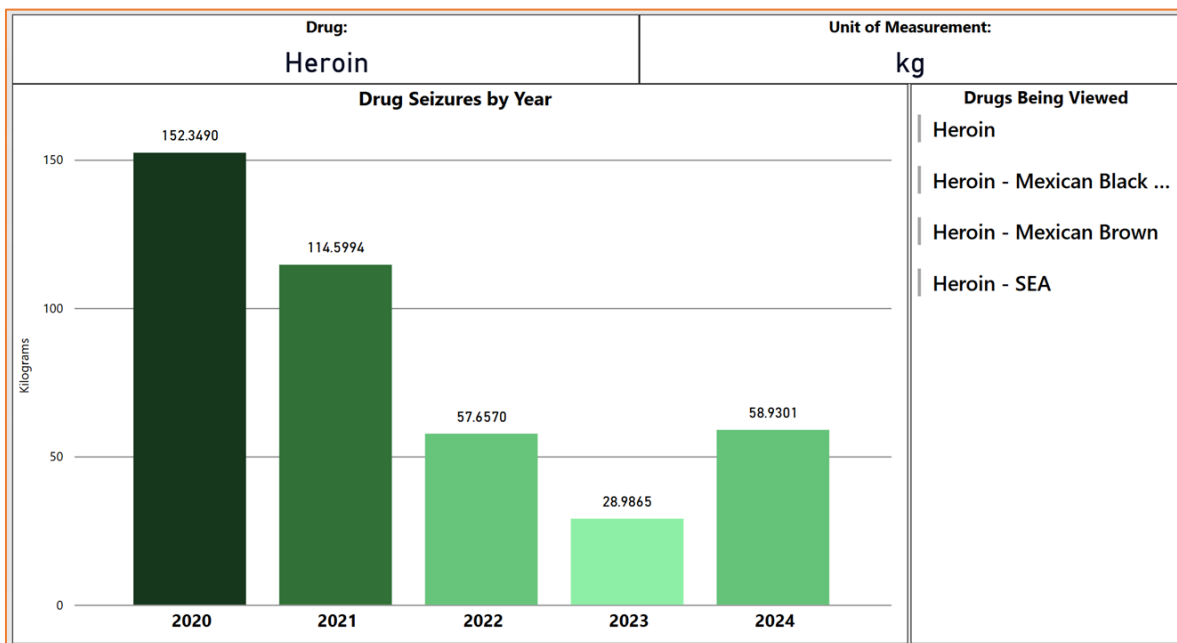


# Heroin



## Availability

Heroin availability has slightly increased in the AC HIDTA AOR. Over the last five years, heroin seizures have plummeted; however, in 2024, heroin seizures rose 49.18% from the previous year. This represents an increase in seizures from 28.9865 kilograms in 2023, to 58.9301 kilograms in 2024.



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## Price

The increased availability of heroin correlates with a lower price point. Current heroin prices are decreasing with the cost of heroin being roughly \$17,500 to \$36,000 per kilogram. In 2023, the price ranged between \$28,000 to \$34,000 per kilogram. Prices in Georgia are typically lower than those in North Carolina and South Carolina. The lower price is attributed to the proximity to major distribution points in the Atlanta, Georgia area causing lower distribution costs.

## Transportation

Heroin seizures in the AC HIDTA AOR tend to originate in Mexico. DTOs utilize ground transportation as the primary means for heroin distribution to and throughout the AC HIDTA AOR. Heroin is often comingled with other drugs for economy of movement. DTOs use a variety

of smuggling methods in private and commercial conveyances. Commercial shipping methods remain popular to reduce DTO exposure to interdiction.



Figure 8 - Heroin – Bulk Seizure of Heroin by AC HIDTA in 2024

### Forecast

The AC HIDTA expects heroin usage rates will stabilize or may even decline through the rest of 2025 and into 2026. Lower costs of alternative drugs like methamphetamine, cocaine, and fentanyl could contribute to the decrease as well. However, several issues may affect heroin usage rates. Pressures on the supply system because of tighter border security and increased pressures applied to cartels trafficking fentanyl who operate from source countries could result in increased efforts to traffic heroin. Fentanyl awareness and identification as a dangerous drug could drive consumers to reconsider heroin as a less dangerous and more natural alternative.

# Marijuana

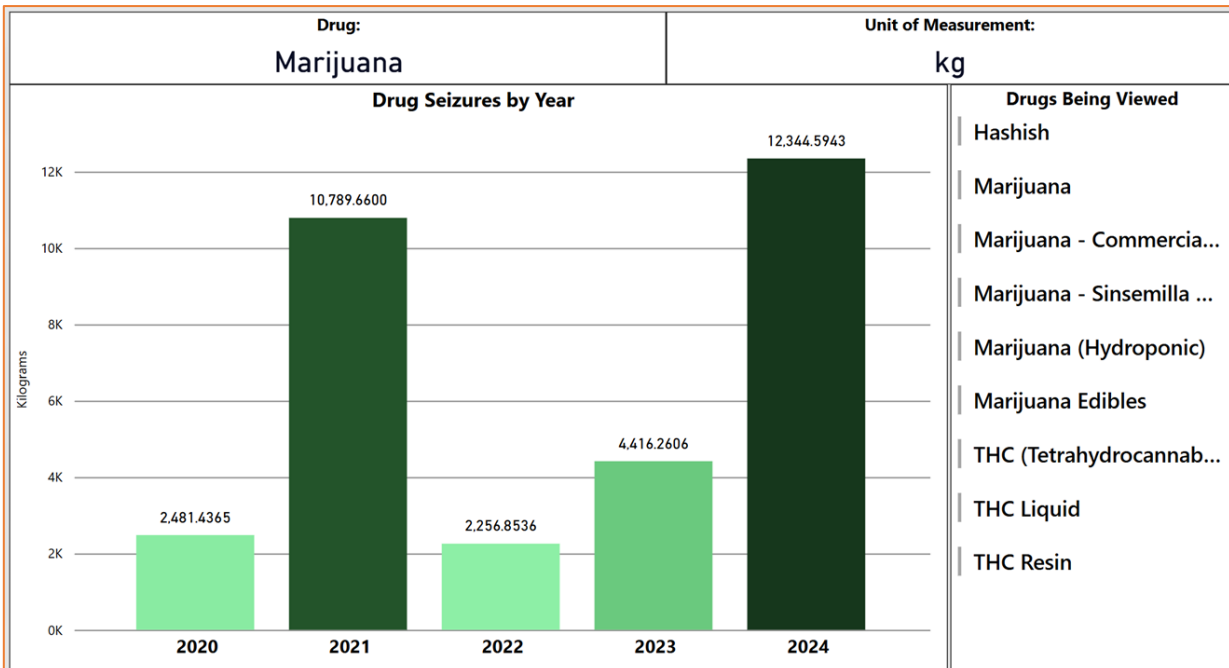


## Availability

Most marijuana and tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) products seized across the AC HIDTA AOR originate from legal dispensaries and grow sites in states such as Washington, Colorado, and California. While bulk seizures have risen, law enforcement is also noting increases in the variety of marijuana products offering customers more options for consumption. Vape pens and THC cartridges, for example, have become popular with younger users.

