

Overview & Limitations of NFLIS Data

OVERVIEW

The National Forensic Laboratory Information System (NFLIS) is a Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), Diversion Control Division program that systematically collects drug identification results and associated information from drug cases submitted to and analyzed by Federal, State, and local forensic laboratories.¹ *NFLIS-Drug* provides timely and detailed analytical results of drugs seized in law enforcement operations across the country and is an important resource for monitoring and understanding drug abuse and trafficking, including the diversion of legally manufactured drugs into illegal markets.¹ “The *NFLIS-Drug* participation rate, defined as the percentage of the national drug caseload represented by laboratories that have joined NFLIS, is currently over 98%. *NFLIS-Drug* includes 50 State systems and 101 local or municipal laboratories/laboratory systems, representing a total of 277 individual laboratories. The *NFLIS-Drug* database also includes Federal data from DEA and U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) laboratories.”¹

In 2018, the DEA expanded the NFLIS program to include two additional drug surveillance components: *NFLIS-MEC*, which collects drug-related mortality data from medical examiner and coroner offices; and *NFLIS-Tox*, which collects drug testing results from toxicology laboratories.² The data visualizations presented in the *NDEWS Sentinel Community Site (SCS) Data* are based on the original *NFLIS-Drug* data collection system and represent reports of **counts** of drugs seized by law enforcement and identified from cases analyzed by State and local forensic laboratories.

National and Regional Drug Estimates vs. SCS Drug Counts: *NFLIS-Drug* estimates are the statistically adjusted number of reports of drugs recorded and submitted by *NFLIS-Drug* laboratories that account for nonreporting and nonsampled laboratories.² *NFLIS-Drug* estimates are based on weighted and imputed data and “allow for inferences to be made of the total number of analyzed drug reports in the entire ‘universe’ of State and local forensic drug laboratories.”² Estimates are not available for NDEWS SCS catchment areas so *NFLIS-Drug* counts are presented in these visualizations. However, mid-year and annual reports of national and regional estimates are produced by the DEA Office of Diversion Control and available at: <https://www.nflis.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/Reports.aspx>

The NDEWS SCS data visualizations presented here are based on raw **counts** of drugs recorded and submitted by *NFLIS-Drug* laboratories. “Raw counts have not undergone any weighting or imputation adjustments to account for laboratory nonresponse” and “reflect a snapshot in time of drugs seized in states and localities across the country.”²

NFLIS-DRUG DATA CAVEATS AND LIMITATIONS

General:

- “*NFLIS-Drug* includes drug chemistry results from completed analyses only. Drug evidence secured by law enforcement but not analyzed by laboratories is not included in the database.”¹
- “State and local policies related to the enforcement and prosecution of specific drugs may affect drug evidence submissions to laboratories for analysis.”¹
- “Laboratory policies and procedures for handling drug evidence vary. Some laboratories analyze all evidence submitted to them, whereas others analyze only selected case items. Many laboratories do not analyze drug evidence if the criminal case was dismissed from court or if no defendant could be linked to the case.”¹
- Laboratories may also have “different criteria for detecting drugs in their samples; thus, they will vary in the way in which these drugs are identified and therefore reported to the *NFLIS-Drug* database.”²

Specific to Drug Counts:

- The number of *NFLIS-Drug* laboratories may vary each year; thus “the raw counts for each year of *NFLIS-Drug* data may be affected by the number of reporting labs for that time frame.”² For this reason, “DEA does not recommend comparing year-to-year trends using raw counts from *NFLIS-Drug* published tables. The differences in counts may be more reflective of differences in laboratory reporting rather than changes in drug abuse or trafficking.”² Any changes in participating and reporting forensics laboratories for an SCS in a given year are indicated in the *Data Availability* note for that site/year.
- “The *NFLIS-Drug* laboratories provide data to DEA on a monthly basis. Monthly submissions may include cases where the date of submission for analyses is one or more months (or even years) prior to the date the analyses were completed and reported. This delay in reporting may be related to ongoing investigations, plea bargains, or other causes that delay the analyses and subsequent reporting to DEA. Thus, the *NFLIS-Drug* database is dynamic—even across years—and queries of the data may result in updated drug counts for more recent years. Therefore, it is important to note the date on which the data were generated because it underscores the reality that these tables reflect a snapshot in time and may not be comparable with data queries generated on a different date.”²
- There are also “instances when laboratories are unable to transmit data to *NFLIS-Drug* by the established cutoff date (typically three months after the data collection period of interest). These instances may be due to backlog in laboratory work or other operational issues preventing a laboratory’s transmission of data. Although past analyses have shown that approximately 95% of cases submitted during an annual period are analyzed within three

months of the end of the annual period (not including the approximately 30% of cases that are never analyzed), there can be remaining cases from the data collection period of interest that participating laboratories did not analyze and/or submit.”²

SOURCES

¹U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), Diversion Control Division. (2018). *National Forensic Laboratory Information System: 2017 Annual Report*. Springfield, VA: U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. Retrieved from: <https://www.nflis.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/DesktopModules/ReportDownloads/Reports/NFLIS2016AR.pdf>

²U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), Diversion Control Division. (undated). *National Forensic Laboratory Information System: NFLIS Public Resources Library, NFLIS Questions and Answers (Q&A)*. Retrieved from <https://www.nflis.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/Resources/NFLISPublicResourceLibrary.aspx>