

## FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION INTELLIGENCE BULLETIN



## (U//FOUO) Western Hemisphere Criminal Organizations Very Likely Altering Cocaine Composition, Challenging Law Enforcement Safety and Narcotics Detection

(U) PREPARED BY FBI MIAMI FIELD OFFICE

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(U//FOUO) The FBI assesses Western Hemisphere transnational criminal organizations (WHTCOs) very likely<sup>a</sup> are altering the chemical composition of cocaine using sophisticated methods, creating detection, identification, and safety challenges for law enforcement. This assessment is made with high confidence,<sup>b</sup> based on investigative activity and human source reporting with direct access and varying degrees of corroboration.

(U//FOUO) The assessments herein rely on the assumptions that WHTCOs are compelled to alter cocaine to avoid law enforcement detection and that law enforcement will continue cocaine enforcement and interdiction operations using visual, canine, and chemical detection. The FBI assesses WHTCOs likely will formulate new means to disguise cocaine in consumer goods and by removing the traditional color and odor over the next 12 months, making it more difficult for law enforcement to detect and interdict cocaine trafficking operations. A reduction in cocaine supply—potentially spurred by resumption of aerial eradication in Colombia—would decrease the likelihood of these alterations and, therefore, make this assessment less likely. Decreasing cocaine prices or a shift in trafficking routes to consumer destinations with less advanced detection mechanisms would also reduce the likelihood that WHTCOs would chemically alter cocaine.

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<sup>a</sup> (U) See Appendix A: Expressions of Likelihood.

<sup>b</sup> (U) See Appendix B: Confidence in Assessments and Judgments Based on a Body of Information.

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**(U) Source Summary Statement**

(U) Reporting in this intelligence bulletin was derived primarily from law enforcement reporting and three FBI human sources with direct access. The human source information was most critical to the assessments herein and was corroborated by law enforcement investigative activity. Although the human sources had direct access, two had a limited reporting history and minimal corroboration, while the third source had provided information for more than three years, much of which had been corroborated. Official statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and DEA reporting provided additional context regarding the impact of the co-occurrence of cocaine and fentanyl. This collection occurred between October 2017 and June 2019. The reporting was current as of 1 October 2019.

**(U//FOUO) WHTCOs Very Likely Are Altering Cocaine Composition, Challenging the Safety and Narcotics Detection Efforts of Law Enforcement**

(U//FOUO) The FBI assesses WHTCOs very likely are altering the chemical composition of cocaine using sophisticated methods, creating detection, identification, and safety challenges for law enforcement. The FBI makes this assessment based on evidence that WHTCOs are altering the chemical composition of cocaine to better disguise it in untraditional, non-powder forms. Cocaine traffickers are evolving from liquid cocaine—a practice used since at least the 1990s—to develop increasingly sophisticated liquid and solid products, often mimicking consumer goods, containing chemical-altered cocaine. These new forms are intended to remove the color and odor, in addition to the traditional technique of altering appearance. Frequently, the alterations require trained chemists to convert the cocaine back into distributable cocaine. Due to the lack of odor and traditional powder appearance, conventional law enforcement techniques, such as canine and visual detection, are less effective.

- (U//FOUO) As of June 2019, a Colombian drug trafficking organization absorbed liquefied cocaine into cardboard boxes, which resembled recycled waste. The boxes, destined for Europe, were shipped via commercial vessel, according to an FBI human source with direct access, much of whose reporting has been corroborated for less than one year.<sup>1</sup>
- (U//LES) As of June 2019, law enforcement in Collier County, Florida, discovered cocaine in pressed powder pill form, according to law enforcement reporting from the Collier County Sheriff's Office (see image below).<sup>2</sup>

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### (U) Compressed Cocaine Pills

(U//LES) Photograph of cocaine in pressed powder pill form discovered in Collier County, Florida.

(U//LES) Source: Collier County Sheriff's Office | Information Bulletin | Bulletin #19-004 | 21 June 2019 | June 2019 | "(U//LES) Compressed Cocaine Pills" | UNCLASSIFIED//LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE | UNCLASSIFIED//LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE.

