

Puerto Rico/Virgin Islands

HIGH INTENSITY DRUG TRAFFICKING AREAS THREAT ASSESSMENT

PROGRAM YEAR 2025

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2. Scope

(U//FOUO) The Puerto Rico – United States Virgin Islands HIDTA (PR/VI HIDTA) is committed to facilitating the needs of the inter-agency task force and ensure that they have the resources to combat drug trafficking, money laundering, and violence associated with the drug trade in the Eastern Caribbean Region. The PR/VI HIDTA plays a vital role in leveraging Law Enforcement (LE) resources to ensure our partners have the tools they need to investigate, disrupt, and dismantle criminal organizations in the Caribbean. This task force develops innovative strategies geared toward illuminating the control and command elements of Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs) and Money Laundering Organizations (MLOs) in the PR/VI HIDTA Area of Responsibility (AOR). In 1994 the PR-VI territory was designated as a High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area. In 1995, the PR/VI HIDTA was awarded its first budget to accomplish this mission by providing the resources to combat drug trafficking activities in the Caribbean Basin. The purpose of the 2024 PR/VI HIDTA Threat Assessment (TA) is to provide the Executive Board (EB) and all national HIDTAs with a synopsis of the current threats posed by TCOs and MLOs operating in the AOR, to include, transportation, distribution, money laundering, and any other illegal activities. Substance abuse continues to rise as the opioid epidemic continues to expand throughout the Caribbean. A key factor that contributes to ongoing substance abuse in the region is the rapid expansion of the opioid pandemic, and the socioeconomic consequences that it causes. Severe health conditions, increase in violence, and the loss of wages for those individuals who are dependent on opioids take a significant toll on the quality of life throughout the Puerto Rico and Virgin Island territories. This TA examines the opioid threat and illustrates the PR/VI HIDTA efforts to mitigate. The TA also fulfills statutory and grant requirements issued by the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) and has been approved by the PR/VI HIDTA Executive Board.

(U//FOUO) The PR/VI HIDTA program is a strategic effort to change the negative influences drug trafficking and money laundering have in the territories. The 2025 TA is being submitted to illustrate drug trafficking threats, the violence associated with it, money laundering trends, distribution routes, and investigative efforts employed to mitigate the threats. The threat and mitigation priorities in the Initiative Description and Budget Proposals (IDBPs) submitted through the Performance Management Process (PMP) address how each initiative contributes to this product. This document will further demonstrate the productive relationship the PR/VI HIDTA initiatives share with our domestic and foreign counterparts in the region. The information contained herein is meant to deliver an accurate depiction of trafficking methods, territorial hurdles, and common practices TCOs and MLOs employ in pursuit of success.

3. Executive Summary

(U//FOUO) The primary drug trafficking threats presented in the PR/VI HIDTA TA include the transshipment of cocaine through the region, the importation of opioids, and the violence associated with the drug threats. Drugs and gun violence go hand in hand in the PR/VI HIDTA AOR. This HIDTA is comprised of the Commonwealth of PR, to include Culebra, and Vieques, and the unincorporated territory of the USVI, to include St. Thomas, St. Croix, St. John, and Water Island. Both PR and USVI have miles and miles of open shoreline. These islands are vulnerable to the international drug trade because of these open shorelines, and their geographic proximity to source countries in South America (SA). Multi-ton shipments of cocaine travel via maritime routes from SA through the PR/VI HIDTA AOR from the Dominican Republic (DR), Haiti, PR, and the British Virgin Islands (BVI). Once these drug loads arrive in PR they are separated for local consumption, and the remaining is coordinated for further transport to the Continental United States (CONUS) and to Europe. This region represents the beginning of the secondary flow. Based on government indices, over 956 metric tons of cocaine was smuggled through the Eastern Caribbean region in 2023. This huge importation of cocaine into the PR/VI region fuels most of the violence the territory suffers from.

(U//FOUO) In PR, the current population is 3.2 million people. In 2023, there were 468 murders, 205 of which were drug related. In 2023, the PR Police Bureau (PRPB) seized 1748 firearms. The USVI has a population of 87,100 people. They saw 37 homicides in 2022, and 39 in 2023. The Virgin Islands Police Department (VIPD) seized 178 guns in 2023.

(U//FOUO) The intelligence platform of the PR/VI HIDTA has identified the scope, methods, and means of drug trafficking and money laundering here in the territory. However, every year new challenges arise as TCOs and MLOs leverage technology to modify their tactics and techniques.

- PR/VI is a region where the “secondary flow” of drugs begins. These loads go onward to CONUS and European markets.
- The primary mode of transportation for TCOs in this region remains to be maritime. TCOs also exploit commercial air routes.
- Private mail couriers and the US Postal Service (USPS) are used to move illegal contraband.
- Marijuana continues to be widely abused throughout PR and the USVI.

- The Fentanyl threat has increased significantly in the region as the opioid epidemic continues to expand.
- Xylazine continues to be widely abused in PR, and based on LE intelligence, it has spread to the northeast parts of CONUS.
- Money laundering continues to be a significant threat in the region.
- The key findings of the 2023 Program Year will shape PR/VI HIDTA's operational strategy with its 15 initiatives and allow us to be more effective in the region.
- The expansion of HIDTA prevention efforts in PR and the USVI focuses on drug abuse throughout the territory.

4. PR/VI HIDTA Region

(U//FOUO) The Commonwealth of PR, an unincorporated territory of the US, and the organized, unincorporated territory of the USVI (see Figure 1) are two judicial areas with cultural distinctions. PR is in the northeast Caribbean Sea, approximately 72 miles east of Haiti and DR, and 38 miles west of the USVI. PR has two off-island municipalities (Vieques and Culebra) and numerous cays. PR, Vieques and Culebra are home to approximately 3.2 million residents. The official languages are Spanish and English. The economy is tourism-based, but pharmaceutical manufacturing and farming play a key role in the local economy.



Figure 1

(U//FOUO) The USVI is comprised of a group of Caribbean Islands and is an unincorporated and organized territory of the US. The islands are geographically part of the Virgin Islands archipelago and are in the Leeward Islands of the Lesser Antilles to the east of PR and west of the BVI. It also has over 50 smaller islands and cays. The territory's population is about 87,100 residents, steadily declining since 2015.

OVERVIEW OF THE PR/VI HIDTA INITIATIVES

(U//FOUO) PR/VI HIDTA program is comprised of 17 initiatives, which consists of the following. Management Initiative which is responsible for the overall guidance of the initiatives at the direction of the Executive Board. Training tasked with providing state of the art training classes for the PR/VI HIDTA and partner agencies throughout the territory. The VI Prevention Initiative which focuses on reducing substance abuse and educating the communities on the dangers of drug use, thus building drug free communities. ALIANZA has the same task, but in the Puerto Rico communities. The Investigative Support Center (ISC) is responsible for 24-hour deconfliction operations at the HIDTA as well as analytical and technical support to the initiatives. There are now 12 enforcement initiatives. The HIDTA Opioid Initiative was established in 2023 and became operational in 2024. This initiative is responsible for targeting the opioid threat throughout the PR/VI AOR. The Airport Investigations and Tactical Team (AIRTAT) is co-led between the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) at the Luis Muñoz Marin International Airport (LMMIA). Their focus is on TCOs exploiting commercial air routes to move drugs and money into and out of the US. We have the Caribbean Corridor Strike Force (CCSF) initiative tasked with investigating international maritime threats to the PR/VI AOR. This group is also designated as an OCDETF Strike Force and participating members include DEA, HSI, CBP, USMS, and FBI on the federal side along with six local police municipalities. We have the Puerto Rico Violent Offenders Task Force led by the US Marshals targeting high risk offenders throughout the PRVI AOR. The ATF led Safe Neighborhoods Initiatives targets gun trafficking throughout the territory and supports the recently established Crime Gun Intelligence Center (CGIC) based at HIDTA. We have an initiative based on the Island of St. Croix and one on St. Thomas USVI. They are tasked with targeting DTOs operating in the USVI region and abroad. We have a Resident Office in Fajardo PR tasked with targeting DTO's operating across the eastern vector of Puerto Rico and onward to the Virgin Islands.