The sale of marijuana products remains streamlined through social media applications such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Signal, Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook. Dealers use these applications to advertise products and communicate purchases. Sales are often conducted through peer-to-peer (P2P) platforms like CashApp, Venmo, or Zelle. Marijuana grows are still occasionally discovered throughout the AC HIDTA AOR, although this is becoming less common due to ease of product transportation from legal states via USPS or other means. The AC HIDTA saw a total of 12,344.59 kilograms of marijuana seized in 2024. Compared to 2023 records, 2024 seizures increased by 7,928.33 kilograms, which amounts to a 179.52% increase in seizures.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> This increase includes a very large indoor grow operation discovered in the Savannah, Georgia area and a large operation in Cape Fear targeting stores selling THC products.

## Use

Law enforcement in the AC HIDTA AOR regularly seizes high-quality, commercially packaged marijuana. THC products such as vape pens, edibles, dab wax and other varieties. Vape pens are consistently popular amongst all ages and demographics, possibly due to flavor variety, lack of discernable marijuana odor, or ease of use.

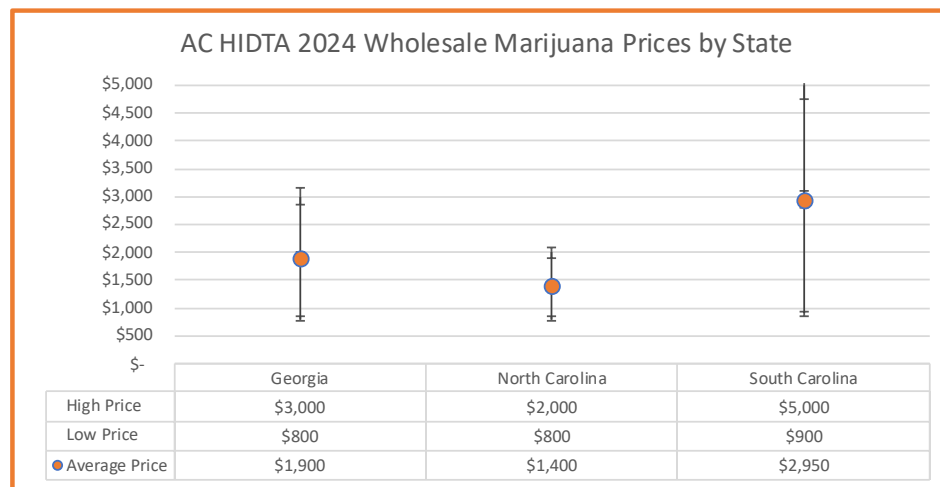
## Price

The demand and availability for marijuana in the AC HIDTA AOR has remained comparatively unchanged. Users still have numerous means of acquiring a variety of marijuana products ranging in quality and cost.

Compared to 2023 data, recent midgrade marijuana prices in Georgia dropped from \$2,000 per pound to just \$1,000 per pound. Otherwise, Georgia marijuana prices of various grades range from \$800 to \$3,000 per pound, \$200 to \$350 an ounce, and \$10 to \$30 per gram. South Carolina marijuana prices have slightly increased across all grades compared to 2023 data. The previous year's range was \$500 to \$4,800 per pound; however, 2024 data indicate prices now range from \$900 to \$5,000 per pound and \$200 to \$500 per ounce. North Carolina saw a change from \$1,400 to \$1,700 per pound to \$800 to \$2,000 per pound for 2024.



Figure 9 - THC Products Seized by AC HIDTA



## Transportation

Marijuana in the AC HIDTA AOR typically originates as bulk wholesale shipments from legal states including Washington, California, and Colorado. While local marijuana grow sites are still occasionally discovered by law enforcement, the wholesale purchases of marijuana from legal states has lessened the need for local grows. Marijuana is usually stored inside sealed containers and is transported with several layers of plastic wrapping or bags to mask the strong scent. Postal

carrier services such as FedEx or USPS are popular means of shipping marijuana products. During seizures, marijuana is typically found alongside other narcotics, most commonly methamphetamine, cocaine, heroin, fentanyl, or pharmaceutical drugs.



Figure 11 - Marijuana Seizure by AC HIDTA



Figure 10 - Marijuana Seizure by AC HIDTA  
Vacuum-Sealed in Plastic

### Forecast

Marijuana purchases through legal out-of-state retailers and P2P payment platforms will make product access easier for drug traffickers and direct consumer purchase in 2026. The variety of marijuana and hemp products in the form of edibles, waxes, and oils will challenge law enforcement in differentiating legal from illegal products. Additionally, THC vape cartridges will remain popular and used primarily amongst younger users.



# Pharmaceuticals

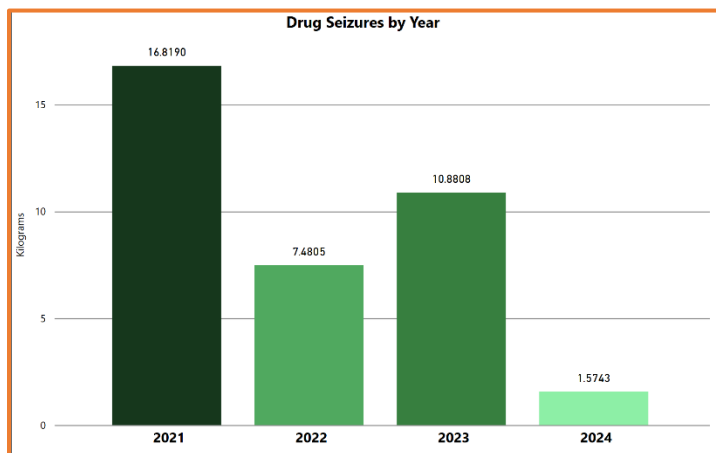
## Availability

Legitimate pharmaceuticals are seen less frequently throughout the region than in previous years. When observed, investigations show individuals obtained legitimate pharmaceuticals through doctor shopping, prescription fraud, illegal online pharmacies or the dark web, theft, or overprescribing by physicians. Legitimate prescription opioids, benzodiazepines, and stimulant pills are mostly encountered on a user and simple-possession level, and more frequently encountered in rural areas of the region. More concerning is the market for counterfeit pharmaceuticals, which remains high and is increasing across the region. Sales of counterfeit pills remain stable in the open market and could be driven by customers seeking legitimate pharmaceuticals but are instead sold a counterfeit product. Counterfeit pharmaceuticals remain easy to obtain as evidenced by the AC HIDTA seizing thousands of counterfeit pills during 2024.



Figure 12 – 1,000 counterfeit oxycodone M30 pills containing fentanyl seized by Columbia, SC HIDTA Task Force in 2024.

