



Houston HIDTA 2011 Threat Assessment

**Office of National Drug Control Policy
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The intent of the Houston HIDTA Threat Assessment, produced by the Houston Intelligence Support Center (HISC), is to identify the potential impact of drug trafficking trends within the Houston HIDTA and to deliver accurate and timely strategic intelligence to assist law enforcement agencies in the development of drug enforcement strategies. The most significant trends identified in 2010 are provided in this Executive Summary.

Drug Trafficking Organizations

- There was a slight increase in the number of DTOs identified by Houston HIDTA Initiatives, from 446 in 2009 to 461 DTOs in 2010. Of these, 45% operate on the local level. The other 55% have a broader scope with 18% operating on a multi-state level and 37% operating internationally.
- Mexican DTOs account for the majority of the identified drug trafficking organizations operating in the region. The Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas have the most prominent influence in the Houston HIDTA.
- Los Zetas and the Gulf Cartel began violently fighting over lucrative drug trafficking routes in the Mexican border cities of Matamoros, Reynosa, and Nuevo Laredo near South Texas in 2010. While the proximity of violence has moved closer to the Houston HIDTA region, the general consensus among survey respondents was that it has not significantly impacted the HIDTA. However, 40% of survey respondents within the Houston HIDTA did report an encounter with a member of a major cartel in 2010.

Gangs and Distribution Trends

- Street gangs, prison gangs, and outlaw motorcycle gangs are present in the Houston HIDTA and many of these gangs continue to grow in membership throughout the region. Gangs play an integral role in drug trafficking and closer relationships between street gangs and prison gangs, and some prison gangs and Mexican drug cartels have increased the drug trafficking threat posed by gangs.

Trafficking Trends Related to Drugs and Drug-Related Proceeds

- Overland transportation methods are predominant for drug trafficking activities. Houston HIDTA Initiatives reported that drug loads coming through the region are now considerably smaller and that rural ranch roads are being used more frequently to avoid the checkpoints.
- Bulk cash smuggling remains the primary method of moving illicit funds, but three other methods have now gained prominence due to a new Mexico banking law restricting the amount of U.S. cash that is accepted. These methods include the Black Market Peso Exchange, a new form of the hawala system called “Espejo” and an increase in the use of wire transfers.

Specific Drug-Related Trends

- Marijuana was identified as the greatest drug threat by survey respondents. The prevalence of indoor marijuana production has escalated within the Houston Metropolitan Area. Drug traffickers operating marijuana grow houses are aware that they face minimal penalties under current Texas law and are taking advantage of this loophole. New and emerging trends include the widespread popularity of synthetic marijuana, and the shipment of medical marijuana into Houston and Corpus Christi for illegal street sale.
- Cocaine was reported to be the drug trafficked most frequently by DTOs identified by the Houston HIDTA Initiatives in 2010. Both powder and crack cocaine continue to pose a high level of threat, although powder cocaine has fallen from its long-held position as the greatest drug threat by survey respondents.
- Pharmaceutical abuse is one of the most significant threats impacting the Houston HIDTA and further Texas legislation is needed to assist law enforcement to address the unique challenges posed by diversion. Now that pain management clinics are required to be owned by doctors, a new trend of drug dealers purchasing pharmacies has emerged. Other trends include an increase in promethazine and codeine being transported into the Houston area and a possible emerging trend of counterfeit production of hydrocodone in Houston.
- Methamphetamine poses a moderate threat to the region. “Ice” from Mexico is the predominant type found, but domestic production of methamphetamine is still occurring and poses a public health and environmental threat in some areas, most significantly in Victoria County.
- The threat from other drugs such as heroin, ecstasy, steroids, and other dangerous drugs are significantly lower than the level of threat posed by marijuana, cocaine, controlled prescription drugs, and methamphetamine within the Houston HIDTA region.

EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW

This Executive Overview further expounds upon the trends identified in the Executive Summary for the reader seeking more specific information on 2010 trends within the Houston HIDTA in a short synopsis. The most detailed information is provided within the body of the Houston HIDTA Threat Assessment.

New and Continuing Trends Occurring Within and/or Impacting the Houston HIDTA Region

Mexican Drug Trafficking Organizations Predominate in the Houston HIDTA Region

The majority of the drug trafficking organizations operating in the Houston HIDTA are Mexican DTOs. The two most predominant Mexican cartels conducting drug trafficking activities in the region are the Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas, although other cartels such as La Familia and the Sinaloa Cartel also have a definite presence.

Los Zetas and the Gulf Cartel began a violent battle for dominance over drug trafficking routes in northern Mexico in 2010. While the violence in Mexico was largely focused on areas such as Ciudad Juarez near the West Texas border in 2009, the focal point of the conflict has shifted to the northern Mexican state of Tamaulipas that borders South Texas. In early 2010, Los Zetas and the Gulf Cartel began heavily fighting in the border cities of Matamoros, Reynosa, and Nuevo Laredo. Due to the high level of threat posed by Los Zetas, the Gulf Cartel has now formed an alliance with the Sinaloa and La Familia cartels against Los Zetas.

Border Violence Primarily Confined to Mexico

There is a high threat level in Mexico, and Americans have been at risk there in 2010. There have also been some isolated instances of threat posed in the South Texas-Mexico border area. However, although the close proximity of the cartel violence to the Houston HIDTA region has been a concern, there has been no significant impact reported by Houston HIDTA survey respondents at this time.

Impact of Border Violence in Mexico Near South Texas

Instances of drug-related violence in Mexico near South Texas include an American citizen who was shot and killed by Los Zetas on the Mexican side of Falcon Lake, located along the South Texas border. He was apparently mistaken for a spy for the Gulf cartel. Most tragically, in early 2011, an ICE special agent originally from Brownsville was murdered by gunmen thought to be Los Zetas in the Mexican state of San Luis Potosi which borders Tamaulipas. This is the first time a federal agent has been killed by drug cartels in Mexico since 1985.

Impact of Border Violence in South Texas

Incidences of cartel violence in the United States along the South Texas border are minimal, but are of concern in the region. For instance, in Brownsville in September, two Los Zetas members were found executed. An investigation indicated that it was a hit ordered by the Gulf Cartel. In Starr County in October, border patrol agents were shot at from the Mexico side of the border.

Impact of Border Violence in the Houston HIDTA

Most survey respondents reported that border violence had not yet significantly impacted the Houston HIDTA, but those that did felt the increase could be seen in higher drug prices (due to increased violence and tighter security along the border), an increase in human and weapons smuggling, and an increased willingness of DTO members to engage law enforcement personnel with violence to protect their drug loads. With regard to human smuggling in 2010, there were more reports of guides sexually assaulting female illegal immigrants. It was also reported that there has been an increase in illegal *criminal* immigrants coming through the region, elevating the threat to the Houston HIDTA. There has been concern that the cartel's increased use of grenades and improvised devices (IEDs) in Mexico may become an emerging trend within the Houston HIDTA, but to date, there have been only isolated occurrences in which drug traffickers have been found with a homemade grenade or IED.

Almost half (40%) of Houston HIDTA survey respondents reported an encounter with a major drug cartel in 2010 and most reported the encounter was with a member of Los Zetas or the Gulf Cartel. FBI reporting indicates that Los Zetas and their associates have expanded their influence and operations in Texas. Los Zetas have been found to be associated with drug and weapons trafficking activities in the Houston HIDTA and they have formed working relationships with prison gangs that are known to be prominent within the region, such as Texas Mexican Mafia and the Houstone Tango Blast.

In order to better understand the extent to which Mexican drug cartels and their associates are operating within the Houston HIDTA, the breadth of illicit activities in which they are involved, and to determine their level of connection to gangs within Houston HIDTA communities, the Houston Intelligence Support Center created a regional clearinghouse for cartel intelligence in early 2011. The clearinghouse will collect information from a broad spectrum of law enforcement sources, from routine patrol encounters to complex narcotics investigations. Fifty-eight representatives from eight federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies attended the initial planning meeting for this clearinghouse.

Gangs and Distribution Trends

Street gangs, prison gangs, and outlaw motorcycle gangs are the main types of gangs present in the Houston HIDTA and many of these gangs continue to grow in membership throughout the region. Gangs pose a formidable threat, due to the impact that their level of violence and criminal activity imposes upon the Houston HIDTA. They play an integral role in drug trafficking and closer relationships between street gangs and prison gangs, and some prison gangs and Mexican drug cartels have increased the drug trafficking threat posed by gangs. In the Central Houston HIDTA region, the Houstone Tango Blast prison gang poses the greatest overall threat, due to its large and rapidly increasing membership and strong connections with DTOs in Mexico. In the Northern Houston HIDTA region, the Aryan Brotherhood of Texas prison gang poses the most significant threat and in the Southern Houston HIDTA, Texas Syndicate, Mexican Mafia, Raza Unida, and Hermandad de Pistoleros Latinos prison gangs remain heavily involved in drug trafficking and human smuggling activities. Gangs are now increasingly working together for financial gain, and the requirement for entrance into some prison gangs has changed, allowing admission of street gang members into at least some factions of prison gangs to order to increase their size and strength. Intelligence gaps exist in regard to the criminal activities of outlaw motorcycle gangs and Asian gangs, although they have a definite presence. Some of the efforts to combat gangs in 2010 included the creation of the StopHoustonGangs.org website by Houston's Multi-Agency Gang Task Force, and the filing of Harris County's first civil gang injunction by the District Attorney's Office.

Transportation Trends

The Houston HIDTA is a major thoroughfare for drug trafficking activities, in part due to its close proximity to Mexico. Overland transportation methods are predominant in the region. The Houston HIDTA Initiative TCCI reported that drug loads coming through the Sarita and Falfurrias checkpoints are now considerably smaller. Other Houston HIDTA Initiatives have also noticed the trend of smaller drug loads and have reported that rural ranch roads are being used more frequently to avoid the checkpoints on their way through the Houston HIDTA.

Money Laundering Trends

Although bulk cash smuggling is still the predominant method of moving illicit drug proceeds, several other methods have gained prominence in 2010. These methods include the Black Market Peso Exchange being used in Mexico, a new form of the hawala system called "Espejo" or "Mirror" system being used by Mexican DTOs, and an increase in the use of wire transfers by Colombian DTOs. The increase in the use of these alternative money laundering techniques are thought to be due to a new banking law created in Mexico in June placing limits on the amount of U.S. cash that is allowed into Mexico's banks. The law was established due to concern about large amounts of U.S. cash with questionable origin that were previously being deposited.

Communications and Technology Trends

Use of disposable cell phones is still the most prevalent method of communication for drug traffickers and gang members. Texting on cell phones is particularly popular, as is the use of social networking websites by gang members. Technology trends include trafficking using GPS tracking devices to monitor their loads, and the continued use of countersurveillance cameras and equipment to monitor for law enforcement and drug trafficking rivals.

Specific Drug-Related Trends

Most Houston HIDTA DTOs are considered to be poly-drug distributors and traffic more than one drug type. Cocaine was reported to be trafficked most frequently (71%), followed by marijuana (56%), methamphetamine (40%), heroin (9%), and pharmaceutical or designer drugs (7%). Of the 461 DTOs identified by Houston HIDTA Initiatives in 2010, 37% operate internationally; 18% operate regionally; and 45% are local.

- **Cocaine**

As in past years, cocaine continues to be the drug trafficked most frequently by DTOs identified by the Houston HIDTA Initiatives, but in 2010, powder cocaine fell from its long-held ranking by survey respondents as the greatest drug threat. Although it now falls behind marijuana, crack cocaine, and controlled prescription drugs, it still poses a high level of threat to the region. Crack cocaine also continues to pose a high threat, and remains the drug most associated with violent crime and property crime. Nationally, cocaine abuse is declining and in Texas, the most current treatment data mirrors this trend with a continued decline in admissions to state-funded treatment centers for cocaine addiction. A decrease in abuse could account for cocaine's fall in ranking by survey respondents within the Houston HIDTA, but there are other plausible reasons. For instance, it may not be that the problem from cocaine is decreasing in severity, but that there is an increasing threat from multiple drug types, such as pharmaceutical drugs and marijuana in addition to cocaine, impacting the Houston HIDTA.

