

## How one machine supercharged illicit drug manufacturing in Mass.

By Hadley Barndollar, MassLive  
Oct. 30, 2024

*Editor's note: The use of pill presses to quickly create dangerous counterfeit pills that kill thousands of Americans annually has skyrocketed in recent years. MassLive conducted a monthslong investigation into what they are, how they caught on and what's being done about them. This is the first story in an ongoing series.*

On a suburban street awash in the fresh green of late May, PJ Susan “Peach” Goldenberg took a pill and never woke up.

The dogs had paced in and out of her bedroom as usual that day. But when her daughter, 20-year-old Carly Goldenberg, pushed open the door, she found her mother face up in bed — foam coming from her mouth, her face swollen and head cocked at an unnatural angle.

Overcome by the discovery, she ran into the front yard of their South Hadley home screaming “bloody murder.” It was warm that day, she remembered, on the cusp of summer weather.

Living with chronic pain, Peach Goldenberg, 57, had taken a counterfeit oxycodone pill sold to her by a stranger she met over text messages, [prosecutors say](#). What she thought was a legitimate pain medication turned out to be metonitazene, a synthetic opioid more potent than fentanyl.

Pills like the one police say killed Goldenberg — a musician, Christian and compassionate mother described as “so lively” — are now being produced all over Massachusetts, according to officials.

They’re made using pill presses.

Little known to the public, the machines — which compress powder into tablets — are used covertly in neighborhoods of all types to make potentially death-dealing fentanyl and methamphetamine pills by the tens of thousands, virtually indistinguishable from pharmaceutical-grade oxycodone, Adderall or Xanax.

“I think about her ghost waking up over her body thinking, ‘What have I done?’” Carly Goldenberg said of her mom. “I think she, in the afterlife, will forever be remorseful for making the decision.”

The rapidly expanding use of pill presses in recent years has brought mass drug production, often thought of as something that happens far away or in other countries, into residential neighborhoods in Massachusetts and across the nation.

Last year in the commonwealth, 2,125 people are believed to have died from opioid-related overdoses. Nationally, drug overdoses kill more than 100,000 people per year.

And the crisis makes millions for illicit drug manufacturers.

Pill presses have historically had legitimate uses in the pharmaceutical profession and by people who make their own dietary supplements, such as bodybuilders or naturopaths. The machines themselves are legal in the U.S., largely unregulated and available for purchase online.

But in recent years, they’ve emerged as a tool for drug traffickers to swiftly feed the counterfeit pill market, while maximizing their profits and hooking a wider customer base outside of injection drug users. Establishing a pill press operation takes little expertise and just a handful of additional materials that can be obtained via the dark web.

“Now we’re seeing 80 to 90% of houses (we investigate) have pill presses,” said Noah Herzon, assistant special agent in charge with the DEA’s New England Division. “Almost everyone has a pill press now and it’s profit driven. It’s, ‘If I buy the finished product in Mexico, I have to spend money for them to press the pill. Well, why would I do that when I can just press the pill myself?’”

MassLive conducted a monthslong investigation into the prevalence of pill presses across the commonwealth — where the opioid death rate has at points been among the highest in the nation — and examined how the machine has transformed the domestic illicit drug market.

It’s both a local and national issue. As of July 31, the most recent data available, the Department of Homeland Security [had seized over 2,200 pill presses nationwide](#) since October 2023. The total for [the 12-month span before that](#) was 3,430.

By analyzing court records and law enforcement communications back to 2019, MassLive identified [at least 25 cases in the state](#) involving or suspected to involve a pill press. There are likely many more.

Over the past few years, investigations and seizures have occurred in cities and towns, including Saugus, Worcester, Greenfield, Lynn, Foxborough, Longmeadow, Stoughton, Whitman and Natick.

“This is lurking in the shadows of every community in our county,” Hampden County District Attorney Anthony Gulluni said.

## **‘There is fentanyl in literally everything’**

For teens and young people who are going to take drugs in social settings or at parties no matter what, Herzon had a candid message: “Anything but pills.”

What makes the pill crisis especially jarring is that people can suffer deadly overdoses after taking what they thought was one thing but turned out to be another. Counterfeits are regularly sold on Snapchat, Instagram, TikTok or Craigslist and on the street. Some drug trafficking organizations run [fake online pharmacies](#).

Herzon and others warned that any pill today that does not come directly from a prescribing doctor and legitimate pharmacy is likely fentanyl.

“In past generations, it’s been safer to experiment with substances, and it’s just not safe anymore,” said Caroline Root, a prevention coordinator for the Worcester County District Attorney’s Office who works with youth. “There is fentanyl in literally everything.”

Two milligrams of the synthetic opioid — the approximate size of Lincoln’s head on a penny — is considered a potentially lethal dose. The DEA’s [2024 National Drug Threat Assessment](#) showed approximately seven in 10 counterfeit pills today contain that amount, based on forensic laboratory analysis.

In 2023, the DEA seized more than 80 million counterfeit pills containing fentanyl nationwide.

Research published this year [in The New England Journal of Medicine](#) found an average of 22 adolescents ages 14 to 18 died in the U.S. each week in 2022 from drug overdoses, driven by fentanyl in counterfeit pills.

It's estimated that [more than 300,000 young people](#) under the age of 18 have an opioid use disorder.

"Fentanyl is so cheap and so addictive that folks have incorporated it into everything," said Joseph Janezic, who oversees narcotics prosecutions for the Suffolk County District Attorney's Office. "You're getting a more potent product and you're bringing more people in to be buyers and users."

There's also a market of people who actively use counterfeit pills because of the portability, discreetness and longer effects than injection drug use, said Kyle Harrington, harm reduction training manager for [Tapestry Health](#), a community-based health care organization in Western Massachusetts.

Because counterfeit pills aren't "homogenized" like pharmaceutical-grade prescriptions, their potency is unknown each time someone takes one. Harm reduction advocates like Harrington urge people who use pills to engage in [drug checking](#) — a practice that allows people to see what substances are in their supply. Massachusetts has [a community drug-checking system](#) with locations across the state.

