The Growth of Synthetic Opioids in the South

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The drug epidemic, driven in large part by the ongoing opioid crisis, continues to ravage tens of thousands of families and communities across the United States. The latest provisional data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, released in September 2018, estimated that more than 71,500 drug overdose deaths occurred nationally between January 2017–January 2018, an increase of 6.6 percent during the same period the previous year, and 31.4 percent higher compared to January 2015–January 2016.1 In the Southern region, drug overdoses were responsible for more than 24,000 deaths in 2017, approximately one-third of the national total.

This SLC Issue Brief reviews the rise of dangerous synthetic opioids, primarily fentanyl, and their evolving role within the broader opioid crisis afflicting the United States. According to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), the popularity of fentanyl and related synthetic opioids will remain unchallenged for the next several years, making it crucial for state and local leaders to understand the extent of the crisis and identify potential solutions for its mitigation.