- **Marijuana**

Marijuana was identified as the highest drug threat by survey respondents. Marijuana imported from Mexico continues to be readily available. The prevalence of indoor marijuana production has escalated within the Houston Metropolitan Area. Many DTOs involved in domestic marijuana production are keenly aware of the minimal penalties under current Texas law and are taking advantage of this legislative loophole. Health concerns related to mold exposure have led the Houston HIDTA Initiative MIG to purchase double-filtered respirators for officers to wear when entering indoor marijuana grow operations. A new trend is the widespread popularity of synthetic marijuana, a legal drug being sold as incense. Due to safety concerns, some Houston HIDTA cities banned its sale and/or possession, and the DEA used its emergency scheduling authority to temporarily place chemicals found in the product in the same category as heroin and cocaine. A possible emerging trend reported both in Houston and Corpus Christi is the shipment of medical marijuana into the Houston HIDTA for illegal street sale. A growing number of states have been approving medical marijuana, increasing the likelihood that this trend will be seen more frequently in the future. Marijuana use is increasing nationally and attitudes regarding the risk of using marijuana may be changing in part due to an increasing acceptance of the use of marijuana for medical purposes. This could, in part, account for its new ranking as the greatest drug threat.

- **Methamphetamine**

Methamphetamine poses a moderate threat to the region and “ice” methamphetamine continues to be the predominant type found in the Houston HIDTA. Powder methamphetamine is more common in the Northern Houston HIDTA region although these areas also report a high level of “ice.” Powder methamphetamine is the drug of choice in Victoria County and domestic production there poses a significant public health and environmental threat.

- **Pharmaceutical Drugs**

Pharmaceutical diversion continues to be widespread and increasing and poses a high level of threat due to the high potential for addiction, overdose, and accidental death. Eighty-one percent (81%) of survey respondents listed prescription drugs in their top five drug threats in 2010, compared to 62% in 2009, and 48% in 2008. Overall, it now ranks as the third greatest drug threat to the region, behind marijuana and crack cocaine. Now that pain management clinics are required by Texas law to be owned by physicians, investigators reported that drug dealers are buying pharmacies in Houston to maintain their illicit activities related to diversion. Other new trends include a report of teens in Houston using Roxicodone intravenously and also putting the drug in Visine bottles and placing drops into their eyes. Orange County investigators reported that drug abusers are melting down Dilaudid and using it intravenously. Another possible new trend reported is counterfeit production of hydrocodone tablets in Houston. In addition to the popularity of prescription pills, there has been an increase in promethazine and codeine cough syrup coming from California into the Houston area.

- **Heroin**

The threat from heroin remains low. The most prevalent types found in the region are black tar and Mexican brown, but heroin is not the drug of choice for the majority of drug users. Heroin is reportedly used most predominantly by a small user group in Port Arthur in Jefferson County, in Rockport in Aransas County, and Robstown in Nueces County. The number of heroin users in Rockport is reported to be growing.

- **Ecstasy**

Ecstasy poses a low threat to the region, compared to other drugs. However, there has been a 37% increase in the use of ecstasy nationally, and Texas treatment center data indicates that the number of persons entering state-funded treatment programs for ecstasy abuse continues to rise fairly consistently each year. Ecstasy is transported into the region from Canada, but local production of ecstasy in Houston is also occurring.

- **Steroids and Other Dangerous Drugs**

Steroids and other dangerous drugs are being abused, but they pose a much lower threat to the Houston HIDTA than other drug types. Of these drugs, steroids and PCP are reported to be abused and available most frequently. The largest seizure of PCP in DEA history (57 gallons produced in Houston) was reported in 2010.

Resources of law enforcement within the Houston HIDTA are continually taxed due to the magnitude of the drug trafficking activity that occurs within the region. The new and emerging drug trends highlighted in this overview are discussed more fully in the body of this threat assessment to assist narcotics investigators to respond rapidly and effectively to evolving tactics of drug trafficking organizations.

ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY

The Houston Intelligence Support Center (HISC), a Houston HIDTA Initiative sponsored by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), publishes this annual threat assessment to identify drug trafficking trends for use by law enforcement throughout the Houston HIDTA region. This assessment is based on a detailed analysis of the best available law enforcement intelligence and public source information. Data was obtained from interviews with law enforcement personnel within the region, survey instruments, existing law enforcement databases, open source reports, and threat assessments from other agencies to include the National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC).

Information from the Houston HIDTA Initiatives and other law enforcement agencies throughout the seventeen-county HIDTA region was obtained in order to produce a broad, comprehensive report. Houston HIDTA Initiatives include the Fort Bend Enforcement Team (FBET), Gangs and Non-Traditional Gang Squad (GANGS), the Houston Money Laundering Initiative (HMLI), Major Drug Squads (MDS), the Narcotics Operation Control Center (NOCC), Train, Airport, Rail, and Port (TARP) which includes the Airport, Hotel/Motel, and Diversion Squads, Texas Coastal Corridor Initiative (TCCI), Targeted Narcotics Enforcement Team (TNET), Texas Narcotics Information System (TNIS), the Methamphetamine Initiative Group (MIG), and the Houston Intelligence Support Center (HISC). The HISC is staffed by intelligence and support personnel from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Harris County Sheriff's Office, Houston Police Department, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, National Drug Intelligence Center, Texas Department of Public Safety, the Texas National Guard, and an array of other contractors. All of these agencies contributed intelligence in order to make this threat assessment a valuable product for use in developing counter drug strategies.

HOUSTON HIDTA REGION

The Houston HIDTA region includes 17 counties and encompasses over 14,900 square miles within the State of Texas. It includes all but six of the counties along the Texas coastline. The total population of the HIDTA exceeds six million people, nearly one quarter of the population of the entire state.¹

For the purpose of describing trends within the Houston HIDTA, the area has been regionalized into Northern, Central, and Southern Houston HIDTA counties. The Northern Houston HIDTA region includes Hardin, Orange, Jefferson, Montgomery, and Liberty counties. The Central Houston HIDTA region includes Harris, Galveston, and Fort Bend counties and the Southern Houston HIDTA region include Victoria, Refugio, Aransas, San Patricio, Jim Wells, Nueces, Kleberg, Kenedy, and Brooks counties. In order to obtain the most comprehensive picture of the threat to the area, information for the assessment was also elicited from surrounding counties such as Grimes, Chambers, Brazos, Brazoria, Matagorda, Jackson, Wharton, and Calhoun.

The counties within the Houston HIDTA region are quite diverse in terms of size and population. On one end of the extreme, Harris County has a population of over four million people.² It is a densely-populated county which includes the city of Houston, the fourth largest city in the United States, in a land area of 1,729 square miles. On the other end of the spectrum, Kenedy County has a population of only 369 people with a land area of over 1,400 square miles.³

Below is a map of the Houston HIDTA counties.⁴ Information on the demographics and economics of the Houston HIDTA region can be found in Appendix A on page 38.



DRUG TRAFFICKING ORGANIZATIONS

Profile of Houston HIDTA Drug Trafficking Organizations

The Houston HIDTA is a major corridor for drug trafficking activities. Primary drug trafficking routes from Mexico into the United States run directly through the region and Houston, the region's principal metropolitan area, is a national and international hub for drug importation and distribution. Numerous drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) operate within the Houston HIDTA, due, in large part, to the region's close proximity to Mexico. There was a slight increase in the number of DTOs identified by Houston HIDTA Initiatives, from 446 in 2009 to 461 DTOs in 2010. Of these, 45% operate on the local level. The other 55% have a broader scope with 18% operating on a multi-state level and 37% operating internationally.

Primary Drug Trafficking Organizations within the Houston HIDTA

Mexican Drug Trafficking Organizations

Mexican drug trafficking organizations account for the majority of the identified DTOs within the region and they pose a high level of threat within the Houston HIDTA. Seventy-eight percent (78%) of survey respondents reported that they had encountered individuals associated with Mexican drug trafficking organizations in their counternarcotics investigations in 2010. According to a report by the National Drug Intelligence Center, "Mexican DTOs are more deeply entrenched in drug trafficking activities in the United States than any other DTOs."⁵

Of these Mexican drug trafficking organizations, the Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas have the most prominent influence in the Houston HIDTA, although other cartels such as the Sinaloan Cartel and La Familia Michoacan also have a presence. Houston HIDTA survey results indicated that 40% of respondents reported an encounter with a member of a major drug cartel in 2010. Members of Los Zetas and the Gulf Cartel were the cartels encountered most frequently.

Mexican DTOs regularly transport drug shipments into and through the Houston HIDTA region to destinations throughout the country, and transport money and weapons back across the border into Mexico. Mexican DTOs operating within the Houston HIDTA often have relatives and close personal acquaintances involved in their organizations who reside in Mexico. These connections in Mexico frequently serve as drug sources of supply.

Border Violence and Its Impact in the Houston HIDTA



Violence Along Mexico-South Texas Border⁷

Increase in Cartel Violence in Mexico along South Texas Border

Violence between cartels in Mexico over lucrative drug trafficking territory continued to escalate in 2010, with over 11,000 drug-related deaths.⁶ Of most concern in terms of threat to the Houston HIDTA is that the proximity of this violence has moved closer to the region in the past year.



In 2009, border violence was primarily focused on regions of Mexico near West Texas such as Ciudad Juarez, but in early 2010, Los Zetas and the Gulf Cartel began battling each other for control of drug trafficking routes in Northern Mexico near the border of South Texas. Violence in the border cities of Matamoros, Reynosa, and Nuevo Laredo in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas increased dramatically. This region borders South Texas which is directly below the Houston HIDTA.

Los Zetas, known for their brutality and violent acts, are viewed as a formidable threat by both Mexican citizens and other drug cartels. In fact, the threat from Los Zetas increased to such an extent in 2010 that the Gulf Cartel formed an alliance with its rivals, the Sinaloan Cartel and La Familia Michoacan in an effort to defeat Los Zetas. This alliance became known as the New Federation.⁶

Risk To Americans from Mexico's Drug Cartels

Mexican drug cartel members and associates were involved in several violent acts related to the death of American citizens in Mexico in 2010. David Hartley, shown in the photograph below, was jet skiing with his wife on Falcon Lake on the Texas-Mexico border in September when he was shot and killed by Los Zetas.⁸ Los Zetas mistakenly believed he was conducting surveillance for their rival, the Gulf Cartel.⁹ In another incident in September, a University of Texas - Brownsville student was killed when the bus he was traveling on in Tamaulipas was hijacked by members of a drug cartel.¹⁰ In March, two U.S. Consulate workers in Ciudad Juarez were gunned down by gang members associated with the Juarez drug cartel.^{6,11}



David Hartley, an American Mistakenly Killed by Los Zetas on Falcon Lake in 2010

Mexican drug cartels' increased use of explosives such as grenades and improvised explosive devices in 2010, although not necessarily targeting innocent citizens, has jeopardized public safety in Mexico.¹² One incident involving Americans was a bombing that occurred near the U.S. Consulate in Nuevo Laredo in April. An explosive device was thrown over the wall that surrounds the Consulate's Office. Fortunately, no casualties were reported.^{13,14}

The most recent act of violence upon American citizens in Mexico was the murder of a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agent in early 2011. Gunmen believed to be Los Zetas shot two agents, killing Agent Jaime Zapata and wounding another in San Luis Potosi, a state in Mexico that borders Tamaulipas. Eighty-five bullet casings were recovered after the violent attack. This is the first time that a U.S. federal agent has been killed in the line of duty in Mexico by drug traffickers since the murder of DEA agent Enrique "Kiki" Camarena in 1985.^{15,16,17}



ICE Agent Jaime Zapata

As a result of the escalating violence and danger to Americans in some regions of Mexico due to warring drug cartels, the U.S. State Department has updated its travel warning for the country, stating that the security situation poses serious risks for U.S. citizens.¹⁸

Impact of Border Violence in South Texas and the Houston HIDTA

South Texas

Although most of the drug-related violence has been confined to Mexico, there has been considerable concern about border security in South Texas due to the escalation of the drug war directly across the border. There have been some isolated instances providing evidence that violence from cartel members has crossed over the border from Northern Mexico into South Texas. However, this type of event appears to be occurring infrequently. For instance, two men from Taumalipas, Mexico were found executed in Brownsville in September. These men were found to be members of Los Zetas. The Brownsville police chief stated that it was a hit ordered by the Gulf Cartel.^{19,20} Additionally, according to FBI reporting, a Zeta “recruit” who is a U.S. citizen residing in the South Texas border town of Zapata was working for the Zeta member believed to be involved in the murder of David Hartley on Falcon Lake.⁸

Violence from drug traffickers in Mexico has been directed toward Texas law enforcement, although, again, instances have been minimal. In Starr County in October, officers patrolling on the U.S. side of the border were shot at by gunmen in Mexico.²¹ No one was injured in this incident, but this type of event has prompted border law enforcement to take extra precautions. Border agents are being encouraged to wear ballistic armor and to use high powered weapons when responding to illicit activity along the border.²²

In Cameron County in December, deputies traded in their shotguns for AR-15 assault rifles to match the firepower of drug cartels across the border. These weapons were purchased with proceeds from money seized from drug traffickers.^{23,24}



Houston HIDTA

The majority of law enforcement interviewed within the Houston HIDTA did not feel that border violence has impacted their jurisdiction. However, twenty-one percent (21%) of survey respondents did report some impact and reported that it could be seen by higher drug prices (possibly due to increased violence and tighter security along the border), an increase in human and weapons smuggling, and an increased willingness of DTO members to engage law enforcement personnel with violence to protect loads. There is also an increased fear of retaliation by drug trafficking organizations. One law enforcement officer in the southern Houston HIDTA reported that the drug traffickers they arrest are more afraid of the cartels now than of law enforcement, and don't want to talk during interviews.



