

AMERICANS' ATTITUDES ABOUT PRESCRIPTION PAINKILLER ABUSE

March 2016



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STAT

INTRODUCTION

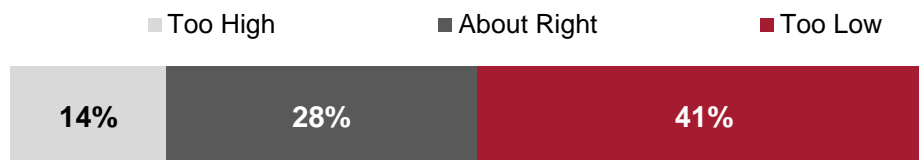
A new poll of adults in the United States by *Stat* and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health shows that just days after the passage of the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act of 2016 through the U.S. Senate, more than two in five Americans believe that the amount of money the government currently spends on treatment programs for people addicted to prescription painkillers or heroin is too low. Despite historic levels of partisan polarization, self-identified Democrats and Republicans nationwide agree not only on increases in government addiction treatment funding, but also on treatment instead of incarceration for drug offenses, and new government prescribing guidelines for strong prescription painkillers such as Percocet, OxyContin and Vicodin. This may be related, at least in part, to the more than one in three Americans who believe that doctors who inappropriately prescribe painkillers bear primary responsibility for the growing problem of prescription painkiller abuse in the U.S. today.

FINDINGS

On March 10, the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act of 2016 (CARA) passed the U.S. Senate by a vote of 94 to 1. Despite concerns from Democrats that the bill does not contain \$600 million in emergency funding for communities affected by the heroin and prescription drug crisis, it “authorizes grants to states for addiction, treatment prevention and education initiatives” aimed at addressing drug abuse.¹ The bill also expands access to naloxone, medicine that can temporarily stop an overdose.

The poll asked adults in the U.S. for their views on government **funding for addiction treatment** programs. Results indicate that a plurality (41%) of adults in the U.S. believe the amount of money the government currently spends on treatment programs for people addicted to prescription painkillers or heroin is too low, while nearly three in ten (28%) believe it’s about right. On the other hand, one in seven (14%) believe the government’s current funding levels are too high (*Figure 1*).

FIGURE 1. Percent of adults in the U.S. who believe the amount of money the government currently spends on treatment programs for people addicted to prescription painkillers or heroin is too high, too low, or about right.



Adults who live in households that earn at least \$75,000 per year (58%) are significantly more likely to say that government spending on treatment programs for people addicted to prescription painkillers or heroin is too low, as compared to adults living in households earning less than \$50,000 per year (36%). White Americans (46%) are also significantly more likely than black (24%) or Latino Americans (28%) to believe that government spending on treatment programs is too low.

¹ James Arkin, “Senate Passes Bill Addressing Heroin, Opioid Crisis,” RealClearPolitics, March 10, 2016, http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2016/03/10/senate_passes_bill_addressing_heroin_opioid_crisis_129935.html

