

Presentation title:

The odds are not in drug users favor: Predatory vendors and fentanyl on darknet marketplaces

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Over the last few years, numerous countries have experienced an increase in overdose deaths from fentanyl. Drug users have knowingly consumed fentanyl, its derivatives, and analogues (hereafter fentanyl), or unknowingly consumed drugs containing fentanyl. Bans on darknet marketplaces (DNMs) and harm reduction policies have not eliminated the sale of illicit drugs laced with fentanyl and ensured “truth in advertising” of drugs. To identify the surreptitious sale of fentanyl on DNMs, we scraped the data from three DNMs and qualitatively analyzed the data. Specifically, we conducted a content analysis of DNM product and vendor descriptions, product and category listings, and vendor and product feedback to identify the surreptitious sale of fentanyl and other powerful synthetic opioids, such as nitazenes. Then, we performed social network analysis to identify and map the illicit sale of fentanyl between vendors and buyers on DNMs. In analyzing these distribution networks, we found predatory vendors who sold drugs containing fentanyl and other powerful synthetic opioids to unwitting buyers. These vendors failed to explicitly state in their descriptions and listings that their products contain these dangerous substances or lied about their drugs being fentanyl-free. The objectives of our research are three-fold, to: 1) identify the types of illegal adulterated drugs sold on DNM sites, particularly drugs containing fentanyl and other powerful synthetic opioids; 2) detect and map predatory vendors on the selected DNM sites; and 3) identify the tactics and methods of operation of these predatory vendors on DNMs. Our findings can be used to inform strategies aimed at detecting and disrupting the illicit sale of fentanyl on DNMs.