As mentioned previously, 40% of survey respondents within the Houston HIDTA region reported an encounter with a major drug cartel in 2010, and most reported that the encounter was with a member of Los Zetas or the Gulf Cartel. FBI reporting indicates that Los Zetas and their associates have expanded their influence and operations in Texas.²⁵ Interviews with other law enforcement agencies indicate that Los Zetas are involved in drug and weapons trafficking activities in the Houston HIDTA. Los Zetas have formed working relationships with Texas-based gangs, both in South Texas and within the Houston HIDTA. For instance, Los Zetas have contracted with the Texas Mexican Mafia prison gang to traffic drugs into and through Laredo, and to collect drug debts and carry out hits. This prison gang is also known to be heavily involved in drug trafficking activities within the Houston HIDTA region. The Houstone Tango Blast gang, which is based in Houston but has members throughout the Houston HIDTA, was found to have sold AK-47s to Los Zetas. These weapons were smuggling from Houston to Laredo and ultimately to Mexico.⁸

In order to better understand the scope of illicit activities being conducted by Los Zetas and other cartels in the region, and to discern the strength of the relationships they are forming with gangs within Houston HIDTA communities, the Houston Intelligence Support Center has responded by creating a regional clearinghouse for cartel intelligence. The clearinghouse will be used to collect information on known and suspected cartels from numerous sources in order to obtain a broader perspective of the overall threat and to develop leads for new and existing cases. Fifty-eight representatives from eight federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies attended the initial planning meeting for this group in early 2011.

Improvised Explosive Devices in the Houston HIDTA

There is some concern that the increased use of grenades and improvised explosive devices by cartels in Mexico may lead to use of these tactics by DTOs associated with these cartels in the United States. At this time, the increased use of IEDs by drug traffickers has not become an emerging trend within the Houston HIDTA region. However, the threat does exist, and isolated instances have occurred, such as the homemade grenade linked to La Familia that was found by the Houston Police Department in 2009. The extent that drug traffickers will go to protect their illicit products should not be underestimated.

Drug investigators often encounter heavily armed criminals during searches. In one instance in September, a Brazoria County Sheriff's Office deputy entered a marijuana grow operation in which a cache of weapons and a homemade improvised explosive device were found. This device is pictured in the accompanying photographs.

In Nueces County in September, a drug user from Odem was found to be in possession of an IED as well as 19 firearms including a machine gun, a grenade launcher, and 11,540 rounds of ammunition. He was using cocaine at the time of his arrest.²⁶



Gangs

Gangs pose a formidable threat, due to the impact that their level of violence and criminal activity imposes upon the Houston HIDTA. They play an integral role in retail drug trafficking. Furthermore, closer relationships between street gangs and prison gangs have developed within the Houston HIDTA, particularly in gangs with Hispanic membership. The close personal or family ties that members of these gangs have to drug trafficking organizations in Mexico further add to the threat posed by these connections. Although law enforcement efforts have been successful in reducing the threat from several gangs in the area over the past few years, many gangs continue to grow in membership and expand their presence throughout the Houston HIDTA.

Types of Gangs within the Houston HIDTA

Street gangs, prison gangs, and outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMGs) are the main types of gangs present within the Houston HIDTA. All counties within the Houston HIDTA have some type of gang presence. Areas with the highest overall concentrations of street gang members within the Houston HIDTA include the cities of Houston, Corpus Christi, Galveston, Beaumont, and Port Arthur. Houston has more street gang members than any other city in Texas. The highest numbers of prison gangs within the Houston HIDTA are in Harris and Nueces counties and the largest concentration of outlaw motorcycle gangs within the Houston HIDTA are in Harris, Montgomery, Galveston, and Brazoria counties. The criminal activities of outlaw motorcycle gangs remain largely unknown.



Gangs Posing the Greatest Threat in the Central Houston HIDTA Region

Within the Central Houston HIDTA region, the greatest overall threat posed by gangs is the rapid expansion of the Houstone Tango Blast gang. The popularity of this gang continues to rise, and becoming a "Houstone" is glamorized by teens, young adults, and particularly street gang members. Their threat in terms of criminal activity is primarily due to the large size of this gang. The threat in terms of drug trafficking is due to their strong connections with drug trafficking organizations in Mexico. The Houstone Tango Blast gang is prevalent not only in Houston, but their presence has expanded throughout the Houston HIDTA. In addition to the threat from the Houstone Tango Blast, the threat in terms of violence toward law enforcement is heightened in this region from gangs having members that are criminal illegal immigrants, such as some members of MS-13. Because of a fear of deportation or of law enforcement in general, these gang members are more likely to react violently when encountered. Asian gangs also have a definite presence in this region of the Houston HIDTA, although knowledge about the criminal activities of Asian gangs remains limited due to the insular nature of this group.

Gangs Posing the Greatest Threat in the Northern Houston HIDTA Region

Within the Northern Houston HIDTA region, the Aryan Brotherhood of Texas prison gang is the gang that poses the overall greatest threat. The exception is in the cities of Beaumont and Port Arthur in Jefferson County and in Brazos County where street gangs are



most prevalent. Port Arthur, in particular, is inundated with street gangs. This relatively small city has 39 street gangs, with thousands of members. The greatest overall threat there is from the Nortenos 14 and Surenos 13 street gangs. The level of violent gang activity in Port Arthur is very high, and drive-by shootings occur regularly, with an average of two per week, and at its peak, a total of three to four per week.

Gangs Posing the Greatest Threat in the Southern Houston HIDTA Region

Within the Southern Houston HIDTA region, more traditional prison gangs are the type of gang posing the greatest overall threat. A large number of Texas Syndicate and Raza Unida prison gang members are present in Corpus Christi. Other prison gangs posing a significant level of threat in Southern Houston HIDTA counties include



Hermandad de Pistoleros Latinos and Mexican Mafia. In this region, drug trafficking and human smuggling by prison gang members is prevalent. In Brooks County, it was reported that human smuggling is the predominant criminal activity of prison gangs there, and that, in this county, Texas Syndicate, Mexican Mafia, Hermandad de Pistoleros Latinos, and Tangos (Vallucos) all work together in human smuggling activities.

2010 Gang Trends

In November, the Houston Intelligence Support Center produced the 2010 Houston HIDTA Gang Threat Assessment. Significant overall gang trends identified through this assessment include the following:

- The requirements for entrance into some prison gangs are changing. Traditionally, entrance into a prison gang includes serving time in prison and a lifetime commitment to the gang. However, some prison gangs have relaxed these requirements. This is apparent in Houston with the Houstone Tango Blast, in Corpus Christi with the Texas Syndicate, and in San Patricio County with the Mexican Mafia. In these areas, street gang members are being allowed into at least some cells of these prison gangs. Prison gangs are acutely aware that a large membership is an indicator of a gang's overall strength and the rapid increase in size of the Tango Blast gang is threatening to other gangs.
- Gangs are increasingly working together for financial gain. Now, "It's all about the money" and even rival gangs such as the Bloods and Crips will put aside their differences for profitable activities.
- Gang members are now more apt to deny gang membership than in the past. They understand that this information can be used against them by law enforcement. They often are no longer flamboyantly displaying outward signs of gang membership.
- Drug distribution by gangs has moved from street corners to more discrete locations such as apartment complexes making it more difficult for law enforcement to determine the extent of their activities.

Efforts to Combat Gangs in Houston

In order to continue to combat the threat from gangs, it will be increasingly important for law enforcement to coordinate their investigative and intelligence efforts and form a strong and united front against gangs in Houston HIDTA communities. In Houston, two major attempts to educate and protect the public from gangs in 2010 included the creation of the StopHoustonGangs.org website and the filing of Harris County's first-ever gang injunction.

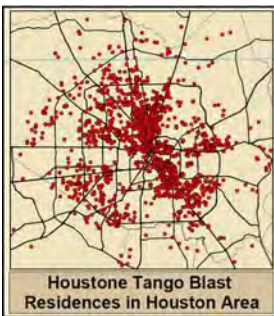
StopHoustonGangs.org

As a proactive measure, the Houston Multi-Agency Gang Task Force (MAGTF) has created a new website called StopHoustonGangs.org. This community policing initiative has been designed to help keep neighborhoods and families safe from gangs and the related violence they bring. The website allows residents to report anonymous tips and suspicious criminal gang activities in an effort to thwart the threat. The website also contains information to educate the public about criminal gangs. This initiative is already showing signs of success in combating gangs and gang-related crime. Since its establishment in September 2010, over 221 leads have already been provided to law enforcement at the MAGTF through this website.



Harris County's First Gang Injunction

In November, the District Attorney's Office filed the first-ever civil gang injunction in Harris County. This measure was taken as an effort to restore public safety in a neighborhood inundated with gang activity in Northeast Houston.²⁷ The injunction will ban 33 known members of the Crips and Bloods gangs from an apartment complex as well as an elementary school in the designated safety zone.²⁷ The injunction was granted in December.²⁸



Houston Police Department
Data as of September 2010

Gang investigators in Harris County have also discussed attempting to impose a gang injunction against the Houstone Tango Blast, the largest gang in Houston, but this strategy would be difficult to implement because members are so widely dispersed throughout the county.

More specific information on the threat posed by gangs within the Houston HIDTA can be obtained by contacting the Houston Intelligence Support Center to request a copy of the 2010 *Houston HIDTA Gang Threat Assessment*.



Activities

Production

International Production

With the exception of ecstasy and hydroponic marijuana (“BC Bud”) which are largely imported from Canada, the majority of the illegal drugs found within the Houston HIDTA region are produced in foreign countries and trafficked into and through the area from Mexico.

Houston HIDTA Production

Due to the Houston HIDTA’s close proximity to Mexico, the area’s market is saturated with imported marijuana and “ice” methamphetamine from Mexico. Therefore, marijuana and methamphetamine have limited production within the Houston HIDTA region. However, both indoor and outdoor domestic marijuana production are occurring within the Houston HIDTA. Indoor marijuana production, in particular, appears to continue to be increasing in the metropolitan areas, such as in Houston and Corpus Christi. In Houston, there has been a noticeable shift toward increased local production of both hydroponic marijuana and ecstasy. Although Mexican “ice” is predominant, domestic methamphetamine production continues to occur within the Houston HIDTA. PCP is also being manufactured in Houston on a limited basis.

Transportation

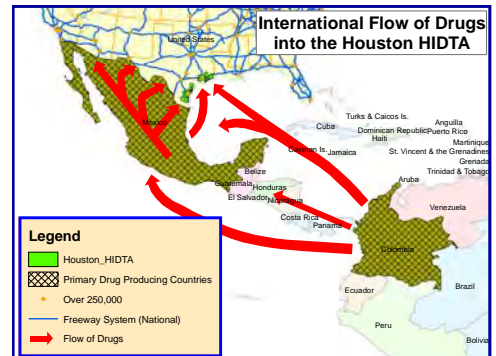
General Patterns

Mexican DTOs are the primary transporters of illegal drugs into and through the Houston HIDTA region. They have developed sophisticated drug transportation networks enabling them to smuggle drugs to destinations throughout the United States. They are also involved in the transfer of money and weapons back through the HIDTA to Mexico.

Drugs being trafficked into the Houston HIDTA most commonly enter the United States from border cities in Mexico such as Reynosa, Matamoros, and Nuevo Laredo. From there, drugs are moved north through Hidalgo, Cameron, Webb, and other counties in South Texas.

After being smuggled into Texas, DTOs transport drug loads to larger cities within the Houston HIDTA region such as Corpus Christi, Beaumont, Baytown, and Houston where DTOs commonly use “stash houses” in these cities to store illegal drugs before moving shipments on to other locations.

