

Drug Residue in Vehicles: Background Information and Resources

Introduction

There is concern about people's exposure to fentanyl and other opioids in cars that have been stolen and recovered. In 2024 the Washington State Legislature passed House Bill (HB) 2396, directing the Washington State Department of Health (DOH), in consultation with the Washington Poison Center, to compile resources on how to decontaminate motor vehicles of fentanyl residue or other synthetic opioid residue. HB2396 also requires the materials be made available to law enforcement agencies for the purpose of providing the information to individuals who recover a stolen vehicle or purchase a vehicle seized by law enforcement ([Chapter 309, Laws of 2024, Sec. 3](#); [Chapter 43.70.769 RCW Notes](#)).

This document contains background information and resources to support the [Drug Residue in Vehicles guidance document](#) located on the [DOH Drug Residue webpage](#). Cars that contain fentanyl residue are also likely to contain methamphetamine residue, so information on reducing methamphetamine residue in vehicles is also provided.

Washington State Laws and Guidance on Drug Residue in Vehicles

[Chapter 64.44 RCW](#) is the contaminated properties law. [RCW 64.44.010](#) defines property as “any real or personal property... that is involved in or affected by the unauthorized manufacture, distribution, storage, or use of hazardous chemicals.” Vehicles are included in this definition as motor vehicles, trailers, and boats. The [interpretive statement EHS-01-2024](#) further clarifies that ‘hazardous substances’ in chapter 64.44 RCW does not apply to illicit use of fentanyl, unless the illicit use of fentanyl can be associated with the manufacture of controlled substances as defined in RCW 64.44.010(4)(b).” [RCW 64.44.050](#) contains the requirements and responsibilities of the owner if the vehicle has been declared unfit for use by the local health officer.

[Chapter 46.12.610 RCW](#) on contaminated vehicles directs the Washington State Department of Licensing (DOL) to modify a vehicle's title to indicate it is contaminated or has been decontaminated at the direction of the local health agency. Licensing has issued three new titles for contaminated vehicles in the past ten years. Once a vehicle has been declared contaminated, it may be decontaminated or demolished. It may not be used or sold. There is no process to remove the decontaminated brand from the vehicle title.

DOL maintains a [page on contaminated property](#) which includes information on what to do if you have a contaminated vehicle.

DOH maintains [a program to certify](#) workers, supervisors, and contractors who clean up illegal drug labs. This program maintains [a list of decontamination contractors](#) who are certified to clean up drug labs. The decontamination of vehicles is included in the certification process. Some certified decontamination contractors provide vehicle decontamination.

Tacoma Pierce County Health Department published [Tacoma – Pierce County Health Department Methamphetamine Contaminated Property Site Remediation Requirements \(2013\)](#). This guidance document includes information on vehicle assessment, removal/disposal, and brief steps for decontamination of methamphetamine. It also includes a section on assessment of RV holding tanks. The removal/disposal section provides steps depending on if the vehicle is found on property already designated as contaminated, if it is located in a law enforcement impound yard or is being held by an insurance company.

Other Agency Guidance on Drug Residue in Vehicles

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

EPA published [Voluntary Guidelines for Methamphetamine and Fentanyl Laboratory Cleanup](#), which includes information on decontamination of fentanyl. These guidelines also include other resources on fentanyl in Appendix F. Section 4.17 of these guidelines says that vehicles used as residences should be cleaned like any other structure that is contaminated. However, it also says that this method is likely too expensive, and demolition is the likely outcome.

Alberta Health

Alberta Health (Canada) published [Fentanyl Remediation: Guidance for Remediators, Regulatory Agencies and Professionals \(alberta.ca\)](#). This document contains guidance on how to decontaminate vehicles. This includes what PPE to wear, what equipment to use, and decontamination steps. Steps include removal and disposal of all porous materials inside the vehicle. This guidance also includes separate steps on HVAC decontamination. PPE, decontamination of interior, and HVAC steps all require training.

Statistics on Vehicles

Washington

While there are anecdotal reports of fentanyl and other drugs in stolen/recovered vehicles, there are no data on this in Washington.

Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs has general crime statistics in [Crime in Washington 2023-compressed.pdf \(memberclicks.net\)](#), which includes statistics on motor vehicle theft. According to this report, 54,187 vehicles were reported stolen in 2023. Here is a breakdown of the motor vehicle theft statistics:

Type	Percentage	Number
Auto	73.8	39,990
Trucks	17.7	9591
Other	7.7	4172
RVs	0.7	379
Buses	.01	54
Total		54187

Estimated amount stolen: \$134,912,829.00; amount recovered: \$113,145,037.00 (84% of the value is recovered).

Colorado

Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment has [a database for testing and reporting of methamphetamine in vehicles and other property](#); some vehicles are also tested for fentanyl. The contaminated property reports are publicly available, whereas the vehicle reports are available through public records request. Like Washington, Colorado has a decontamination standard for methamphetamine, but not for fentanyl. Colorado's decontamination level is 0.5 µg/100 cm². We requested vehicle reports from the Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment and pulled data on assessment and decontamination. In 2023 for cars, pick-ups, and SUVs there were 27,029 vehicles stolen, 24,802 recovered, and 1372 assessed for methamphetamine contamination. In the 18 months from January 2023 through June 2024, 1,837 vehicles were assessed.

It is unknown why most (94.5%) recovered vehicles were not assessed or how the 5.5% of vehicles that were assessed were selected for assessment. Several possibilities include variations in insurance company policies, local advice from law enforcement or the public health department, owner concern, and visual assessment of a vehicle's condition.

Based on a detailed review and analysis of 201 of the 500 assessments in 2024, we found that 75% of the vehicles that were assessed had detectable levels of methamphetamine, 41% had levels of methamphetamine above the Colorado decontamination standard of 0.5

$\mu\text{g}/100\text{ cm}^2$, and 29% had levels of methamphetamine above the Washington decontamination standard of $1.5\ \mu\text{g}/100\text{ cm}^2$. Testing for fentanyl varied by testing company. Only 68 of the vehicles were also tested for fentanyl, with detectable fentanyl in 26% of the vehicles tested. About 3% of the vehicles tested for fentanyl had levels of fentanyl above the [American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists \(ACGIH\) surface limit of \$1\ \mu\text{g}/100\text{ cm}^2\$](#) . All but one of the vehicles with detectable fentanyl also had detectable methamphetamine. While some vehicles that were tested were negative for drug residue, we've provided the lowest and highest detected amounts of methamphetamine and fentanyl in the tables below.

Data for 199 vehicles tested for methamphetamine:

Detected	Above 0.5 $\mu\text{g}/100\text{ cm}^2$	Above 1.5 $\mu\text{g}/100\text{ cm}^2$	Lowest detected ($\mu\text{g}/100\text{ cm}^2$)	Highest detected ($\mu\text{g}/100\text{ cm}^2$)	Mean ($\mu\text{g}/100\text{ cm}^2$)
149 (75%)	81 (41%)	57 (29%)	0.005	980	14

Data for 68 vehicles tested for fentanyl:

Detected	Above 1 $\mu\text{g}/100\text{ cm}^2$	Lowest detected ($\mu\text{g}/100\text{ cm}^2$)	Highest detected ($\mu\text{g}/100\text{ cm}^2$)	Mean ($\mu\text{g}/100\text{ cm}^2$)
18 (26%)	2 (3%)	0.003	14	1.1

From January 2023 to June 2024 there were only 17 decontamination reports, implying that the majority of contaminated vehicles were destroyed rather than decontaminated. Of the 17 vehicles that were decontaminated, only one had been assessed for fentanyl, and was not detected. After decontamination the vehicles had lower levels of methamphetamine that were below the Colorado decontamination standard. All vehicles had detectable levels of methamphetamine after decontamination. The maximum level of methamphetamine detected before decontamination was $6\ (\mu\text{g}/100\text{ cm}^2)$ and the maximum detected after decontamination was $0.44\ (\mu\text{g}/100\text{ cm}^2)$.