A U.S. Senate report raises fresh concerns about how easy it is to buy illicit, mail-order opioids from China, a source federal authorities say has fueled a nationwide addiction crisis claiming tens of thousands of lives.

The new Senate report, issued ahead of a hearing Thursday, is the latest to focus on how international mail has become a major conduit for these drugs.

Investigators for the Senate's Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations posed as would-be online buyers, entering terms like “fentanyl for sale” into Google and wound up exchanging messages with six websites, according to the report. The investigators used payment information to track more than 500 U.S.-linked transactions from these sites, at least five of which they believe are based in China.

The investigation found seven of these U.S. customers died from overdoses, including a 49-year-old Ohio man who sent about $2,500 to an online seller over 10 months and died from “acute fentanyl intoxication” early last year.

The report was critical of the U.S. Postal Service and Customs and Border Protection, saying the agencies have failed to prepare for a general surge in international shipments, struggled to cooperate with each other at times and been slow to roll out enhanced-screening methods.

“The federal government can, and must, act to shore up our defenses,” Sen. Rob Portman, an Ohio Republican and chairman of the Senate committee, said in a statement.
The addiction crisis that has continued to worsen around the country killed more than 42,000 people in 2016, according to the most recent federal data. The Drug Enforcement Administration has identified China as the main source of fentanyl and other synthetic opioids flooding the U.S. market, though China has resisted that characterization.

Mr. Portman has sponsored a measure that would require overseas shippers that use the Postal Service to provide more detailed shipment information, transmitted electronically to Customs, before parcels arrive in the U.S.

International packages that come to the U.S. through the Postal Service often lack advance, electronic data. Unlike private shippers, the Postal Service is obligated under international agreements to accept incoming mail from nearly every country and has to negotiate agreements to get such data.

"The U.S. Postal Service is deeply concerned about America’s opioid crisis and is working aggressively with law enforcement and key trading partners to stem the flow of illegal drugs entering the United States," the Postal Service said in a statement.

In prepared testimony for Thursday, Robert Cintron, vice president of network operations at the Postal Service, highlighted tracking improvements since he testified on the same issue last May. These include a substantial climb in synthetic-opioid seizures between fiscal 2016 and 2017.

Customs outlined steps it has taken, including training fentanyl-detecting dogs and beefing up staffing at the six main international mail facilities by 20% in the last six months. A spokeswoman said the agency will continue working with the Postal Service to improve drug interdiction.

Senate investigators were able to identify more than 300 U.S.-based buyers linked to the six online drug sellers, some of whom they believe are distributors.

In one email to investigators, an unnamed seller wrote “our fentanyl is very good,” while highlighting client satisfaction. The seller also offered carfentanil, a synthetic opioid up to 100 times more potent than fentanyl.