5. Drug Threats

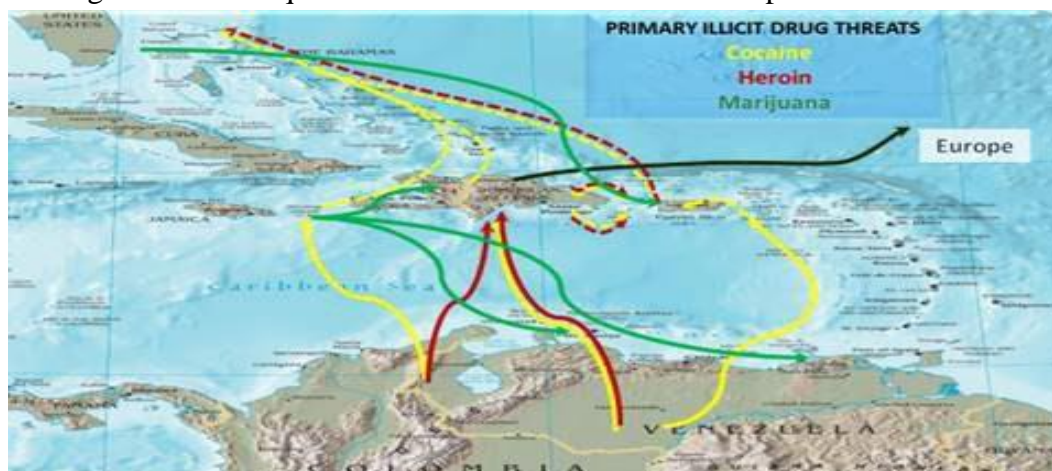
a. Overview

(U//FOUO) The transshipment of cocaine through the PR/VI HIDTA region continues to be the primary threat. Based on government indices, over 476 metric tons of cocaine were trans-shipped from SA through the Eastern Caribbean region in 2022. In 2021, there were 373 metric tons. In 2023, the cocaine flow was 956 metric tons. Cocaine smuggling through the region has steadily increased over the past five years. Maritime transportation continues to be the primary transportation method in the region. TCOs operating between the USVI, and the BVI have slightly altered their tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP), opting away from frequent trips with smaller loads to bulk shipments. The major threats to the PR/VI HIDTA territories are cocaine, opioids, marijuana, heroin, and methamphetamine. Cocaine continues to be the most lucrative drug market in PR and the USVI because of its high profit margin upon arrival in US territories. Cocaine is widely an abused drug in PR whereas marijuana is most abused in the

USVI. Opioids, such as Fentanyl and heroin, are major health threats in PR and the USVI because of their high rate of addiction, and susceptibility to overdose. Methamphetamine is still considered a low-risk drug in the territories because there is a limited appetite for it among drug users in PR and the USVI. It has, however, begun to show up in parts of PR. When our HIDTA initiatives encounter methamphetamine, it's typically imported from CONUS. There is no evidence of methamphetamine being manufactured in the region. Marijuana is the most widely abused drug in the USVI because it's grown locally in abundance. In addition, high grade marijuana is shipped to the territory from Arizona and Texas among other states via parcel services and private shipping companies.

(U/FOUO) The Eastern Caribbean is an important route for TCOs because they target the porous borders of PR and the USVI. Dominican TCOs dominate the transportation market moving drugs through the region. Dominican TCOs work closely with Mexican TCOs to manufacture Fentanyl in the rural areas of the DR.

The following map illustrates the flow of cocaine and heroin moving from SA to the Eastern Caribbean Region and subsequent movement to CONUS and Europe.



b. General Drug Transportation Methods

(U/FOUO) The Caribbean islands of PR and the USVI represent the southernmost border to CONUS and the largest border to the US. The region is particularly vulnerable because of its proximity to the source countries in SA. This makes it an ideal transshipment point for illicit drugs from SA through PR, the DR, and other Eastern Caribbean countries towards the US. In recent years, border security has been enhanced along the US Southwest border, as a result, TCOs have been forced to traffic more frequent and larger drug shipments through the Caribbean.

- 1. Maritime (U/FOUO)** Historically, TCOs have used all regions of PR for multi-ton quantities of illegal drugs and undocumented immigrants. These TCOs change their methods and smuggling patterns very often to avoid detection by LEAs. SA and DR

TCOs are responsible for introducing large amounts of cocaine, marijuana, heroin, Fentanyl, and undocumented immigrants illegally into PR. PR is an attractive transshipment point for these unlawful activities, and the TCOs provide the SA smugglers the support they need with transportation, security, stash houses and other logistic support to manage drug trafficking operations.

(U/FOUO) TCOs continue to smuggle drug shipments and illegal immigrants through the west region of PR via the Mona Passage. Mona Island is located approximately 37 nautical miles off the west coast of PR, and 35 nautical miles to the west of Mona Island lies the DR. TCOs use go-fast vessels, "yolas" (wooden homemade boats), large vessels, and yachts to transport multi-ton quantities of drugs and undocumented immigrants into the coast of PR. Dominican traffickers participate in all aspects of the drug trade, serving as smugglers, transporters, captains, and even wholesalers in the Caribbean Region.

(U/FOUO) The islands of Vieques and Culebra, located at the east side of PR, continue to be vulnerable and attractive locations for TCOs. Both islands continue to be popular smuggling routes due to their strategic location near the mainland of PR and a limited local maritime LEA presence. Drug traffickers continue to use both islands (Vieques and Culebra) as a bridge to bring drugs into the mainland on fishing boats, pleasure boats and the ferries into the municipality of Fajardo. They also use them as stash sites to avoid maritime security.

(U/FOUO) PR, being strategically located, allows TCOs, not only to smuggle drug shipments through the west and east coasts of the island, but also through the northern and southern regions. TCOs departing SA, primarily from Venezuela (VZ), may transport drug shipments directly to the southern region of PR. In addition, drug traffickers departing the DR, as well as TCOs island hopping through the Eastern Caribbean, use the northern region of PR as landing sites.