Houston continues to serve as a major hub for further distribution to other Houston HIDTA cities as well as to other locations in Texas and the United States. According to 2010 Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) seizure data for the Houston HIDTA region, many of the drugs originating in the Houston area were destined to a out-of-state location, most commonly in Louisiana. The most popular destination cities in Louisiana included New Orleans, Lake Charles, and Lafayette. In addition to Louisiana, some other destination states in 2010 were Alabama, Florida, Georgia, and Mississippi. Because the Houston area is a central trafficking hub, virtually all states are impacted at some level by drugs coming from this large metropolitan area.



New Trends

A new trend reported by the Houston HIDTA Initiative TCCI in Corpus Christi is that the drug loads coming through the Falfurrias and Sarita checkpoints are significantly smaller now. They reported that they used to see 1,000 pounds of marijuana every other day to every week, but that in the past year, they've seen amounts averaging 50 to 400 pounds per seizure. They theorize that perhaps more drug loads are being transported through the rural ranches to avoid the checkpoints. The Houston HIDTA Initiative MDS reported that rural ranch roads are being used more frequently, and that ATVs are being used more often to move the loads through the ranches. The Houston HIDTA Initiative TNET said that drug traffickers are more wary now and will often run an initial "test" load. Both of these Initiatives also concurred that drug loads are smaller now than they were in the past.

Conveyance Methods and Concealment Techniques

DTOs continue to use a variety of conveyance methods to transport drugs into and through the Houston HIDTA region. Land transportation is the primary method. DTOs use personal vehicles (passenger cars, trucks, and sport utility vehicles), recreational vehicles such as RVs and ATVs, as well as commercial vehicles such as tractor trailers and buses. Other methods also being exploited include trains, airplanes, boats and ships, and U.S. mail delivery services. In 2010, it was reported that the use of car haulers to move vehicles containing drugs has gained popularity. Additionally, Kenedy County Sheriff's Office reported that they are seeing more vehicles coming through the checkpoints with temporary "paper" license plates. The vehicles transporting drugs are also now newer models than in the past and the drivers tend to be young, clean-cut individuals.

DTOs are continuing to use more sophisticated methods to conceal drug loads in vehicles. Investigators reported that it is much more difficult to locate the hidden compartments now and that they can spend hours trying to find drugs.

In addition to more complex hidden compartments, vehicles with other elaborate modifications also have been found such as a vehicle stopped in Katy on a car hauler with a modification to its electrical system. This vehicle, seized by the Katy Police Department and the Houston HIDTA Initiative MDS in October, contained 20 kilograms of cocaine hidden in the rocker panels on the sides of the vehicle. It was also equipped with an after market button placed near the steering wheel. When pressed, the button caused a gas to be emitted from within the wheel wells of the vehicle. The gas was found to be a mild irritant called Diisopentyl Sulfoxide. It is believed that this device was installed in an effort to thwart attempts by law enforcement to use a canine to search the vehicle. Further information on this incident can be obtained by contacting the Houston Intelligence Support Center to request a copy of the Houston HIDTA Officer Safety Bulletin on this topic.



Vehicle Modification: Button to Left of Steering Wheel Caused Emission of Gas under Wheel Wells When Pressed
Houston HIDTA Initiative MDS Squad H34/Katy Police Dept

Additional information on conveyance and concealment trends can be found in Appendix B on page 39.

Distribution

Mexican DTOs are the main traffickers of bulk quantities of drugs into the Houston HIDTA. These DTOs typically work with retail-level distributors who sell the drugs in local HIDTA communities. Retail distribution is primarily carried out by street gangs in the major metropolitan areas, and by independent drug dealers in the more rural regions.

Most DTOs within the Houston HIDTA are considered to be poly-drug distributors and traffic a combination of drug types into and through the region. They continue to be motivated by opportunity and profit, and will move any product that is currently in demand to supply the consumer market. Of the 461 DTOs identified by Houston HIDTA Initiatives in 2010, 71% were found to be trafficking cocaine, 56% trafficked marijuana, and 40% were trafficking methamphetamine. Heroin, ecstasy, pharmaceutical drugs, steroids, and designer drugs were trafficked less frequently. As can be seen from these statistics, many of these DTOs were trafficking more than one drug type.

While DTOs and gangs will often distribute a variety of drugs, some are known for trafficking of a particular drug within the Houston HIDTA. For instance, Asian organized criminal groups tend to be involved in the distribution of ecstasy and hydroponic marijuana, African American street gangs distribute crack cocaine, militia and motorcycle groups are known for trafficking methamphetamine, and the Mexican Mafia street gang is known for trafficking heroin.

Money Laundering

According to the National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC), “Mexican DTOs use bulk cash smuggling as their principal method to move billions of dollars in drug proceeds annually from the United States into Mexico.”⁵ The Houston HIDTA’s Money Laundering Initiative (HMLI) and DEA’s Financial Investigations Team (FIT) agree that bulk cash smuggling continues to be the primary technique used to transport currency south through the Houston HIDTA to Mexico. The majority of survey respondents also reported bulk cash movement as the most predominant method of money laundering.

The main currency route through the Houston HIDTA is down U.S. Highway 59 and then to U.S. Highway 281 or U.S. Highway 77 to the U.S.-Mexico border. Interstate Highway 35 to Laredo is also used.



\$879,977 Seized by Texas DPS in Brooks County
May 2010 on U.S. Hwy 281

Although bulk cash smuggling is still the predominant method, it has become more difficult now due to a new banking law in Mexico implemented in June. The law places restrictions on the amount of U.S. cash that will be accepted by Mexico’s banks in an effort to weaken the financial resources of drug cartels. Mexican banks now cannot accept over \$4,000 per month in U.S. currency from bank customers, or over \$300 per day up to \$1,500 per month from non-bank customers. There is no daily limit for foreign tourists.²⁹

Because of this new law, drug traffickers are relying more heavily on other methods. At least three alternative methods of moving money are now gaining prominence. These include the renewed emergence of the Black Peso Market Exchange (BMPE), a new form of the hawala system called “Espejo” or “The Mirror” System, and an increase in the use of money service businesses (wire transmitters).³⁰ In regard to the Black Peso Market Exchange, the Houston HIDTA Initiative HMLI reported that it is now being used for transactions between the U.S. and Mexico and that the increase in this method has been significant. DEA FIT reported that in regard to “Espejo,” they have seen a huge increase in the use of this money laundering technique. There is less risk than with bulk cash because the payout is almost instantaneous. When a pickup occurs in the U.S., a prearranged code is exchanged and a simultaneous release occurs in Mexico or another country such as Colombia from a separate currency source. “Espejo” is more popular with Mexican DTOs, and wire transmitters are being used more by Colombian DTOs.³⁰

Information on currency seizures in the Houston HIDTA in 2010 can be found in Appendix C on page 43.

Human Smuggling

DTOs and gang members participate in a variety of criminal activities, in addition to drug trafficking, if there is potential for financial gain. Some augment their incomes by participating in human smuggling. For Los Zetas, it is one of their main sources of revenue.³¹

Within the Houston HIDTA, human smuggling is most prevalent in the southern Houston HIDTA counties. In Brooks County, deputies reported that human smuggling is the predominant criminal activity of prison gangs and the gang members all work together in human smuggling activities. Generally, they are friends or acquaintances from before they became gang members and continue these relationships to further their criminal activities.

Illegal immigrants often will walk for miles through remote ranches in South Texas in order to avoid the Sarita and Falfurrias checkpoints. Guides then pick them up north of the checkpoints. They also transport them in vehicles through rural ranches. According to deputies in Brooks County, oil companies have paved numerous ranch roads and these areas are ideal for smuggling activities because they are not usually heavily patrolled.³²

Illegal immigrants sometimes carry drugs with them in their backpacks for drug trafficking organizations. For instance, the Texas Highway Patrol encountered illegal immigrants with backpacks containing marijuana in the Houston HIDTA region in 2010. In Victoria, on two different traffic stops on U.S. 59, occupants bailed out carrying backpacks.³³ In both instances, a backpack with two bundles of marijuana was left behind. In Jackson County, three occupants with backpacks bailed out of a vehicle on a traffic stop on U.S. 59. Again, one of the occupants left a backpack behind that contained 24 pounds of marijuana.³³



Texas Highway Patrol Seizure, Jackson County
Makeshift Backpack with 24 Pounds of Marijuana

New trends related to human smuggling in 2010 are that there have been more reports of guides sexually assaulting female illegal immigrants and that there has been an increase in illegal *criminal* immigrants coming through the region. The latter trend, in particular, increases the threat from human smuggling within the Houston HIDTA.

DTO Communications and Technology

Communications

"Disposable" cell phones are still the predominant method of communication being used by drug trafficking organizations and gang members. Nextel Push-to-Talk functions on phones are also popular. While smartphones such as BlackBerrys and I-Phones are being used, their use was not reported to be as common as throw-away "Cricket" cell phones. Texting on cell phones has become a particularly prevalent method of communication.

Internet-based methods of communication continue to grow in popularity, particularly among gang members. Social networking websites such as Facebook and MySpace are frequently used for communication by gang members.

Technology

GPS Devices

The Houston HIDTA Initiative TCCI in Corpus Christi reported that GPS tracking devices were found hidden in two separate marijuana loads seized at the checkpoints. Furthermore, in early January 2011, a trooper in the Kerrville area stopped two individuals traveling from California to Houston. In their possession, they had a device later determined to be capable of detecting GPS tracking devices. This device, called the "Spy Hawk Handheld Wire Tap Bug Detector/GPS Sweep Unit" is available for general purchase through the Internet.^{34,35}



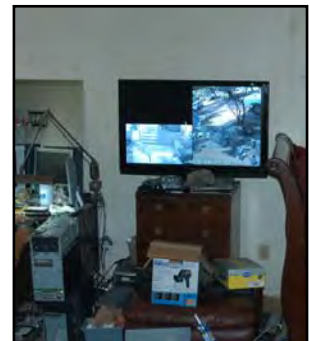
Spy Hawk Handheld Wire Tap Bug Detector/GPS Sweep Unit



GPS Tracker Found in Marijuana Load
Houston HIDTA Initiative TCCI

Countersurveillance by Drug Traffickers

Countersurveillance by drug traffickers continues to be reported by law enforcement within the Houston HIDTA. For example, surveillance cameras and equipment were found at several indoor marijuana grow operations in the Houston Metropolitan Area in 2010. The surveillance equipment in the accompanying photograph was found at a grow house seized by the Houston HIDTA Initiative MIG.



DRUG THREATS

Marijuana

Assessment of Threat

Marijuana poses a high level of threat within the Houston HIDTA region. Not only is it the most prevalent and readily available drug found within the Houston HIDTA, in 2010, marijuana surpassed powder and crack cocaine in ranking and now holds the position of the greatest drug threat to the region, based on survey results. It was identified by 26% of respondents as the greatest drug threat in their jurisdiction, the highest percentage of any drug ranked as the primary drug threat for the year. Marijuana was trafficked by 56% of the DTOs identified by Houston HIDTA Initiatives in 2010.

2010 Houston HIDTA Region-Specific Trends Related to Marijuana

While imported marijuana from Mexico is by far the most significant threat from marijuana within the Houston HIDTA, domestic production of hydroponic marijuana continues to increase. Two new and emerging trends also developed in 2010 within the Houston HIDTA.

- Emergence of “Fake” or Synthetic Marijuana

A drug that was previously unheard of by most drug investigators became enormously popular in many Houston HIDTA communities in 2010. Marketed as incense, this drug is actually a type of synthetic marijuana being sold legally throughout the United States. Widespread use was reported throughout the Houston HIDTA. With names such as K2 and Spice, synthetic marijuana is being smoked by users of all ages, producing a high reported by some sources to be many times more potent than typical marijuana.³⁶ It is particularly popular among teens and young adults, according to interviews with law enforcement within the Houston HIDTA.



According to a retired organic chemistry researcher who developed several of the compounds found in synthetic marijuana as part of his research with the National Institute on Drug Abuse, the chemicals were never intended to be used by people. They were developed to study how compounds that mimic THC but have very different chemical formulas interact with the brain and were never tested on humans.³⁷ Due to increasing reports of hallucinations, seizures, and other safety concerns, at least fifteen states have passed laws to control the use of this drug. Although Texas has not yet passed such a law, several cities within the Houston HIDTA have passed ordinances banning the sale and/or possession of synthetic marijuana, and in late 2010, the DEA used its emergency scheduling authority to temporarily control five chemicals known to be used in these products. The ban puts these chemicals in the same class as heroin and cocaine for at least one year.^{38,39,40}

- Illegal Sale of Medical Marijuana

A possible emerging trend is the shipment of medical marijuana into the Houston HIDTA region for illegal street sale. Law enforcement from the Corpus Christi Police Department reported that medical marijuana from Colorado is being shipped by mail delivery services to the Corpus Christi area for this purpose.



