

# Santa Monica CALIFORNIA

Substance Use Policy Brief | June 2024

Santa Monica is a coastal city west of downtown Los Angeles, known for its rich history and vibrant cultural scene. With nearly 93,000 residents, almost 8% of which are youth and young adults.

Santa Monica, like many other metropolitan areas, faces challenges with a range of substances such as alcohol, cannabis, methamphetamine, and opioid prescription drugs and fentanyl.

This brief describes the policy context of Santa Monica and the Greater Los Angeles Area related to each group of substances and city-specific policy initiatives that are currently being considered or have recently been passed.

## Federal Policy Context

- **The SUPPORT Act** prioritizes increasing access to evidence-based treatment for substance use disorders, specifically focusing on opioids.
- **SAMSHA Guidelines and Best Practices:** SAMHSA issues guidelines and best practices for SUD treatment and prevention, which states often adopt or adapt.
- **Federal Alcohol Administration Act (FAA):** Federal regulations on the production, distribution, and marketing of alcoholic beverages impact state-level alcohol policies and enforcement.
- **Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) Controlled Substances Regulations:** The DEA enforces regulations on controlled substances, including registration and compliance requirements for medical practitioners and researchers.
- **Prescription Drug Monitoring Programs:** Federal support for state PDMPs helps track prescribing and dispensing of controlled substances, aiming to reduce misuse and diversion.

## Excessive and Underage Drinking



The City of Los Angeles has an interest in reducing alcohol abuse and underage drinking. Excessive and underage drinking poses a number of serious health and behavioral health risks, such as liver damage, mental health issues, risky behaviors, and accidents/injuries among other things.

**Alcohol-Related Statistics.** According to a 2022 LA County Community Needs Assessment, alcohol poses a great risk to people in Santa Monica. According to those surveyed in SPA 5:

- Nearly 9% of L.A. County residents aged 12 and over reported ever using a delivery service to buy alcohol.
- Liquor stores were the most popular source (58.3%) for those who ever ordered alcohol via delivery service, followed by grocery stores (49.6%), restaurants (25.3%), and subscription services (7.8%).
- SPA 5 residents reported a high prevalence of using alcohol delivery services, with 7% indicating they had used such services.

**Current Policy Efforts.** Santa Monica's current policy efforts on excessive and underage drinking primarily focus on decreasing prevalence and increasing safety measures related to alcohol consumption, for example:

- Similar to Los Angeles, Santa Monica has specified operating standards for alcohol on-site retailers.
- Cannabis consumption is banned at social service centers in Santa Monica.
- Santa Monica addresses loud gatherings through nuisance abatement laws with a dedicated cost-defraying fund.

New legislation being considered in the California Senate (AB 2865) as of June 2024 would require high school students to get a crash course on the short- and long-term health effects of alcohol consumption.

**Policy Recommendations.** Communities and advocates in Santa Monica should focus on prevention, education, and treatment/support focused policies and initiatives for youth, which could include implementing school-based education programs, public awareness campaigns, and in-patient and outpatient services for alcohol abuse and mental health disorders.

# Cannabis Regulation



Following California's legalization of cannabis in 2016, Santa Monica has had limited cannabis-related business activity and prohibited adult recreational use of cannabis. The city has greatly shifted their policies on cannabis use and retail in the last year.

**Cannabis Licensing.** Prior to 2023, Santa Monica has issued one of two medicinal cannabis retail permits and allowed permits to be issued for light manufacturing operations, which includes assembly type operations. In 2023, Santa Monica began revising the city's ordinance on adult recreational cannabis use to encourage economic recovery from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Recent Policy Changes and Programs.** As of October 2023, important changes related to cannabis regulation were made:

- The Santa Monica City Council approved changes to the city's zoning code to allow for expanded retail cannabis sales. This would allow for adult-use cannabis sales and delivery for the two medicinal cannabis retailers with active Conditional Use Permits.
- The sales of adult-use cannabis have been subjected to a 3% business sales tax, and could be revised in the future, but cannot exceed 10% without voter approval.

- In January 2024, city staff secured a \$40,000 Cannabis Equity Grant from the Governor's Office of Business and Economic Development to fund a cannabis equity assessment in Santa Monica. This study, in line with industry best practices, is the first step in developing the equity program.

Nationally, as of May 2024, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration is considering reclassifying cannabis as a Schedule III drug, which is considered "less dangerous" than its current designation as a Schedule II drug. If this shift is made, this will eliminate legalization contradictions at the state and federal level, which has both social and economic implications.

**Policy Recommendations.** Related to cannabis regulation, communities and advocates should focus on vocalizing support for equity-initiatives that aim to give cannabis-related economic opportunities to historically and modernly marginalized groups. In addition, while cannabis is a legal substance, communities and advocates should continue to push for education and awareness campaigns to spread information about reducing the health- and behavioral health implications of using cannabis. These efforts should have a particular focus on youth and emphasize aspects of mental health and wellness.



## Methamphetamine, Fentanyl, and Opioids



Santa Monica has been experiencing historically high levels of drug use and drug-related deaths, specifically a result of methamphetamine and fentanyl/opioids. While these drugs are different in nature, both are incredibly dangerous and addictive.

**Drug-Related Statistics.** According to a 2022 L.A. County Community Needs Assessment, illicit drugs pose a great risk to Santa Monica. According to those surveyed in SPA 5:

- In L.A. County, the average age of first-time methamphetamine use is 20 years old.
- Among youth who experimented with methamphetamine (aged 12-17), 72% indicated it was easy to obtain.
- 65% of residents aged 12 and older have binged meth at least once in their lifetime.

According to reports from Substance Abuse and Control for LA County, the health-related implications of illicit drugs were profound:

- Fentanyl overdose hospitalizations in 2021 were highest among 26-39 year olds (40%) in L.A. County.
- Fentanyl overdose hospitalizations in LAC increased by 575% for males from 40 in 2016 to 270 in 2021, while they remained relatively stable during the period for females. Males accounted for 39% of fentanyl overdose hospitalizations in 2016 and accounted for 82% in 2021.

**Current Programs and Policy Efforts.** Santa Monica has taken a number of measures to address illicit drug use, such as:

- The 2019 Budget Act allocated \$15.2 million over four years to prevent overdose by distributing naloxone, the overdose reversal drug, and training people who use drugs on how to use it to prevent death.

California's Department of Health Care Services created the Naloxone Distribution Project (NDP) to combat opioid overdose-related deaths by distributing naloxone spray throughout the state. California Senate Bill 234 is being considered which requires stadiums, concert venues, and amusement parks to have naloxone available for fentanyl overdoses. Melanie's Law Senate Bill 10, also currently in consideration, requires mandatory training for school staff on life-saving drug prevention and response resources. This includes education for students and staff on youth fentanyl exposure and naloxone training.

**Policy Recommendations.** Communities and advocates in Santa Monica should focus on prevention, education, and treatment/support focused policies and initiatives for communities, which could include implementing community-based education programs, public awareness campaigns, and in-patient and outpatient services for illicit drug abuse and mental health disorders.