Dr. Ruth Potee, an addiction medicine doctor who works with the Behavioral Health Network, Baystate Health and Franklin County House of Corrections, said many of her patients who are regular injection drug users avoid counterfeit pills specifically because of the unpredictability.

"In some ways, they actually have more faith in what is out there from their local dealer that's in a powder in a little baggie," she said. "They understand the coloring of it, the volume of it, the potency of it. With the pills, they have no idea what's in that stuff and they feel as if they can't tell the strength of it."

Potee sees counterfeit pills targeting more of the "unsuspecting crowd," including individuals with chronic pain who have been cut off by doctors from legitimate painkillers.

## How pill presses work — and how they caught on

Inside Herzon's office at the John F. Kennedy Federal Building at Boston's Government Center, a 300-pound pill press machine sat on a dolly. The sleek metal contraption, labeled with Chinese characters, had been seized by the DEA before a suspect began using it.

Herzon was adept at discussing the topic. Counterfeit pills have become the DEA's daily reality.

He said the machines, which are stealthy-looking and eerie, are almost always destroyed immediately after being discovered by police because they are highly contaminated.

On a June day, he walked a reporter and photographer through the manufacturing process. The operator would need a binding agent, such as baby powder, acetaminophen or creatine, to combine with the cutting agent — fentanyl or methamphetamine in most cases.

Pill presses themselves are legal, but counterfeit molds — called dies — that shape pills and stamp symbols to mimic legitimate prescriptions aren't. An "M-30" die, for example, stamps pills with what appears to be a 30-milligram oxycodone marking. On the streets, these have names like "M30s" or "blues."

A person can face criminal charges for possessing a counterfeit die. In May, a Lawrence man connected with a pill press operation in Lynn [was indicted in federal court](#) for retrieving a package from China containing a die set, court documents show.

Most pill presses and die sets today are purchased through China-based suppliers that operate through encrypted communication apps and take cryptocurrency as payment. Under [the U.S. Controlled Substances Act](#), people who buy pill presses are supposed to notify the DEA of their purchase and intentions (medical, scientific, etc.). But drug traffickers circumvent that process, and the law doesn't have any teeth to make them do otherwise.

Leaning forward on his large wooden desk with a view over the city, Herzon pulled up side-by-side photos on his computer of two pills — one real oxycodone and one counterfeit. For the average person, determining which was fake would be nearly impossible. A lab test would be needed.

Pills can be made in any color, and when holidays come around, some even look like Easter or Valentine's Day candy. Last year, authorities in Lynn orchestrated what was believed to be one of the largest single-location seizures in New England history that included [20 pounds of pink heart-shaped fentanyl-laced pills](#).

In 2021, the DEA [issued its first public safety alert](#) in six years, warning about an “alarming increase in the lethality and availability” of counterfeit pills, coinciding with the illicit drug market’s transition to domestic pill presses.

Pills used to arrive in the U.S. from Mexico as finished products, ready to be sold at the street level and on social media apps. But drug trafficking organizations, especially those at the end of the distribution line in New England, were paying for that.

They figured out they could increase their profit margins by instead manufacturing pills where they are — in living rooms, bathrooms and basements across Massachusetts — using loose fentanyl from Mexico.

Massachusetts State Police said they started seeing small, manual pill presses with lower-quality production capability about four years ago. Now, the presses are often automated, dramatically accelerating the rate of manufacturing and creating a better all-around pill.

Motorized pill presses can produce anywhere between 1,800 and 20,000 pills per hour. U.S. Customs and Border Protection has referenced larger, industrial-scale pill presses that can produce more than one million in an hour.

“It’s a pretty unbelievable machine that it can make that many pills so quickly,” Herzon said. “(Manufacturers) can just run it 24 hours a day, seven days a week.”

He lamented the frequency in which law enforcement finds children living alongside pill press operations, simply behind a closed door — going to school with fentanyl residue on their backpacks.

“Anyone who thinks this is all a southern border issue, it’s actually right here in our communities and there’s hundreds of thousands of pills being pumped out,” Herzon said. “And if we seize 100,000 or 200,000, how many do we not seize?”

Data from Brandeis University’s Street Check program, which tests drug sample submissions, shows counterfeit pills testing positive for fentanyl, methamphetamine and xylazine all over the state — Barnstable, Brockton, Cambridge, Gloucester, Haverhill, North Adams, Northampton and Quincy.

More often than not, experts told MassLive, individuals who operate pill presses to manufacture counterfeit pills at a large-scale distribution level aren’t drug users themselves, but rather, wholly profit-focused. Typically, they’re men of varying

ethnicities, either directly associated with Mexican cartels in the Boston area or “one-or-two phone calls removed,” they said.

## What happened to Peach Goldenberg

The last 10 months of Peach Goldenberg’s life were plagued by deteriorating physical and mental health after the death of her husband, Bob, from pancreatic cancer in July 2023.

Her daughter described her as a shell of herself.

“My dad was her center of gravity,” Carly Goldenberg said. “The only reason I believe in soulmates was because of my parents. Their love was the greatest love I’ve ever seen. We had such a loving home.”

The woman portrayed as “lighting up a room” and “bubbly” struggled to get out of bed and stopped eating. She lost 80 pounds. She’d been prescribed pain medication by doctors for much of her life, with a herniated disk in her back and chronic pain in her neck and knee.

Carly Goldenberg moved back to South Hadley from Arizona after her freshman year of college to be with her mom. And since she’d been home, things were looking up. Her mother was going for walks, getting to the gym, having dinners with friends and even back attending church.

Together, they were planning for the future, picking up the pieces after a tremendous loss.

Everything changed when a 42-year-old Westfield man named Christopher Halla sought out Peach Goldenberg via text message after hearing through a mutual acquaintance that she was experiencing pain, according to the Northwestern District Attorney’s Office.

Authorities say Halla told Goldenberg he was selling legitimate oxycodone. Text messages between the two showed her repeatedly asking if they were “fentanyl free,” and Halla assuring her they were.