- (U) As of May 2019, a WHTCO was smuggling cocaine from Colombia to Spain in cocaine-infused plastic products. Once in Spain, three specialized laboratories extracted the cocaine from the plastic with the assistance of specialists from Colombia. The WHTCO was capable of producing more than 600 kilograms of cocaine each month, according to open source reporting based on Spanish police enforcement action.<sup>3</sup>
- (U) As of July 2018, Colombian WHTCO Clan del Golfo began shipping liquid cocaine, which was difficult to detect. The liquid cocaine was mixed in water, placed in large metal canisters, hidden in scrap metal, and placed in shipping containers. Recipients cut open the scrap metal, removed the canisters, drilled a hole in the canisters to remove the liquid, and converted the liquid into solid form, according to a human source with direct access.<sup>4</sup>
- (U) As of October 2017, a Colombian chemist altered the chemical composition of cocaine to appear odorless and undetectable when tested using narcotics testing kits. The chemist then processed the cocaine to resemble small decorative rocks for transportation to Europe and the United States, according to a human source with direct access, but with a limited reporting history.<sup>5</sup>

### (U) Perspective

(U//FOUO) For decades drug traffickers have employed their ingenuity to alter drugs to evade law enforcement detection. With fentanyl and other potent, deadly chemicals on the rise, however, these alterations pose a more pronounced threat to law enforcement and drug users. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, cocaine-related deaths have been increasing since

2012. In 2017, almost 14,000 Americans died from an overdose involving cocaine.<sup>6</sup> Officials believe this increase was partially attributable to the co-occurrence of cocaine and fentanyl.<sup>c</sup> In 2016, fentanyl compounds were detected in combination with other non-opioid substances in more than 1,500 drug submissions tested by the National Forensic Laboratory Information System, with more than 60 percent of these involving a combination of fentanyl and cocaine, according to DEA analysis of National Forensic Laboratory Information System submissions.<sup>7</sup> Given the lethality of fentanyl and other synthetics, it is essential law enforcement be able to detect the presence of these substances for law enforcement safety, as well as to triage individuals who may have been exposed. This becomes increasingly difficult as WHTCOs transform drugs, including cocaine, into untraditional forms.

(U//FOUO) This is the first FBI external intelligence product on alternate forms of cocaine. FBI information on the topic, however, has been disseminated via raw reporting. The February 2018 DEA Miami Intelligence Bulletin, titled “(U) Deadly Contaminated Cocaine Widespread in Florida,” discussed the deadly consequences of cocaine and fentanyl mixtures, which is echoed in this intelligence bulletin and highlights the potential consequences of altered cocaine. The FBI assesses cocaine alterations, which have occurred for decades, are becoming more varied and have more lethal consequences now that deadly chemicals, such as fentanyl, are being mixed in with the cocaine, an assessment aligned with DEA’s bulletin.

## (U) Analysis of Alternatives

(U//FOUO) The FBI considered the alternative hypothesis that WHTCO’s likely alter cocaine infrequently, thus this activity is not widespread, but is reported due to the novelty, limiting the impact to law enforcement. The FBI discounted this alternative because of the extensive corroboration of the reporting, as well as the prominence of the actors reported to engage in this activity. Foreign law enforcement, FBI human sources, and local law enforcement have all reported the occurrence of altered cocaine. The variety and diversity of the reporting is corroborative, highlights the geographic diversity, and demonstrates the observation of this at multiple levels in the supply chain. Taken together, these factors indicate this practice is indeed pervasive. Furthermore, reporting stating large-scale WHTCOs, such as the Clan del Golfo, are engaged in this activity indicates this is more than an ad hoc, novelty activity undertaken by boutique traffickers. One indicator of this alternative would be a lack of further reporting on additional concealment mechanisms. Another indicator would be an increase in cocaine seizures accompanied by a steady or decreasing supply. This would suggest that WHTCOs have not employed sophisticated chemical alterations that defeat law enforcement detection.