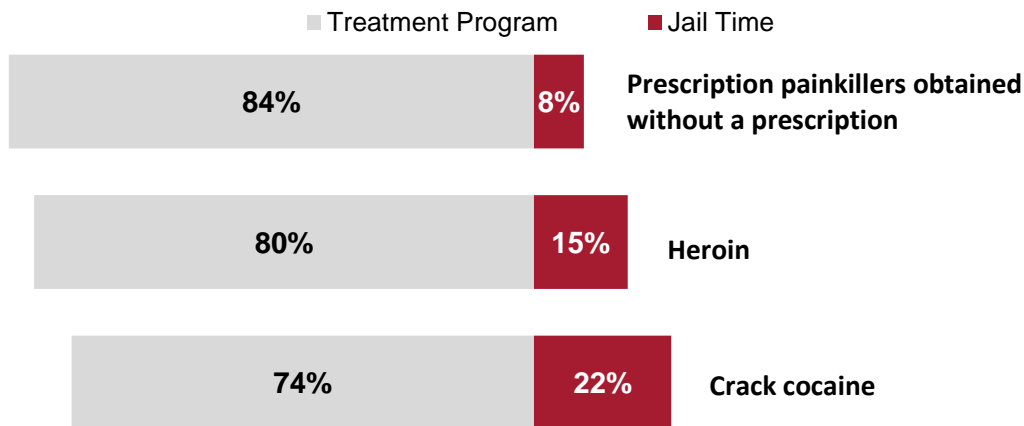
INCARCERATION v. TREATMENT

Poll results indicate overwhelming support among American adults for treatment programs in lieu of incarceration, as it pertains to using or misusing pharmaceutical and illegal drugs. When asked about prescription painkillers, heroin and crack cocaine, nearly three-fourths of all surveyed adults in the U.S. say they support treatment programs without jail time.

Recent articles and opinion pieces in the *New York Times*, the *Atlantic*, and other national media outlets have alleged that the problem of opioid abuse — a category that includes heroin and strong prescription painkillers such as Percocet, OxyContin and Vicodin — has yielded more compassionate policy and criminal justice responses because opioid users are disproportionately white and middle-class. In order to gauge Americans' opinions on **criminal justice and treatment approaches** to drug abuse, the poll split participants into three groups. Each group was asked whether people found possessing small amount of a certain substance should serve jail time or whether they should be placed in a treatment program *without* jail time.

Among those who were asked this question about prescription painkillers obtained without a prescription, less than one in ten (8%) adults say users should serve jail time, while more than four in five (84%) say users should be placed in a treatment program without jail time. Among those who were asked this question about heroin, about one in seven (15%) say users should serve jail time, while four in five (80%) say users should receive treatment without incarceration. And finally, among those who were asked this question about crack cocaine, more than one in five (22%) say users should be incarcerated, while less than three in four (74%) say they should only receive treatment (*Figure 2*).

FIGURE 2. Percent of U.S. adults who say people found possessing small amounts of different substances should serve jail time or should be placed in a treatment program without jail time.



Adults ages 18-29 are significantly more likely than adults ages 65 and over to recommend treatment without jail time for people found possessing small amounts of heroin (89% versus 73%), but are significantly more likely to recommend jail time for people found possessing small amounts of prescription painkillers (12% versus 1%).

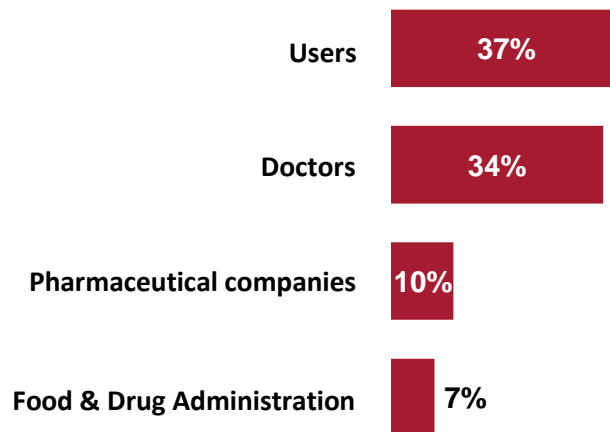
Democrats and Republicans also disagree when it comes to treatment versus incarceration for heroin. Whereas one in five (20%) Republicans advocate jail time, just eight percent of Democrats feel similarly.

As for crack cocaine, the major schism occurs along ethnic lines. Whereas more than one in four (27%) white Americans favor jail time for crack, just one in twenty (5%) Latinos feel the same.

PERCEIVED RESPONSIBILITY

When asked which group they believe is **mainly responsible** for the growing problem of prescription painkiller abuse, nearly two in five (37%) Americans say people who take prescription painkillers are primarily responsible. A similar proportion (34%) say doctors who inappropriately prescribe painkillers are mainly responsible, while one in ten (10%) attribute responsibility to pharmaceutical companies that sell prescription painkillers. Just one in fifteen (7%) adults says the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, which approves prescription painkillers before they can be sold, is responsible (*Figure 3*).

