

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

March 9, 2023

The Honorable Antony Blinken  
Secretary of State  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken:

Alarming news reports have documented Mexican pharmacies in popular tourist destinations selling counterfeit prescription pills laced with illicit fentanyl and methamphetamine. These adulterated drugs place unsuspecting U.S. tourist customers — some of whom are seeking to avoid high pharmaceutical drug pricing in the United States — at risk of overdose and death. We write to urge the State Department, which plays a critical role in ensuring the safety of Americans traveling abroad, to immediately issue a travel advisory warning of the dangers of buying adulterated pharmaceuticals from Mexican pharmacies.

Mexican transnational criminal organizations are the source of most of the illicit fentanyl and methamphetamine trafficked into the United States.<sup>1</sup> Fentanyl is a particularly deadly synthetic opioid, up to 50 times stronger than heroin and 100 times stronger than morphine. In 2021, there were more than 106,000 drug-overdose deaths in the United States, with more than 70,000 of them involving illicit fentanyl.<sup>2</sup> Methamphetamine is a highly addictive and dangerous stimulant; in 2021, stimulants — primarily methamphetamine — were involved in more than 32,000 U.S. deaths.<sup>3</sup>

Now, fentanyl, methamphetamine, and other illicit drugs have apparently made their way into the supply chains of some Mexican pharmacies. A February 2023 investigation by the *Los Angeles Times* found that pharmacies in popular Mexican tourist destinations are selling counterfeit prescription pills laced with fentanyl and methamphetamine, passing them off as legitimate pharmaceuticals and leading to potentially fatal outcomes.<sup>4</sup> According to the report: “In Tijuana, reporters found that pills sold as oxycodone tested positive for fentanyl, while pills sold as

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, National Drug Threat Assessment (Mar. 2021), [https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2021-02/DIR-008-21%202020%20National%20Drug%20Threat%20Assessment\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2021-02/DIR-008-21%202020%20National%20Drug%20Threat%20Assessment_WEB.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> National Institutes of Health: National Institute on Drug Abuse, *Drug Overdose Death Rates* <https://nida.nih.gov/research-topics/trends-statistics/overdose-death-rates>.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> Keri Blakinger & Connor Sheets, *Some pharmacies in Mexico passing off fentanyl, meth as legitimate pharmaceuticals*, L.A. Times (Feb. 2, 2023), <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2023-02-02/mexico-pharmacy-fentanyl-laced-pills-meth>.

Adderall tested positive for methamphetamine. Testing conducted farther south in Cabo San Lucas and nearby San José del Cabo bore similar results, although there, even weaker painkillers — including pills sold as hydrocodone — also tested positive for fentanyl.”<sup>5</sup> Another independent study published in January 2023 found similar results, with counterfeit pills from Mexican pharmacies testing positive for fentanyl, methamphetamine, and heroin.<sup>6</sup>

In Mexico, where pharmaceutical drug pricing is lower than the United States, Mexican pharmacies have a long history of selling prescription drugs at substantially lower prices than their U.S. counterparts. This differential has incentivized many Americans to travel to Mexico to obtain certain medication at more affordable prices.<sup>7</sup> Many areas of Mexico — including resort towns — are lined with pharmacies that cater to tourists. As the *Los Angeles Times* reported: “Finding tainted pills in a Mexican pharmacy doesn’t take much doing” — especially in popular tourist areas such as Tijuana, Cabo San Lucas, and San José del Cabo.<sup>8</sup> The *Los Angeles Times* investigation found that 71% of the pills their investigators purchased from Mexican pharmacies were contaminated with powerful drugs such as fentanyl and methamphetamine.<sup>9</sup>

The State Department, through the travel advisories it issues, plays an important role in protecting the health and safety of Americans traveling abroad. The Bureau of Consular Affairs tells visitors to its website: “We provide information to help you assess for yourself the risks of international travel and what steps to take to ensure your safety when you decide to go abroad.”<sup>10</sup> Specifically, the Bureau advises: “As a first step in planning any trip abroad, check the Travel Advisories for your intended destination.”<sup>11</sup> Risk indicators include “crime” and “health.”<sup>12</sup>

U.S. tourists who unwittingly purchase counterfeit pills from Mexican pharmacies — both with and without a prescription, according to the *Los Angeles Times*<sup>13</sup> — face deadly risks from medications that have effectively been poisoned. We must continue to work to reduce the incentives for Americans to travel abroad because cheaper medication is available there, ensure we have adequate tools at home to combat substance use disorder, and ultimately reduce the demand for opioids and other drugs that are fueling our epidemic. But as an immediate step, the

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<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Friedman et al., *Fentanyl, Heroin, and Methamphetamine-Based Counterfeit Pills Sold at Tourist-Oriented Pharmacies in Mexico: An Ethnographic and Drug Checking Study*, MedRxiv (Jan. 27, 2023), <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2023.01.27.23285123v1>.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew W. Mulcahy et al., *International Prescription Drug Price Comparisons*, Rand Corporation (2021), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2956.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2956.html).

<sup>8</sup> Keri Blakinger & Connor Sheets, *Some pharmacies in Mexico passing off fentanyl, meth as legitimate pharmaceuticals*, L.A. Times (Feb. 2, 2023), <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2023-02-02/mexico-pharmacy-fentanyl-laced-pills-meth>.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Dep’t of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, Travel Advisories, <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories.html/>.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Dep’t of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, Safety and Security Messaging, <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/international-travel/before-you-go/about-our-new-products.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Keri Blakinger & Connor Sheets, *Some pharmacies in Mexico passing off fentanyl, meth as legitimate pharmaceuticals*, L.A. Times (Feb. 2, 2023), <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2023-02-02/mexico-pharmacy-fentanyl-laced-pills-meth>.

State Department needs to warn Americans traveling to Mexico of the danger they face when purchasing pills from Mexican pharmacies.

To help us better understand how the State Department can address our concerns about the threat Mexican pharmacies pose to U.S. tourists, please provide written answers to the following questions by March 30, 2023:

1. Has the State Department considered issuing a travel advisory for Mexico warning of the dangers posed by counterfeit pills sold in Mexican pharmacies? If not, why not?
2. What factors does the State Department take into consideration when assessing issuing a travel advisory such as the one at issue here?
3. Will the State Department issue the requested travel advisory and urge Americans traveling to Mexico to exercise extreme caution when purchasing pills from Mexican pharmacies, especially in tourist areas? If not, why not?
4. Will the State Department coordinate with the Department of Health and Human Services and Office of National Drug Control Policy to reduce incentives for Americans to travel to Mexico to obtain medications at more affordable prices?

Thank you in advance for your attention to this urgent matter. We look forward to your prompt response.

Sincerely,



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Edward J. Markey  
United States Senator



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David Trone  
Member of Congress