A division of the U.S. Department of Justice. The DEA’s role is to enforce all laws relating to controlled substances. President Richard Nixon created the agency in 1973 to establish a centralized force to fight “a war on drugs.”

Prior to the establishment of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), a fragmented approach to fighting the “War on Drugs” existed in the United States. The DEA has 227 field offices, 80 offices in 58 countries, and approximately 5,600 Special Agents. Under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Justice, the DEA is the lead agency on the domestic enforcement of drug policy, and tasked with the war on drug smuggling entering the United States borders.

The DEA emerged under an agency reorganization plan signed by President Richard Nixon on March 28, 1973. The plan consolidated and reorganized a federal agency to coordinate the government’s drug control mission. Prior to the development of the DEA, there were several overlapping agencies. Moreover, during that era, the president’s reorganization plan corrected poor unity of command and eliminated multiple agency responsibility for drug law enforcement.

Originally, President Lyndon Johnson, President Nixon's predecessor, consolidated the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (FBN), which had jurisdiction in narcotics and marijuana cases, and the Bureau of Drug Abuse Control (BDAC), which had law enforcement jurisdiction over dangerous drugs, depressants, stimulants, and hallucinogens. These fragmented agencies reorganized under the Justice Department through the creation of the former Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs (BNDD).

Under President Nixon's plan, the Office of Drug Abuse Law Enforcement (ODALE) and the federal offices of BNDD merged to form the current DEA to fight the national and international War on Drugs. Selecting the right special agents to serve in the DEA was of primary importance in establishing the new DEA identity.

Organizational Structure

A Department of Justice law enforcement agency, DEA remains the lead federal agency with jurisdiction for coordinating and managing law enforcement concerning illegal drug use and illicit trafficking. DEA provides a unified management system for the control of illegal substances under federally mandated laws. This agency is responsible for preventing, deterring, and investigating the manufacture and distribution of controlled substances imported to the United States.

The president of the United States appoints the DEA Administrator and the presidential appointment requires the approval of the U.S. Senate. The management structure of DEA includes a deputy...
administrator (DA), chief of operations, chief inspector, assistant administrator for operations support, intelligence division, and human resources division. The budget for DEA exceeds $2 billion. The headquarters for the DEA is located in Quantico, Virginia, near the FBI, and runs its own DEA Academy.

History

Upon its inception in 1973, DEA comprised 1,470 special agents and had an annual budget of $74 million. Ever since, DEA resources have consistently grown in response to the ever-increasing drug problem in the United States. As of 2008, the budget for DEA was $2.4 billion and its special agents numbered 5,235.

The El Paso Intelligence Center (EPIC), established in 1974, evolved out of the need to secure the border and prevent drug trafficking. The EPIC mission is to provide accurate near time or real-time intelligence support to federal, state, local, tribal, and international law enforcement agencies. A host of federal agencies supports the EPIC mission including DEA, FBI, the U.S. Marshal Service, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives, Homeland Security, and many other federal agencies. This intelligence center serves 15 law enforcement agencies, 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Guam. In addition, EPIC supports Canada and foreign counterparts internationally.

The DEA created the highly successful central tactical units (CENTACs) in 1975 that targeted high-level national and international drug trafficking organizations. In 1982, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and DEA merged and integrated their investigative skills. The purpose was to take advantage of DEA street knowledge and incorporate the FBI's expertise in the investigation of money laundering and organized crime. Reorganization also supported the anti-drug effort by increasing available personnel and resources.

DEA established the Mobile Enforcement Team program in 1995 to provide DEA expertise, personnel, and resources to state and local agencies with limited budgets and help arrest drug offenders. More recently, DEA's focus has shifted to disrupting the revenue and financial strength of major drug organizations. In 2007, DEA seized a record $3.5 billion in drug-related assets. Compared, however, to the estimated $65 billion that changes hands for drugs each year in the United States alone, it is clear that drug trafficking remains a thriving business. DEA is currently collaborating with the governments of Mexico, Colombia, and numerous other countries to dismantle drug cartels and prosecute drug offenders.