(U/FOUO) Drug transportation routes through the region have always been primarily via maritime conveyances. Traffickers use go-fast boats, fishing vessels, luxury yachts, ferries, cruise ships and containerized cargo to transport narcotics into and throughout the region. Colombia (CO) and VZ are the main source countries for large quantities of drug shipments into PR and USVI. The DR is commonly used as a transshipment point for cocaine shipped from SA to CONUS and Europe. Large cargo ships bring into PR substantial amounts of cocaine per trip. Once these loads arrive in the region, several vessels will travel from the southern shores of PR and DR to meet the cargo ship and pick up their consignment of narcotics. Drug loads being moved between PR, USVI, BVI, and DR tend to be smaller because distributors and resellers are passing loads off for local distribution, and others are preparing smaller loads for the secondary flow into CONUS or Europe. These smaller shipments typically range between 25 – 200

kilograms. Certain parts of the USVI are separated from the BVI by approximately two miles of open waterway which allows TCOs to move drug loads in and out undetected.

- 2. Air (U/FOUO)** Criminal organizations continue to exploit commercial air traffic to move drugs and money through the region. Traffickers are actively recruiting young men and women with no prior criminal history to be narcotics and money couriers. Traffickers will smuggle cocaine concealed within passenger's luggage, after successfully compromising airport security personnel. These same traffickers have been known to use airline employees like flight attendants, custodial crews, and mechanics to get drug loads onto commercial flights destined for CONUS. *One of our Intelligence Gaps is understanding the full extent of our regional DTO's ability to exploit commercial air traffic to move illegal drugs in and out of the territory.*

(U/FOUO) The use of privately owned aircrafts to transport illegal drugs is another common method. In 2023, in BVI, TCOs used private chartered aircrafts to smuggle copious quantities of narcotics into the region. The TCOs also use charter flights to smuggle drug shipments from PR to CONUS and European locations as security measures are less strict.

(U/FOUO) Protecting the borders of PR and the USVI has been challenging. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) has limited search authority on domestic cargo passing through the territory. In all, there are over 1,000 miles of porous entry points for criminal organizations to exploit. CBP uses innovative search techniques to uncover illicit cargo coming into the region. One of their tools is the Common Viewer System. This technology allows agents to send non-intrusive search images to a centrally located database so that analysts can further examine for anomalies. Analysts can also share the data with other regions for further exploitation. This technology helps improve their ability to look at potentially dangerous cargo that is a threat to the US and improve their operational effectiveness to connect different ports of entry or even different terminals within our territory.

(U/FOUO) A new investigative tool employed by LEAs in the region is unmanned drones. This technique has allowed LEO's to conduct maritime surveillance from a high covert posture, allowing them to gather intelligence without being compromised. In 2023, this technique proved valuable, resulting in multi- hundred-kilogram quantities of cocaine being seized.

(U/FOUO) In the USVI and BVI, personnel for many ground shipment companies are often targeted or recruited by drug trafficking organizations (DTOs). These employees are sometimes unaware of the fact that they are providing cover for illicit loads moving

through the territory. Carriers on the islands are also recruited to transport smaller loads of these illicit products in private vehicles. Many of the illicit narcotics are delivered to either private residences, businesses, or abandoned buildings, serving as stash houses in support of drug trafficking operations. The swift movement of illicit products contributes to the inability of law enforcement to interdict their movement. However, an increase in initiatives by federal and local law enforcement has recently contributed to the mitigation and seizure of the ground movement of illicit narcotics.

(U/FOUO) The USPS and other mail couriers, such as, FedEx and United Parcel Service (UPS), and DHL continue to be the secondary choice for TCOs to ship their drugs to various parts of the US. The US Postal Inspection Service (USPIS) works closely with the AIRTAT Major Crimes Initiative at the airports throughout the territory to investigate, disrupt, and dismantle criminal organizations exploiting these shipment mechanisms. The AIRTAT has representatives from DEA, FBI, and HSI collocated at the LMMIA airport, and they use sophisticated technology to identify these trafficking organizations. In 2022, the USPIS seized over 114,679 pounds of illicit drugs and over \$38,413,233.00 in illicit proceeds. They arrested 2,110 individuals for drug trafficking related crimes and had 1,949 convictions. **(USPIS 2022 Annual Postal Inspection Report, pg. 14).**

(U/FOUO) The drug trafficking problem has expanded by the growth of e-commerce, which has significantly increased the number of packages the parcel services process and deliver. Drug traffickers, particularly those who use the internet for sales and distribution, are familiar with using shipping providers to transport their products. In the past, the HIDTA initiatives have identified and arrested postal and third- party mail providers who were assisting TCOs with surreptitiously moving illegal contraband through the territory to CONUS.

c. Cocaine

(U/FOUO) Cocaine is still the most prevalent drug problem in both PR and USVI. The range of communities suffering the effects of the cocaine trade go from public housing projects (PHPs), lower to middle income households, schools, and tourist areas. The results of these effects stem from the activities of drug trafficking, but also violent gang activities after a rise in violent crime and murders. The PRPB estimates that for 2023 around 45% of the violent murders reported were related to illicit drug trafficking activities **(El Vocero 2023)**. For the past years, the DR has been the major hub controlling the transportation and distribution of cocaine. However, during 2023, law enforcement initiatives have reported a rise in CO and VZ nationals' involvement. In the USVI, TCO's consists of Dominicans, Venezuelans, and locals who are organizing the drug trade. The DEA has reported an 8% increase of new maritime routes where vessels are departing from VZ straight to PR, without

stopping in the DR (**InSight Crime 2022**). After arriving in PR, the cocaine shipment goes to the US east coast, from Florida to New York or to Europe. HSI reported that only 10% to 12% of the drugs that arrive in PR, stays on the island, the rest is being shipped for further distribution (**El Vocero 2023**). Based on government indices, cocaine flow through the Caribbean Region in FY23 was 956 metric tons.

i. Availability

(U/FOUO) Cocaine is readily available in PR and the USVI, causing a price reduction per kilogram. PR and the USVI, being territories of the US, facilitates the sale of cocaine in these areas and secondary movement to CONUS. Cocaine’s high demand and the recent reduction of the price per kilogram, enables the retail sale of these drugs throughout PHPs, neighborhoods, rural areas, tourist areas and cities. Cocaine arrives in the USVI in bulk quantities. It's then transported to PR in various quantities by maritime conveyances. It is estimated that the cocaine market is generating millions of dollars in illicit proceeds and continues to fuel the subterranean economy.

ii. Use

(U/FOUO) The use of cocaine continues to be a prevalent problem in the communities of both territories. According to law enforcement, 20 to 30% of the drug flow through PR remains in the island for local consumption. HIDTA initiatives have reported a resurgence in the acceptance of cocaine use is occurring between young adults to 35-year-olds. As a result, this is increasing the demand and availability of cocaine, provoking addiction, and fueling violence. Periodically, the USVI experiences an uptick in violent crimes, a lot of which is attributed to the drug trade. To combat the crime wave in the USVI HIDTA partners established an ad-hock task force to investigate and mitigate the threat. LEAs indicate that drug addiction is intricately linked to the crime rate and violence in PR.

iii. Price (PR & USVI)

Cocaine Prices in PR

Kilogram
\$10,000 – \$12,000

Cocaine Prices in USVI

Island	Kilogram
St. Thomas	\$9,000 - \$9,500
St. Croix	\$13,000 - \$15,000

d. Opioids

(U/FOUO) The opioid crisis is heavily affecting the region. It is estimated that 70,000 people in PR are addicted to opioids and around \$3 million dollars per day is spent on illicit drugs (Narconon.org 2024). The combination of its availability (both legal and illegal), pricing and the long-standing history it has on the area, poses a threat to the communities of both PR and USVI. The abuse of controlled prescription medications is an ongoing problem in PR. Fentanyl use has also increased and is now considered a threat to the public. The DEA has been warning of Fentanyl's threat to the region for the past two years. The production of Fentanyl in the US has increased, with Mexico (MX) and CO also manufacturing this opioid. Fentanyl is smuggled to PR and the USVI via parcel services, from the US and MX. Fentanyl is used as a cutting agent to increase the cocaine proceeds. For people addicted to opioids, the use of Fentanyl prolongs the effect of the original drug.

