

Poll finds strong support for providing treatment over criminalization of opioid abuse

January 18 2017



Credit: Virginia Commonwealth University

The 2017 Public Policy Poll: Public Safety, Substance Use and Mental Health—conducted by the Center for Public Policy at the L. Douglas

Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs at Virginia Commonwealth University—found strong support for providing treatment to opioid users.

More than six out of 10 (61 percent) respondents felt [heroin users](#) should be offered treatment instead of being arrested and criminally charged. Seven out of 10 (72 percent) said the same course of action should be offered to prescription drug abusers. Similarly, citizens surveyed were also supportive of treatment programs instead of incarceration for nonviolent offenders who suffer from [mental illness](#).

In recent months, opioid use and its impact on the criminal justice system has taken center stage in policy debates around the country and Virginia has been no different. In November 2016, Virginia State Health Commissioner Marissa Levine declared a [public health emergency](#) and said, "The consequences of opioid addiction in Virginia have risen to unprecedented levels and can now be classified as epidemic."

While respondents strongly support the idea of treatment versus arrest, there were significant differences among those who identified themselves as Democrat, Republican and Independent. For those who favored treatment among heroin users, 38 percent identified themselves as Democrat, 18 percent Republican and 38 percent Independent as compared to 35 percent Democrat, 24 percent Republican and 35 percent Independent who favor treatment for prescription medication abuse.

However, there was overwhelming support for treatment for [opioid users](#) suffering mental illness by both Republicans (81 percent) and Democrats (92 percent).

As with issues of substance abuse and mental illness, police community relations are also at the forefront of public debate. Violent events in

Baltimore, Tulsa and Charlotte have linked the use of force and poor race relations to unfavorable views about the police. Current public opinion in Virginia does not show similar results. More than three-quarters of poll respondents believe police in their community treat people fairly (78 percent), do a good job handling race relations in their community (75 percent), and use the appropriate amount of force in dealing with suspects (73 percent).

"Public perceptions of police in our community are key to the maintenance of public safety," said Robyn McDougle, Ph.D., faculty director of the Office of Public Policy Outreach and associate professor of Criminal Justice at the Wilder School.

"As many communities around the country are addressing dismal community police relations, Virginians' perceptions of police are very favorable, which is a testament to the continual training and outreach that our police departments have done and continue to do around the commonwealth," she said.

The poll was conducted in partnership with the office of the Virginia Secretary of Public Safety and Homeland Security. It also addressed issues on national security. Nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of respondents are concerned about terrorist attacks in Virginia, with a majority stating they would be conducted by U.S.-based hate groups.

"The partnership we have with VCU on this poll presents a tremendous opportunity to check the pulse on a variety of public safety and security issues across the commonwealth," said Brian Moran, Virginia secretary of public safety and homeland security.

"After surveying the results, I am pleased to see that support for our law enforcement officials is trending positively, and the job they are doing in communities is viewed favorably. The poll also demonstrates support for

the governor's initiatives with regard to mental health and combating the opioid epidemic," Moran said. "Virginians view opioid abusers and those experiencing lack of treatment for mental illness as an increasingly difficult issue plaguing communities and that treatment options should be available for these users."

Citizens were not, however, as confident in [public safety agencies'](#) abilities to respond to acts of terrorism in Virginia. Slightly less than three-quarters of respondents (71 percent) indicated they were concerned about [public safety](#) agencies being unable to protect residents from such attacks.

"Terrorist attacks around the world are becoming regularly reported news events and the commonwealth's proximity to the nation's capital has kept concerns regarding personal safety at the forefront of our citizens' thoughts. Recent poll responses highlight the need for continual community conversations and preparations," McDougle said.

More information: 2017 Public Policy Poll: Public Safety, Substance Use and Mental Health: news.vcu.edu/pdfs/Public-Safety-Poll.pdf

Provided by Virginia Commonwealth University

Citation: Poll finds strong support for providing treatment over criminalization of opioid abuse (2017, January 18) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-01-poll-strong-treatment-criminalization-opioid.html>

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