




Office of the Attorney General
Washington, D. C. 20530

March 20, 2018

MEMORANDUM TO UNITED STATES ATTORNEYS

FROM: THE ATTORNEY GENERAL 

SUBJECT: Guidance Regarding Use of Capital Punishment in Drug-Related Prosecutions

The opioid epidemic has inflicted an unprecedented toll of addiction, suffering, and death on communities throughout our nation. Drug overdoses, including overdoses caused by the lethal substance fentanyl and its analogues, killed more than 64,000 Americans in 2016 and now rank as the leading cause of death for Americans under 50. In the face of all of this death, we cannot continue with business as usual.

Drug traffickers, transnational criminal organizations, and violent street gangs all contribute substantially to this scourge. To combat this deadly epidemic, federal prosecutors must consider every lawful tool at their disposal. This includes designating an opioid coordinator in every district, fully utilizing the data analysis of the Opioid Fraud and Abuse Detection Unit, as well as using criminal and civil remedies available under federal law to hold opioid manufacturers and distributors accountable for unlawful practices.

In addition, this should also include the pursuit of capital punishment in appropriate cases. Congress has passed several statutes that provide the Department with the ability to seek capital punishment for certain drug-related crimes. Among these are statutes that punish certain racketeering activities (18 U.S.C. § 1959); the use of a firearm resulting in death during a drug trafficking crime (18 U.S.C. § 924(j)); murder in furtherance of a continuing criminal enterprise (21 U.S.C. § 848(e)); and dealing in extremely large quantities of drugs (18 U.S.C. § 3591(b)(1)). I strongly encourage federal prosecutors to use these statutes, when appropriate, to aid in our continuing fight against drug trafficking and the destruction it causes in our nation.