(U/FOUO) According to HIDTA initiatives, heroin is no longer the biggest opioid threat, ranking it in 5th place and placing Fentanyl as the 3rd in the scale of drug threats in the area, increasing the threat in the region. Additionally, Xylazine has become a common tranquilizer used alongside Fentanyl. Xylazine, also a cutting agent, marketability has increased its presence in the drug market through veterinary suppliers. According to PR's Institute of Forensic Sciences, from January 2022 to September 15, 2023, 1,071 deaths caused by intoxication were reported, and of that number, 900 of them tested positive for Fentanyl, representing 84%. In 2022, 23% of powder Fentanyl seized contained Xylazine, and over 7% of Fentanyl pills contained Xylazine. **(DEA.GOV Alerts Report 2022)** In 2023, PR's Institute of Forensic Sciences reported 299 deaths by intoxication cases where 259 tested positive for the presence of Fentanyl in the system, marking 86.6%. Additionally, 66 of these intoxication deaths tested positive for Xylazine. PR/VI HIDTA initiatives report that, as a direct result of the increase in deaths, TCOs are opting for alternatives as cutting agents since they are losing customers. Fentanyl in powder form is less expensive than cocaine, retailing from \$6 to \$20 US Dollars (USD). Additionally, the production cost of Fentanyl is low, making it accessible for TCOs to order the chemicals and create clandestine laboratories around the region.

i. Availability

(U/FOUO) The illicit supply of opioids stems from physicians over prescribing. The illicit supply of opioids stems from “doctor shopping”, which consists of obtaining prescriptions from several doctors, purchasing on the black market, or simply taking medications from others. HIDTA initiatives have reported that, in PR, minors from middle school to high school partake in taking medications from parents or other family members and share pills between each other.

ii. Use

(U/FOUO) The versatility of Fentanyl, includes this substance being found and produced as powder, liquid, and solid form. Seizures in HIDTA PR/VI have found Fentanyl in either pill or powder form. DEA reporting states that even though liquid Fentanyl is the most undetectable form, its production is not cost effective, hence TCOs are exporting pills. TCOs are also mixing Fentanyl in cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamines, unbeknownst to most drug users. The biggest threat being with injectable drugs, such as heroin, since, in most cases Fentanyl goes completely undetected. The Central for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Institute on Drug Abuse have alerted the population that the mixture of cocaine and Fentanyl is the deadliest. Cocaine increases the need for oxygen, and Fentanyl depresses the respiratory system. In PR, Fentanyl seizures have gone up at an alarming rate in local and federal prisons with inmates using Fentanyl for personal use and to commit homicides by forceful injection. The PR Fusion Center (PRFC) reported that 0.42% of Fentanyl seizures came from the Guayama correctional complex; 0.30% from the Ponce correctional complex; and 0.10% from Aguadilla and Bayamon prisons. This has resulted in 89 deaths by Fentanyl intoxications in PR’s prisons between 2019 - 2022.

iii. Price (PR & USVI)

Opioid Prices in PR

Drug	Price	Measurement
Fentanyl	\$40,000 - \$60,000	kilogram
Heroin-laced fentanyl	\$2,000	gram
Fentanyl-laced pill	\$3	price per pill
Counterfeit Fentanyl Pills	\$6	price per pill
Xylazine	\$200 - \$500	vial

iv. Transportation

(U/FOUO) The main transportation of opioids occurs through the mail. TCOs find it faster and more convenient since opioids are often concealed inside comingled shipments. For Fentanyl, its pill form is the standard unit. TCOs wrap Fentanyl pills in various layers of plastic wrap and foam, while mixing in household cleaning products to mask the scent. Conversely, Xylazine is not manufactured nor packaged in PR, meaning that this opioid is also being delivered through mail. The DEA’s Caribbean Division reported that the main sources for Xylazine shipments come from the DR, MX, and Argentina. However, contrary to Fentanyl, there is a licit market of Xylazine through the veterinary supplies stores that are later deterred for illegal distribution. As a result, this makes the availability of Xylazine much higher and its retail price to be lower and accessible.

12. Marijuana

(U/FOUO) Marijuana continues to be widely available in the Caribbean. It continues to be a Schedule 1 substance under the Controlled Substance Act (CSA), meaning that it has a high potential for abuse, now currently accepted use in treatment, and a lack of accepted safety for use under medical supervision (**DEA Fact Sheet, 2022**). Legislation for recreational use of marijuana in the USVI territory has been approved and the territory continues to develop a regulatory committee to monitor dispensary licensing and compliance. In PR, medical marijuana is legal for legitimate medical purposes, but illegal for recreational purposes.

i. Availability

(U/FOUO) Marijuana is readily available in both PR and the USVI. In PR, marijuana is commonly sold across the island to include residential, school, and business districts. To a lesser degree, high grade marijuana has been imported to the region from Arizona and California among other states. In the USVI, the recent trend shows that marijuana is sold in larger quantities for street distribution. Nationally marijuana was the fifth most reported drug by federal laboratories, representing 5%, behind methamphetamine, cocaine, and heroin. Marijuana being imported via private and USPS couriers continues to be seized by initiatives conducting ongoing federal investigations. Marijuana production in the USVI is home grown in the remote areas of St. Thomas and St. Croix. Working closely with the USPS, HIDTA has made marijuana seizures from parcels arriving and departing the jurisdictions.

(U/FOUO) Cannabidiol (CBD) oil is also a growing market in the USVI. Due to the legalization in other states, CBD is now being sold in pharmacies, gas stations, and other retail outlets. Currently, cannabis and its products, are legal in the USVI. CBD is an approved prescription drug which is legal under the CSA.

ii. Use

(U/FOUO) Marijuana use throughout PR and the USVI remains constant. Recent legislation approving recreational use in the USVI poses a new problem in the territory. The federal laws do not recognize marijuana as an acceptable drug for social use, yet the local law does. As a result, local seizure, arrest, and prosecution of marijuana has decreased, yet federal cases centered around importation into the territories continue.

