

# Honduran Drug Gangs Rule the Streets of San Francisco

In the Tenderloin, the “Hondos” have cornered the fentanyl market.

[Christopher F. Rufo](#), [Ryan Thorpe](#), and [Jonathan Choe](#)



It's 3 a.m. in San Francisco's Tenderloin district, and an all-night, drug-fueled party has been raging for hours. The sidewalks are littered with trash and human feces. Addicts huddle in the alleys, inhaling fentanyl fumes through plastic straws; others are slumped over, barely conscious. Makeshift homeless encampments line block after block.

Dealers are everywhere. On the street corners, groups of men dressed in dark hoodies and face masks sell drugs. These are the “Hondos,” migrants from Honduras who have taken over the San Francisco drug trade. Night after night, they turn the Tenderloin into a lucrative, open-air drug market.

For this *City Journal* investigation, we spent three days and nights in the Tenderloin, talking to addicts, journalists, cops, and the dealers themselves. We discovered that the city's progressive policies have allowed foreign drug gangs to take over an entire neighborhood in downtown San Francisco, poisoning the down-and-out and bringing Third World conditions to one of America's wealthiest cities.

In the Tenderloin, the Hondos rule.



If you're looking to score hard drugs on the streets of San Francisco, the Hondos are your best bet. In 2022, former San Francisco mayor London Breed seemed to admit as much in a radio interview, saying that "a lot" of the city's drug dealers were Honduran. Her comments sparked a wave of backlash from Latino activists, with one local group denouncing the remarks as "xenophobic and racist." Soon after, Breed was pressured into issuing a public apology.

But Breed was right. Gangs of migrants, primarily from Honduras and supplied by Mexican cartels, run the fentanyl trade in San Francisco. In 2023, the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported that Hondurans had "taken over the sale of [fentanyl]" in the city's "[open-air markets]." Last year, an article in the *Harvard Law Review* stated that "nearly all" low-level fentanyl and meth dealers prosecuted as part of a federal sentencing program were "Honduran men without legal status in the United States."

JJ Smith is a lifelong San Francisco resident and the owner of a café in the Tenderloin. A few years ago, his older brother died from a fentanyl overdose. Ever since, Smith has dedicated himself to documenting life in the Tenderloin and doing what he can to help get addicts into treatment. He says that, while the Tenderloin has always had problems, the situation is worse than ever. He also confirmed what we'd heard from more than a dozen drug users: the Hondos run the corners.

"I know they Hondos because I've been seeing them out here for a while," Smith said. "I know what they tag on the wall. I know what they speak. And I know where they say they from and what they call themselves. They always dressed with the hoods on in the nighttime, with the masks on . . . Hustling. Selling they drugs, selling fentanyl."

In 2023, Smith said that he saw a group of Hondos selling drugs in front of a school. He approached them and told them they couldn't sell there. In response, Smith said, he was jumped by three men. During the ensuing brawl, he was twice hit with a machete—once on the top of his head, and once on his right hand and wrist.

"After it was over, everybody stopped, and that's when I start seeing the blood coming down my face," Smith said. "I had a split head."

That same year, Smith says he saw a "Hondo" hack another man to death with a machete. "I also seen the Hondurans hack another individual with a machete until they killed him," Smith said. "And you know what? The same Honduran I seen hack him with that machete that killed the guy . . . he's still, right now, probably going to be on the same corner tonight."



On our last night in the Tenderloin, we studied a Honduran crew peddling drugs at the corner of 6th Street and Market. Homeless addicts clustered around them as they processed a steady stream of hand-to-hand sales. As we learned, these crews are well-organized. This one had a shot caller, multiple dealers, two spotters stationed a half-a-block down the street, and a homeless drug mule who held onto the product.

As we approached the crew, one of the Hondos—a young man who appeared to be in his early twenties and, according to our translator, claimed to be from Puerto Rico but couldn't answer basic questions about it and spoke with a Honduran accent—offered to sell us fentanyl. He stood on the sidewalk and nodded at us as we walked up, saying, “how much?” in between puffs on his cigar.

Further down the block, a second dealer offered to sell us “ISO,” or isotonitazene, a new drug up to nine times stronger than fentanyl. “How much you got?” he asked one of us. “I’ll give you a gram for \$30.”

We also spoke with a dealer nicknamed “Cricket.” Cricket indicated that he was a Mexican national who had illegally crossed into the United States three years ago. “In five minutes, I was already on the other side,” he told our translator.

Now, Cricket claimed to work with the Hondos, selling small baggies of ISO on the sidewalk. He also suggested that Mexican cartels help relocate the Hondos to San Francisco, where they’re employed as foot soldiers in a multinational drug operation.

Soon after, a San Francisco police cruiser pulled up to the corner of 6th Street and Market. An officer parked the cruiser near a bus stop and flipped on its red and blue lights. Almost immediately, the dealers began to disperse, walking away down the sidewalk. After a few minutes, the officer turned off the lights and drove off, having never stepped out of the vehicle. Seconds later, the dealers turned around and set up shop at the corner again.



Why is this happening? In short, because of San Francisco’s “progressive” policies. For years, the city has prioritized its “sanctuary” law that make deportations more difficult; relaxed drug enforcement, limiting arrests of dealers and users; and embraced “housing first” policies, which make cleaning up homeless encampments and coercing addicts into treatment nearly impossible. This crisis didn’t come from nowhere. It is the predictable result of deliberate choices.