He sold her 30 pills for \$900, Assistant District Attorney Joseph Webber said at a court hearing in September when Halla [was arraigned on a charge of manslaughter](#) and pleaded not guilty.

“God rest her soul and I love my mother, but it was stupid,” Carly Goldenberg said. “It was something that could have been so avoided and it didn’t have to happen. And she knew what those consequences were. But she was hurting, she was struggling. She was in pain physically and mentally. I don’t blame her.”

She noted people in pain looking for remedies often “get taken advantage of.”

Halla’s case is the first manslaughter charge brought in connection with a fatal drug overdose in the Northwestern District since the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled in 2019 that selling heroin to someone isn’t reckless or dangerous enough to support a manslaughter conviction.

Prosecutors have said the evidence against Halla is “particularly strong.”

## **Law enforcement versus harm reduction**

For decades, the DEA has been the face of what many perceive to be a failed War on Drugs. Some advocates, like Maritza Perez Medina, director of federal affairs at the national nonprofit [Drug Policy Alliance](#), say the agency’s focus on pill presses is yet another installment of practices that won’t have any tangible impact on the opioid crisis.

She said “well-meaning” law enforcement efforts going after the supply side generate unintended consequences — such as incentivizing a more toxic, lethal drug supply.

“It creates a perverse incentive for drug manufacturers to become more creative, to think of other substances that can elude law enforcement,” Perez Medina said. “I mean, this is how we got fentanyl and fentanyl analogs in the first place.”

What she sees as missing from the overall approach is an emphasis on harm reduction and public health tools — the idea that there will always be people taking pills regardless, but they can manage their harm for a safer experience.

“They should not use alone, for example,” she said. “They should know that they should have (Narcan) on hand and that (it) should be accessible. They should know that there are places they can go to get their drugs checked out so they know exactly what they’re consuming. It needs to be more than just fear. We actually need to empower people with practical ways.”

For Herzon, he feels the focus on pill presses is one lever the agency has to pull — and an important one. But he admits it won’t solve the drug crisis.

## **‘My mother was ripped away from me brutally’**

During a court hearing, Webber said Halla indicated to Peach Goldenberg that pills would be available “at any time.”

Between counterfeit pill production both stateside and in foreign countries, that’s a daunting reality.

“Even if you were to eliminate all the pill presses, they will go right back to just getting the finished product in from Mexico,” Herzon said. “They’ve increased their profits greatly because of the pill presses. But even if they were to go away tomorrow, the pipeline is already set up.”

What the pill press landscape has emphasized to the DEA, as well as other branches of law enforcement, is their active role in demand reduction through education.

Five years ago, Herzon said, the DEA was “strictly law enforcement.” But in response to the growing counterfeit pill issue, it launched a robust [“One Pill Can Kill” campaign](#), an example of how the agency is doing more public-facing education and social media engagement.

In June, for example, the DEA and local law enforcement partners [hosted an esports tournament in Worcester](#) using the popular gaming pastime to reach youth where they are — online.

“We have to get in front of young people, in front of people who are most vulnerable, and explain to them the dangers of these pills,” he said. “This not like the pill you took from Walgreens or CVS.”

On a chalkboard in the alcove leading to the Goldenbergs' front door, Peach’s handwriting still reads, “God Bless all who enter!”

Carly Goldenberg is the homeowner now. She didn’t want to lose the house where she grew up, where her parents were married in the backyard and her mom jumped in the pool afterward.

Inside, traces of her are everywhere: Photographs, drawings, a cardinal memorial coin above the kitchen sink. Her bedroom door upstairs remains closed.

“I will never be the same,” Carly Goldenberg said. “It disgusts me that people don’t think about that. Not only did my mother lose her life, I lost mine, too. I lost everything that makes me, me. My mother was ripped away from me brutally.”

## Hidden in plain sight: Where pill presses have been uncovered in Mass.

By Hadley Barndollar, MassLive  
Oct. 30, 2024

*Editor's note: The use of pill presses to quickly create dangerous counterfeit pills that kill thousands of Americans annually has skyrocketed in recent years. MassLive conducted a monthslong investigation into what they are, how they caught on and what's being done about them. This is the second story in an ongoing series.*

On quiet Salem Street in Lawrence, a forest green Cape-style home went on the market this summer, advertised as “updates galore”: granite countertops, stainless steel appliances and copper accents on the roof.

What the home’s real estate listing didn’t mention was that, in May, a search sparked by a carbon monoxide alarm uncovered a homegrown drug manufacturing operation in the finished basement — fueled by two industrial-scale pill presses.

In a bathroom, there were yellow, orange, green and blue powders, some filling Home Depot utility buckets, police photos show. “Several thousand” pills were found in plastic baggies in the sink and in a milk crate. The average person would never know they were made with fentanyl and methamphetamine, as police contend they were.

All of this unfolded on a residential street where people put pumpkins on their front steps and hang Christmas lights from porches.

Pill press operations are hidden in plain sight and have been discovered in urban, rural, wealthy, and low-income neighborhoods. According to court documents and law enforcement records analyzed by MassLive, pill presses have been found or suspected in at least 25 cities and towns across Massachusetts since 2019.

There are likely many more, too, given law enforcement often makes covert seizures as part of larger investigations they don’t publicly disclose.

Between fentanyl, [xylazine](#) and emerging synthetic opioids such as [nitazenes](#), the U.S. drug supply is more poisonous than ever, causing approximately 100,000 deaths per year. Last year in Massachusetts, 2,125 people are suspected to have suffered opioid-related overdose deaths.

Illicit pill press operations, which often utilize a cocktail of drugs, can rake in millions of dollars. Using one kilogram of fentanyl, a trafficker could yield \$6.6 million in revenue at \$10 per pill, U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration calculations estimate.

## The view from across the street

By May, before police raided the home across the street, neighbors David Arce and his girlfriend had been watching something for months. But they didn't know what exactly. Their first observations were cars — fancy ones — arriving on the densely settled, residential Salem Street, which backs up to a wooded area.