(U//FOUO) Throughout the PR and USVI territories, marijuana is packaged in small plastic zip-lock bags or plastic vials for street sale. Large quantities are wrapped in plastic cellophane, then in plastic tape and waterproofed, as needed.

iii. Price

Contraband	Pound	Ounce	Bag/Vial
Marijuana	\$1,200 - \$2,500 USD	-	\$5 - \$25 USD
High Grade	\$5,000 - \$6,000 USD	-	-

Transportation

(U//FOUO) Transportation of marijuana into and out of the PR/VI territory has primarily been by USPS and private mail carriers. TCOs actively ship high grade marijuana from California, Arizona, Texas, and other places to PR and USVI. CBP routinely intercepts many of those outbound and inbound parcels while in transit. At times, investigators can develop enough intelligence to expand the investigation leading to the identity of the shipper and or the intended recipient. *An intelligence gap for the PRVI HIDTA is knowing how much of the locally grown marijuana is distributed to other islands in the Eastern Caribbean, and onward to the CONUS.*

13. Methamphetamine

(U//FOUO) Historically, methamphetamine has not posed a major drug threat in PR or the USVI. HIDTA initiatives continue to investigate TCOs involved in the distribution of methamphetamine, but seizure rates have declined over the past two years. Currently, LEAs seize small shipments coming into the territory from domestic locations.

i. Availability

(U//FOUO) Drug poisoning deaths and seizures involving methamphetamine have risen sharply as Mexican TCOs increase the drug's availability and expand the domestic market. (<http://DEA.gov>. **2022 National Drug Threat Assessment, page 1**) Although domestic production of methamphetamine has been decreasing, its production in MX has been increasing, as they shift to alternative methods requiring chemicals that are easier to obtain.

ii. Use

(U//FOUO) In 2021, over 2.5 million Americans had used methamphetamine. (**2021 National Survey on Drug Use & Health, pg. 1**). In contrast, the use of methamphetamine in PR and the USVI is low. Past methamphetamine seizures were in small quantities, and after further investigation, it was determined that it had been imported from

CONUS for arranged deals. There was no evidence that large quantities of methamphetamine have ever been imported. Counterdrug intelligence suggests that individuals in St. Thomas have made attempts to manufacture methamphetamine in rural parts of the island, but there has never been a fully functional lab discovered. *An intelligence gap for the PR/VI HIDTA is fully understanding why drug users find opioids more appealing to use than methamphetamine.*

iii. Price

Contraband	Kilogram	Ounce	Gram
Methamphetamine	-	\$1,000 – \$2,000 USD	-

6. Drug Trafficking Organizations

i. Overview

(U/FOUO) The greatest threat to the PR/VI HIDTA is the ability of TCOs to move bulk cocaine loads through the territory. Colombian TCOs are the primary suppliers of cocaine for the region. Dominican TCOs are the primary transportation organizations through the region and onward to other markets. The opioid threat has emerged as the second largest threat due to the volatility of the drugs such as Fentanyl and heroin laced with Xylazine. Marijuana has remained a steady threat, with loads being mailed into the territory from Arizona and California among other states. Recently, the Government of the USVI approved legislation to legalize recreational use of marijuana. The USVI has seen a significant increase in the consumption of edibles laced with marijuana. As a result, we have seen a significant increase in non-fatal overdose events in schools. Finally, methamphetamine continues to be a threat in the PR/VI HIDTA region. DEA intelligence indicates that there is not a big appetite for methamphetamine in the territory, but it continues to be sold in the Ponce area.

a. International TCOs**i. Identified International TCO Characteristics**

International TCOs Identified by PR/USVI HIDTA	
Characteristics	
Total International TCOs	69
Dominican	23
Puerto Rican	18
Colombian	22
Venezuelan	5
Total Members (594 members) (88 leaders)	594 (88)
Average TCO size	9
Multi-ethnic	0
Gang Related	11
Violent	30
Polydrug	9
Money Laundering Activities	4
Federal Case Designations	
OCDETF	13
CPOT	2
RPOT	3
PTO	0

ii. Affiliations and Membership

(U//FOUO) Colombian TCOs are the primary suppliers of illegal drugs that flow through the PR/VI HIDTA region, and DR TCOs continue to dominate the transportation cells in the region. These networks have vessels capable of moving drug shipments between islands while avoiding LE assets. Puerto Rican TCOs control distribution of cocaine, heroin, marijuana, and opioids throughout the island, but they have strong relationships with Dominican and Colombian suppliers. LEAs routinely seize large cocaine loads transiting directly from CO to PR and the USVI. Recent seizures have been over 1,000 kilograms per shipment, indicating the trend has changed.

iii. Activities and Methods

(U//FOUO) International TCOs continue to exploit maritime routes from SA to smuggle cocaine and heroin into PR and the USVI. Money couriers have also demonstrated their ability to navigate illicit cargo through the territory. Traditional trafficking patterns

consist of TCO’s moving drug loads north through the PR/VI region, while other TCO’s move drug proceeds south through the region in route to the source countries of CO, VZ, and others.

b. Multi-State/Regional TCOs

i. Overview

(U/FOUO) Regional TCOs in the PR/VI HIDTA AOR have demonstrated the ability to coordinate drug deals with organizations from neighboring countries, like the BVI, St. Marteen, and the DR. A great deal of these regional organizations are polydrug distributors who sell cocaine, crack, heroin, and marijuana. They tend to maintain a customer base in the USVI, and the outlying islands of PR.

ii. Affiliations and Membership

(U/FOUO) Regional TCOs are typically comprised of Puerto Rican, Venezuelan and Dominican dealers in PR. In the USVI, these organizations are typically comprised of Dominican and Virgin Islander members. In both territories, these members can communicate and coordinate with TCOs from neighboring countries to procure drug loads.

iii. Activities and Methods

(U/FOUO) Regional TCOs in the PR/VI HIDTA AOR typically procure drug loads from neighboring countries and islands for resale in PR and the USVI. Regional TCOs operating in the USVI typically have Dominican counterparts, whereas in PR, these TCOs tend to be comprised of Puerto Ricans. Regional TCOs use speedboats to exploit the maritime routes and move their product from island to island. Regional TCOs are also prone to violence to protect their loads and territories.

Multi-State TCOs Identified by PR/USVI HIDTA	
Characteristics	
Total multi-state TCOs	18
Total Members (174 members) (19 leaders)	174 (19)
Average TCO Size	10
Gang Related	1
Violent	12

Federal Case Designations	
OCDETF	2
CPOT	0
RPOT	0
PTO	0

c. Local TCOs

i. Overview

(U//FOUO) Drug traffickers operating on local land conduct cocaine smuggling operations in PR PHPs, and in the tourist areas in the USVI. They have access to major TCOs where they can purchase drugs that are high quality. TCOs looking to profit in the drug trade have proven that they will resort to violence to protect their interests.

Local TCOs Identified by PR/USVI HIDTA	
Characteristics	
Total Local TCOs	143
Puerto Ricans	52
Dominicans (residing in PR)	23
Caribbean	11
Total Members (1405 members) (217 Leaders)	1,405 (217)
Average TCO size	10
Multi-ethnic	0
Gang Related	50
Violent	92
Polydrug	42
Money Laundering Activities	19
Federal Case Designations	
OCDETF	12
CPOT	0
RPOT	0
PTO	0

ii. Affiliations and Membership

(U//FOUO) Local TCOs compete to sell cocaine, marijuana, and other illegal drugs in both the USVI and PR. Local traffickers have gained access to illicit opioids in the region. HIDTA initiatives in the USVI and PR have seized Fentanyl and arrested the traffickers responsible for it.

iii. **Activities and Methods**

(U/FOUO) Local traffickers are considered polydrug traffickers because they have demonstrated a pattern of selling cocaine, marijuana, and opioids in the tourist areas of the USVI as well as in PR. They sell these drugs in the public housing communities of PR as well. The threat of violence continues to expand as TCOs continue to sell illicit drugs on the streets of PR and the USVI. The violence is typically associated with territory wars where TCOs fight to sell their product in what they consider target-rich environments. Local traffickers typically oversee all phases of their drug operation, from acquiring the drugs, to securing, transporting, and distributing it in the communities.

