



## Solving Drug Abuse in Los Angeles

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### I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Drug abuse in Los Angeles is a public health issue that is directly related to the homelessness, mental illness, and many more problems attributed to the mega city. This issue has been a huge factor in the destruction of numerous great empires. The problem must be properly recognized and subdued as soon as possible to prevent even worse effects on Los Angeles, so it may not share the same fate of once prosperous civilizations. This brief will examine the history of drug abuse, its factors, consequences, and solutions regarding the policies that must be implemented in Los Angeles.

### II. OVERVIEW

While the city of Angels is known for its entertainment industry, baseball, basketball, and many other cultural aspects, it is also one of the many places in the United States plagued by drug abuse. The impact of drug abuse has been immense, with more than 1.15 million people killed by drug overdoses since 1999 and 51.2% of individuals over 12 having used illicit drugs at least once (Nat. Center for Drug Abuse Statistics). In Los Angeles alone, more than 1.4 million residents in the county struggle with substance abuse (Recover LA). This issue cannot simply be ignored and must be firmly recognized and confronted. However, in order to tackle the issue,

one must investigate drug abuse in the context of history, including the opium crisis in the Qing Dynasty and the American War on Drugs. Furthermore, one must have a solidified understanding of the factors of drug abuse and its consequences in Los Angeles itself. This paper will briefly explore what we can take away from historical events and mainly focus on problems and solutions of drug abuse in Los Angeles to build a better future for its residents.

#### *A. Relevance*

Drug abuse can affect every aspect of an individual's life and those around said user. It may lead to lung disease, heart disease, strokes, mental health conditions, death, and many other negative results. While destroying one's physical health, it can also result in social problems as housing instability, criminal behavior, unemployment, are commonly associated with it. In Los Angeles, extensive drug abuse has caused strains on healthcare and justice systems and disproportionality killed more people of lower socioeconomic status (Magaña). While overall deaths have decreased, there is still much more work to be done to prevent further unnecessary deaths.

### III. HISTORY

#### *A. Current Stances*

Drug abuse has historically been the cause for economic and social strains on numerous

governments throughout history. This is exemplified by the collapse of the Qing Dynasty and the failure of the American War on Drugs.

In the 1800s, the British Empire exported opium to the Qing Dynasty in China which weakened its population, destroyed its economy, and eroded trust in the Chinese government. This would lead to the Opium Wars which further destabilized China and led to its decline (Pletcher). This historical case highlights how unchecked drug epidemics can cripple a society.

Similarly, in the United States, the War on Drugs started by President Nixon would serve as another lesson on drug abuse. While it was intended to diminish drug use and trafficking, it mainly focused on criminalization instead of rehabilitation. This resulted in mass incarceration and disproportionately affected minorities (Dholakia). The punitive approach only worsened social inequality and strained government resources.

Two critical lessons must be learned from these examples. Failing to address addiction as a public health crisis will destabilize society as it affects not only the health of the individual, but the functionality of the whole society. Moreover, a lack of rehabilitation, preventative measures, and an over-reliance on criminalization may only worsen the problem. History proves to be an effective guide to how Los Angeles must confront its own drug abuse crisis today.

#### IV. POLICY PROBLEM

##### *A. Issues Pertaining to Drug Abuse in Los Angeles*

Many of the causes and effects are intertwined with one another as demonstrated in this section.

Drug trafficking, homelessness, and Los Angeles' public health crisis are significant problems that come along with major drug abuse, especially in Los Angeles.

##### *B. Drug Trafficking*

In 2007, the Department of Justice stated that Los Angeles is the most significant illicit drug distribution center in the United States (US DOJ). While this description of Los Angeles may no longer be true, it is undeniable that Los Angeles remains to be a hub for major illegal drug activities. There is a long-winded history regarding the presence of cartels in Los Angeles. Contrary to popular belief, people of numerous ethnic backgrounds including but not limited to African Americans, Caucasian, Colombian, Dominican, Salvadorian, Canadian, Chinese, Jamaican, and Vietnamese crime groups have all participated in the illicit drug industry. This diverse collection of individuals along with many others have participated in this lucrative business due to numerous factors regarding the geography, infrastructure, poverty, and criminal history of Los Angeles.