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DEA Operations

The mission and functional intelligence requirements necessitated the establishment of the Office of Intelligence Headquarters, and the Regional Intelligence Units in domestic and foreign intelligence field offices. DEA intelligence operations include strategic, operational, and tactical functions. Strategic intelligence provides the picture of the entire system in which drugs are cultivated, produced, transported, smuggled, and distributed globally. Operational intelligence engages in analysis of information that supports the structure of criminal enterprises. Tactical intelligence functions support the identification of drug traffickers and point of origin circulation routes of the drug commodities. DEA developed the National Narcotics Intelligence System to enhance cooperation with federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies. It also coordinates the critical gathering of intelligence concerning international narcotics smuggling. Law enforcement intelligence is the vital component for successful strategic and tactical operations. Intelligence analysis of criminal information is a basic requirement for assessing criminal organizations and their related networks and it provides the means to interdict drug smuggling in a systematic manner.

The laboratory analysis of controlled substances, processing chemicals, crime scene investigation, latent fingerprint identification, and photography are at the core of the DEA scientific operation. Additional functional responsibilities include the evaluation of digital computer evidence, monitoring, and processing hazardous waste cleanups and disposal procedures. DEA laboratories can conduct strategic intelligence analysis of seized drugs. Chemically analyzed drugs indicate signatures and purity that may lead to the original source and distributors. The DEA also has a high priority for targeting illegal source targets like clandestine laboratories that produce a variety of illegal drugs for distribution.

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Legitimately manufactured controlled substances for medical and other lawful purposes can be diverted to illegal black markets. The investigation of these diversions come under the authority of the DEA Diversion Investigators (DIs). The DEA estimates that approximately 13,000 physicians or pharmacists may provide opportunities for the criminal diversion of drugs, an easy crime to cover-up. Suspicious fires, burglaries, and robberies can cover record falsification or drug shortages.

DEA special agents investigate conspiracy crimes against high-level drug dealers. The DEA's goal is to dismantle a criminal organization's conspiracy network. Basic objectives include targeting the leadership hierarchy that may not directly participate but is responsible for importing and transporting the drugs. Federal statues define enterprise conspiracy crimes, which include a number of different criminal activities. These enterprise criminal activities include racketeering, such as drug violations, obstruction of justice, and the violation of related federal racketeering statutes. DEA undercover operations are difficult in the United States; internationally they can become very dangerous missions. However, buying drugs in a hand-to-hand transaction is one of the best techniques for gathering evidence on a criminal cartel. Insider information and intelligence can provide insight that is not available through external means.

The preferred undercover operation involves a drug buy, but uses the opportunity to gather intelligence on the drug network. DEA agents make multiple buys; this proves that the purchase is not a onetime lapse event. The deep undercover agent attempts to buy his way up the ladder to the source of supply. The special agent may allow the offender to walk free in order to gain insight into the system and develop investigative leads. Once the confidence is in place, the undercover agent tries to purchase a larger amount of drugs, over the suspect's ability to deliver. This forces the drug offender to travel to their source; surveillance teams follow to obtain further intelligence. Undercover operations offer critical intelligence and criminal prosecutions, but also risk the lives of federal agents, state, and local officers.

Hazards
DEA Special Agent Enrique (Kike) Camarena Salazar's kidnapping and murder over 25 years ago at the hands of a drug cartel continues to reverberate throughout the DEA. The drug cartel criminals injected Salazar with drugs to guarantee he remained conscious during a 30-hour torture session. His body was found near a ranch 60 miles southwest of Guadalajara, Mexico, wrapped in plastic bags. DEA field work is dangerous. Between 1970 and 2008, 82 DEA agents have died in the line of duty.