7. Violence Associated with Drug Trafficking in the Region

(U/FOUO) Each year, TCO's smuggle drugs and other commodities through the Eastern Caribbean region, straight on to CONUS and European markets. DR and PR represent the beginning of the secondary flow. This huge importation of cocaine into our region fuels most of the violence the territories suffer from. Local drug trafficking organizations fight to protect their market. They often have shoot outs on the streets of PR and USVI, sometimes murdering innocent bystanders. In addition, carjackings' and robberies are additional consequences of the drug trade. This level of violence affects and reduces the quality of life for the citizens in the region, and negatively impacts tourism because potential visitors do not feel safe to travel to the region.

(U/FOUO) In 2023, overall violence in the PR/VI HIDTA region decreased slightly. In 2022, there were 37 homicides in the USVI, and that number rose to 39 in 2023. In PR, there were 567 homicides in 2022, but decreased to 468 in 2023. The PRPB reported 19,444 arrests in 2023. These statistics reflect the trend indicating that violence at the national level decreased in 2023. According to the Associated Press, in 2023, the homicide rate decreased by 13% in CONUS, while overall violent crimes decreased by 6%. (**ASSOCIATED PRESS, March 2023.**)

(U/FOUO) One of the greatest threats to the PR/VI HIDTA region is the importation of fire- arms from the US via private mail couriers, and USPS. Often, a firearms trafficker breaks down the weapon into multiple pieces and mails the parts individually to different people throughout the territory. Once the intended recipient receives all the individual parcels, the weapon is reassembled to its full operational capacity. The USPIS conducted an extensive investigation in 2023 that targeted an organization that made threats to a Postal employee in St. Thomas. This investigation subsequently revealed how traffickers were importing guns into the territory exploiting postal routes from CONUS to the USVI. USPIS made multiple arrests and seized over 40 guns and ammunition. Another significant threat is the fact that weapons are often brought into the territory from foreign islands in the region, mixed with drug consignments. *Intelligence Gap – We do not*

know the full extent of weapon trafficking into PR and the USVI, but through inter-agency cooperation, we are building out that picture.

(U/FOUO) Internationally, once weapons are seized, law enforcement personnel coordinates with ATF to trace their origin. In 2022, ATF traced more than 623,654 weapons through their NIBIN system (**ATF.GOV, 2022 Fact Sheet**). ATF traced 487,741 weapons in 2023. Nationwide, ATF initiated approximately 34,436 firearms cases in 2022. In 2023, ATF referred 10,138 cases for criminal prosecution.

(U/FOUO) In PR, there is a population of 3.2 million people. In 2022, there were 567 homicides, and in 2023, that number dropped to 468. There were 1,748 guns seized in PR in 2023. The USVI has a population of 87,100 people, and saw 37 homicides in 2022, and 39 in 2023. The VIPD seized 171 guns in 2022, and 178 in 2023. Based on credible intelligence, much of the violence throughout the territory is fueled by the drug trade.

8. Money Laundering Organizations

a. Overview

(U/FOUO) PR's economy is still fragile, providing fertile ground for illicit financial activity. Nonetheless, there are positive economic elements worth mentioning. Unemployment is still high at 5.7 % (January 2024), but lower than the long-term average of 14.18% of previous years. Official sources indicate the public debt has been restructured from \$70 billion to a sustainable \$37 billion. Despite those positive factors, PR continues showing a high percentage of its population (41.7 %) lives below the federal poverty level. On the other hand, USVI has a 22.4 % poverty rate, and the unemployment rate is about 3.4%, also better than previous years.

(U/FOUO) The economies of the US territories (PR and USVI) offer back door points of access into the stream of commerce of the US and its financial system. Many consider PR as a tax haven, including investors, lawyers, hedge funders, and cryptocurrency millionaires. Many wealthy US citizens and residents continue taking advantage of what is known as Act 60 to evade taxes. PR Act 60 is a tax incentive designed to draw wealthy individuals to relocate to PR and boost the island's economic activity. The benefits are available to both foreigners and U.S. citizens, but to be eligible individuals must spend at least 183 days a year in PR and must not have another tax home outside of PR. Individuals are exempt from PR income taxes from proceeds derived from dividends and interest and from short- term and long-term capital gains after an individual becomes a legal resident of the U.S. territory. According to open-source information, the US Internal Revenue Service (IRS) identified approximately 100 individuals, including crypto traders and fund managers suspected of illegally claiming PR's tax benefits. The PR government is cooperating with the IRS in their efforts to identify individuals abusing these benefits.

(U//FOUO) Many of these benefits extend to residents of PR engaged in cryptocurrency activities. PR residents are subject to a 0% tax on cryptocurrency (individuals need to satisfy some conditions related to presence in PR to be considered “resident”). This includes profits from cryptocurrency disposals as well as income from staking and mining for individuals. Because of this situation, PR is home to one of the world’s most active crypto communities thanks to tax-friendly incentives. This appearance of tax heaven promotes illicit financial activities in the region. The USVI also offers lucrative tax incentives, especially to companies relocating to the USVI, with tax benefits lasting 20 to 30 years depending on the amount of investment and location.

b. Money Laundering Trends and Patterns

(U//FOUO) One of the highest threat priorities for the PR/VI HIDTA AOR is the exploitation of financial institutions. This includes money service businesses (MSBs), depository institutions, and the use of the dark web. Complex and sophisticated, Third- Party Money Laundering (3PML), as well as Trade Based Money Laundering (TBML) schemes remain significant threats in the area. The Black-Market Peso Exchange (BMPE), bank fraud, structuring, and tax evasion also continue as recurrent illicit activities in the AOR. Cryptocurrency activities are now widely established in the money laundering schemes and activities in the region.

(U//FOUO) Public corruption, at diverse levels within the PR and USVI government agencies, continues promoting different schemes to circumvent and exploit the US and PR financial systems. Unethical officials (actively and passively) and fraudulent schemes in furtherance of illicit finance and money laundering activity have been identified within PR Department of Motor Vehicles, and PR Nutritional Assistance Programs, among others. Also, during this period there has been an increase in referrals associated with fraud related to the Cares Act, Small Business Administration (SBA) Economic Disaster Loan (EIDL). Additionally, financial exploitation of elderly persons is on the rise.

(U//FOUO) TCOs and MLOs top-command and control/management personnel are located and operate in SA. Most TCO/MLO brokers are based in CO with supply chains involving smuggling services of smaller criminal cells located throughout the PR/VI HIDTA AOR. Countries that are command and control elements in the AOR are: CO, VZ, Panama, and DR. Similarly, the nationalities involved or whose presence is well known within the MLOs operating in the region are US, DR, VZ, the BVI, and the Netherland Antilles. The purchase of assets under the name of straw owners to avoid detection of illicit assets and proceeds continues as a frequent practice. This includes purchases of high value assets on behalf of convicted felons and high-ranking members of TCOs.