Arce recalled seeing “luxury Mercedes Benzes, BMWs” and “even a Lamborghini SUV one day” parking in front of the house, which he had a direct view of from his windows.

Arce was at work on May 22 when motion sensors from his Ring security camera, connected to his phone, interrupted his day. He opened the app and was taken by surprise.

“I saw the whole street was just covered with cops and an ambulance,” he said. “When I got home, I was just standing in the driveway and we were just watching. We knew there was something going on, but we didn't think a meth lab.”

Police photographs of the basement bathroom on Salem Street show a Nutribullet blender used to mix powders, a pasta strainer, five-gallon utility buckets and the two industrial-scale pill presses sitting on a tiled floor in front of the bathtub.

Court documents suggest the suspect, Manuel Barroso, 42, was renting the basement from the female homeowner solely for his illicit activities. Between there and the nondescript, suburban home where he lived with his elderly mother just three miles away on Crestshire Drive, authorities seized “thousands” of orange, red, pink and blue pills between May and June.

In a court affidavit, a Lawrence police officer wrote he suspected the basement held “well over” 10,000 grams (about 22 pounds) of fentanyl and/or methamphetamine.

Authorities believe Barroso had been buying his pill binding filler — everyday acetaminophen, found in Tylenol — from a local BJ's Wholesale Club in Haverhill.

He has been incarcerated since his June arrest, held by a judge on a determination of dangerousness. He pleaded not guilty to all charges.

“The whole reason I bought a house in this neighborhood was not to ever have to deal with that,” said Arce, a Lawrence native.

He described his street as something from the “Hallmark Channel,” a pleasant neighborhood where everyone says hello and knows one another, but people largely keep to themselves.

## **Where pill presses have been found in Mass.**

Drug manufacturing operations with pill presses as their centerpiece, like the one alleged at the Lawrence home, have been increasingly springing up across the state.

The Massachusetts State Police Narcotics Unit said it has executed search warrants at pill manufacturing locations “in every major city in the commonwealth as well as suburbs.”

“(People) are using one bedroom to press pills and young kids are sleeping in the next bedroom over,” said Noah Herzon, assistant special agent in charge with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration’s New England Division. “That’s the type of operation that we see time and time again.”

MassLive found [local and federal criminal investigations involving pill presses](#) have occurred in the following cities and towns going back to 2019, though this is not a comprehensive list: Attleboro, Boston, Cambridge, East Longmeadow, Everett, Foxborough, Framingham, Greenfield, Haverhill, Lawrence, Leominster, Longmeadow, Lynn, Lynnfield, Natick, Northampton, Peabody, Quincy, Reading, Revere, Salem, Salisbury, Saugus, Stoughton, Whitman and Worcester.

The operations discovered in the Bay State have been of varying magnitudes. Some are part of large-scale drug trafficking networks and street-level gangs or are tangentially connected. Fewer appear to be individual endeavors, but there are some.

## **‘Part of our new reality’**

Counterfeit pills don’t discriminate by city or town. Court documents in [an international pill mill case out of New York](#), connected to at least nine deaths, recently illustrated the breadth of lives they can touch: “Veterans, doctors, lawyers, musicians, artists, politicians, economists, restaurant managers, personal trainers, dancers, former schoolteachers, administrative executives and first responders.”

“We have to get used to thinking about this as part of our new reality,” said Dr. Traci Green, director of the Opioid Policy Research Collaborative at Brandeis University. “And it has actually always been there.”

Pills, experts say, are perhaps the most approachable form of illicit drugs because of their likeness to conventional medicine. Typically, people see low risk when it comes to taking a pill.

“We are still very much haunted by the story of the pill and the place of the pill in the history of this crisis,” Green said.

Her reference was to [the prescription pill OxyContin](#), credited with setting off a decades-long chapter, starting in the 1990s, of the ongoing addiction scourge that has led to countless overdose deaths and lives ravaged.

## The power of the pill press

In September, retired State Police Sgt. Mike Sampson spoke to a crowd of law enforcement and harm reduction professionals.

He recounted an [October 2022 investigation](#) in Worcester that started with an apartment fire near the Clark University campus and led to the discovery of a pill press operation, [20 pounds of fentanyl](#) and criminal charges against 30-year-old Joseph Boucher.

“The kid that was arrested in Worcester, he had one class B arrest (oxycodone) on his record, just one,” Sampson said. “And he’s overseeing and manufacturing this — a nobody in Worcester with this pill press.”

Police found two pill presses in Boucher’s fourth-floor apartment, which, according to court documents, didn’t have ordinary living room or bedroom furniture but was covered in rubber flooring along the walls, ceiling, and floor. There were also room-darkening shades.

Once arrested, Boucher told police he lived there with his girlfriend and a roommate. He pleaded not guilty to all charges and the case is headed to trial in Worcester County Superior Court.

Illicit pill manufacturing is “in our backyard,” cautioned Sampson, who is now a drug intelligence officer with the [New England High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area](#), a program of the federal Office of National Drug Control Policy.

## A pill operation in Whitman

Just over an hour from Lawrence, a pill press operation was raided on a chilly morning last December, less than a half mile down the road from the Whitman Police Department, ballfields and a VFW post.

Inside a contractor bay and its adjoining offices, a desktop-sized pill press machine had allowed Andrew Billings, 39, of Plymouth, to operate a rudimentary drug laboratory, court documents say. It all happened on a suburban road in the South Shore town known for [the invention of the chocolate chip cookie](#).

The industrial property on Essex Street was unsuspecting, backing up to the Hobart Meadow conservation area and Shumatuscacant River. The road was bookended by playgrounds and fountains at the town park, and a landscaped roundabout with a “Welcome to Whitman” sign.

The commercial unit’s interior was found covered in loose, white powder, police said, and a hazmat team was called in. There were thousands of counterfeit Adderall and Xanax pills made with fentanyl and methamphetamine — more than 30 pounds.

“I didn’t expect to have something like that so close to me,” said Pedro Ribeiro, who owns a custom printing and design business next door. “I saw one guy there once walking with a dog, but that was it. He waved his hand to say hi.”

