



## Fentanyl and San Francisco: The Crisis Seen From The Ground

### Description

#### USA: Fentanyl and San Francisco: The Crisis Seen From The Ground

*'We need more police and a way to throw dealers and suppliers in the slammer for a long time'*

For years, fentanyl has caused tens of thousands of deaths across the country, with many larger cities in California seeing hundreds of deaths a year. In the last few years, San Francisco has been the poster child of what happens when laws and punishments are diminished.

Policies under former District Attorney Chesa Boudin to limit prosecutions, a worsening economic situation, and a growing law enforcement shortage situation in the city made the problem go from bad to worse since 2020. A huge rise in overdoses was recorded, as was a new record number of drug-related deaths in the city.

Even after Boudin was recalled last year, and new DA Brooke Jenkins bringing back more accountability for drug dealers, fentanyl death rates still rose. San Francisco was beginning to empty out in many key areas, and the lowered police presence in high-drug use areas such as the Tenderloin were factors.

In the first three months of 2023, 200 fentanyl-related deaths were recorded, a huge jump from 142 deaths in 2022. With the Legislature failing to pass legislation to increase punishments over fentanyl in Sacramento, and SFPD numbers shrinking, more drastic measures have taken place.

Last month, Governor Gavin Newsom sent California Highway Patrol and National Guard members to the city to assist the DA and SFPD with the crisis. Fentanyl busts have also been more common in the city. But, while many have noted that it is a good start, the wake of the fentanyl crisis is still harming the city.

The Globe talked with several people in San Francisco with a hand in the crisis, ranging from former addicts to volunteers, about what the day to day is still like even with tougher laws and the boost in law enforcement.

“You can never stop being a drug addict, but you can be sober and remain clean. And I’ve been clean going on two years now,” said Deacon Grissom, a former addict in San Francisco who sought help from fentanyl in 2021. “And you just don’t get addicted to fentanyl. It’s always cut in with something. It’s just a part of it.”

“But it got bad. If you have ever seen The Wire during that season where the police ignored the drug market in a block of the city, that was what it was like sometimes. People using any drug you care to name really, some passed out right on the street. Everyone has their area they stay in and you go pick your poison.”

“What did it for me was seeing three ODs in three weeks. The second of which was this guy in his twenties just out of it with no one really noticing he had died for some time.”

“I got clean but I still need to walk the streets to get to my BART station for work. Outside looking in now, I can tell you that it has gotten worse. I know it will get better at some point, but we need better addict resources, and most pressing, anything to get fentanyl off the streets. A lot of support was taken away because of the drug wars winding down and people still jumpy over giving the police more funding after the riots three years ago. But the city needs to get tough on it, and people in power here just don’t get what works. I’m a black former addict who honestly does not trust the police on most things, so when I say that we need more police and a way to throw dealers and suppliers in the slammer for a long time, I don’t say that lightly. I’ve seen too many people die from this.”

### **More police for SF**

Harmony Smith, who runs a support group for addicts and often walks the street giving assistance to addicts and the homeless, added that “This is a big problem still. Really big. The San Francisco I grew up with in the 90s isn’t the same. I mean, not to toot my own horn, but I was an extra in Sister Act and Princess Diaries and George of the Jungle, so I got to see how beloved the city was. Nowadays, there is still love there, but it’s been tainted. The tech companies masked how things were for a while, but with that gone, everyone is seeing beyond that façade now.”

“Every person on the street knows about fentanyl and the dangers of it. They aren’t stupid. In fact, many actually have a really good understanding on what to do when an overdose happens to the extent that one of the regulars I help out actually had to tell a nurse who responded to one on the street on how to administer Narcan. I wouldn’t have believed it, but I saw it happen.”

“Most want help to get off the stuff, and they also want police to not hassle them and instead go after the people bringing it all in. If the police had the power to arrest a dealer or above and put them in jail for at least a few years, you can bet fentanyl deaths would go way down. Same with being able to do that with shoplifters, although that’s a different topic altogether.”

“We all want to see the situation improve, but we’re not seeing our city leaders do it. The general

feeling is that Breed is trying, the SFPD is doing what they can, Jenkins is trying, and the Board of Supervisors just do not care. Feelings are all over, but if you want an informal poll of residents and addicts around here, that's generally how it is panning out amongst the voices you don't hear all that often from the one issue. Drug users want to see more cops. It's like a story from the Onion, but that's the consensus, at least here."

More actions on the fentanyl crisis are expected to come soon in San Francisco.

By Evan Symon

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