AC HIDTA Pharmaceutical Drug Seizures by Kg



The continued decline in the total number of prescribed and dispensed controlled substances indicates progress in the region's goal of turning the tide on the opioid and substance abuse crises. Georgia reported from 2022 to 2023, the number of prescriptions for both opioids and benzodiazepines decreased by 3%, while those for stimulants increased by 1%. Opioid prescriptions remain the most prescribed and dispensed controlled substance in the state (GA Dept. of Public Health, 2024). Likewise,

in North Carolina, there was a decrease of 3.3% in the total number of controlled substances dispensed from 2022 to 2023 (N.C. Dept. of Health and Human Services, 2024). Schedule II substances, such as hydrocodone and oxycodone, were the most prescribed narcotics. In South Carolina, the total number of controlled substance prescriptions dispensed in 2023 reflects an overall approximate 4% decline since 2019 (S.C. Prescription Drug Monitoring Program, 2024).

South Carolina has observed an overall decline in prescriptions for opioids and benzodiazepines, however, the number for stimulant medications have increased by 15% from 2019 to 2023, including ADHD medications, which remain the number one controlled substance dispensed in the state (Ibid).

### Use

Pharmaceutical drug abuse crosses all demographic boundaries. Younger people tend to be affiliated more with the use and sale of counterfeit pills. Law enforcement agencies within the AC HIDTA AOR continue to report widespread seizures of these counterfeit pills marketed and sold by traffickers as legitimate pharmaceutical-grade opioids, benzodiazepines, or stimulant controlled substances. The most sought after counterfeit pharmaceutical drugs continue to include oxycodone (Oxycontin®), alprazolam (Xanax®) and Adderall®. These counterfeit pills can be identical in appearance to the actual prescription medications they mimic, making it difficult to differentiate between the two. Users are unable to tell the difference, exposing themselves to non-pharmaceutical grade pills with inconsistent quality, many of which are adulterated with life-threatening amounts of high potency fentanyl. Illicit pills confiscated in the AC HIDTA AOR are frequently found to contain fentanyl and/or methamphetamine. While declining in numbers, overdose deaths remain a significant problem with this drug category. Violence is not generally reported with the illegal pharmaceutical drug trade; however, property crimes such as robbery and theft occur.



Figure 13 - Counterfeit pill press and fentanyl seized by Asheville, NC HIDTA Task Force in 2024



### Price

Street prices of abused pharmaceutical pills and their counterfeit variants have remained steady and, depending on their type and dosage unit, typically range from \$10-\$30 per pill.

### Transportation

Seizures of legitimate prescription pharmaceutical drugs are often in smaller quantities at a user level. Legitimate pharmaceutical drugs are transported in vehicles or on an individual person and kept in private residences. Illicit pharmaceutical drugs and/or their precursor ingredient chemicals needed to produce counterfeit pharmaceuticals are smuggled in larger quantities across the southern U.S. border and then transported to the region in passenger or commercial vehicles. Many times, the components are sent in parcel packages, via USPS and commercial common carriers.

### Forecast

The AC HIDTA predicts pharmaceutical abuse in the AC HIDTA AOR will either slightly decline or level off to a consistent rate for the remainder of 2025, and into 2026. DTOs are expected to continue filling supply voids with adulterated and potentially lethal counterfeit illicit controlled substances. Increased availability of naloxone will help to keep overdose fatalities lower even though the total number of overdoses may continue to increase.

## Drug Trafficking Organizations



### Overview

The southeastern region of the United States, specifically the AC HIDTA AOR, remains the primary conduit for the movement of drugs to the eastern seaboard and serves as a major staging area for the collection of drug proceeds. In 2024, Mexican drug cartels and smaller DTOs dominated the distribution of illicit drugs in the AC HIDTA AOR. Intelligence indicates the listed Mexican Cartels significantly influenced drug trafficking in the AC HIDTA AOR:

Major DTOs	Smaller DTOs
Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generacion (CJNG)	Guerreros Unidos
Sinaloa Cartel	Cartel Del Noreste - Formerly part of Los Zetas
Juarez Cartel	Los Zetas – Remnants
Colima Cartel	Gulf Cartel – Remnants
Rafael Caro-Quintero	La Familia Michoacana - Remnants / La Nueva Familia
Knights Templars - Remnants	

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New DTOs continue to push into the AC HIDTA AOR and 74 new DTOs were identified in 2024. This is a 42% increase over the number identified in 2023. In all, 278 DTOs remained under investigation at the end of 2024. This included a total of 2,886 members and 273 leaders participating in DTO activity. The DTOs are primarily split in ethnicity between Hispanic (non-Mexican), African American and other ethnicities. All are poly-drug in nature. The average DTO size is 12 members. Eighty-eight DTOs operate on the international level, 76 operated on a multi-state level and 109 on the local level. DTOs under investigation by the AC HIDTA are primarily engaged in trafficking cocaine, heroin, fentanyl, methamphetamine, marijuana, psilocybin, and THC liquid (synthetic). MDMA, alprazolam, benzodiazepine, and crack cocaine round out the remaining drug types trafficked. The primary source areas are Mexico, California, Texas, North Carolina, South Carolina, Arizona, Georgia, and Florida.

### International DTOs

Mexican DTOs remain the greatest criminal drug threat to the AC HIDTA AOR; they are responsible for the importation and transportation of illicit and diverted drugs throughout the AC HIDTA AOR.

The *Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generacion* (CJNG) is connected to several methamphetamine investigations throughout the AC HIDTA AOR. The CJNG continues to be one of the fastest growing transnational criminal organizations in Mexico, and among the most prolific methamphetamine producers in the world. It has been tied to the smuggling of multi-kilogram quantities of methamphetamine and fentanyl in pill form.

The *Sinaloa Cartel* is known to have a nexus to several methamphetamine, cocaine and heroin cases in the AC HIDTA AOR. The *Sinaloa Cartel* is responsible for smuggling multi-kilogram quantities of drugs from Mexico to the AC HIDTA AOR.

International DTOs Identified by AC HIDTA in 2024	
Characteristics	
- Total DTOs	22
General Characteristics	
- Total Members (Leaders)	277 (22)
- Average DTO Size	13.6
- Gang Related	8
- Violent	10
- Poly-drug	18
- Money Laundering	0
Federal Case Designations	
- OCDETF	0
- CPOT	0
- RPOT	2

### Multi-State DTOs

Multi-State DTOs pose a significant drug trafficking threat to communities in the AC HIDTA AOR and like their international DTO counterparts, these DTOs are poly-drug and primarily trafficking methamphetamine, fentanyl, heroin, marijuana, and cocaine. One multi-state organization is responsible for smuggling multi-kilogram quantities of methamphetamine and cocaine from Mexico to the Atlanta metropolitan area. This DTO was designated as a Regional Priority Organizational Target (RPOT) and is affiliated with the *CARO-Quintero* DTO and the *Sinaloa Cartel*.

Multi-state DTOs Identified by AC HIDTA in 2024	
Characteristics	
- Total DTOs	21
General Characteristics	
- Total Members (Leaders)	160 (21)
- Average DTO Size	8.6
- Gang Related	8
- Violent	12
- Poly-drug	14
- Money Laundering	0
Federal Case Designations	
- OCDETF	6
- CPOT	0
- RPOT	0

### Local DTOs

Local DTOs pose a high threat to communities in the AC HIDTA AOR. Local DTOs are involved in retail drug sales along with other criminal activities including violent crimes and property crimes. They interact with multi-state and international DTOs to obtain drugs and occasionally to trade weapons, vehicles, and assist with money laundering activities. Almost half of the local DTOs are violent and a few have gang affiliations.