Court records show the Norfolk County State Police Detective Unit had been surveilling the Essex Street location for several months. After executing their search warrant, police arrested Billings at a Town Fair Tire in Plymouth, where he was driving an Audi SUV.

“I was surprised,” Ribeiro said. “That (day) was when I realized there was some issue next door.”

The property manager declined to be interviewed for this story. State police would not discuss specifics of the ongoing investigation.

After the discovery of the pill press operation, the Whitman Board of Health condemned the unit because of how badly contaminated it was with hazardous drug material.

It’s since been cleaned and deemed fit for occupancy. Ribeiro said he thinks the unit had been rented to someone new. An orange traffic cone sat next to the door on a September morning. The blinds were pulled.

Billings has pleaded not guilty to all charges.

## **A walk through the neighborhood**

When a MassLive reporter and photographer visited Lawrence's Salem Street area in August, most neighbors were hesitant to speak about the recent pill press investigation and declined to comment.

But their homes told a story of their own. Security cameras and "beware of the dog" and "no soliciting" signs at nearly every house suggested an especially safety-conscious neighborhood.

There was another story, too. One of a typical neighborhood where families live, going about their day-to-day lives just south of Lawrence's urban core.

There were children's bicycles, lounge chairs and yard sculptures. Pinwheels spun in the wind next to solar lights dim in the daytime. Green thumbs were evident in many yards where bushes flowered among bird baths. A Lawrence High School Class of 2024 sign celebrated the achievement of a neighborhood kid.

The house of the alleged pill press operation went on the market in August, listed for \$430,000.

It sold in September for \$455,000.

# Inside a DEA drug buy: Building a case against a ‘white whale’ trafficker

By Hadley Barndollar, MassLive  
Oct. 30, 2024

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The exchange of a couple thousand dollars for one pound of methamphetamine wrapped in a plastic grocery bag was over in about 15 seconds.

From a parked car a few streets over, a MassLive reporter and a U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration agent listened to the audio streaming live from inside the vehicle under surveillance.

It was a quick huddle. The confidential informant casually thanked his supplier and offered friendly banter. Within moments, the suspect put his car in reverse and left the small parking lot located off an average-looking street lined with homes and small businesses.

A convoy of generic cars driven by plain-clothed DEA agents began following the man, who law enforcement believes is a large-scale trafficker of fentanyl, methamphetamine, counterfeit pills and cocaine in Massachusetts.

Would he lead them to a stash house? Return to a residence? Perhaps arrive at an address of interest previously unknown to law enforcement?

Any of those would have been a bonus.

On the hot July day, law enforcement from the DEA, the U.S. Postal Police, Boston police and its Special Investigations Unit had already achieved what they wanted: they had the suspect with distribution-level quantities of methamphetamine in hand, a critical building block in their mounting case against him. There would be no arrest that day — or for quite a while.

As part of a MassLive investigation into pill press machines and counterfeit pills, this summer, a reporter rode along with members of the DEA’s New England Division. Listening to and watching the controlled-buy operation shed light on how law enforcement builds cases against and ultimately apprehends large-scale drug traffickers and manufacturers in months- sometimes years-long, investigations.

MassLive has been investigating the escalating use of pill presses in the domestic illicit drug market, including in Massachusetts, where they've enabled an explosion of counterfeit pill manufacturing with fentanyl and methamphetamine.

The consequences are deadly. **One study** from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found evidence that counterfeit pills in overdose deaths more than doubled between July 2019 and December 2021.

While Massachusetts saw a celebrated 10% decrease in overall overdose deaths last year after a record high in 2022, **data showed** deaths among Black men actually increased, while Black women registered the highest death rates ever seen in the state.

## A 'white whale'

The DEA operation in question involved a suspect believed to have regular access to a pill press source, as well as a steady supply of methamphetamine.

Agents called him a high-level target, one they'd been watching for more than a year after the discovery of fentanyl, meth, cocaine and 20,000-plus counterfeit pills at a Boston-area stash location. They were ultimately able to trace the extensive drug supply to this individual as the suspected source, they said.

"He's a white whale," remarked a DEA group supervisor. "He's very surveillance conscious and knows how to evade law enforcement."

Because the ride-along was part of an ongoing criminal investigation involving several law enforcement agencies looking into multiple prongs of a drug trafficking organization, MassLive is not publishing specific locations from that day or case-identifying details.

MassLive is also not identifying DEA agents working on the case because only certain agents within the federal agency are authorized to speak openly to the press for safety and security reasons. Many DEA agents often perform undercover work.

## Preparing for a drug bust

Law enforcement started the humid morning with a case debrief arranged at a large commercial parking lot for several big box stores.

Unknowing shoppers walked to and from their cars as members from multiple law enforcement agencies, dressed in everyday clothes, discussed what would be taking place later that day — an operation to purchase one pound of methamphetamine using a confidential informant working directly with the DEA.

The suspect, they said, has been targeted by both Massachusetts State Police and the DEA, but successfully evaded arrest. He is “switching cars constantly” and has multiple addresses between the Boston area and North Shore. Agents said he often uses women as fronts to obtain apartments and condos, so his name remains off the books.

An armed team would be on site if the buy became violent or somehow went sideways, while another team remained on standby to follow the suspect.

The DEA group supervisor explained the agency aims to make controlled buys in “significant distribution amounts,” not small user amounts because they want to see large-scale traffickers prosecuted and sentenced for the extent of their crimes.

She likened this level of drug distribution to wholesale foods — you get lower prices for buying in bulk.

For example, an alleged dealer involved with a Brockton-based drug trafficking organization agreed to sell an undercover officer 6,000 counterfeit Adderall pills containing meth at \$1.50 per pill, according to court documents in **a federal case out of Taunton filed in August**.

During the encounter, the suspect allegedly said he would drop the price per pill if the undercover officer were to buy 10,000 or 20,000 pills.

## How pill presses have altered the chase

What a trafficker charges customers tells investigators a lot about the case they’re looking at.