“Medical” Marijuana Shipped to Corpus Christi

The Houston HIDTA Diversion Squad has received similar information about medical marijuana coming into the Houston area from California. Apparently, individuals are going to California, obtaining California identification, requesting the drug from doctors there, and returning to Houston to sell it as hydroponic marijuana. There have been a growing number of states approving medical marijuana, increasing the likelihood that this trend will be seen more frequently in the future.⁴¹

Abuse

There has been a sharp increase in marijuana use in the United States. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) annual report, marijuana use increased by 8%.⁴¹ Marijuana remains a drug of choice throughout the Houston HIDTA region. According to available state-funded treatment program data, it was the primary problem for 24% of persons admitted for treatment in 2009. This percentage has remained fairly stable over recent years.⁴²

Availability

The majority of survey respondents (86%) reported that the availability of imported marijuana in Houston HIDTA communities is high and most reported that the level of availability has remained the same from the previous year. Hydroponic marijuana is available at moderate to high levels and most survey respondents felt that the level of availability had either remained high (47%) or had increased (38%). Agencies from 9 of the 17 Houston HIDTA counties reported an increase in hydroponic marijuana in 2010. These counties were from Central, Northern, and Southern Houston HIDTA counties and included Harris, Fort Bend, Galveston, Montgomery, Jefferson, Nueces, Kleberg, Jim Wells, and Brooks.

Production

Indoor Domestic Marijuana Production

Most of the marijuana found within the Houston HIDTA is produced in Mexico. However, domestic production of both indoor and outdoor marijuana is occurring. In larger metropolitan areas such as Houston and Corpus Christi, law enforcement reported that they feel the prevalence of indoor domestic marijuana production has escalated in the past year. Sixty-nine percent (69%) of survey respondents reported that domestic marijuana is being cultivated indoors. Of those reporting an increase in cultivation, most (87%) reported that the increase was due to indoor production.



Numerous Hydroponic Grow Operations were seized by Houston HIDTA Initiative MIG in 2010

It is likely that domestic marijuana cultivation will continue to increase in frequency and scope due to the high profit/low risk ratio unless Texas legislation is changed to enact harsher penalties. The potential to earn millions of dollars, coupled with minimal sentencing and monetary penalties makes this type of criminal activity enticing to drug traffickers. Although many grow houses in Houston are operated by Asian criminal organizations, investigators reported that a wide variety of individuals and groups are now getting involved in this activity.

Safety Hazards to Law Enforcement Related to Indoor Marijuana Production

Some law enforcement officers have complained of sinus problems they feel may be related to exposure to mold in indoor marijuana grow houses. In fact, criminals involved in indoor marijuana production are now wearing protective equipment themselves due to the potential adverse effects from mold. Members of the Houston HIDTA Initiative MIG have had an increased level of exposure in the past year due to the multitude of indoor grow operations they have seized. As a proactive measure, the MIG has purchased double-filtered respirators for officers to wear during this type of counternarcotics work. The Initiative had previously been using paper face masks for protection.

Outdoor Domestic Marijuana Production

Although outdoor marijuana grow operations are not encountered as frequently in the Houston HIDTA, there were at least two large operations discovered in the area in 2010. One was found in the Katy area in June in which 6,000 to 7,000 plants were seized.⁴³ The other was found in Montgomery County in July. Over 2,400 plants were seized.⁴⁴



Outdoor Grow Operation Seized in Katy, June 2010
By DEA's Domestic Marijuana Eradication Program

Trafficking and Distribution

Mexican DTOs continue to be the primary traffickers of imported marijuana both within the Houston HIDTA and throughout the United States. In regard to hydroponic marijuana, Asian DTOs in the Houston area are cultivating and selling it, but independent growers of various nationalities are now increasing in number, according to interviews with law enforcement in the area.



Marijuana Growers in Houston are Selling
"Ball Jars" of Hydroponic Marijuana
Photo from Houston HIDTA Initiative MIG

Seizure Trends

See Appendix D on page 45 for a comparative analysis of marijuana seizure data for 2009 and 2010.



2,521.9 Kilograms of Marijuana as seen on Checkpoint Scan of Vehicle
Falfurrias Checkpoint, January 2010, Courtesy of Houston HIDTA Initiative TCCI

Powder Cocaine/Crack Cocaine

Assessment of Threat

Powder cocaine has dropped from its long-held ranking by survey respondents as the greatest drug threat within the Houston HIDTA. Survey results indicated that only 15.5% of participants felt that powder cocaine was the most significant drug threat in their jurisdiction, compared to 27% in 2009. Marijuana, crack cocaine, and prescription drugs all surpassed powder cocaine in the ranking of drug threats to the region. Methamphetamine and powder cocaine now share fourth place in the ranking. Although powder cocaine has declined in ranking, it still poses a high level of threat and has a significant impact in the region. Powder cocaine was trafficked by 71% of the DTOs investigated by Houston HIDTA Initiatives in 2010. This is, by far, the largest percentage of DTOs moving a specific drug type.



98 Kilograms of Powder Cocaine
Seized at Sarita Checkpoint, February 2010
Houston HIDTA Initiative TCCI

Crack cocaine maintained its position as second greatest drug threat, listed by 22% of survey participants as posing the greatest drug threat in 2010, compared to 24% in 2009. Crack cocaine remains the drug most linked to violent crime and property crime within the region. As with powder cocaine, crack cocaine continues to pose a high level of threat within the Houston HIDTA.

2010 Houston HIDTA Region-Specific Trends Related to Cocaine

- The Houston HIDTA Initiative FBET in Fort Bend County reported that the user group for crack cocaine is changing. It is no longer just the drug of choice for African Americans in the area, but other groups, such as members of the Hispanic population are also now involved in the sale and abuse of this drug. In October, FBET was able to significantly impact the availability of crack cocaine in the Rosenberg/Richmond area when the Initiative filed 50 charges against a family of Hispanic crack cocaine dealers in the area. The crack cocaine was being sold out of the family's residence and investigators reported that the children in this family referred to the drug as "the white medicine." Numerous weapons, including machine guns were also found at the residence.
- The Beaumont Police Department's Narcotics Division in Jefferson County has traditionally reported that "Crack is King" in Beaumont. Crack cocaine is still the most predominant threat, but the threat from abuse of controlled prescription drugs is now rivaling crack cocaine for the greatest drug threat there. They also reported that the cost for crack cookies has remained the same in Beaumont. However, the quality of the cookies continues to decrease. They used to be 21 grams each, but now weigh approximately 8-10 grams.

Abuse

Although the overall rate of illegal drug use has risen to the highest level in nearly a decade, cocaine abuse continues to decline in the United States.⁴¹ Admission to Texas state-funded treatment facilities for powder and crack cocaine addiction has continued to decrease from 24% of all admissions in 2006 and 2007, and 22% in 2008 to 18% in 2009 (the most current data available). The population of crack cocaine users is changing in regard to those abusing the drug. Texas treatment data shows increased abuse of crack cocaine by groups other than African Americans. The percentage of Caucasians and Hispanics admitted for issues related to abuse of crack cocaine has increased while the percentage of African Americans admitted for this problem has actually decreased.⁴²

Availability

According to the National Drug Threat Assessment, “cocaine availability has decreased sharply in the United States since 2006.”⁴⁵ There is a combination of factors believed to be contributing to this national trend, such as decreased production of cocaine in Colombia, violence related to warring cartels in Mexico, and an increased market for cocaine in Europe.⁴⁵ However, those interviewed for this assessment, as well as the majority of survey respondents, reported that the availability of both powder cocaine and crack cocaine in Houston HIDTA communities is high and that the availability level has remained the same from the previous year.

Production

Almost 90% of all cocaine seized in the United States originates in Colombia.⁴⁶ The majority of this cocaine is smuggled via maritime means through Mexico and then by land into the United States.⁴⁶ Most of the surveyed Houston HIDTA law enforcement agencies (90%) reported that powder cocaine is converted to crack in their communities. The level of conversion has remained relatively the same from 2009 to 2010.

Trafficking and Distribution

Mexican DTOs are the primary group trafficking cocaine into and through the Houston HIDTA region. They are predominantly using overland transportation routes for their smuggling activities.⁵ There have been some indicators of both maritime and air smuggling of cocaine into the area in the past year, but intelligence related to these methods of drug trafficking is limited.

Cocaine is distributed at the retail level by gang members and a variety of individual street-level dealers in Houston HIDTA communities. Although African American gangs and independent dealers have been the traditional groups distributing crack cocaine, survey responses show that Hispanic gangs are also routinely involved in the distribution of this drug.

Seizure Trends

See Appendix E on page 45 for a comparative analysis of cocaine seizure data for 2009 and 2010.



29 kilograms of cocaine seized at Falfurrias Checkpoint
Houston HIDTA Initiative TCCI, November 2010

Controlled Prescription Drugs

Assessment of Threat

Pharmaceutical diversion and abuse poses a high level of threat to the Houston HIDTA. It is a growing problem and the increased abuse of these drugs is leading to addiction, overdose, and death. Eighty-one percent (81%) of survey respondents listed controlled prescription drugs within their top five greatest drug threats in 2010, up from 62% in 2009, and 48% in 2008. Survey respondents from eight different Houston HIDTA counties ranked prescription drug abuse as their greatest drug threat in 2010 and, overall, it ranks as the third greatest drug threat in the Houston HIDTA.

2010 Houston HIDTA Region-Specific Trends Related to Pharmaceutical Diversion

- Possible Emerging Trend: Counterfeit Diverted Pharmaceutical Production

The Houston HIDTA Initiative MIG seized what they believe to be an ecstasy and counterfeit hydrocodone production laboratory in early January 2011 in Harris County. Pills were found stamped with Watson 540 like typical hydrocodone tablets, but when investigators tried to pick them up, they crumbled upon touch. At the time that this assessment was produced, the pills and powder were in the process of being tested to determine their content.



Possible Counterfeit Production of Hydrocodone?

- Increased Movement of Promethazine and Codeine from California to Houston

The Texas Department of Public Safety has seen an increase in the movement of promethazine and codeine cough syrup on the interstate highways. The majority of the seized codeine/promethazine originated in California and has been destined for Houston. Some of this controlled substance is then being transported from the Houston area to Louisiana and other Eastern states, according to information obtained during recent seizures.^{47,48,49}



1.4 Gallons of Liquid Codeine from Houston Seized in Louisiana in October 2010

- Drug Dealers in Houston are Now Purchasing Pharmacies

One new trend reported by the HIDTA Diversion Squad is that now that laws have been passed requiring doctors to own pain clinics, drug dealers are buying pharmacies. Although they must have a pharmacist on board, there are no laws governing ownership of pharmacies. This issue once again highlights the need for more legislative changes in regard to controlled prescription drugs. Of most significance, a law prohibiting “doctor shopping” in Texas is imperative to successful control of diversion activities.

Abuse

Abuse of prescription drugs is now the second most common type of illicit drug use in the United States, surpassed only by marijuana as drug of choice.⁵⁰ A recent study conducted by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA) found that there has been a 400% increase in substance abuse treatment facility admissions for abuse of prescription drugs from 1998 to 2008.⁵⁰ Abuse within the Houston HIDTA is rampant, according to interviewed drug investigators. People often have the false perception that because they don't have to go to a drug dealer to get these drugs, they must be safer to use. However, abuse of these drugs is dangerous. In fact, Houston has one of the nation's highest rates of emergency room visits linked to hydrocodone abuse, according to a comparative analysis of major U.S. hospitals by the Drug Abuse Warning Network.⁵¹ In Harris County, pharmaceuticals were involved in over 78% of all toxicity-related deaths in 2009.⁵²

The most common prescription drugs being abused within the Houston HIDTA are hydrocodone (such as Lorcet, Vicodin) and Alprazolam (Xanax). Carisoprodol (Soma) is also being abused regularly, though the Houston HIDTA's Diversion Squad reported that Soma is not being prescribed as frequently by Houston doctors as in the past. One new trend reported by the HIDTA Diversion Squad is increased usage of Roxicodone (a brand of oxycodone) by teens. Teens are injecting the the drug intravenously, or putting it in Visine bottles and placing drops in their eyes. Investigators from Orange County reported that individuals there are melting down and injecting Dilaudid, a form of opioid similar in effects to heroin.

Availability

Eighty-three percent (83%) of survey respondents reported that controlled prescription drugs were available at high levels, up from 78% in 2009. Sixty-four percent (64%) indicated an increase in availability in 2009, slightly up from 62% the previous year. The problem is widespread throughout the Houston HIDTA and respondents in 13 of the 17 Houston HIDTA counties reported an increase in availability of prescription drugs in 2010.

