

GR 5.4 - Current events in Congress

Directions: You will read the following article that looks at a recent bill passed in the Senate that focuses on increased penalties for Fentanyl traffickers. You will then answer the questions on a piece of paper. Please upload a picture of the questions to google classroom in the corresponding assignment section.

Senate passes bill that would increase penalties for fentanyl traffickers

By Stephen Groves (AP) 14 March 2025¹

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate on Friday passed a bill that would result in more prison sentences for fentanyl traffickers as both Republicans and Democrats seek to show they can act to rein in distribution of the deadly drug.

The bill passed the Senate on an 84-16 vote, with all the nay votes from Democrats. It next heads to the House, where a similar version of the bill has already passed with significant Democratic support, showing many in the party are eager to clamp down on fentanyl distribution following an election in which Republican Donald Trump harped on the problem. House Republicans passed a similar bill in 2023 with dozens of Democrats joining in support, but it languished in the Democratic-held Senate.

Critics say the proposal repeats the mistakes of the so-called “war on drugs,” which imprisoned millions of people addicted to drugs, particularly Black Americans.

Now, with Republicans in control of the Senate, Majority Leader John Thune has prioritized the legislation.

Thune said this week the legislation “gives law enforcement a critical tool to go after the criminals bringing this poison into our country and selling it on our streets.”

Called the HALT Fentanyl Act, the bill would permanently place all copycat versions of fentanyl — alterations of the drug that are often sold by traffickers — on the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration’s list of most dangerous drugs, known as Schedule 1. The drugs had already been temporarily placed on the list since 2018, but that designation was set to expire at the end of the month. The move would mean an increase in criminal convictions for distributing fentanyl-related substances, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

The legislation also seeks to make it easier to research the drugs.

¹<https://apnews.com/article/congress-fentanyl-trafficking-drugs-bill-3a142db24a7657ebf2b3901b62d2ab5a>

A similar version of the bill passed the House last month with 98 Democrats and every Republican except Rep. Thomas Massie of Kentucky in support. Law enforcement groups have also supported the bill.

“This is bipartisan because, frankly, fentanyl is a bipartisan problem,” said Sen. Bill Cassidy, the Louisiana Republican who has sponsored the bill.

Both Democrats and Republicans in Congress have found agreement on trying to halt the flow of fentanyl into the United States, where it is blamed for tens of thousands of overdose deaths every year. Trump has said that halting the illicit flow of fentanyl is one of the top goals of his on-again-off-again tariff threats against Mexico, Canada and China.

But some progressive Democrats said the bill was missing an opportunity to tackle root causes of addiction or to focus on stopping the drug from entering the U.S.

Sen. Ed Markey, a Massachusetts Democrat, said in a statement that support for the bill was “enabling a political stunt at the expense of real solutions.”

The bill will “do little to actually solve the fentanyl crisis but will make it harder to research addiction and overdose reversal medication, disrupt communities and families by incarcerating rather than treating addiction, and divert resources from methods that work to disrupt the flow of fentanyl in the United States to strategies from the outdated War-on-Drugs solutions that do not work,” Markey added.

The average prison sentence for those convicted of trafficking fentanyl-related drugs was seven years and three months in 2023, according to the U.S. Sentencing Commission. Almost 60% of those convicted were Black, 23% were Hispanic and 16% were white.

Article Questions

- 1) What is the main goal of the HALT Fentanyl Act?
- 2) How did the Senate vote on this bill?
- 3) What is the next step for this bill before it becomes law?
- 4) What are the arguments in favor of increasing penalties for fentanyl trafficking?
- 5) What concerns do some lawmakers have about this approach?
- 6) How does this legislation compare to past drug policies in the U.S.?
- 7) Which committees likely worked on this bill? Why?
- 8) What role do committees play in shaping this type of legislation?
- 9) How might public opinion influence congressional action on drug laws?