(U/FOUO) Money service businesses and depository institutions continue to be the largest point of entry into the PR/VI banking system. Cyber-criminals continue to operate from a covert posture on the dark web. Like the traditional black money market peso transaction coordination, virtual currency movement show Colombian brokers favoring the utilization of cryptocurrency for the movement of illicit funds. Traditional money pickup operations are shifting towards crypto transactions whereas cryptocurrency wallet addresses are provided for continuing further transactions. More than 90% of the money picked up involved cryptocurrency. The use of cryptocurrencies by criminal organizations and individuals attempting to exploit the US financial system in the PR/VI HIDTA AOR is no longer an emerging threat but a well-established trend. Local criminal enterprises and TCOs are shifting their money laundering activities to include some sort of cryptocurrency activity associated with their money laundering schemes.

(U/FOUO) Most utilized brokers for movement of cryptocurrency in the AOR are based in CO. At present, the known proceeds and movement of cryptocurrencies are traced back to that country. Brokers from the DR have recently been involved in the operation of cryptocurrencies. Shell company financial accounts are utilized for the covert funneling and concealment of the proceeds. TCOs utilize networks of cryptocurrency wallets to layer the funds on multiple levels before introducing the proceeds back into international commerce to make it difficult for LEAs to track and trace the illegal proceeds to the criminal actions or origins that generated those proceeds. The use of tumblers and mixing services (a service that mixes potentially identifiable or "tainted" cryptocurrency funds with others) are frequently used to obscure tracing techniques to the funds original source. Privacy coins such as Monero, Dash and Cash provide anonymity. The most usual form of currency being sent is Tether (USDT/ the most used coin). USDT is linked to the USD. Tether is called a "stablecoin" because it was originally designed to always be worth \$1.00 USD, maintaining \$1.00 in reserves for each Tether issued. Recent activity confirms the laundering of money from narcotics proceeds in cryptocurrency.

(U/FOUO) Reliance on cryptocurrency continues to be a major threat because it provides a high degree of privacy, though blockchain technology used in cryptocurrencies is not 100% anonymous. The rapid development of cryptocurrency in PR, and the lack of adequate and/or enough oversight and controls to minimize the illicit use of cryptocurrency, represent both a threat and challenge to federal and local LEAs in the region.

(U/FOUO) Investigations under the auspices of the HIDTA Caribbean Money Anti-Money Laundering Agency (CMLA) initiative continues reporting, substantial wire transfer activity in and out of high interest countries such as VZ, China, and DR. Wide use of wire transfers to other high-risk jurisdictions in the region such as, Panama, CO, Tortola in the

BVI, have also been observed. In PR many shell companies are open to conduct wire transfers of high monetary value because of the PR Law 60-2019. The ability for MLOs to hide their illegal proceeds using the accounts owned/controlled by shell companies in the AOR is extremely high. Currently, there are thousands of corporations listed in the Commonwealth of PR's Department of State, that are believed to be shell companies. Money laundering investigations identified shell companies in Panama City, Panama; CO; Lima, Peru; Carabobo, VZ; San Roman Puno, Paraguay; and CONUS, in the states of South Carolina, Florida, New Jersey, and New York.

(U/FOUO) International Banking Entities (IBEs) and the International Financial Entities (IFE) activities continue to represent a risk of illicit finance activities in PR and the USVI as well as a threat to the US financial system. These financial entities behave and perform many of the functions of American chartered banks (and yet, legally, are not officially "banks"), offering the potential of a high-volume point of entry or intake for proceeds of dubious origin. The lack of federal functional regulators promotes numerous violations to the Bank Secrecy Act (BSA). In September 2023, the US Department of the Treasury's Financial Crimes Enforcement Network ("FinCEN") announced a \$15 million civil money penalty against a Puerto Rican International Banking Entity ("IBE"), *Bancrédito* International Bank and Trust Corporation ("*Bancrédito*"). The penalty was based on multiple violations of the BSA, including Suspicious Activity Reporting Violations, and Anti Money Laundering Program Violations. This specific IBE frequently served high-risk customers. FinCEN identified hundreds of millions of dollars in suspicious transactions on which the IBE failed to report, including large international wire transfers. Many of the suspicious activities identified in these entities include the wiring of funds through shell company held accounts in a foreign jurisdiction. Individuals, organizations and IFEs identified in money laundering and tax evasion schemes in the PR/USVI are, on many instances, facilitators for numerous clients around the world. The suspicious financial activities observed in the IFEs and IBEs are on many occasions intrinsically associated to 3PML and TBML schemes.

(U/FOUO) The proliferation of third-party money laundering schemes continues to rise. Analysis of financial data indicates 3PMLs employed by MLOs are using multiple domestic offshore and foreign shell corporations, as well as funnel bank accounts, to move vast amounts of illicit drug trade proceeds by employing sophisticated TBML/BMPE schemes. Investigations of the 3PML in the AOR include the use of front businesses allegedly engaged in real estate for the laundering of drug related proceeds. Also observed during this period is the use of the auto industry (auto dealers) involved in money laundering schemes.

(U/FOUO) There is a significant TBML threat to the AOR particularly when merchandise is exported into narcotic source-countries such as MX and CO. Historically, TBML

schemes in the PR/USVI area include the sale of auto parts, motor vehicles, transportation businesses, importation of foreign cigarettes, smuggling of counterfeit prophylactics, and pharmaceuticals, among others. TBML also profits in the transport and trafficking of mis-branded drugs. Current significant trends associated with TBML investigations include misclassification of goods, transshipments through foreign countries and undervalue of goods. During the past year, investigations revealed an uptick of custom fraud investigations that are not necessarily associated with TBML but with white collar. In 2023 there was an increase in investigations associated to renewable energies (i.e., solar panels) as well as construction materials.

(U//FOUO) There is also significant upward trend in investigations involving public safety pharmaceutical drugs. Joint investigation efforts with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) focused on Xylazine diversion. This is a drug used as a prescribed tranquilizer for horses and is being purchased by veterinary related businesses and shipped to the US to be mixed with narcotics.

(U//FOUO) A change in trends and patterns regarding trade base money laundering was observed in this reporting period, identifying an increase of foreign nationals traveling to the U.S. Joint trade investigations with foreign partners are currently focusing on the Free Trade Zones (FTZ), specifically the DR and the Port of Panama, two places in which traditionally investigation have stalled due to the way the FTZ works. However, FTZ remains the number one place to transship and smuggle merchandise.

(U//FOUO) Several investigations have identified the shipment, registration, and sale of stolen vehicles, including luxury vehicles from CONUS that are imported to PR and USVI. Due to a lack of a good public transportation system, there is a dependency of vehicles. In the absence of a robust verification system of the local authorities makes it easy to register and title-wash stolen vehicles in PR. This scheme continues to be a significant part of TBML and illicit finance schemes in PR and USVI with millions in losses. Particularly USVI is experiencing an increase in this type of scheme associated with luxury vehicles.

(U//FOUO) Bulk cash smuggling activity continues in decline. For FY2023 the Caribbean Border Interagency Group (CBIG) reported \$3,551,139.37 (75% decrease compared to FY2022). Despite this declining trend, in August 2023 there was a significant seizure of almost a million dollars in cash in St. Thomas, USVI, demonstrating that bulk cash smuggling activity is still a concern in the region. The already established use of cryptocurrency in money laundering schemes may be associated with this decline in bulk cash smuggling activity. The use of passengers, USPS and the express consignment industry continue to be utilized to move monetary instruments (cash and money orders) through the region (inbound and outbound). Most of these monetary instruments are associated with drug smuggling activities. *Intelligence Gap –We have yet to identify the subjects and*

organizations behind the emerging cryptocurrency schemes.