Sources, Trafficking, and Distribution

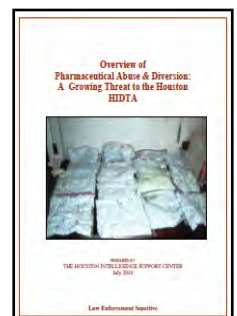
Prescription drugs are diverted in a variety of ways including "doctor shopping," primarily using pain management clinics, theft of pharmaceuticals, forging prescriptions, and the purchasing of drugs on the Internet. Youth obtain prescription pharmaceutical drugs from typical sources of supply as well as their parent's medicine cabinets and from friends and acquaintances. To assist in curbing this type of abuse, DEA initiated its "Take-Back" Campaign in September to safely dispose of unused prescription drugs such as those in household medicine cabinets. It resulted in the disposal of more than 242, 000 pounds of pills nationwide.⁵³

Controlled prescription drugs are distributed by individuals and gangs within the Houston HIDTA. Most of these drugs come from within the Houston HIDTA, but investigators in the Southern Houston HIDTA reported that they are seeing pills at the checkpoints coming into the HIDTA from Mexico as well. These drugs are distributed widely throughout the region, and are also distributed to markets in other nearby states.

Seizure Trends

See Appendix F on page 46 for a comparative analysis of pharmaceutical seizure data for 2009 and 2010.

For additional information on pharmaceutical drug abuse and diversion within the Houston HIDTA, contact the Houston Intelligence Support Center to obtain a copy of the *2010 Houston HIDTA Pharmaceutical Threat Assessment*.



Methamphetamine

Assessment of Threat

Methamphetamine poses a moderate level of threat within the region. Methamphetamine ranked as the fourth greatest drug threat within the Houston HIDTA, tied with powder cocaine for this position. It was reported as being in the top three drug threats by over half (57%) of survey respondents. Methamphetamine was trafficked by 40% of the DTOs identified by the Houston HIDTA Initiatives in 2010.



25 pounds of "Ice" Methamphetamine Seized
Houston HIDTA Initiative MDS in June 2010

2010 Houston HIDTA Region-Specific Trends Related to Methamphetamine

- "Ice" methamphetamine continues to be the predominant type of methamphetamine seen throughout the Houston HIDTA. In the Houston Metropolitan Area, most of the methamphetamine found is "ice." Powder methamphetamine is more common in the Northern Houston HIDTA counties such as Jefferson and Montgomery counties, although these regions also report a high level of "ice" methamphetamine. Powder methamphetamine is the drug of choice in Victoria County in the Southern Houston HIDTA region.



The Production of Powder Methamphetamine in
Fields and Abandoned Houses in Victoria is a Major
Public Health and Environmental Threat to the Region

- Methamphetamine production in some areas of the Houston HIDTA poses a serious public health and environmental threat. Victoria County Sheriff's Office reported that production of powder methamphetamine is their most serious drug threat. They regularly find methamphetamine laboratories in fields and abandoned sheds and houses in the county. Chemicals are often left behind or stored in these locations for further use.

Because of the dangers associated with methamphetamine laboratories and the numerous house fires they have had in the county, the Victoria County Sheriff's Office has now trained staff from the Victoria County Probation Department and other community partners such as parole, child protective services, and constables to recognize these laboratories. Since many of these laboratories are located in rural homes, they can now identify and report them to the Sheriff's Office. They have also educated the general public through public service announcements and billboards.



House Fire Caused by Methamphetamine
Production in Victoria County in 2010

Abuse

The abuse of methamphetamine has continued to increase in the United States. An annual report produced by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration indicated that there has been a 60% increase in methamphetamine users nationwide.⁴¹ Agencies from Galveston and Jefferson Counties, in particular, reported an increase in the abuse of methamphetamine. In Texas, admissions to state-funded treatment programs for methamphetamine/amphetamine abuse as a primary problem remained the same from 2008 to 2009, accounting for 8% of all admissions. Treatment data for 2010 is not yet available.⁴²

Availability

Forty-three percent (43%) of survey respondents reported a high availability of “ice” methamphetamine, similar to the response in 2009. High availability of “ice” was reported by survey respondents from 10 out of 17 Houston HIDTA counties. Respondents from 9 out of 17 Houston HIDTA counties reported an increase in level of availability. Most reported either that availability had remained the same (45%) or increased (41%), also similar to 2009. Most respondents reported low or moderate availability of powder methamphetamine. Over half (53%) reported that level of availability of powder methamphetamine had remained the same from the previous year.

Production

Most of the methamphetamine entering the Houston HIDTA is “ice” methamphetamine from Mexico. However, most survey respondents did report that low to moderate domestic production continues to occur. Survey respondents from 8 of the 17 Houston HIDTA counties reported an increase in methamphetamine production. These included Victoria, San Patricio, Nueces, Harris, Fort Bend, Galveston, Liberty, and Montgomery counties. Counties surrounding the HIDTA such as Wharton and Brazoria also reported increased production. Seven percent (7%) reported seizing more than 10 laboratories in 2010, compared to 11% in 2009. Survey respondents reporting more than 10 laboratories were from Harris, Montgomery, and Victoria counties.

Trafficking and Distribution

Mexican DTOs are the primary traffickers as well as producers of methamphetamine.^{5,54} The trafficking route for methamphetamine differs to some extent from other drug types within the Houston HIDTA region. Rather than entering the Houston HIDTA from the south, methamphetamine is generally transported from Mexico, up to Dallas and then down into the Houston area. In 2010, it was also reported that methamphetamine is being shipped by mail delivery services from Arizona to Houston. Gang members and a variety of independent dealers are the main groups distributing methamphetamine in Houston HIDTA communities. Some motorcycle gangs and prison gangs such as the Aryan Brotherhood of Texas are known for their involvement in the distribution of methamphetamine in the region.

Seizure Trends

See Appendix G on page 46 for a comparative analysis of methamphetamine seizure data for 2009 and 2010.



These pictures depict a methamphetamine lab that was seized by the Houston HIDTA Initiative MIG. Anhydrous ammonia was in the process of reacting with lithium when law enforcement arrived at the scene.

Heroin

Assessment of Threat

The threat from heroin within the Houston HIDTA remains low. Aransas County Sheriff's Office in Rockport was the only agency reporting heroin as the primary drug threat. Heroin was trafficked by approximately 9% of the DTOs identified by the Houston HIDTA Initiatives in 2010.



Black Tar Heroin Concealed in a Sticky Candy
Houston HIDTA Initiative TARP Seizure, May 2010

2010 Houston HIDTA Region-Specific Trends Related to Heroin

- Decrease in Abuse of Liquid Heroin by Teens in Galveston County

The Friendswood Police Department in Galveston County reported that use of liquid heroin by teens has decreased dramatically in 2010. Now methamphetamine use in the area is on the rise.

Abuse

Heroin is not the drug of choice for the majority of drug users within the Houston HIDTA. Two cities within the Southern Houston HIDTA (Rockport in Aransas County and Robstown in Nueces County) and one city in the Northern Houston HIDTA (Port Arthur in Jefferson County) have a small population of heroin users. The number of heroin users in Rockport is now increasing. The number of persons admitted to Texas state-funded treatment programs for heroin abuse rose slightly, from 11% in 2008 to 13% in 2009.⁴²

Availability

Heroin is available and stable in most Houston HIDTA communities at low to moderate levels. Survey respondents reporting high availability were from Aransas, Kleberg, and Harris counties. Those agencies reporting an increase in heroin availability in 2010 were from Aransas, Victoria, Harris, Fort Bend, Galveston, and Montgomery counties.

Production

The majority of the heroin within the Houston HIDTA comes from Mexico. Black tar is the most predominant type of heroin in the region, followed by Mexican brown. There have been reports of Colombian white heroin, but it is encountered much less frequently by law enforcement within the Houston HIDTA.

Trafficking and Distribution

Mexican DTOs are the primary wholesale traffickers of black tar and Mexican brown heroin.⁵ Within the Houston HIDTA, heroin is distributed at the retail level by individual drug dealers and gang members. According to survey respondents, Hispanic gangs are the most predominant type of gang distributing heroin. Law enforcement in the southern Houston HIDTA region reported that most of the heroin comes across the border in Laredo. In October, Customs and Border Protection officers at the Laredo Port of Entry seized 127 pounds of heroin. This was the largest heroin seizure in Laredo port history and the largest heroin seizure along the southwest border in the past five years.⁵⁵ From Laredo, investigators report that heroin is transported to Robstown in Nueces County. Southern Houston HIDTA law enforcement often report that the heroin in their area comes from Robstown.

Seizure Trends

See Appendix H on page 47 for a comparative analysis of heroin seizure data for 2009 and 2010.



Seizure of 2,000 Ecstasy Tablets in Capsule Form
Houston HIDTA Initiative TNET, May 2010

Ecstasy

Assessment of Threat

The threat from ecstasy within the Houston HIDTA is low in comparison to other illicit drugs. Ecstasy was trafficked by approximately 3% of the DTOs identified by the Houston HIDTA Initiatives in 2010.

Abuse

There has been a 37% increase in the use of ecstasy nationally, according to the annual report from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).⁴¹ Data from Texas state-funded treatment programs indicates that there continues to be an increase in the number of persons admitted with a problem related to the use of ecstasy with 1,189 patients in 2008 and 1,350 in 2009 reporting ecstasy abuse as part of a poly-drug abuse problem.⁴²

Availability

Sixty-seven percent (67%) of survey respondents reported that ecstasy was available in moderate to high levels, down from 80% in 2009. Those agencies reporting high availability of ecstasy were from Harris, Fort Bend, Galveston, Jefferson, Liberty, Orange, and San Patricio counties.

Production, Trafficking and Distribution

Canadian-based DTOs are the main producers of ecstasy that is transported into the United States, including the Houston HIDTA region.⁵⁶ However, local production of ecstasy is also occurring within the Houston area. This production is being conducted by Vietnamese organized criminal groups and individuals, although other groups and individuals have also been found to have involvement in this activity.



Ecstasy (MDMA) Laboratory
Seized by Houston HIDTA Initiative MIG in early January 2011

Asian DTOs control the distribution of ecstasy within the Houston HIDTA, but street level distribution is being conducted by both individuals and gang members. In 2010, survey respondents reported that ecstasy is being distributed by Hispanic gangs and African American gangs.

Seizure Trends

See Appendix I on page 47 for a comparative analysis of ecstasy seizure data for 2009 and 2010.

Steroids and Other Dangerous Drugs

Assessment of Threat

Steroids and other dangerous drugs pose a low, but viable threat to the Houston HIDTA. Other dangerous drugs found within the Houston HIDTA include PCP (phencyclidine), LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide), GHB (gamma-hydroxybutyrate), GBL (gamma-butyrolactone), ketamine, and Rohypnol.

2010 Houston HIDTA Region-Specific Trends Related to Steroids and Other Dangerous Drugs

- Largest PCP Seizure in DEA History Seized in Harris County

In December, the DEA concluded an 18-month long investigation in which they seized a total of 57 gallons of PCP in the Houston area. This was the DEA's largest PCP seizure to date. It was reported that just "one gallon of PCP is conservatively enough to produce well over 500,000 dosage units."^{57,58}

- Large Steroid Seizure in Montgomery County

In November, Montgomery County Sheriff's Office seized approximately \$100,000 worth of steroids from a residence in Spring.^{59,60} Some of the steroids came by mail from China.



Abuse

Steroids, GHB, GBL, LSD, PCP, ketamine, and Rohypnol are generally considered to be less of a threat than other illegal drugs. However, it is important to note that state-funded treatment centers continue to admit individuals who have problems with these dangerous drugs.⁴²

Availability

The availability of steroids and other dangerous drugs in the Houston HIDTA is largely unknown. This is, in part, because resources for investigations are being directed toward threats from the other drug categories. However, in general, availability of other dangerous drugs in the United States has decreased to very low levels compared to other drug types.⁵⁶ Overall, most survey respondents reported low availability of these drugs. For steroids and PCP, the range of responses was slightly higher, with primarily low to moderate availability. Survey respondents from Harris and Galveston counties did report a high level of availability of steroids and agencies from Harris and Montgomery counties reported an increase in their availability.

Production

These drugs, with the exception of PCP, are not produced within the Houston HIDTA.