- 1) The geographical location of Los Angeles in relation to the Mexican border makes it a prime city for importing, producing, and selling illicit drugs of all kinds. Los Angeles is only 90 miles away from the Mexican border and is connected by an extensive highway system that leads directly to it (Ono).
- 2) The infrastructure in Los Angeles has been able to facilitate the movement of drugs both domestically and internationally to a great extent. Besides the aforementioned highway system, Los Angeles is also home

to one of the busiest airports in the world, LAX, and 8 international mail facilities. Moreover, the Port of Long Beach and the Port of Los Angeles serve as major distribution centers for drug cartels and their products. Oftentimes, the precursor chemicals for drugs are imported from Asia to LAX, then refined in Mexico. It is then smuggled back into Los Angeles for distribution across the nation (Ono). This is just one of many examples of the role Los Angeles plays in the larger drug economy due to its infrastructure.

- 3) Poverty in Los Angeles is another major reason as to why drug trafficking is so prevalent in Los Angeles. Among adult drug-users, the main reasons street-level dealers sell drugs are to create personal income and sustain their own drug abuse (Semple et al). According to Poverty USA, more than one million individuals in Los Angeles are in poverty. Coupled with increasing costs of living such as the now \$1,390 median rent cost in Los Angeles, it is clear that many individuals may resort to desperate and illegal measures, involving themselves with drug trafficking (Poverty USA).
- 4) Violent crimes and drug related crimes each perpetuate each other. Famously in the 1990s, gangs such as the Crips, Bloods, MS-13, and Venice 13. While many of these gangs fought for turf, many fought for domination of the drug market. While gang activity has steadily declined since then, it is still present and perpetuates the drug distribution issue of Los Angeles.

Each of these contribute to drug trafficking,

which is only one of numerous issues that have caused the drug abuse epidemic in Los Angeles.

### *C. Homelessness*

Homelessness is a major issue in Los Angeles that is directly tied to drug abuse. Nearly 20-35% of homeless individuals face some type of substance abuse issue (County of LA Public Health).

Widespread use of fentanyl on the streets has led to numerous deaths, rising 45% from 2021 to 2022. Moreover, methamphetamine was responsible for 75% of drug overdoses in 2022 (Dream Center). Drug abuse can often propel an individual into homelessness as it may lead to financial instability and job loss. Those who are already homeless and begin drug abuse after the fact may only perpetuate their poor economic position. This is largely due to the institutionalized criminalization and stigmatization of drug abuse, causing hardships to recover. Many shelters and housing initiatives require that those who are eligible must abstain from drugs. This is somewhat contradictory and unrealistic as it is often difficult to refrain from using drugs without a stable house, environment, and proper necessities (Assaf). This demonstrates the interconnectedness of drug abuse in Los Angeles to homelessness, demonstrating one of its major consequences.

### *D. Public Health Crisis*

Drug abuse is one of the major contributors to the public health crisis in Los Angeles. One of the main drugs that is causing a particular strain on public health administration and logistics is fentanyl. It is the most common drug in accidental overdoses, responsible for 52% of all alcohol and drug deaths. Furthermore, deaths caused by fentanyl from 2016 to 2022 have risen by 1,652% (County of LA Public Health). This has resulted in increased costs for Los Angeles in

emergency services and hospital treatments. These deaths and hospitalizations have placed a growing strain on the already struggling public health system in Los Angeles. With issues such as fentanyl use and recent federal funding cuts on the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, the problems and strains that drugs cause may intensify.