9. Investigative Support Center

a. Overview

(U/FOUO) The Investigative Support Center (ISC) provides investigative and intelligence support to the PR/VI HIDTA initiatives and federal and state LEAs in the region. It is a multi-agency center that provides services in intelligence sharing, strategic intelligence, investigative support, deconfliction, and digital forensics analysis.

(U/FOUO) The ISC Watch Center focuses on intelligence sharing with access to numerous commercial and criminal databases available to assist LEAs in their investigations. Through requests for information (RFI), the Watch Center has provided support to thousands of investigations during 2023.

b. Watch Center Statistics

Year	2023
RFIs	1,951
Queries	5,612
Targets	2,407
Positive Targets	169

(U/FOUO) The ISC also provides deconfliction service, which is used to avoid operational conflicts between state and federal LEAs. This service is 24/7, 365 days a year, where agencies report significant upcoming investigative events, such as arrest and search warrants, surveillance, buy-bust operations, and undercover purchases of evidence, among others. The ISC has been a key element in the coordination between agencies to avoid conflict between agencies conducting simultaneous operations within a two-mile radius. Below are the ISC deconfliction statistics for 2023.

c. Event Deconfliction Statists

Year	2023
Reported Operations	2,407
Conflicts Avoided	134

d. Digital Forensic Laboratory

(U/FOUO) The ISC has a Digital Forensics Laboratory, which serves PR/VI HIDTA initiatives and other federal and state LEAs. The ISC has personnel certified in the extraction of mobile devices, used for the collection of intelligence and actionable evidence that can be used during a criminal investigation. The laboratory is designed to extract data from cellphones, storage devices, SIM cards, drones, and GPS devices. During 2023, the Digital Forensics Laboratory conducted 432 extractions, including 17 drones seized by the PR Department of Corrections, in coordination with the DEA Ponce office. The drone extractions were conducted with the assistance of the CBP Center for Air and Maritime Drone Exploitation (CAMDEx) team, working alongside HIDTA ISC laboratory personnel.

10. Outlook

(U/FOUO) Based on the latest trends in trafficking, we believe that drug trafficking and the violence associated with it will continue to expand throughout the 2024 calendar year. Maritime conveyances will continue to facilitate the drug trade, while the USPS as well as private mail carriers will continue to be exploited by TCOs and MLOs. Cocaine production in SA continues to increase. As more cocaine becomes available, TCOs and transportation organizations are moving it north to other countries. As cocaine importation numbers rise, HIDTA enforcement initiatives continue to identify new TCOs and MLOs trafficking trends. These organizations become more resilient resulting in larger amounts of drugs being transported through the region, undetected. This steady increase in flow clearly demonstrates the expansion of the drug threat through the region, and further illustrates the need for our initiatives to develop bilateral investigations with our foreign partners as well as other HIDTA initiatives. Due to our geographic proximity to our British, Dutch, and West Indies counterparts, our working relationships with these foreign LE partners will continue to develop because our targets of interest move between the island chain effortlessly.

(U/FOUO) As the emerging opioid threat continues to expand in both PR and the USVI, we believe our enforcement initiatives will continue to see an increase in Fentanyl seizures than in past years. The Fentanyl threat has continued to expand throughout CONUS, and as its availability continues to rise in PR and USVI, our threat will continue to expand.

(U/FOUO) The recent establishment of the Opioid Initiative will allow the PR/VI HIDTA to focus on the threat in greater detail, and direct resources toward mitigating the threat. In addition, the USPIS recently joined the PR/USVI HIDTA EB. This new relationship allows the PR/VI HIDTA to further align our interdiction priorities and leverage our collective resources from all the participating agencies. The investigative authorities of the USPIS will help expand investigations into criminal organizations exploiting the USPS to move illegal commodities. This will translate into

the seizure of more guns and drugs both inbound and outbound, thus reducing violence and drug addiction in PR and the USVI.

- The addition of USPIS to the EB helps the PR/VI HIDTA further align enforcement priorities, leveraging the authority that USPIS brings to the table.
- The threat of Fentanyl continues to rise in the region, but the establishment of the Opioid Initiative allows the PR/VI HIDTA to direct resources dedicated to attacking the opioid threat.
- Violence continues to pose a major threat to both PR and the USVI. Violence in most cases remains a direct result of the drug trade.
- Maritime routes will continue to facilitate the importation of cocaine from SA through the Eastern Caribbean Region and into PR and the USVI.

11. Appendices

a. Methodology

(U/FOUO) The development of the 2025 TA was a joint effort between HIDTA partners (see list of agencies below). The process began with the issuance of a survey to all the initiatives. The survey was designed to capture a better understanding of the region's most significant threats and identify changes in trends. After collecting the data, the results were analyzed, and a follow-up meeting was scheduled with each initiative supervisor. During those meetings, we were able to narrow down specific information about our regional threats and discuss the role each initiative played in mitigating the threats. We were able to document various responses to the threats, such as prevention approach, interdiction strategies, undercover techniques, intelligence collection and dissemination, technical exploitation. In addition, we thoroughly evaluated PMP data to ensure that initiatives were meeting their performance expectation goals and document their progress toward the threats.

(U/FOUO) The availability statistical data from local LE organizations have vastly improved. To fully understand the severity of the opioid threat, we need to know what type of opioid is being commonly abused, and at what rate are these overdose victims dying because of opioid ingestion. The PR and the USVI Departments of Health keep mortality data and are beginning to separate overdose events from other types of deaths. This is a significant step forward toward our ability to better understand the severity of the opioid threat in the territories.

The following agencies were consulted to develop this Threat Assessment:

- Alianza para un Puerto Rico Sin Drogas (Prevention Initiative PR/USVI HIDTA)
- Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF)
- Customs and Border Protection (CBP)
- Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA)
- Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)
- Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Homeland Security Investigation (ICE- HSI)
- Internal Revenue Service (IRS)
- Joint Inter Agency Task Force South (JIATF-S)
- PR Police Bureau (PRPB)
- PR Police Bureau Joint Forces of Rapid Action (*Fuerzas Unidas de Rápida Acción*, FURA, acronym in Spanish)
- PR Forensics Sciences Institute (*Instituto de Ciencias Forenses*)

- Transportation Security Administration (TSA), Department of Homeland Security (DHS)
- US Postal Inspection Services (USPIS)
- US Virgin Islands Police Department (VIPD)
- US Attorney’s Office (USAO) District of PR
- US Attorney’s Office (USAO) District of the USVI
- US Coast Guard (USCG)
- US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM)
- US Virgin Islands Fusion Center

b. Endnotes

USPIS.GOV, US Postal Inspection 2022 Service Annual Report

EL VOCERO, 2023

INSIGHT CRIME 2022

ASSOCIATED PRESS 2023

DEA.GOV, 2021 National Drug Threat Assessment

NATIONAL SURVEY ON DRUG USE & HEALTH

ATF.GOV, Fact Sheet 2022

DEA Drug Fact Sheet, 2022

DEA.GOV ALERTS REPORT 2022