“What they are charging us per pill indicates how close they are to a pill press,” the DEA supervisor said. “The prices tell you what they have access to, their proximity to a source.”

That’s largely the reason pill presses have become so popular for drug traffickers in recent years: Instead of paying for the finished product to arrive in New England from Mexico, they can maximize their profits by pressing pills locally, law enforcement says.

DEA estimates show vast profits can be made by manufacturing and selling counterfeit pills. One kilogram of fentanyl is enough to make 666,666 pills each containing 1.5 milligrams. Sold at \$10 per pill, a dealer would yield \$6.6 million in revenue. Up the price to \$15 per pill and the revenue becomes \$9.9 million.

Pill presses also enable a level of “on-demand” manufacturing. In 2021, authorities apprehended multiple individuals from Salem, Lynn, Saugus and Revere who were allegedly involved in a **North Shore pill press operation that could produce 15,000 pills per hour**.

“One of those horrific things that we see is there’s no limit to what you can buy,” Noah Herzon, assistant special agent in charge with the DEA New England Division, said in an earlier interview

with MassLive. “If I go to a dealer and say, ‘Can I have 50,000 pills?’ The answer is, ‘This is what it will cost.’ The answer is never, ‘I can’t get you that.’”

“That just shows that they’re sitting on it,” he continued, “hundreds of thousands of pills waiting for customers to order. And it shows how cheap they are to make.”

## Through a harm reduction lens

Those who believe the decades-long War on Drugs has failed remain skeptical of enforcement efforts catered toward the supply of drugs, rather than a focus on demand through a harm reduction and public health lens.

Maritza Perez Medina, director of federal affairs at the national nonprofit Drug Policy Alliance, said the pursuit by law enforcement to apprehend sources of large-scale drug manufacturing most often ends up in street-level dealers at the lower end of the distribution chain — usually drug users themselves — getting arrested instead.

“These are the people who are most often caught in the criminal legal system,” she said. “Very rarely do we get the so-called kingpin or manufacturer.”

Traci Green, director of the Opioid Policy Research Collaborative at Brandeis University, said there’s an opportunity for a shift in thinking outside of traditional drug enforcement — built on the idea that if people are always going to manufacture, sell and use drugs, how could society make the unregulated illicit market safer?

For Green, a nationally recognized epidemiologist studying drug use and opioids, that could mean incentivizing safer processes for people who are making counterfeit pills, for example.

“We consume opioids, we use opioids, our species has used opioids for a long, long time,” she said. “That’s not going to change. We have to think about the inevitability of the fact that this is a market. But we can shift how we improve our process so it’s less lethal.”

Green used a hamburger analogy.

“Say people die from E. coli and we’re looking at the McDonald’s hamburgers they ate,” she said. “But we actually need to go back to where the hamburgers were processed — way, way up further to understand how to prevent this at a different point because people are always going to eat hamburgers.”

## ‘Who is going to pay attention?’

To the rear of the location where the controlled buy occurred was a sprawling residential area. Law enforcement parked inconspicuously along side streets where split-level homes displayed garden statues and well-groomed shrubbery. There were blooming hydrangeas, basketball hoops in driveways and trampolines in backyards.

The DEA group supervisor said illicit drug activities are often hiding in plain sight — and in middle-and-upper-class neighborhoods, too.

She glanced across the street, signaling to a blue-shingled home with a brick facade.

“You could put a pill press in this house, and who is going to pay attention?” she said. “You just come outside and wave to your neighbors.”

Coming from a military background, the supervisor, first and foremost, said she believes in the public service the DEA does. Secondly, she loves the chase — the variability of her day-to-day. There’s an adrenaline aspect.

Drug trafficking organizations are constantly evolving, she said, and every case is different. Technology is a huge element, and she doesn’t think laws have caught up to modern methods of illicit activity. In that sense, law enforcement is almost always coming from behind.

As she lamented the prevalence of counterfeit pills, she referenced them in the tens of thousands when rattling off different cases she’s worked on — seizures of 20,000 here, 60,000 there. Counterfeits are particularly dangerous because it isn’t known which drugs or how much each pill contains, she said. Even those injecting fentanyl have a better sense of how much is going into their body, she added, and they’re making the choice to do so.

The same can’t be said for a college student who takes a counterfeit Adderall to study and instead ingests methamphetamine.

The controlled buy took place as planned and without incident, as law enforcement monitored the area from afar. Agents said their next goal would be to arrange for a second buy from the suspect, likely for additional pounds of methamphetamine. They would continue to build their case against him while ramping up surveillance.

As of October, the DEA told MassLive it was still working the case and any arrest at this point would jeopardize the overall investigation.

# **We bought a machine that makes fentanyl pills. It wasn't hard.**

By Hadley Barndollar, MassLive  
Dec. 5, 2024

*Editor's note: This is the fourth story in an ongoing series about how pill presses are changing illicit drug production in Massachusetts and beyond. Read the rest of the series [here](#).*

The package arrived at MassLive's Worcester office like any other FedEx delivery. Inside the cardboard box and tightly wrapped in foam sheets was [a machine](#) that has fueled an explosion of counterfeit pill production across the U.S.

The pill press itself required minimal assembly and was already greased at all movement points. Production of [potentially deadly pills](#) could have begun almost immediately if fentanyl or methamphetamine had been on hand, along with a binding agent like baby powder or crushed Tylenol.

As part of a [monthslong investigation into the rise of pill press machines](#) in Massachusetts and across the country, MassLive ordered its own pill press from China to see how challenging it would be to obtain.

We waited approximately four weeks between placing the order for \$600 in Bitcoin over Whatsapp and receiving the package. A 53-pound, hand-crank pill press, likely made of low-grade steel, arrived in Worcester in mid-October after clearing customs in California, en route from a supplier in China's Hunan province.

With a production rate of up to 50 pills per minute, manning the pill press for just two hours could yield 6,000 pills. One pill would likely sell for \$10-20 on the street or social media.