Trafficking and Distribution

Because the threat from other types of drugs within the Houston HIDTA is so prominent, resources are limited for investigations of drugs falling into the "other dangerous drugs" category. Therefore, less information is known about the trafficking and distribution of these drugs throughout the Houston HIDTA. According to NDIC, national and international-level DTOs have no significant involvement in the production or distribution of these drugs.⁶¹

Seizure Trends

Although these drugs pose a relatively low threat, some of these drugs are being encountered and seized within the Houston HIDTA. The majority of survey respondents reported that the seizure amounts of steroids and other drugs had remained the same from the previous year.

ENVIRONMENTAL THREATS

Because of the diverse geographical makeup of the Houston HIDTA region, law enforcement agencies face many challenges in efforts to detect and counter the activities of drug traffickers. The Houston HIDTA is an area of substantial international activity. It serves as a gateway into and out of the United States: by land, with its proximity to the Mexico border; by sea, with its location next to the Gulf of Mexico; and by air, housing one of the nation's largest and busiest international airports. These environmental features contribute to the region's susceptibility to drug trafficking activities via its roadways, waterways, and airways.

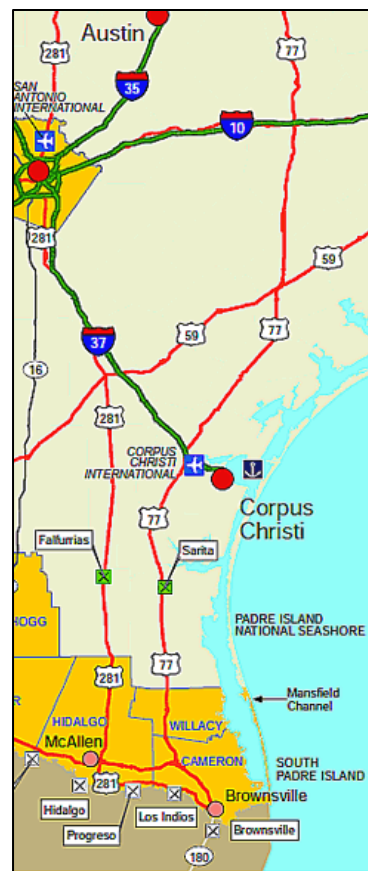
Land Threat

Trafficking using overland routes is the primary method DTOs use to transport drugs into and through the Houston HIDTA. This activity is extensive, and this method of drug trafficking poses the greatest threat in terms of transportation of illicit drugs, currency, and weapons throughout the region.

Roads and Highways

Primary entry routes into the Houston HIDTA from Mexico include U.S.-281, U.S.-77, and U.S.-59. Major exit routes from the HIDTA to other areas of Texas and other states include I-37, I-45, U.S.-59, and I-10. Texas Department of Public Safety seizure data for the Houston HIDTA region in 2010 showed that drug and currency seizures occurred most frequently on I-10, U.S.-59, and U.S.-281.

The southern portion of the Houston HIDTA includes the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) checkpoints on U.S.-77 (Sarita Checkpoint) and U.S.-281 (Falfurrias Checkpoint). According to CBP, "The Falfurrias Checkpoint continues to rank as one of the top checkpoints in the nation for the seizure of narcotics."⁶²



Houston HIDTA Region
Transportation Infrastructure⁶³

Railways

Major Railroads



Both freight and passenger railways exist within the Houston HIDTA. Major freight railroads include Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad, Union Pacific Railroad, and Kansas City Southern Railroad. Amtrak's passenger rail service also passes through the region.

The scope of drug smuggling on railroads remains a serious intelligence gap within the Houston HIDTA. The information that is known about this threat in the region is discussed in the 2009 Houston HIDTA Threat Assessment entitled *Narcotics Smuggling on Railroads* which can be obtained by contacting the Houston Intelligence Support Center.

Although incidents of rail seizures are minimal compared to other trafficking methods, they continue to occur within the Houston HIDTA. Some of these instances are highlighted below.

2010 Rail Smuggling Activity

- The U.S. Border Patrol in Kingsville (Kleberg County) seized 110 pounds of marijuana from a grain hopper car in February. It was concealed using lumber to brace the marijuana between the beams underneath the hopper.⁶⁴



- The Calhoun County Sheriff's Office seized 30 pounds of marijuana from a rail car in September. The rail car had been stored at a plastics factory in Port Lavaca. The marijuana was discovered by employees as they were cleaning it.^{65,66}



The "Weed Express"

Rail seizures are found less frequently than other seizure types in the Houston HIDTA, but there is evidence that large amounts of drugs are still being transported into the United States using this method. In one seizure on a freight train traveling from Mexico to Chicago in December, law enforcement seized 22,000 pounds of marijuana thought to have a street sale value of at least \$22 million dollar. Dubbed 'The Weed Express', the marijuana was packaged in "super sacks."⁶⁷

Sea Threat

Major Ports

The Houston HIDTA contains or immediately borders these main sea ports: the Port of Houston, Port of Corpus Christi, Port of Beaumont, Port of Galveston, Port of Texas City, Port of Port Arthur, Port of Freeport, and Port of Orange. The HIDTA also contains the Padre Island National Seashore (PINS), the nation's longest natural sea barrier, with the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway running through it. This waterway runs from Brownsville at the most southern border of Texas all the way to Carrabelle, Florida.⁶⁸

2010 Maritime Smuggling Activity

The scope of maritime smuggling continues to be one of the most significant intelligence gaps within the Houston HIDTA. This is, in part, due to the numerous remote locations along the Houston HIDTA coastline in which drug smugglers can conduct their activities with little risk of detection.

There were less indicators of maritime smuggling reported in 2010 than in 2009, but seizures and wash-ups occurred in the Houston HIDTA, as well as further south on the Gulf Coast along the South Padre Island shoreline.

Seizures and Wash-ups identified within the Houston HIDTA in 2010:

- 50 pounds of marijuana were found on the Padre Island National Seashore in March after a suspicious vehicle was stopped at the Sarita checkpoint with fishing gear not typically used for salt water fishing. Two men, one of whom was from Pasadena, reported that they were on their way to Houston. Upon questioning, one of the suspects admitted that marijuana was buried in the dunes.⁶⁹
- 230.6 kilograms of cocaine was seized by U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents from Corpus Christi during a joint vessel boarding in the area in May.⁷⁰
- One kilogram of cocaine washed up along the shore in the Corpus Christi inner harbor in June. It was suspected to be connected to the cocaine seizure in May.⁷¹



- Sixteen kilograms of cocaine were found by a beachcomber on the shoreline in Galveston in May. This was the first large drug wash-up on the Galveston Coast in at least a decade, according to a media source.^{72,73}

- One kilogram of cocaine was recovered from the Padre Island North Beach in July. It had probably been in the water about a month due to the amount of marine growth found on the packaging.⁷⁴

Drug traffickers throughout the world continue to attempt to exploit maritime methods of transportation. In 2010, it was discovered that they are using now using fully submersible submarines. One was found in Equador in July and in early 2011, a submarine believed to belong to narcotraffickers was found in Colombia. The vessel is designed to remain underwater for up to nine days. It is capable of holding eight tons of drugs, enabling DTOs to travel long distances more discretely than with previously used semi-submersibles.⁷⁵



Air Threat

Airports

The largest airports within the Houston HIDTA region include the George Bush Intercontinental Airport, Hobby Airport, and the Corpus Christi International Airport. In addition to these major airports, there are well over 100 public and privately owned airports located within the 17 Houston HIDTA counties.

2010 Drug Trafficking Activity involving Aircraft/Airports

Drug smuggling is still occurring at international airports and through the use of private planes. An operation conducted by the DEA and Houston HIDTA Initiative TCCL in Corpus Christi called "Sky's The Limit" was reported in 2010. The investigation resulted in the seizure of three private airplanes used for illicit activities, \$305,000, 20 kilograms of cocaine, and 25 pounds of ice methamphetamine. In addition to transporting drugs and money, the traffickers were smuggling illegal immigrants into the country.



In one instance of smuggling at the Bush Intercontinental Airport (IAH) in Houston, a man from Africa was caught trying to smuggle cocaine from Houston to France. He was apprehended as he tried to board an Air France flight leaving IAH in July. He had allegedly swallowed 85 condoms of cocaine. Inspectors noticed his nervousness, questioned him, and ultimately confirmed the drug smuggling through a hospital x-ray and the eventual evacuation of the 2.2 pounds of the drug into a no-flow toilet.⁷⁶

More information on drug smuggling on aircraft within the Houston HIDTA can be found by contacting the Houston Intelligence Support Center to request a copy of the 2009 Houston HIDTA Threat Assessment entitled *Narcotics Smuggling and other Illicit Activity on Aircraft*.



OUTLOOK

The Houston HIDTA will remain a major drug trafficking corridor in the United States predominantly because of its close proximity to the Mexico border, and due to the wide array of methods available to DTOs to smuggle drugs into and through the area, by land, air, and through maritime access along the Texas Gulf Coast. Because Houston is a national and international hub for drug trafficking, the Houston HIDTA will need a sustained, high level of law enforcement resources to combat the numerous drug trafficking organizations operating in the region.

Mexican DTOs are known to be increasing their presence in numerous cities nationwide, including those within the Houston HIDTA. This threat from DTOs in the Houston HIDTA is amplified by their increasing connections with prison and street gang members. These working relationships will continue to strengthen, due to the lucrative potential of drug-related activities, extending the reach of drug trafficking organizations more deeply into Houston HIDTA communities. These relationships will further facilitate a smooth flow of illicit drugs into and through the Houston HIDTA region.

DTOs and their associates will continue to traffic drugs through the Houston HIDTA on its numerous roads and highways, but pressure from law enforcement will cause them to increasingly seek alternative conveyance methods to successfully move drug loads through the region. Smuggling via private aircraft and by maritime means probably go undetected much of the time due to the vast space in which DTOs can operate using these modes of transportation as well as a lack of routine inspection of private airplanes and vessels. The likelihood that they will increase their use of these methods is high.

Drug traffickers will continue to exploit law enforcement weaknesses to their advantage. Until Texas legislation is changed to address the significant threats posed by prescription drug abuse and diversion and the proliferation of indoor marijuana production in the Houston HIDTA Metropolitan Area, these activities will continue to flourish due to their lucrative potential and relatively low risk. Specifically, until a “doctor shopping” law is passed in Texas and a law creating harsher penalties for production of hydroponic marijuana, the threat from these drugs will continue to escalate.

Law enforcement agencies in the Houston HIDTA face significant challenges in their counter drug efforts due to the level of drug trafficking activity occurring in the region. Drug enforcement activities must remain a high priority within law enforcement agencies so that narcotics officers will be able to respond aggressively and proactively to reduce this threat.

APPENDIX A: DEMOGRAPHICS AND ECONOMICS

Demographics

The Houston HIDTA can be divided demographically into three regions, a northern region which is predominantly Caucasian, a central metropolitan region which is racially quite diverse, and a southern region comprised primarily of persons of Hispanic origin. Overall, Texas has fairly high Hispanic or Latino population (37.6%).⁷⁷

Most of the population within the Houston HIDTA region is concentrated in its metropolitan areas. Harris County is most populous county within the Houston HIDTA and in Texas. The city of Houston, which is the fourth largest city in the country, is located within Harris County.³ According to the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau, the population of Harris County is 4,092,459.² Racially, the composition of Harris County is roughly 36% Caucasian, 19% African American, 39% Hispanic or Latino, and 6% Asian. Adjoining Harris County is Fort Bend County. The northern portion of Fort Bend County is considered to be part of the expanding metropolitan region of the Houston HIDTA. Its population is culturally diverse as well, consisting of approximately 39% Caucasian, 21% African American, 24% Hispanic or Latino, and 15% Asian.¹

Economics

The Houston HIDTA counties are home to energy, petrochemical, space, finance, medical, and agricultural industries. The northern counties have a predominance of oil and natural gas industries, whereas the southern counties have more of an agricultural economic base.

The metropolitan regions of the Houston HIDTA which include areas in Harris, Fort Bend, Montgomery, and Nueces counties have an extremely diverse economic makeup. Houston has over 40 colleges and universities, and ranks high in its number of Fortune 500 companies. Considered by many to be the Energy Capital of the World, Houston has over 5000 energy-related firms. The Texas Medical Center is the largest medical center in the world and Houston area hospitals rank among the best in the nation.⁷⁸

There is a wide variance in annual income, unemployment, and poverty between the northern and southern halves of the Houston HIDTA region. The most populous counties (Harris, Fort Bend, Nueces, Galveston, and Montgomery) have the highest percentages of college graduates and the highest income levels. Harris County residents have a median household income of approximately \$52,000. In the most southern counties, in contrast, residents have an average household income of about half this amount, again emphasizing the great diversity within the Houston HIDTA region.^{1,3}

APPENDIX B: CONCEALMENT TRENDS

The use of gas tanks, spare tires, and increasingly sophisticated compartments continued to be popular methods of concealment in 2010, in addition to a wide array of other methods being used by drug traffickers. Some examples of these concealment methods are provided below.