The *30 Deep* are one of the locally resurging criminal street gangs created in Atlanta in the mid-2000's. Originally, the group was made up of young men, teens and drug dealers in the southwestern Atlanta area.

Local DTOs Identified by AC HIDTA in 2024	
Characteristics	
- Total DTOs	31
General Characteristics	
- Total Members (Leaders)	240 (31)
- Average DTO Size	8.7
- Gang Related	11
- Violent	14
- Poly-drug	21
- Money Laundering	0
Federal Case Designations	
- OCDETF	0
- CPOT	0
- RPOT	0

## Gangs

Members of *30 Deep* are like many Atlanta gangs and commit a wide variety of crimes. The gang's origins are traced back to car thefts, armed robberies, snatch and grabs, violent assaults, car jackings, and the drug trade in the Mechanicville community. Recent reports show the *30 Deep* is making a comeback in the DeKalb County area.

*Tren de Aragua* (TDA) is the largest transnational criminal operation in the South American nation of Venezuela with operations expanding progressively throughout Central and South America and the United States. TDA members and their illegal activities have been recorded in Tennessee, Louisiana, Georgia, Virginia, Florida, New York, Illinois and Texas. TDA members are estimated to be between 2,500 to 7,000 members worldwide and are known to be operating locally as a DTO in the AC HIDTA AOR.

Local Gangs in the AC HIDTA'S AOR		
Crips	Aryan Brotherhood	Young Gutter Crew
Gangster Disciples	Black Gangster Disciples	Ghost Faced Gangsters
Bloods	Outlaws Motorcycle Gang	Young Slime Life
Sex Money Murder	Salvador Valencia	MS-13
White Cell	TreeTop	Bounty hunter bloods
Young Old Dixie	Paper Gang Family	5-9 Brims
Sureños	The Samali Outlaws	Hells Angels Motorcycle Gang
Norteños	The "Dirty Ones" Motorcycle Gang	18 <sup>th</sup> Street Gang
Drug Murder	Eight Trays	Tango Blast Prison Gang
Famerica	952-Subset of Famerica	Young Killer Click
Raw Sewage MC	Latin Kings	Bank Roll Mob
Clutch the Mob	CME Rattlers (aka The Snakes)	Duct Tape
Zoo Krew	30 Deep	Tren De Araugua (TDA)

The National Gang Intelligence Center assessed in 2024, TDA members “will identify US cities and municipalities that are vulnerable to criminal exploitation or lack an established gang presence” (National Gang Intelligence Center, 2024). Through this identification process, TDA members will establish new networks of criminal connections and bases of activity for extortion, violence, sex, drug, and arms trafficking. Whether it be through overrunning current organized crime in an area or absorbing it into TDA ranks. Law enforcement may expect to see even more activity from TDA in the coming year.

### Forecast

The AC HIDTA expects increased pressure by DTOs operating in the AOR in 2026. Changing markets will continue to encourage DTOs to increase their footprint in the AC HITDA AOR. Pressure from violent gangs attempting to move into the area like the TDA may result in an increase in violence as existing gangs attempt to defend their “turf.” The increase in new DTOs will provide more opportunities for continued abuse of cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine. Drug trafficking in the AC HIDTA AOR will continue to be controlled by larger cartels, but smaller, more numerous local DTOs, may be willing to use violence to control their territory.

### All DTO/MLOs Currently Under Investigation<sup>15</sup>

AC HIDTA DTO/MLOs Under Investigation in 2024				
Characteristics	International	Multi-State	Local	Total
- Total DTOs	92	77	109	278
General Characteristics				
- Total Members (Leaders)	1,167 (92)	677 (77)	1,111 (109)	2,955 (278)
- Average DTO Size	13.7	9.8	11.2	11.6
- Gang Related	41	31	52	124
- Violent	57	43	60	160
- Poly-drug	63	53	62	178
- Money Laundering	4	1	0	5
Federal Case Designations				
- OCDETF	15	23	10	48
- CPOT	3	0	0	3
- RPOT	7	1	1	9

<sup>15</sup> PMP data as of 05/09/2024.

## Money Laundering Organizations

### Bulk Currency

Tractor-trailers, multi-car haulers, long-distance passenger buses, and passenger vehicles remain primary smuggling methods encountered by law enforcement containing illicit bulk currency shipments, often commingled with various other types of contraband (e.g., narcotics and firearms). Traditional voids and constructed, hidden storage spaces (“traps”) are still used. Common “lazy concealment” methods of currency shipments are also utilized such as duffle bags, mislabeled packages, and other overt storage containers. The volume of bulk currency seizures in the AC HIDTA AOR appears to have leveled off over the past couple of years following a sharp decline in 2022. In 2024, the AC HIDTA seized more than \$17.2 million in cash.

### Electronic Money Laundering and Fraud

Self-employed businesses like construction, painting, lawn care, towing services and similar cash-in-hand type businesses are commonly used to launder illicit funds. The low profile maintained by these businesses assists them in avoiding detection by law enforcement. DTOs and MLOs continue to exploit the rise in electronic platforms to launder and transfer funds. Organizations commonly use popular applications such as CashApp, PayPal, Venmo, wire-transfers to international and domestic banks, and Zelle to move the illicit proceeds from one account to the next.

Prepaid and reloadable cards, such as Green Dot and Western Union, are relatively anonymous and easy to use. Obtaining the cards is easy because they are available at most convenience stores and corner shops. Many forms of cryptocurrency exist; however, the most common form is Bitcoin. Bitcoin Ethereum allows users to transfer funds anonymously to each other’s digital accounts making it difficult for law enforcement to track or identify the transaction. DTOs are also using gambling applications to launder currency in the attempt to conceal illegal drug proceeds from the detection of law enforcement.

DTOs and MLOs maintain a degree of anonymity while routing funds through numerous applications, businesses, and currency types. Financial crimes investigations are complex and difficult. Many electronic applications resist law enforcement investigation requests making monitoring of these transactions difficult.

Money Laundering Organizations Identified by the AC HIDTA in 2024			
Total Identified	International	Multi-State/Regional	Local
0	0	0	0

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Money Laundering Organizations Under Investigation by the AC HIDTA in 2024			
Total Under Investigation	International	Multi-State/Regional	Local
5	4	1	0

Forecast

DTOs and MLOs will continue to enhance their laundering methods with increased use of electronic applications and cryptocurrencies. Enhanced cryptocurrency regulations are expected to continue providing improved protection from illegal use of digital platforms. Many larger currency transfers will be forced back to bulk currency shipments. However, smaller transactions of currency will continue to be sent via electronic applications. Electronic methods of communication and currency transfers will help shield DTOs from law enforcement detection.

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## Outlook

The AC HIDTA will continue to identify, disrupt, and dismantle the DTOs and MLOs engaged in drug trafficking, money laundering, and violent activities within its AOR. This will be accomplished by utilizing force-multiplying, efficient operations which take advantage of the strategic and tactical intelligence obtained from commingled federal, local, state, and tribal agency task forces. In addition, given the proposed focus of the Homeland Security Task Forces to attack drug cartels and violent criminal gangs, the AC HIDTA anticipates collaboration with these Task Forces as they become operational.

