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Oregon Leaders Declare Drug Emergency in Portland

Written By [Michael Corkery](#) (Jan. 30, 2024)

Oregon leaders are marshaling resources against fentanyl.

Oregon leaders on Tuesday declared a 90-day state of emergency in central Portland as part of a broad effort to tackle the effects of fentanyl on the streets of the state's largest city.

Why It Matters: Portland has been struggling.

Portland used to be known as one of the most desirable places to live in the United States. But in recent years, the city has been struggling with widespread fentanyl use on its streets, which has led to an increase in homeless encampments and crime.

As many other American cities have rebounded from the pandemic, the fentanyl crisis has hampered the city's recovery.

Several key retailers, [such as REI](#), have closed stores in Portland, while hundreds of people continue to die from fentanyl overdoses every year, often in tents or on sidewalks.

The emergency declaration is part of a broader plan announced late last year by Oregon's governor, Tina Kotek, to curb public drug use and crime in Portland and re-establish a sense of security for workers and visitors.

In an executive order on Tuesday, Gov. Kotek cited the "economic and reputational harm" that the fentanyl problem was inflicting on Portland and the state.

"Our country and our state have never seen a drug this deadly addictive, and all are grappling with how to respond," the governor said in a statement.

Oregon decriminalized most public drug use in 2020.

The emergency declaration tries to address a frequent criticism among Oregon taxpayers: Millions of dollars are being spent on homelessness and addiction problems, but the resources are not always reaching people effectively.

State officials said a “command center” would be set up in central Portland, where various agencies from the state, city and county would coordinate their responses to the fentanyl problem. The command center is also designed to collect and analyze data and identify any “gaps” in the government’s response.

Many cities are struggling with the fallout from fentanyl. In Oregon, the problem was accelerated by a law voters passed in 2020 that decriminalized the use of so-called hard drugs, including methamphetamine and fentanyl, and not just marijuana, which was already legal in Oregon and many other states. At the time of its passage, Measure 110 was celebrated as a first-in-the-nation law, an attempt to recognize drug addiction as a health problem, not a crime.

Under this law, Measure 110, the police are supposed to refer people they see using fentanyl to treatment, and not send them to jail. But, in reality, many fentanyl users have ignored these referrals and continue to use the drug openly in parks, on city buses and in front of restaurants with impunity.

Liberal elected officials in many U.S. cities have been wary about returning to policies of the past that focused on arresting and jailing drug addicts rather than getting them into treatment.

But in many of those cities, widespread disorder has alienated even liberal-minded voters, forcing leaders to take a harder-line approach.

In 2021, San Francisco’s mayor, London Breed, [made waves](#) by declaring an “emergency” in the city’s Tenderloin District and stepped up arrests for public drug use and shoplifting.

The emergency declaration in Portland was announced jointly by Gov. Kotek; Portland’s mayor, Ted Wheeler; and the Multnomah County chair, Jessica Vega Pederson — all Democrats.

Some officials are discussing ramping up drug laws.

The emergency declaration seems unlikely to draw much political pushback, but a bigger dispute lies ahead. Gov. Kotek has said that she is proposing a change in state law to ban public drug use and to give the police more resources to crack down on drug dealing.

Seeking to roll back Measure 110 is likely to face opposition from many addiction-treatment providers. They have argued that recriminalizing drug use will lead people to use fentanyl in private, increasing the risk of overdoses.

[Opioid overdoses](#) in Oregon increased from 738 in 2021, the first year Measure 110 was in effect, to 956 in 2022.

Gov. Kotek has signaled that her plan calls not just for more police involvement but also for increased services for homeless people, including more shelter capacity.

[Michael Corkery](#) covers national issues such as drug addiction, mental illness and violence and the people and places most affected by it. [More about Michael Corkery](#)

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/30/us/portland-fentanyl-emergency.html>