Spare Tires



Kleberg County Sheriff's Office and the U.S. Border Patrol seized 88.9 pounds of marijuana from the occupants of a Jeep Laredo traveling on US-77 from Mission to Houston. The drugs were found in the spare tire, gas tank, and side door panels.⁷⁹

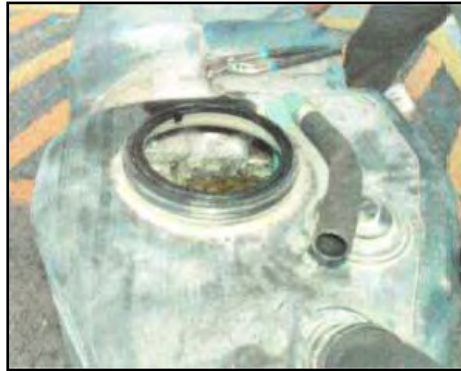
Brooks County Sheriff's Office and the U.S. Border Patrol seized 90.5 pounds of marijuana from the occupants of a rented Ford F-150 traveling on US-281 from Alton to Corpus Christi in September. The marijuana was found in the spare tire and gas tank of the vehicle.⁸⁰



Refugio County Sheriff's Office seized 25 pounds of marijuana from the occupants of a KIA Sorento traveling north on US-77 in December. Once again, the marijuana bundles were located in the vehicle's spare tire.⁸¹

Gas Tanks

Troopers in Brooks County seized 49.85 pounds of marijuana from the occupants of a Ford Expedition traveling on US-281 from Mission to Tennessee in November. The marijuana bundles were located in the vehicle's gas tank.⁸²



Kleberg County Sheriff's Office seized 96.2 pounds of marijuana from the gas tank of a 2008 Dodge pickup truck and 92 pounds of marijuana from the gas tank of a 2008 Dodge pickup truck. The drivers of the vehicles were traveling together on US-77 from Harlingen to Dallas in December.⁸³

Kleberg County Sheriff's Office and the U.S. Border Patrol seized 69.4 pounds of marijuana from the gas tank of a Chevrolet Silverado. The driver was traveling on US-77 from Los Corales on South Padre Island to Dallas and was going to be paid \$2,000 for the transport of these drugs.⁷⁹



Hidden Compartments

Compartments being used by drug traffickers continue to become more sophisticated and elaborate. Law enforcement reported that it is now more difficult to find the drugs they feel certain are there. It can now take hours to locate the hidden compartments.



The Houston HIDTA Initiative TNET seized 10 kilograms of cocaine in August 2010. The cocaine was found in a hidden compartment in a side panel of an extended cab truck.



The Texas Highway Patrol seized 85.75 pounds of marijuana in 45 bundles from the occupants of a Dodge Caravan traveling on US-281 in Brooks County in early 2010. The bundles were hidden inside the interior door panels and behind the seats of the van.⁸⁴

Cloned Official Vehicle

A drug trafficker was caught in a cloned Webb County Sheriff's Office vehicle by Laredo Border Patrol agents in May. The driver of the F-150 pickup was wearing a uniform and a security guard badge, but was unarmed and was not a law enforcement officer. The cloned vehicle was found to contain 1,000 pounds of marijuana.^{85,86}



Other Concealment Techniques

Batteries were found to be used to conceal heroin and methamphetamine in 2010.



A police officer from Hattiesburg, Mississippi seized 28 pounds of heroin from the owner of a Dodge pickup truck on I-59 in April 2010. The driver was a resident of Spring, Texas within the Houston HIDTA. He claimed to be traveling to Bronx, New York from Houston. The heroin was concealed inside two truck batteries in the vehicle's engine compartment.⁸⁷



4.44 kilograms of methamphetamine were found to be concealed within the battery of a GMC Envoy by U.S. Customs and Border Protection at the South Texas border at the Hidalgo Port of Entry in 2010.⁸⁸

APPENDIX C: CURRENCY SEIZURES

There are numerous currency seizures that occur within the Houston HIDTA each year and in 2010, over one-third of survey respondents reported an increase in currency seizures from the previous year. The following are some examples of large currency seizures by law enforcement within the Houston HIDTA region.

2010 Houston HIDTA Region-Specific Highlights Related to Currency Seizures



The Texas Department of Public Safety seized \$879,977 in Brooks County on US-281 in May 2010. The currency was concealed in a false floor panel.^{89,90}



Jim Wells County Sheriff's Office seized \$405,730 from the occupants of a Volkswagen traveling near Alice on US-281 in December 2010. The driver was returning to his residence in San Luis Potosi, Mexico from San Antonio. The currency was found in the driver's side compartment.⁹¹



\$523,145 was seized on US-59 in Fort Bend County in January as part of a joint effort involving various law enforcement entities including the DEA, and the Houston HIDTA Initiatives FBET and TARP. The currency was found in the cab of a trailer truck. The truck driver was from Mission, Texas.⁹²



The Houston HIDTA Initiative TARP seized \$358,326 in October 2010. The currency was hidden in an air compressor.



Victoria County Sheriff's Office seized \$285,000 in November 2010. The currency was found in a hydraulically operated compartment behind the passenger side air bag cover.⁹³



APPENDIX D

Comparison of Marijuana Seizure Data for 2009 and 2010

Most law enforcement agencies surveyed within the Houston HIDTA reported that their seizure totals for marijuana had remained the same (50%) or increased (38%) in 2010. For hydroponic marijuana, 47% reported an increase in seizures while 40% reported seizures had remained the same. However, a review of actual seizure data shows a different trend. Seizures statistics from the Texas DPS for the Houston HIDTA region indicated an increase in marijuana seizures, but data from the DEA Removal Reports for the Houston HIDTA region, Houston Police Department, and the CBP Sarita and Falfurrias checkpoints all reflected a decrease in total amounts of marijuana seized in 2010. Seizure data from the Houston HIDTA Initiatives also showed a decrease from 133,523.5 kilograms in 2009 to 101,829.3 kilograms in 2010.

Seizing Agency (Seizures Within Houston HIDTA)	Unit	2009	2010	Trend
Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS)	kg	10,519	21,146	INCREASE
Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) Removal Reports	kg	16,904	13,382	DECREASE
Houston Police Department	kg	39,615	33,099	DECREASE
Sarita DHS Checkpoint	kg	51,934	24,740	DECREASE
Falfurrias DHS Checkpoint	kg	147,231	119,659	DECREASE

APPENDIX E

Comparison of Cocaine Seizure Data for 2009 and 2010

According to survey responses, most Houston HIDTA law enforcement agencies indicated that seizure amounts of powder cocaine had remained the same (41%) or had increased (40%) in 2010. Seizure statistics from the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) and Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) Removal Reports for the Houston HIDTA region, and U.S. Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) data for the CBP Sarita and Falfurrias checkpoints show a similar pattern. The Houston Police Department data shows a slight decrease in powder cocaine seizures for 2010. Seizure data from the Houston HIDTA Initiatives showed a decrease of powder cocaine from 1,671.6 kilograms in 2009 to 1,391.7 kilograms in 2010. Amount of crack cocaine in 2009 was 2.867 kilograms versus 2.479 kilograms in 2010.

Seizing Agency (Seizures Within Houston HIDTA)	Unit	2009	2010	Trend
Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS)	kg	90	478	INCREASE
Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) Removal Reports	kg	476	638	INCREASE
Houston Police Department	kg	648	615	DECREASE
Sarita DHS Checkpoint	kg	787	795	INCREASE
Falfurrias DHS Checkpoint	kg	1,046	1,046	SAME

APPENDIX F

Comparison of Pharmaceutical Seizure Data for 2009 and 2010

Over half (64%) of Houston HIDTA law enforcement agencies surveyed indicated that seizure amounts of diverted pharmaceuticals had increased from the previous year. Analysis of available seizure data from DEA Removal Reports for the Houston HIDTA region supports this trend, but Houston Police Department data showed a decrease in the seizure of pharmaceutical drugs. Texas DPS data was reported in both grams and dosage units, and therefore was not included in the trend analysis. Seizure data from the Houston HIDTA Initiatives showed an increase in the seizure of prescription drugs from 54 kilograms of pharmaceutical pills in 2009 to 73 kilograms in 2010, and a decrease in the seizure of codeine syrup from 108 gallons of codeine syrup in 2009 to 50 gallons in 2010.

Seizing Agency (Seizures Within Houston HIDTA)	Unit	2009	2010	Trend
Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) Removal Reports*	du	26,791	138,845	INCREASE
Houston Police Department**	kg	547.04	331.87	DECREASE

*includes depressants and other narcotics

**includes hydrocodone, oxycodone, alprazolam, lorazepam, diazepam, codeine and carisoprodol

APPENDIX G

Comparison of Methamphetamine Seizure Data for 2009 and 2010

Over half (53%) of Houston HIDTA law enforcement agencies surveyed indicated that seizure amounts of powder methamphetamine had remained the same from 2009 to 2010. Twenty-one percent (21%) reported an increase. Forty-eight percent (48%) stated that seizure amounts of “ice” methamphetamine had remained the same and 33% reported an increase in seizures of “ice” methamphetamine. Seizure statistics available for analysis showed an increase in methamphetamine seizures by most agencies. Texas DPS and DEA Removal Reports for the Houston HIDTA region, the Houston Police Department and the Sarita Checkpoint data all showed an increase in methamphetamine seizure amounts. Only the Falfurrias Checkpoint data showed a decrease in methamphetamine seizures, but they had an unusually large seizure in 2009 accounting for the wide variation between the two years. Seizure data from the Houston HIDTA Initiatives showed a decrease in the amount of methamphetamine seized, from 223 kilograms in 2009 to 83 kilograms in 2010.

Seizing Agency (Seizures Within Houston HIDTA)	Unit	2009	2010	Trend
Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS)	kg	0.4	54.9	INCREASE
Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) Removal Reports	kg	10.5	39.5	INCREASE
Houston Police Department	kg	20.97	44.2	INCREASE
Falfurrias DHS Checkpoint	kg	141.7	16.5	DECREASE
Sarita DHS Checkpoint	kg	0	8.6	INCREASE

APPENDIX H

Comparison of Heroin Seizure Data for 2009 and 2010

Over half (64%) of Houston HIDTA law enforcement agencies surveyed indicated that seizure amounts of heroin had remained the same from 2009 to 2010. Seventeen percent (17%) reported an increase in seizures, down from 24% in 2009. Seizure statistics available for analysis show varying patterns. Seizure statistics from Texas DPS for the Houston HIDTA region, and the CBP Sarita and Falfurrias checkpoints all reported a decrease in the amount of heroin seized. Data from the DEA Removal Reports for the Houston HIDTA region and the Houston Police Department showed an increase in heroin seizure totals from 2009 to 2010. Seizure data from the Houston HIDTA Initiatives showed a decrease from 39.085 kilograms in 2009 to 31.510 kilograms in 2010.

Seizing Agency (Seizures Within Houston HIDTA)	Unit	2009	2010	Trend
Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS)	kg	20.86	5.86	DECREASE
Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) Removal Reports	kg	6.1	10.2	INCREASE
Houston Police Department	kg	8.45	44.13	INCREASE
Sarita DHS Checkpoint	kg	12.19	6.49	DECREASE
Falfurrias DHS Checkpoint	kg	39.93	0	DECREASE

APPENDIX I

Comparison of Ecstasy Seizure Data for 2009 and 2010

Over half (62%) of Houston HIDTA law enforcement agencies surveyed indicated that seizure amounts of ecstasy had remained the same from 2009 to 2010. Analysis of available seizure data from agencies such as the Texas DPS, the Houston Police Department and DEA Drug Removal reports for the Houston HIDTA region, on the other hand, all showed a decrease in seizures of ecstasy. Seizure data from the Houston HIDTA Initiatives also showed a significant decrease, from 504,646 dosage units in 2009 to 23,591 dosage units in 2010. *Note: In 2009, the Houston HIDTA Initiative TNET seized an unusually large amount of ecstasy (150 pounds) which skews the statistics for comparative purposes.*

Seizing Agency (Seizures Within Houston HIDTA)	Unit	2009	2010	Trend
Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS)	kg	0.31	0.12	DECREASE
Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) Removal Reports	du	8,529	6,183	DECREASE
Houston Police Department	kg	185	15	DECREASE

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