The AC HIDTA is using key findings from the *2026 AC HIDTA Threat Assessment* to develop expectations for the upcoming year:

	Confidence	Probability Level	Analysis
1.	High	Nearly Certain	Local agencies will continue to rank methamphetamine as the top drug threat in their communities.
2.	High	Nearly Certain	The distribution networks for methamphetamine, cocaine, marijuana, heroin, and synthetic opioids (fentanyl) in the AC HIDTA AOR will remain under control of Mexican DTOs.
3.	High	Highly Probable	Drug overdose rates are expected to rise while the availability of naloxone (Narcan®) should continue to suppress overall fatality rates.
4.	High	Nearly Certain	Increased profitability, potency levels that allow for reduced bulk transportation, and high addiction rates will continue to push fentanyl and its analogs as an adulterate for other narcotics.

Findings from the *2026 AC HIDTA Threat Assessment* will assist in prioritizing efforts to reduce or eliminate major drug threats from local communities. The AC HIDTA will use strategic and tactical intelligence to ensure each initiative has the most current information available on DTO threats to the AOR. Violent organizations and their sources of supply will be the priority for the AC HIDTA, local law enforcement partners, and the U.S. Attorney's Offices. It is this ability to work together that allows the AC HIDTA to meet and exceed the goals and expectations established by the National HIDTA program and ONDCP.

# Appendix

## Methodology

The Intelligence Section of the AC HIDTA Investigative Support Center (ISC) is responsible for the production of the annual *Threat Assessment*. The ISC uses a team concept to compile and review information to accurately show the current drug threats within the AC HIDTA'S AOR. The ISC then utilizes predictive analysis to show potential developing threats to the AOR. The final product is presented to the AC HIDTA Executive Board. Once approved, the AC HIDTA executive staff, enforcement, and intelligence managers may utilize the information to implement new or modify existing strategies to counter identified threats.

## Source Considerations

Multiple law enforcement and public health sources including the HIDTA Web Performance Management Process (PMP), the AC HIDTA initiatives' commander surveys and interviews, the HIDTA PowerPMP program, the *DEA National Drug Threat Assessment*, and the *DEA Trends in the Traffic Report* provide timely intelligence and statistical data used in the development of the *AC HIDTA Annual Threat Assessment*. The AC HIDTA obtains other data from state sources in Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina including the Poison and Drug Centers, Department of Human Services, and Departments of Public Health and Environment.

## Estimative Language

The AC HIDTA uses estimative language to express the probability of an event. Assessments are supported by information which vary in quality and source. Additionally, the AC HIDTA assigns confidence levels of high, moderate, or low to any assessments.

These charts detail expressions of likelihood correlating with percentages of chance:

Quantifying Likelihood of Occurrence						
Remote	Highly Improbable	Improbable	Roughly Even Odds	Probable	Highly Probable	Nearly Certain
1-5%	5-20%	20-45%	45-55%	55-80%	80-95%	95-99%

Defining Confidence Levels		
Low Confidence	Moderate Confidence	High Confidence
Nature of the issue may not be knowable (e.g., complex or future-oriented);	Nature of the issue is knowable or sufficient evidence minimizes uncertainty;	Nature of the issue is knowable;
Uncorroborated information from marginal-to-good sources;	Partially corroborated information from reliable sources;	Well-corroborated information from proven sources;
High potential for deception;	Moderate potential for deception;	Low potential for deception;
Key assumptions are critical to analysis;	Assumptions are potentially critical to analysis	Assumptions are not critical to analysis;
Mostly weak inferences		Undisputed reasoning

### AC HIDTA Description and Initiatives

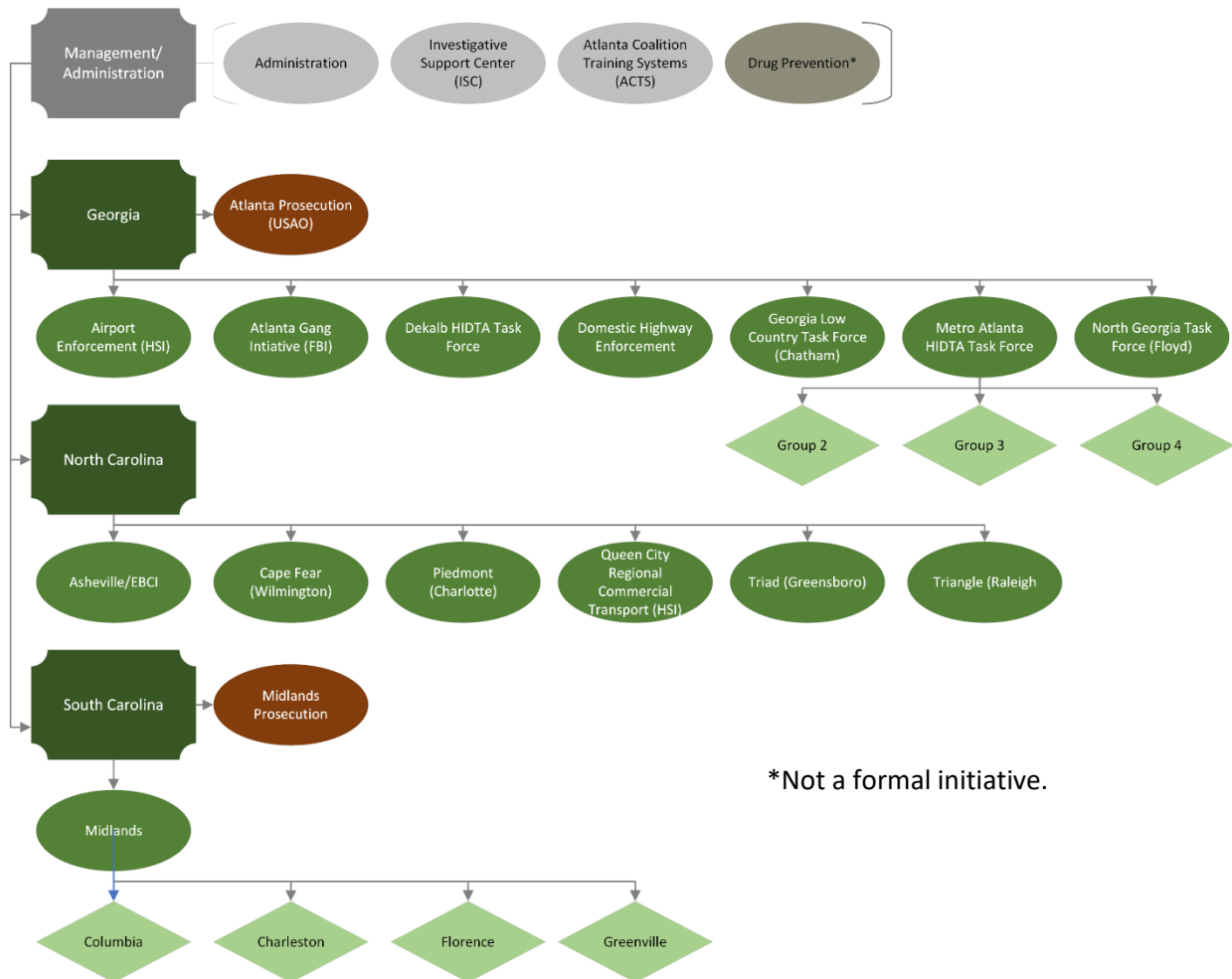
The Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) established the Atlanta HIDTA AOR with two Georgia counties in 1995. The AOR began expanding in 2006. The AOR (re-named as the Atlanta-Carolinas HIDTA) currently consists of 35 counties in three states and the EBCI which covers portions of five counties. Participating agencies in 2025 include 142 state, local, tribal, and federal law enforcement agencies.<sup>16</sup> The AC HIDTA currently supports 19 initiatives – 16 enforcement and three support initiatives. This list shows currently designated counties:

Georgia	North Carolina	South Carolina
Bartow	Alamance	Lexington
Chatham	Buncombe	Richland
Cherokee	Durham	Horry
Clayton	Gaston	Florence
Cobb	Guilford	Greenville
DeKalb	Henderson	Charleston
Douglas	Johnston	
Fayette	McDowell	
Floyd	Mecklenburg	
Forsyth	New Hanover	
Fulton	Randolph	
Gwinnett	Rockingham	
Henry	Union	
	Wake	
	Wayne	

<sup>16</sup> As of April 2025.

	Wilson	
	EBCI <sup>17</sup> : Cherokee Graham Jackson Haywood Swain	

This chart indicates the assignment of initiatives:



<sup>17</sup> EBCI covers portions of five counties.

## Georgia Enforcement Initiatives

Georgia currently has eight enforcement initiatives (including prosecution), and most initiatives are comingled with federal, state, and local officers who are deputized as Task Force Officers (TFOs) by a federal agency. The DeKalb HIDTA Task Force has local and federal presence and DHE only has state officers. Fifty-eight state, federal, and local departments are comingled and collocated within these initiatives. A total of 21 intelligence analysts, one Threat Assessment and Strategy Coordinator, one public health analyst, and one drug intelligence officer support the GA enforcement initiatives.

**Airport Group:** is headed by the Department of Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) at the busiest airport in the world – Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport (City of Atlanta, 2025).

**Atlanta Gang Initiative (AGI):** is led by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The mission of the AGI is to identify and target the most violent and organized gangs posing the greatest threats to their communities that are often involved in murder, robbery, kidnapping, drug trafficking, firearms trafficking, human trafficking, and extortion. As part of their investigations, the AGI also targets the illegal pharmaceutical trade, money laundering by drug traffickers, and pursues asset forfeiture. All local and state task force personnel assigned to AGI are federally deputized as FBI Task Force Officers.

**DeKalb HIDTA Task Force:** is a DeKalb-led initiative with a primary focus on the DeKalb County, Georgia regional area. The DeKalb task force partners with the ATF&E. This task force group works to identify, disrupt, and dismantle DTOs operating in the metropolitan Atlanta area.

**Domestic Highway Enforcement (DHE):** consists of the Georgia State Patrol's Criminal Interdiction Unit (GSP/CIU). Currently, there are 13 state troopers assigned. GSP/CIU does not directly investigate DTO/MLOs, but they routinely support Georgia AC HIDTA initiatives – effectively becoming a uniformed arm of the initiatives. DHE enforcement stops made without prior intelligence open new investigative cases often revealing DTO/MLO cells previously unknown to law enforcement.

**Georgia Low Country Task Force:** (Chatham County) is a DEA-led initiative with a primary focus of operation in Chatham County, GA (Savannah). This task force group works cooperatively with local county and city agencies to find, disrupt, and dismantle drug operations in the metropolitan Savannah, Georgia area.

**Metro Atlanta Task Force:** consists of three multi-jurisdictional groups supervised by DEA Group Supervisors. These three groups are collocated at the AC HIDTA Operation Center. This initiative works with multiple local county and city agencies to identify, disrupt, and dismantle drug operations in the metro Atlanta area.

**North Georgia Task Force:** (Floyd) is a DEA-led initiative whose primary focus of operation is on Floyd County, GA (Rome) area. This task force group works cooperatively with several local county and city agencies to find, disrupt, and dismantle drug operations in the north Georgia area.

**Prosecution:** prosecution initiatives are a key part to a successful AC HIDTA strategy. The Prosecution Initiative in Georgia includes funding for three Special Assistant U.S. Attorney's (SAUSA) and a legal assistant located in the Northern District of Georgia U.S. Attorney's Office.

### North Carolina Enforcement Initiatives

Six enforcement initiatives operate in the state of North Carolina. Sixty-six state, federal, and local departments are co-mingled and colocated within these initiatives. Investigators in these groups are deputized as TFOs through the DEA which allows for broader arrest authorities. Seven intelligence analysts support enforcement operations in North Carolina including one HIDTA-funded program analyst and one drug intelligence officer.

**Asheville:** (Asheville, NC) One DEA-led task force focused on the identification, disruption, and dismantling of DTOs operating in the 16 westernmost counties of North Carolina, including the Qualla Boundary of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI). The Asheville Initiative is supported by 15 different federal, state, and local agents and task force officers, as well as a HIDTA intelligence analyst and investigative assistant.

**Cape Fear:** (Wilmington, NC) A new initiative approved in 2024, the Cape Fear Initiative operates in the newly designated HIDTA county of New Hanover, NC. Twelve agencies work together to identify, target, disrupt and dismantle DTOs operating in the Wilmington, NC area.

**Piedmont:** (Charlotte, NC) includes one DEA-led group concentrating on the identification, disruption, and dismantling of DTOs operating in the North Carolina area. This initiative is supported by one HIDTA-funded group assistant and one intelligence analyst.

**Queen City Regional Commercial Transport:** (Charlotte, NC) Another initiative created in 2024, the Executive Board approved an unfunded HSI-led Interdiction Initiative at the Charlotte Mecklenburg International Airport. The "Queen City" Initiative is supported by 10 different federal, state, and local agencies.

**Triad:** (Greensboro, NC) includes two DEA-led groups concentrating on the identification, disruption, and dismantling of DTOs operating in the North Carolina area. This initiative is supported by a HIDTA-funded intelligence analyst.

**Triangle:** (Raleigh, NC) includes two DEA-led groups concentrating on the identification, disruption, and dismantling of DTOs operating in the North Carolina area. This initiative is supported by a HIDTA-funded technology specialist, and a program analyst.

