

STOP LYING ABOUT DRUGS IN CALIFORNIA

California is weathering the nationwide drug overdose crisis better than most states. Have reforms helped?



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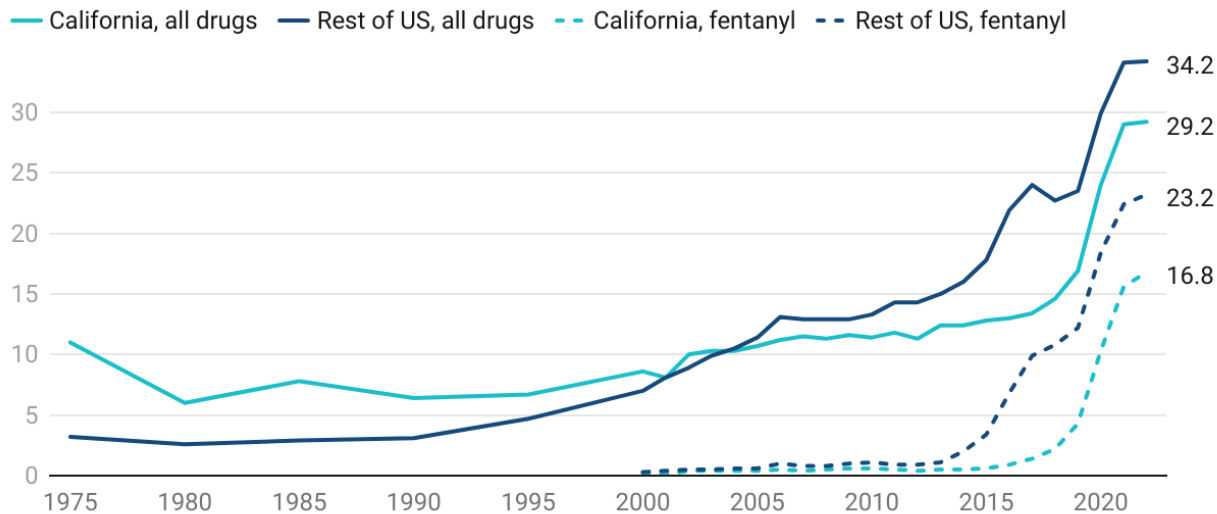
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Research Brief

Drug overdoses are a nationwide crisis. Tragically, more than 100,000 Americans died from overdoses of non-prescribed drugs in 2023, and a staggering 800,000 people have lost their lives since overdoses began surging a decade ago (CDC, 2024). California, like most states, has seen a devastating spike in drug deaths. Yet the state has weathered this crisis better than most. California, which for decades prior to 2004 suffered singularly high drug death rates, fell below the national average during its post-2000 drug policy reform era and has since **maintained lower rates of both fentanyl and all drug deaths than the United States as a whole.**

Despite these data, media outlets and political interests remain fixated on misrepresentation. From far-right *Fox News* (Lambert, 2023) to far-left *The Young Turks* (Kasparian, 2024), sources seem eager to depict California's drug crisis as uniquely out of control and attributable to liberal crime policy reforms. To be clear, no state has escaped the tragic toll of fentanyl and other deadly drugs. California certainly has areas (like San Francisco's Tenderloin district and Del Norte, Mendocino, Lake, and Kern counties) where problematic drug use prevails. However, California's cities as a whole and the state overall show lower drug death rates and more favorable trends than other areas. These trends indicate more **liberal policies have not brought more drug problems** (Figure 1) and may have helped to buffer the state against an even more catastrophic loss of life.¹ What factors might be contributing to the state's trends?

Figure 1. Illicit drug, including fentanyl, deaths per 100,000 population, California versus the rest of the United States, 1975-2022.



Fentanyl deaths are those from synthetic narcotics (ICD-10 code T40.4).