Major DEA Operations
In 1976 “Operation Trizo” represented one of DEA's first major international efforts to disrupt drug production outside U.S. borders. In collaboration with the Mexican government, helicopters sprayed herbicides onto 22,000 acres of Mexican poppy fields. In addition to reducing the purity of Mexican heroin to its lowest level in seven years, 4,000 arrests were made.

In 1984 a Colombian individual offered to pay cash to a New Jersey chemical company for two metric tons of ether—a chemical used in the manufacture of cocaine. DEA used the opportunity to set up “Operation Scorpion,” a sting in which a fake company filled the ether order. Electronic tracking devices traced the movement of the ether to a remote site in the Colombian jungle. DEA and the Colombian National Police raided the site and discovered a major drug factory capable of producing 20 tons of cocaine per month. The drugs and material destroyed as part of the operation was worth an estimated $1.2 billion.

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“Operation Zorro II” represented the first time that a Colombian drug production cartel and its Mexican distribution organization were targeted concurrently. Involving 10 federal agencies, 42 state and local agencies, and 14 DEA field divisions, the eight-month operation concluded in 1996 with 156 arrests and the seizure of $17 million and 5,600 kilograms of cocaine.

In 1999 “Operation Impunity” targeted all facets of the Amando Carillo-Fuentes drug operations including its headquarters in Mexico, transportation systems, and local distribution centers. DEA arrested 90 members of the operation including three high-level leaders and seized $19 million in currency, 12,434 kilograms of cocaine, and more than 4,800 pounds of marijuana. One year later, “Operation Impunity II” resulted with the arrest of 155 members of the Amando Carillo-Fuentes organization, including the replacement leaders for those arrested in the first operation.

“Operation Conquistador” in 2000 coordinated the efforts of 26 countries in and around the Caribbean Sea to disrupt drug trafficking. With DEA facilitating the exchange of information among the participating countries, “Operation Conquistador” resulted in 2,331 arrests, the destruction of 94 cocaine laboratories, and the seizure of almost 5,000 kilograms of cocaine, 362 metric tons of marijuana, and assets worth $2.2 million.

In a bilateral effort between Mexico and the United States, the 22-month “Operation Deliverance” aimed to dismantle Mexican drug cartels. The operation concluded in June 2010 with 2,266 arrests and the seizure of $154 million, 2.5 tons of cocaine, 1,410 pounds of heroin, and 69 tons of marijuana.

**Criticisms**

Criticism of the DEA include its enforcement policy of focusing on Schedule I drugs like heroin and cocaine. The interception of these drugs at the national borders is presently the DEA’s main priority. DEA also receives criticism for focusing on operations in which it can seize large quantities of drug money and criminal assets. Moreover, others argue that the attack on heroin and cocaine does not deter the widespread use of these drugs. Rather, DEA efforts to restrict the drug supply drive up drug prices and may even cause higher rates of drug-related crime as addicts attempt to support their more expensive habit.

Some professionals suggest that the DEA should focus further attention on marijuana. They claim that DEA policy emphasis detracts from the enforcement of marijuana and crack cocaine. In addition, critics advocate placing more emphasis on prescription opiates that influence recreational drug use. Others argue that the DEA policies interfere with scientific research.

In some criminal cases, the DEA has experienced positive results. Criminal prosecutions, seizures, and financial assets seem impressive. However, in other areas such as strategic objectives the elimination of source and production patterns still remain problematic. Furthermore, the drug problem in the United States has only increased since DEA’s inception, leading some to believe that its resources would be better spent on strategies, such as drug treatment and education, to reduce the demand for drugs.

**Conclusion**

The DEA mission involves stopping the flow of drugs from foreign sources. Furthermore, disrupting the illegal domestic distribution at the highest levels of distribution remains a primary goal. Moreover, this requires assisting state and local police in preventing the entry of drugs into their communities. This mission requires excellent intelligence analysis and coordination. Many DEA special agents continue to volunteer for dangerous assignments and serve with distinction.
See Also:

Further Readings


Baker, Thomas E.
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