In recent years, pill presses have emerged as a tool for drug traffickers to locally produce counterfeit pills made with fentanyl and methamphetamine that look like legitimate prescription medications — such as oxycodone, Adderall and Xanax — [in just about any location they choose](#). The machines don't require any expertise to run.

And yet, because of a handful of legal uses — creating a slippery slope for regulators — they exist in a gray area.

Pill presses by themselves are legal to possess, and there are few oversight laws. MassLive easily bought one, while following the U.S. Controlled Substances Act by registering our machine with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. The process showed how simple it is for people with illicit intentions to circumvent regulations that in many ways are unenforceable.

“In the U.S., pill press laws at the federal level are limited, and state laws are generally weak or nonexistent,” a [2023 study](#) on pill press control stated.

In Massachusetts, there may be an appetite among lawmakers to tighten regulations or stiffen criminal penalties next session. Law enforcement officials say pill press operations have unfortunately become typical in the commonwealth over the past five or so years.

“These presses are being used to produce hundreds of thousands of pills, and they’re very, very profitable,” said Hampden County District Attorney Anthony Gulluni. “It’s much more commonplace. If I were to divide my time as D.A., the first five years, a pill press was kind of unheard of, and now we’re encountering them much more in the last several years.”

## **Pill presses aren’t illegal, making enforcement tricky**

Before they became popular in the illicit drug trade, pill presses had been used by the pharmaceutical profession and individuals such as bodybuilders and naturopaths who make their own dietary supplements. Their basic function is to compress powder into tablets.

The machines themselves aren’t illegal, but using them for illicit drug manufacturing is.

Pill presses are classified as “regulated machines” under the U.S. Controlled Substances Act, but oversight is largely dependent on self-reporting.

According to [the Controlled Substances Act](#), online retailers selling pill presses are required to comply with “recordkeeping, identification and reporting requirements on the distribution, importation and exportation” of the machines. This includes providing records of purchases to the U.S. Attorney General via the DEA’s Diversion Control Division.

But most pill presses and associated materials are shipped from China-based suppliers, which are beyond the reach of U.S. government regulation.

“The problem is anyone can set up a website to sell pill presses in China, and they don’t have to accept Visa or Mastercard,” said Noah Herzon, assistant special agent in charge with the DEA’s New England Division.

Under the Controlled Substances Act, buyers of pill presses are also supposed to report their purchase and intentions to the DEA [via an online reporting system](#). But there aren’t any enforcement mechanisms to ensure people do so.

The online reporting form isn’t well tailored to the ways in which many people obtain pill presses from overseas, either. For example, the DEA asks for a machine serial number to be entered, but most pill presses coming from China have no traceable markings, including the one MassLive bought.

When MassLive first submitted a registration form to the DEA, the agency deemed the form “non-compliant” because we didn’t provide certain information, such as the port of export in China and the specific make and model of the machine. After resubmittal, the application was approved and we were issued a formal DEA transaction number and PDF confirmation.

Buyers and sellers can face civil or criminal penalties for not registering a pill press with the DEA, but those hinge entirely upon the agency knowing the purchase even took place, according to Herzon.

Pill presses that haven’t been registered can be seized by U.S. Customs while en route to their destination. But suppliers have found ways to circumvent detection, such as breaking down a machine and shipping it in multiple packages.

Chinese sellers often operate via encrypted communication apps, such as Whatsapp and Telegram, and request payment in Bitcoin or other types of cryptocurrency. They use neutral language, too. One Chinese website advertises its pill presses for “fitness, vitamin, weight loss and nutritional tablet production.”

The U.S. government has been trying to gain control over where it does hold jurisdiction.

In February, DEA Administrator Anne Milgram [sent a letter about pill presses](#) to companies identified as “legitimate” suppliers — of which the DEA recognizes about 100 — reminding them of reporting requirements.

That same month, the government cracked down on eBay, which [agreed to pay \\$59 million](#) to settle allegations that it violated the Controlled Substances Act in connection with thousands of pill presses that were sold through its platform. The company also agreed to enhance its compliance program.

Today, [eBay's website](#) states that “pill presses, counterfeit dies and tableting or encapsulating machines aren’t allowed. eBay will provide information about sales and suspensions in violation of this policy to law enforcement.”

Amazon and Etsy have also banned the sale of pill presses.

“E-commerce platforms cannot turn a blind eye to the fentanyl crisis and to the sale of pill presses on their platforms,” Milgram said. “They must do their part to protect the public, and when they do not, DEA will hold them accountable.”

## Here’s how we bought one

Google “pill press for sale,” and a rabbit hole appears.

Their presence on search engines is like that of any other product. Many sellers post their pill presses and related accessories on international marketplace websites that advertise for a medley of suppliers, from electronics to fashion.

They then move communications to free, encrypted messaging apps once a buyer expresses interest.

MassLive’s first attempt to purchase a pill press was canceled by seller based in Foshan, China, who wrote, “We can not send to USA unless client get DEA. Otherwise machine always stop.”

The seller was likely referring to potential interception by U.S. Customs if a buyer doesn’t inform the DEA of the incoming parcel via the registration process.

MassLive made three attempts to purchase a pill press and was unable to do so with a debit or credit card. Ultimately, on the third try, we had to use Bitcoin — a common form of accepted payment among pill press sellers.

Bitcoin allows for seamless international transfer and camouflages senders and recipients. Cryptocurrencies are often used as part of money laundering schemes, as well as fraud and drug trafficking.

As a MassLive reporter communicated over Whatsapp with a seller based in Changsha, China, the seller sent photos and video of what appeared to be a large-scale pill press warehouse overseas, stocked with machines of all capability levels and sizes.

“We sent packages to your country everyday and none of the customers packages have been locked,” the seller wrote. “We directly send them to the warehouse in your country and then send them to the customer, so you don’t have to worry about the customs clearance.”

In photos, warehouse shelves were filled with packaged pill binding filler in the colors of the rainbow — lime green, purple, hot pink and gold. The powders come in shiny or matte.