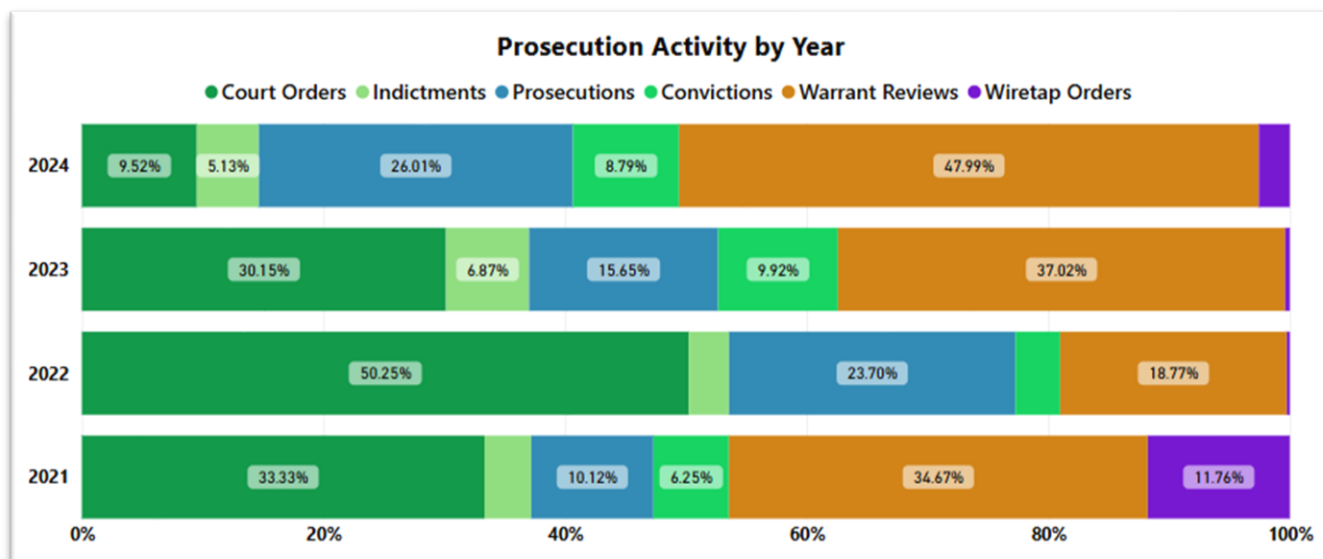
### South Carolina Enforcement Initiative

South Carolina has two enforcement initiatives, including prosecution, working supportively to find, disrupt, and dismantle DTOs operating across the state of South Carolina. Investigators in these groups are deputized as TFOs through the DEA which allows for broader arrest authorities. One HIDTA-funded group assistant, one HIDTA-funded program analyst, four analysts, and one drug intelligence officer support South Carolina enforcement operations.



**Midlands:** four separate enforcement groups operate in the cities of Columbia, Florence, Greenville, and Charleston, South Carolina. Like all AC HIDTA initiatives, the Midlands Initiative focuses on finding, disrupting, and dismantling DTOs at the highest levels. The four enforcement groups in this initiative are supervised by two DEA Resident Agents in Charge (RACs), and two DEA Group Supervisors. Members from 29 state, local, and federal agencies are comingled and collocated within the four groups.

**Prosecution:** The Midlands initiative has one AC HIDTA-funded Special Assistant Solicitor (SAS) to prosecute HIDTA cases in South Carolina.



## Support Initiatives

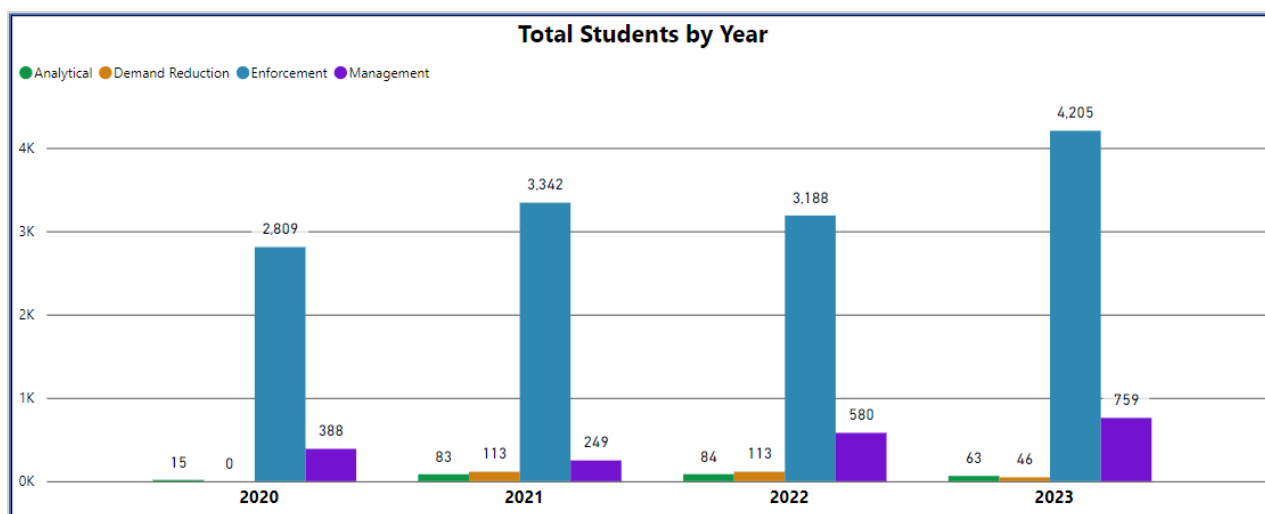
The AC HIDTA has three support initiatives categorized under the three sections of Management, Intelligence, and Support:

Initiative	Section
Management/Administration	Management
Investigative Support Center (ISC)	Intelligence
Atlanta Coalition Training Systems (ACTS)	Support

**Management/Administration:** The Management/Administration group is the primary administrative office located in Norcross, GA. This group provides administrative and day-to-day support for the AC HIDTA. The management group includes administration, financial support, technical support, and computer/network support. The Norcross facility has also served as the operating base for the Intelligence and Support Initiatives.

**Investigative Support Center (ISC):** The ISC's main component is the Intelligence Section (IS) which provides tactical and strategic intelligence case support for AC HIDTA initiatives, and occasional assistance to non-HIDTA participating agencies. The ISC has been located at the AC HIDTA Operation Center in Norcross, GA but is relocating to the Atlanta DEA office in 2025. DEA intelligence analysts are imbedded in some of the individual initiatives. When available, National Guard intelligence analysts support HIDTA efforts in each of the represented states. The ISC also aids investigators who are making undercover purchases on the Dark Web or investigating modus operandi.

**Atlanta Coalition Training Systems (ACTS):** The ACTS initiative provides specialized training for AC HIDTA initiatives and other law enforcement agencies. ACTS provides crucial support to the mission of the AC HIDTA by providing free, high-quality training courses to support local agencies.



Total Training Initiative Students			
63	46	4,205	759
Analytical	Demand Reduction	Enforcement	Management

Total Training Hours Provided			
872	385	79,029	14,644
Analytical	Demand Reduction	Enforcement	Management

## Special Programs

**Drug Prevention Program (DPP):**<sup>18</sup> Located at the ISC in Norcross, GA, the DPP's overall goal is to lower the demand for illegal drugs and equip communities in the AC HIDTA'S AOR with resources by using prevention education and training. The DPP conducts training and programs for law enforcement, military, educators, counselors, Drug-Free Community (DFC) coalitions, Youth Challenge Academies, and Counterdrug operations. The Tactical Leadership training courses focus on intra-personal skills, communication, de-escalation, belief intelligence, SWOT (strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat) analysis, strategic planning, and leadership skills. Also, the DPP offers specialized training and programming for U.S. Army recruiters and future soldiers throughout the state of Georgia. The DPP participates in local DFC meetings to highlight the channels of support the AC HIDTA can offer in community strategic planning workshops. The DPP hosts training events with Law Enforcement and Counterdrug operations in Georgia and the Carolinas.