In response to a public records request, the San Francisco Police Department provided *City Journal* with a copy of its policy on immigration enforcement. The document makes clear that officers are not allowed to “inquire into an individual’s immigration status” and cannot ask anyone to produce documents proving their status. Officers are barred, in many cases, from “assist[ing] in the enforcement of federal immigration laws” or honoring ICE detainer requests. In addition, illegal migrants prosecuted for drug dealing in California courts have been repeatedly released back onto San Francisco’s streets.

JJ Smith says he often speaks with city police officers who tell him these policies have demoralized the department: “That’s messing up the morale within the police department. They constantly arresting the same person over and over for the same thing . . . . They turn around and see that person right back out here doing the same thing . . . . It’s like there’s no accountability.”

Predictably, San Francisco’s permissive drug culture, and the tolerance it showed to illegal aliens peddling poison, helped drive an explosion of overdose deaths. In 2023, San Francisco’s overdose-death rate was more than double the national average. Between 2020 and 2025, an estimated total of 4,087 people died of overdoses in the city, with many of those deaths clustered in the Tenderloin.

By 2023, then-Mayor Breed had declared a state of emergency and reached out to the federal government for help. In August of that year, the All Hands on Deck initiative began, a new partnership between federal, state, and city officials to crack down on fentanyl dealing. The initiative saw the federal government step in to prosecute low-level street dealers in the Tenderloin. It also included fast-track sentencing, which can result in a “reduced sentence in return for a quick plea and waiver of procedural rights.” In theory, this arrangement would enable officials to bypass the city’s sanctuary law and deport undocumented criminals quickly.

This policy might sound like progress, but some evidence suggests that the Honduran criminal networks view the initiative more as a get-out-of-jail free card than a serious threat to their operations.

So far, there have been a handful of cases of Hondurans deported for drug offenses but who quickly return to San Francisco and allegedly resume criminal activity. In 2023, Jairo Mendoza Erazo, a Honduran, was deported after pleading guilty to a fentanyl charge. By early 2024, he was back in San Francisco, and was later arrested again, allegedly in possession of both cocaine and heroin. In another case, Anderson Medina was arrested and deported in 2023 after he and an accomplice were allegedly found with more than 350 grams of fentanyl. In 2025, he was reportedly arrested again—two blocks from the site of his arrest two years earlier in San Francisco.

“It is too soon to tell whether these are individual recidivists or reflect a larger trend,” wrote the *Harvard Law Review*. “Nevertheless, they lend credence to fears that a ‘free trip home with no prison time’ is inadequate deterrence.”



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When Daniel Lurie ran for mayor in 2024, he promised to restore order to a city that had become an international symbol of disorder and decline. Since taking office in January 2025, Lurie has embraced tougher enforcement, reduced the level of visible homeless encampments, and pursued increased cooperation between local and federal officials. But as our reporting makes clear, Lurie’s reforms do not go far enough.

San Francisco has devoted significant resources to homelessness, addiction, public health initiatives, and street outreach. Meantime, police, prosecutors, and federal agents have targeted low-level dealers, as well as the larger trafficking networks that supply them. But for these efforts to succeed, the city must remove the policies that created the crisis from the books.

Lurie cannot simultaneously wage war on the Tenderloin’s open-air drug markets and preserve the policies that make it difficult to detain and deport drug dealers. Nor can he claim victory when a handful of corners are temporarily cleared but the wider market remains undisturbed. As long as San Francisco remains a place where you can sell fentanyl with minimal consequences, the open-air drug markets in the Tenderloin—and all the human misery they bring—will endure.

In response to a request for comment, a spokesman for Lurie’s office said that “unsheltered homelessness is at its lowest level in 15 years and April had the lowest number of overdose deaths since the city started tracking in 2020.”

The test for Lurie is whether he is willing to move beyond half-measures and confront the progressive political orthodoxies that have allowed this problem to fester for so long. That will require not only

sustained policing and prosecutions but also rolling back the sanctuary city protections that have allowed foreign drug gangs to poison people in San Francisco with impunity.

*Christopher F. Rufo is a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, a contributing editor of City Journal, and the author of America's Cultural Revolution. Ryan Thorpe is an investigative reporter at the Manhattan Institute. Jonathan Choe is a senior fellow at the Discovery Institute and a journalist.*

A guest post by

### Ryan Thorpe

Investigative reporter at the Manhattan Institute. Ex-newspaper hack. Words in City Journal, New York Post, etc.

A guest post by

### Jonathan Choe

Jonathan Choe is a Senior Fellow and journalist with Discovery Institute's Center on Wealth and Poverty, covering homelessness, mental health, and drug addiction issues. Choe is also an investigative journalist for Frontlines TPUSA.

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Great investigation. Lurie and all "centrist" California Democrats are too terrified of their base to cooperate with ICE and save lives with deportations. Most of the Hondurans are from the Siria Valley, where they have built mansions with their fortunes adorned with flags SF sports teams: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-2og-VL4Kyc>

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JC Collins

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The only way the city will get rid of these criminals is if the toxic empathy party is voted out.

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