

# Illicit drug prices in Baltimore fluctuate under DEA estimates

By Justin Fenton / Baltimore Sun  
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A group of alleged Black Guerrilla Family members met last December to discuss a robbery with a confidential source, who, unbeknownst to them, was working with the Drug Enforcement Administration. The price of cocaine in Baltimore City at that moment was "high" at \$40,000 per kilogram, agents wrote in court documents, making the proposed robbery "especially lucrative."

"Coke price [is] high and everything, but a better price is free," the source told the group. In a more recent court document, however, that estimate had tumbled by 30 percent.

The DEA tracks the fluctuations of drug prices, which can be a gauge of national and regional trends, as well as effectiveness of law enforcement efforts, said Edward Marcinko, a spokesman for the agency. A high price for heroin, for example, could in part reflect successful efforts to stem the supply, he said.

It could also predict looming conflict over what's left.

"Prices are going to be high until other shipments start coming in," Marcinko said.

The information comes through undercover purchases, cooperating witnesses and suspects, and other evidence-gathering means, he said. "When we talk to defendants, we ask, 'What were you paying for it, what were you getting for it, what were you charging customers?'" he said.

Generally, the cost of drugs increases the farther they get from the Mexican border. As recent cases have shown, drug traffickers have been accused of using everything from charter jets to trucks carrying strawberries to mobile homes and jet skis to get drugs across the border and into various markets.

"All of that is a gamble, and all of that costs extra," Marcinko said.

Baltimore has primarily been a market for heroin over the years. But recently, pharmaceuticals have risen in popularity and availability, Marcinko said. He cited information collected through December, the latest statistics available for the region.

The two go hand in hand. When heroin is in short supply, addicts may turn to drugs such as oxycodone "to get their fix," he said. That has in turn led to a spike in heroin use. In the Cincinnati area, for example, one surge has doubled the number of fatal and nonfatal overdoses, according to a report in the Cincinnati Enquirer.

After heroin and pharmaceuticals, the drugs most available in Baltimore are, in order: crack, cocaine and marijuana, Marcinko said. Baltimore Police have said that a recent string of violent home invasions may have been propelled by a new, powerful strain of marijuana that had been introduced into the region.

Nationally, cocaine use is down 50 percent since 2006, while methamphetamine use has fallen by one-third, White House drug czar Gil Kerlikowske said at an event in Baltimore last week.

According to the report, the wholesale price for a kilogram of cocaine in Baltimore was \$28,500. Court documents reflect the volatility of the market.

The Black Guerrilla Family case brought in January listed the wholesale price as \$40,000, and another case filed in April also listed the price as \$40,000. But in a case filed last week, in which agents said they seized 10 kilograms from homes in Owings Mills and Phoenix, Md., the drug's going price was listed at about \$28,000.

Other prices listed in the report: \$40 to \$100 for a gram of heroin, \$16 to \$20 for a capsule and \$35,000 for a half-kilogram. Oxycodone costs \$25 to \$30 per 30 mg pill.

Marijuana, the documents estimate, goes for \$1,150 per pound and \$300 to \$400 per ounce, he said. That's on par with the price that the website PriceofWeed.com, a site that asks users to submit how much they paid and aggregates the information nationwide, reflects for the area's highest-quality product.

[jfenton@baltsun.com](mailto:jfenton@baltsun.com)

[twitter.com/justin\\_fenton](https://twitter.com/justin_fenton)