

## AP-NORC Poll: Most Americans see drugs as a big problem

March 25 2016, by Lisa Marie Pane And Emily Swanson

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In this photo taken March 24, 2016, Sharon Johnson poses in her apartment in Lynn, Mass. Johnson calls herself an addict, although she's been sober for three years now. She started by smoking pot and eventually moved to crack cocaine. Her daughter has tried heroin and "I believe I'm going to pull her out of the gutter someday," she laments. (AP Photo/Michael Dwyer)

Sharon Johnson calls herself an addict, although she's been sober for three years now. She started by smoking pot and eventually moved to

crack cocaine. Her daughter has tried heroin and "I believe I'm going to pull her out of the gutter someday," Johnson laments.

Johnson has seen firsthand the ravages of drug abuse reflected in a national Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll. Whether it's alcohol or illegal drugs such as heroin and cocaine, a majority of Americans say it's a problem and that more needs to be done to address it.

Johnson, 56, of Lynn, Massachusetts, said she doesn't believe any drug should be legalized and believes more needs to be done to crack down on dealers. She goes to Narcotics Anonymous meetings every Thursday and sees too many of her companions there relapsing and dying from drug use. Still, she considers treatment the best option for users rather than prosecution.

"To lock someone up for using, it's not going to solve anything. They're going to rebel," Johnson, a poll respondent, told the AP in a follow-up interview. "For dealers, in my eyes, they should be locked up."

The poll found that most Americans—62 percent—said that at least one type of substance use was a serious problem in their communities. That included alcohol, marijuana, heroin, cocaine, meth and prescription pills. Some 43 percent said they have a relative or close friend with substance abuse issues. Seven in 10 Americans believe not enough is being done to find better addiction treatment or to make treatment programs more accessible in their communities.



In this photo taken March 24, 2016, Sharon Johnson reaches out to her napping granddaughter Aries, 2, in her apartment in Lynn, Mass. Johnson calls herself an addict, although she's been sober for three years now. She started by smoking pot and eventually moved to crack cocaine. Her daughter has tried heroin and "I believe I'm going to pull her out of the gutter someday," she laments. (AP Photo/Michael Dwyer)

And, like Johnson, most prioritized punishment for drug dealers rather than cracking down on users.

It was a long road for Johnson to get clean. She bounced from couch to couch because she couldn't pay the rent. She's estranged from her sister after going on a binge and not returning a debit card her sister lent her.

"Before I got locked up, my probation officer told me, 'Sharon, you're going to end up dead,' " Johnson said. "I was in denial a long time, and one day I did a complete turnaround."

Johnson spent six months in treatment as part of Project COPE, an outpatient substance abuse treatment program. She's now on disability and hopes to complete her education. She spends time with her grandchildren. Lynn, a city of 90,000 north of Boston, has experienced one of the state's highest rates of deaths from heroin.

Johnson's story captures much of what the AP-NORC survey described: A feeling that drugs are a pervasive problem, with many seeing friends or relatives ravaged by drugs and believing that treatment options need to be improved for addicts while punishment needs to be fierce for dealers.

While 61 percent of those surveyed said they support legalizing marijuana, most said they want it limited to medical treatment or want to impose restrictions on amounts that can be purchased.

Warren Lawler Chansky is a retired criminal defense lawyer who believes that as long as alcohol is legal, so should marijuana for recreational and medicinal uses.

"In all these years of practicing (law), I've seen awful crimes, tragedies. But very few associated with marijuana," said Chansky, 57, of Port St. Lucie, Florida.

He doesn't personally smoke but he had a family member who used marijuana to keep up her appetite while she was battling cancer. "She would have died had she not been able to eat," Chansky said.

The AP-NORC Poll of 1,042 adults was conducted Feb. 11-14 using a sample drawn from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak panel, which is designed to be representative of the U.S. population. The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 3.9 percentage points.

Respondents were first selected randomly using address-based sampling

methods, and later interviewed online or by phone.

**More information:** AP-NORC Center: [www.apnorc.org/](http://www.apnorc.org/)

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