The seller sent 40 pages of PDFs of available die molds — used to stamp and shape pills — for purchase, including shapes of the Disney logo, marijuana leaves, Darth Vader, a Super Mario mushroom, and the faces of soccer star Lionel Messi and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The counterfeit dies mimicking markings of Percocet, Adderall, Xanax, Valium and Viagra are federally illegal in the U.S., but MassLive could have bought them for around \$40 each from this seller.

MassLive’s machine is a TDP 0 Tablet Press — one of the simpler, manual models that can make up to 50 pills per minute. Motorized machines, which are more expensive and often utilized by drug traffickers, can produce significantly more pills at faster rates.

We selected our machine based on photos provided by the seller through Whatsapp when we communicated what we were willing to spend.

The supplier sent us a photo of our package, covered in red and yellow “fragile” stickers with Chinese characters, in September, telling us it would likely take 18-23 days to clear customs. We didn’t have any tracking information until the package arrived in Chino, California, at which time it registered on FedEx.

It appears the Chinese seller mailed the package to a specific address in Chino, located in San Bernardino County, and then from there, it was mailed to Massachusetts.

## Laws have passed, but none outlawing pill presses

The pill press issue has made its way to Capitol Hill and the White House. Between the [Biden administration](#) and [congressional lawmakers](#), there have been proposals to establish a pill press registry and [require machines be engraved with serial numbers](#) so they're easier for law enforcement to track.

President-elect Donald Trump will return to the White House in January with promises to crack down on fentanyl and other illegal drugs crossing the southern border. He recently threatened Mexico and China [with 25% tariffs](#) on goods unless both governments moved to stop the flow of fentanyl into the U.S.

Whether pill presses will be part of Trump's agenda is unknown. MassLive reached out to the Trump-Vance transition team and did not hear back.

Some states have passed laws to create specific criminal charges ranging from misdemeanors to felonies, as well as bolster state-level reporting requirements.

As of March of this year, there were eight states with pill press laws — [Florida](#), [Hawaii](#), Mississippi, [North Carolina](#), Tennessee, [Texas](#), Utah and [Washington](#), according to the Legislative Analysis and Public Policy Association.

Under [Victoria Huggins' Mississippi Pill Press Law of 2022](#), a violator could face up to five years in prison for “knowingly or intentionally” possessing, selling or manufacturing a pill press to be used to make a controlled substance or counterfeit controlled substance.

[Tennessee](#) categorizes pill presses as drug paraphernalia, unless they are used by a person or entity that lawfully possesses drug products as part of “legitimate business activities,” such as board-certified pharmacists, pharmacies and wholesale drug distributors.

Utah has a specific “[Clandestine Drug Lab Act](#)” that allows for “legal inference of intent” if someone is in possession of a pill press.

## What could happen in Massachusetts?

A [pill press bill](#) was introduced in the Massachusetts State Legislature last year. As written, it was similar to Mississippi's law: making it a felony to “possess, purchase, deliver, sell or possess with intent to sell or deliver” a pill press for the purpose of manufacturing controlled substances or counterfeit drugs.

It was later sent to study in a massive package of other judicial bills. Sponsoring Rep. Marcus Vaughn, R-9th Norfolk, said he intends to reintroduce the “crucial commonsense” legislation in January, which he believes will target “just how easy it appears to be to make these drugs.”

There could be an appetite among other lawmakers for action next session, as well.

Rep. Steven Xiarhos, R-5th Barnstable, said he joins Vaughn in a commitment to refiling pill press legislation.

“We cannot allow pill press machines, which can produce thousands of deadly counterfeit pills in mere hours, to remain unregulated,” said Xiarhos, who worked as a police officer for 40 years. “This equipment is facilitating a surge in overdoses, and it’s clear that our laws have not kept pace with the evolving methods of illicit drug manufacturing.”

Xiarhos believes there is growing bipartisan recognition on Beacon Hill of what he called a “dangerous loophole” enabled by an absence of regulation and oversight.

For Sen. John Velis, D-Hampden/Hampshire, who chairs the Joint Committee on Mental Health, Substance Use and Recovery, counterfeit pills are the issue that keeps him up at night, he said.

As a person in recovery from alcohol addiction, the topic is personal for Velis.

He first learned of the issue about two years ago while riding along with State Police, when he heard about someone selling methamphetamine pills disguised as Adderall “in bulk.”

“The message that I am conveying (to kids) is, unless you or your parents, preferably you, went into CVS or Walgreens and bought this yourselves, there is a very strong chance you could die,” Velis said about counterfeit pills.

“I think awareness is getting better,” he continued, “but what I can tell you with absolute certainty is there is still a profound gulf between the number of people who realize that when they buy something on social media or on the street that’s being advertised as something, it’s very likely something else.”

In that vein, this past budget cycle, Velis helped secure \$100,000 for a Department of Public Health awareness campaign around “drug contamination in the commonwealth,

including the presence of fentanyl.” He said the intention is for Massachusetts to create its own campaign modeled off the DEA’s [“One Pill Can Kill”](#) initiative.

Velis also envisions a future where colleges and universities send alerts to students about counterfeit pills when they become aware of a batch going around, in the same way they do for shelter-in-place or school closings.

Velis said he believes the “first and foremost focus” for legislators on this topic should be spreading awareness.

“I’m convinced we will save lives,” he said.

He also supports elevated criminal charges for people who manufacture counterfeit pills using pill presses. He’s interested in passing a law that captures the issue’s “nuance and complexity,” considering the machines themselves are not illegal to possess.

“My personal feeling is that if there is an individual who is pressing pills and selling them as something else, I have absolutely zero patience and compassion for someone doing something like that.”



MassLive, Hadley Barndollar submission

**Website URLs featuring photography and video**

Paywall log-in information: hbarndollar@masslive.com masslive1

**Story 1:** [How one machine supercharged illicit drug manufacturing in Mass.](#)

**Story 2:** [Hidden in plain sight: Where pill presses have been uncovered in Mass.](#)

**Story 3:** [Inside a DEA drug buy: Building a case against a 'white whale' trafficker](#)

**Story 4:** [We bought a machine that makes fentanyl pills. It wasn't hard](#)