## (U) Outlook

(U//FOUO) The FBI assesses WHTCOs likely will formulate new means to disguise cocaine in consumer goods by removing the traditional color and odor over the next 12 months, making law enforcement detection more difficult and creating health risks when mixed with fentanyl. The FBI further assesses new alterations made by WHTCOs very likely will increase the success of cocaine trafficking over the next 24 months, resulting in steady cocaine supplies for consumers and profits for WHTCOs. As coca growth, cocaine production, and cocaine supplies remain high, and law enforcement interdictions remain successful, the FBI assesses WHTCOs likely will employ these

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<sup>c</sup> (U//FOUO) *Analyst Note:* It is unclear whether drug distributors and users are intentionally mixing cocaine and fentanyl or if this is cross-contamination from the drugs being co-located.

techniques to evade law enforcement detection and interdiction over the next 24 months. Indicators that WHTCOs are increasingly altering cocaine include reporting regarding the recruitment and training of chemists, who could provide collection opportunities for law enforcement; decreasing seizures of traditional cocaine forms; and increasing seizures of altered cocaine. The presence of chemicals or equipment not typically used to produce cocaine at a processing facility would also serve as an observable indicator that WHTCOs are transforming the cocaine into unique forms.

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(U) If you would like to provide qualitative feedback on this product, please send an email to the appropriate address with the product title as the subject line: [DI\\_Customer\\_Feedback@fbi.gov](mailto:DI_Customer_Feedback@fbi.gov); [DI\\_Customer\\_Feedback@fbi.sgov.gov](mailto:DI_Customer_Feedback@fbi.sgov.gov); or [DI\\_Customer\\_Feedback@fbi.ic.gov](mailto:DI_Customer_Feedback@fbi.ic.gov);

(U) The Miami Field Office of the FBI prepared this intelligence bulletin. Please direct comments and queries to the FBI Miami Field Intelligence Group at 1-754-703-2000.

**(U) Appendix A: Expressions of Likelihood**

(U) Phrases such as “the FBI judges” and “the FBI assesses,” and terms such as “likely” and “probably” convey analytical judgments and assessments. The chart below approximates how expressions of likelihood and probability correlate with percentages of chance. Only terms of likelihood should appear in FBI products; the chart includes terms of probability strictly for comparison, as they sometimes appear in reporting of other government agencies. Furthermore, the FBI does not arrive at judgments through statistical analysis and will not use terms of probability to convey uncertainty in FBI external intelligence products.

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<b>Terms of Likelihood</b>	<b>Almost No Chance</b>	<b>Very Unlikely</b>	<b>Unlikely</b>	<b>Roughly Even Chance</b>	<b>Likely</b>	<b>Very Likely</b>	<b>Almost Certain(ly)</b>
<b>Terms of Probability</b>	Remote	Highly Improbable	Improbable (Improbably)	Roughly Even Odds	Probable (Probably)	Highly Probable	Nearly Certain
<b>Percentages of Chance</b>	1-5%	5-20%	20-45%	45-55%	55-80%	80-95%	95-99%

(U) Table showing terms of likelihood aligned with terms of probability and percentages of chance.

## (U) Appendix B: Confidence in Assessments and Judgments Based on a Body of Information

(U) Confidence levels reflect the quality and quantity of the source information supporting a judgment. Consequently, the FBI ascribes high, medium, or low levels of confidence to assessments, as follows:

(U) **High confidence** generally indicates the FBI's judgments are based on high quality information from multiple sources. High confidence in a judgment does not imply the assessment is a fact or a certainty; such judgments might be wrong. While additional reporting and information sources may change analytical judgments, such changes are most likely to be refinements and not substantial in nature.

(U) **Medium confidence** generally means the information is credibly sourced and plausible but not of sufficient quality or corroborated sufficiently to warrant a higher level of confidence. Additional reporting or information sources have the potential to increase the FBI's confidence levels or substantively change analytical judgments.

(U) **Low confidence** generally means the information's credibility or plausibility is uncertain, the information is too fragmented or poorly corroborated to make solid analytic inferences, or the reliability of the sources is questionable. Absent additional reporting or information sources, analytical judgments should be considered preliminary in nature.