## V. TRIED POLICY

### *A. Hardline Approach*

The 1990s saw the peak of the War on Drugs in California. In response to a growing drug epidemic, California implemented a “tough on crime approach” to solve the issue. This largely came in the form of the Three Strikes Rule which California legislators and voters passed in 1994. The law requires a sentence of 25 years to life for a three-time repeat offender of serious felony convictions, including that of illicit drugs (LAO). However, the effects were rather insignificant as crime was already decreasing after its passage. The law drove up the prison population and incarceration costs as well. While this hardline approach is widely debated and complex, it lacked preventative measures for drug abuse, disproportionately incarcerated peoples of color, and did not contribute much to the already declining crime rates (Murch).

### *B. Preventative and Rehabilitative Approach*

In recent years, an approach adopting rehabilitative and preventative systems dealing with drug abuse have been adopted in Los Angeles. Los Angeles’ public health department has focused heavily on community building. This has been done through an emphasis on education, drug abuse, social support, promoting healthy lifestyles, and sustainability instead of fearmongering. The LA County Department of Public Health has expanded its efforts to an incredible with a 260% increase in prevention,

275% increase in treatment, 205% increase in offerings of addiction medications (2022-2024), 550% increase in recovery housing, and 500% increase in harm reduction services and investments. Besides the actions of the department of public health, legislative action has taken place with bills such as AB 2473, updating training standards for Substance Use Disorder counselors to improve patient care quality and rehabilitation effectiveness. In recent years, drug overdose deaths have been steadily declining, mostly due to the newer solutions Los Angeles has implemented against drug abuse. Fentanyl deaths have declined from 64% to 52% from 2023 to 2024. Overall, drug related overdoses have also decreased by 22% in 2024, the most significant drop in Los Angeles history (County of LA Public Health). This demonstrates the effectiveness of a preventative and rehabilitative approach, as it prevents the problem from growing instead of punitive action after crimes have already been committed.

## VI. POLICY OPTIONS

By utilizing lessons from history and the recent victories against drug abuse in Los Angeles, these policy recommendations should be prioritized to continue the reduction of drug abuse and its harmful consequences:

### *A. Expand Harm Reduction Services*

Los Angeles should continue expanding harm reduction programs including supervised consumption sites, needle exchange programs, and widespread distribution of naloxone (County of LA Public Health). These intervention programs can save lives while also connecting individuals to necessary treatment services. The city should also increase funding for mobile outreach to administer these programs so they may reach vulnerable populations wherever they are.

### *B. New Housing Approach*

Rather than requiring abstinence from drugs before providing housing, Los Angeles should adopt a “housing first model” that provides stable shelter paired with treatment services (Assaf). This approach emphasizes that recovery is achievable when unhoused individuals can secure housing. It also recognizes the cyclical relationship between homelessness and substance abuse.

### *C. Strengthen Security*

Since Los Angeles is a distribution hub, the city should work with federal and state agencies to enhance security at LAX, the Port of Long Beach, and the Port of Los Angeles. They should focus on preventing precursor chemicals, which many people are unsuspecting of, from entering. However, the same mistakes of a hardline approach must not be made and rehabilitation must follow many arrests.

### *D. Address Economic Issues*

As a preventative measure, investment in job training programs, education, and economic development in poorer communities should be prioritized. Providing legal and profitable economic opportunities for impoverished communities reduces the chances of their reliance on illicit drug trade and may solve the fundamental motive for dealing and use of drugs.

### *E. Sustain and Increase Funding*

Despite major federal funding cuts especially to the department of public health, Los Angeles must maintain its investment and expansion involving prevention, treatment, and recovery services that have contributed to the historic 22% reduction in overdose deaths (County of LA Public Health). This includes continued support

for community-based organizations and the department of public health’s other programs.

## VII. CONCLUSIONS

It is clear that the drug abuse issue in Los Angeles is not unsolvable, but will be extremely difficult to mitigate. History has taught us through the Qing Dynasty, Nixon’s War on Drugs, and “tough on crime” approaches, what Los Angeles should and should not do. It is clear that prevention, harm reduction, rehabilitation, and recognition of the issue is paramount to solving it in a sustainable and efficient manner. As drug crime, homelessness, and deaths continue to plague Los Angeles, progress is still being made. History and effective modern policies provide the guidelines on how Los Angeles can save lives and build a better future for its residents.

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