Chart: Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice • Source: CDC, 2024 • Created with Datawrapper

¹ California's below-average rate of overdose deaths, beginning in 2004, has resulted in approximately 30,000 fewer lives lost than if California had followed national trends (CDC, 2024).

- **California’s below-average drug deaths coincide with a more diverse population and progressive reforms.**

For half a century before 2004, California had worse—often much worse—rates of overdoses of illicit drugs than did other states (Figure 1), a standard measure of problematic drug use (CDC, 2024).² Since then, the state has had lower rates and more favorable trends. What caused this reversal? California’s relatively better drug death trends coincide with two major changes: (a) the growing share of Latinx and Asian people, who have lower rates of illicit drug overdose mortality, from 15% of the state’s population in 1970 to 56% today (DOF, 2024), and (b) policy shifts away from harsh arrest and imprisonment for drug offenses, toward reforms emphasizing decarceration and treatment. These reforms began with Proposition 36 (2000) and continued with decriminalization (2010) and legalization (2016) of marijuana, Realignment (2011), and Proposition 47 (2014).

- **Cuts to prison spending have freed up hundreds of millions of dollars for drug treatment.**

Amid this crisis, one key reform has helped to boost California’s investment in community-based treatment programs: Prop 47. The 2014 initiative has saved the state more than \$800 million in reduced prison costs, with two-thirds of these savings allocated to local behavioral health departments, nonprofits that deliver community services, and other local service providers (California Budget and Policy Center, 2024; CJCJ, 2022; DOF, 2022; 2023). More than 40,000 Californians have already received substance use, mental health, or housing services through Prop 47-funded programs. After completing a program, participants show lower rates of re-offending, homelessness (down by more than half), and unemployment (down by one-third) (CJCJ, 2022).

- **The fentanyl crisis began later in California, and deaths remain below national averages.**

Proposition 47, implemented in late 2014 to reduce felonies and imprisonments for lower-level drug and property offenses, is often blamed for the fentanyl scourge and open-air drug markets plaguing communities like San Francisco’s Tenderloin district. However, drug issues, like the opiate scourge, long predate Prop 47, and the fentanyl epidemic started years after. From 2013 (the last full year before Prop 47 took effect) to 2022, total illicit-drug and fentanyl deaths in California rose less precipitously than in the rest of the United States.³ Further, the fentanyl crisis, which started on the East Coast around 2012 and spread westward, began later in California (CDC, 2014). Through 2022, California’s trends, though bad, have not been as dire as elsewhere (CDC, 2024).

Conclusion

Drug overdose deaths have risen to crisis levels, with communities in every state feeling their devastating effects. Although tens of thousands of Californians have lost their lives to drug addiction over the past decade, the state has still managed to weather this crisis better than the rest of the country. Several factors may be helping to lessen the harm, including demographic shifts driven by immigration and progressive criminal justice policies that have reduced the criminalization of addiction and invested in safety and treatment.

Yet media reports, typically fixated on a particularly distressed urban area, continue to paint California as grappling with a unique drug crisis. Ignoring nationwide data, they point to those suffering in San Francisco or Los Angeles as evidence that progressive criminal justice reforms are not working. In reality, it is California’s move away from jailing and imprisoning those struggling with addiction that has helped mitigate the crisis, including lower rates of overdose deaths in California’s major urban areas as a whole than in comparable regions elsewhere (CDC, 2024). Through Prop 47 alone, the state has funneled hundreds of millions of dollars into services critical to supporting people with substance use issues, including housing, employment, mental health, trauma recovery, and drug treatment programs.

² For every overdose death, there are numerous near-fatal overdoses and scores of people suffering from addiction. Drug overdose death rates serve as a reliable indicator of trends within the broader substance use disorder crisis, which affects millions of Americans.

³ California’s illicit-drug and fentanyl deaths rose 16.8 and 16.3 per 100,000 population, respectively from 2013 to 2022 compared to an increase of 19.2 and 22.1 deaths per 100,000 population in the rest of the United States.

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