In addition to the training, the DPP supplies an evidence-based Life Skills Prevention program called *GPS for SUCCESS*. DPP primarily offers this program in schools, after-school programs, Youth Challenge Academies, and for student counselors. This program is open to grades 1-12 focusing on the five core principles: Vision, Purpose, Mission, Team, and Commitment ([www.gpsforsuccess.org](http://www.gpsforsuccess.org)).

## Participating Law Enforcement Agencies

Currently, 146 state, local, and federal agencies actively participate in the AC HIDTA. This includes 54 agencies in Georgia, 65 agencies in North Carolina, and 27 agencies in South Carolina.<sup>19</sup> DEA and HSI have agents working in all three states and the U.S. Attorney's Office (USAO) also provides support in all three states.<sup>20</sup>

### Agencies Participating in the Atlanta-Carolinas HIDTA

Georgia:	North Carolina:	South Carolina:
Atlanta PD (AGI Only)	Alamance Co SO	Anderson Co SO
Bartow Co SO (analyst part time)	Albemarle PD	Anderson PD
Brookhaven PD	Archdale PD	Beaufort Co SO
Clayton Co PD	Asheboro PD	Charleston Co Aviation Authority
Cobb Co PD (AGI Only)	Asheville PD	Charleston Co SO
Cobb Co SO (AGI Only)	Bladen Co SO	Charleston PD
Covington PD	Burlington PD	Cheraw PD

<sup>18</sup> DPP is not an officially designated initiative but operates under Management/Administration.

<sup>19</sup> As of April 2025.

<sup>20</sup> Federal agencies are included in individual state counts with exception of the USAO.

Coweta Co SO (AGI Only)	Cary PD	Chesterfield Co SO
Customs & Border Protection	Charlotte-Mecklenburg PD	DEA
DEA	Chatham Co SO	Dept of Homeland Security
Dallas PD	Cherokee Indian PD	Goose Creek PD
DeKalb Co PD	Clay Co SO	Horry Co PD
DeKalb Co SO	Cleveland Co SO	Kershaw Co SO
Dept of Homeland Security	DEA	Lexington CO SO
Douglasville PD (AGI Only)	Dept of Homeland Security	Mount Pleasant PD
Dunwoody PD	Duplin Co SO	Myrtle Beach PD
East Point PD (AGI Only)	Durham PD	N Charleston PD
Fairburn PD (AGI Only)	Fayetteville PD	N Myrtle Beach PD
Fayetteville PD (AGI Only)	Federal Air Marshal Service	Orangeburg Co DPS
Fayette Co SO (AGI Only)	Federal Bureau of Investigation	Richland Co SO
Federal Bureau of Investigation (AGI only)	Forsyth Co So	SC Law Enforcement Division
ATF&E	Gastonia PD	SC National Guard
Floyd Co PD	Greensboro PD	Spartanburg PD
Forsyth Co SO	Greenville PD	Spartanburg Co SO
Fulton Co SO	Guildford Co SO	Summerville PD
GA Bureau of Investigation	Harnett Co So	USPIS
GA National Guard	Haywood Co SO	Union PD
GA Dept of Community Supervision (AGI Only)	Henderson Co SO	
GA Dept of Corrections	Highpoint PD	
GA State Patrol	Hope Mills PD	
GA Port Authority Police	Huntersville PD	
Glynn Co SO	Jackson Co SO	
Heard Co SO	Jacksonville PD	
Henry County Sheriff's Office	Johnston Co SO	

Johns Creek PD	Kernersville PD	
Liberty Co SO	Leland PD	
Marietta PD	Lenoir Co SO	
MARTA PD (AGI Only)	Lexington PD	
Morrow PD	Matthews PD	
Newton Co SO (AGI Only)	Mecklenburg Co SO	
Polk Co PD	Mint Hill PD	
Riverdale PD	Nash Co SO	
Rome PD	NC Dept of Public Safety	
Roswell PD	NC Highway Patrol	
Sandy Springs PD	NC National Guard	
Savannah PD	NC State Bureau of Investigation	
Smyrna PD	New Hanover Co SO	
South Fulton PD (AGI Only)	Orange Co SO	
Spalding Co SO	Pender Co SO	
Stockbridge PD	Person Co SO	
Suwanee PD	Raleigh PD	
US Fish & Wildlife Service	Randolph Co SO	
US Secret Service	Reidsville PD	
Whitfield Co SO	Richmond Co SO	
	Rockingham Co SO	
	Rutherford Co SO	
	Sampson Co SO	
	Stallings PD	
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	Wake Co SO	
	Wayne Co SO	
	Waynesville PD	
	Wilson PD	
	Williamston PD	
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### Ragged Old Flag

By Johnny Cash

I walked through a county courthouse square,  
On a park bench an old man was sitting there.  
I said, "Your old courthouse is kinda run down."  
He said, "Naw, it'll do for our little town."  
I said, "Your flagpole has leaned a little bit,  
And that's a Ragged Old Flag you got hanging on it."  
He said, "Have a seat," and I sat down.  
"Is this the first time you've been to our little town?"  
I said, "I think it is." He said, "I don't like to brag,  
But we're kinda proud of that Ragged Old Flag.  
"You see, we got a little hole in that flag there  
When Washington took it across the Delaware.  
And it got powder-burned the night Francis Scott Key  
Sat watching it writing Oh, Say Can You See.  
And it got a bad rip in New Orleans  
With Packingham and Jackson tuggin' at its seams.  
"And it almost fell at the Alamo  
Beside the Texas flag, but she waded on through.  
She got cut with a sword at Chancellorsville  
And she got cut again at Shiloh Hill.  
There was Robert E. Lee, Beauregard and Bragg,  
And the south wind blew hard on that Ragged Old Flag.  
"On Flanders Field in World War I  
She got a big hole from a Bertha gun.  
She turned blood red in World War II.  
She hung limp and low by the time it was through.  
She was in Korea and Vietnam.  
She went where she was sent by her Uncle Sam.  
"She waded from our ships upon the briny foam,  
And now they've about quit waving her back here at home.  
In her own good land she's been abused --  
She's been burned, dishonored, denied and refused.  
"And the government for which she stands  
Is scandalized throughout the land.  
And she's getting threadbare and wearing thin,  
But she's in good shape for the shape she's in.  
'Cause she's been through the fire before  
And I believe she can take a whole lot more.  
"So we raise her up every morning,  
Take her down every night.  
We don't let her touch the ground  
And we fold her up right.  
On second thought, I DO like to brag,  
'Cause I'm mighty proud of that Ragged Old Flag."

"Ragged Old Flag" written by Johnny Cash, © 1974

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