FIGURE 3. Percent of U.S. adults who say each group is mainly responsible for the growing problem of prescription painkiller abuse.



Results indicate almost no difference between Democrats (36%) and Republicans (37%) when it comes to assigning responsibility to people who take prescription painkillers. Republicans (49%), however, are significantly more likely than Democrats (32%) to ascribe primary responsibility to doctors, while Democrats (15%) are significantly more likely than Republicans (4%) to attribute responsibility to pharmaceutical companies.

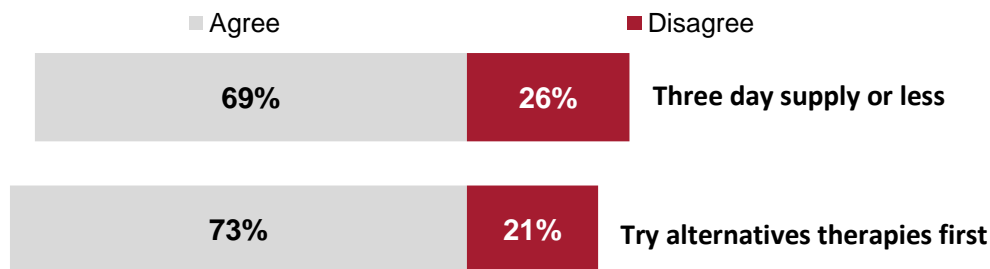
Additionally, women (39%) are significantly more likely than men (28%) to ascribe responsibility to doctors; as are adults under age 50 (29%), as compared to adults ages 50 or older (40%).

PRESCRIBING GUIDELINES

In order to curb the opioid crisis, several states and municipalities, including Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New York City have proposed **limiting the amount of painkillers which doctors can prescribe** to a three-day supply or less. When asked whether they agree or disagree with these guidelines for treating acute pain, except in the case of trauma or major surgery, nearly seven in ten (69%) Americans agree, while just over one in four (26%) disagree.

A separate sample of poll participants was asked about government guidelines that would encourage physicians to **prescribe painkillers for chronic pain only after trying alternative therapies** such as physical therapy and less potent, non-narcotic pain medication. A greater proportion of these adults — nearly three in four (73%) — agree with these guidelines, while 21% disagree.

FIGURE 4. Percent of adults in the U.S. who agree or disagree with proposed government guidelines that (1) doctors should prescribe strong painkillers for three days or less when treating acute pain, unless that pain results from trauma or surgery, or (2) doctors should prescribe strong painkillers for chronic pain only after trying alternative therapies such as physical therapy and less potent non-narcotic pain medication.



Even though most Americans support new prescribing guidelines, many worry they could become too restrictive. Both of the previous groups — those who agreed or disagreed with three-day prescription limits and those who agreed or disagreed with narcotic alternatives — were asked follow-up questions regarding the implications of these new guidelines. Across both groups, a majority (55%) of adults says they are very or somewhat concerned that new government guidelines will make it too difficult for people who need prescription painkillers for medical reasons to get them; while more than two in five (42%) adults say they are not too or not at all concerned about their effects.

When it comes to demographic differences in attitudes regarding the effects of prescribing guidelines, women (60%) are more likely to express concern than men (51%). Also, black Americans (34%) are significantly more likely than white (22%) or Latino (20%) adults to be *very* concerned that these guidelines could make prescription painkillers too difficult for people to get for medical reasons.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

The problem of prescription painkiller abuse hits close to home for more than two in five Americans. Forty-one percent of adults in the U.S. say they personally **know someone** who has abused prescription painkillers in the past five years — almost the same proportion (39%) as a similar poll by the *Boston Globe* in May 2015.² Furthermore, of those who say they know someone who has abused prescription painkillers, one in five (20%) say it led to the user’s death.

White adults (45%) are significantly more likely than Latino adults (30%) to report knowing someone who has abused prescription painkillers in the past five years. Americans over the age of 65 (25%), on the

² Brian MacQuarrie, “Poll finds great awareness — and fear — of opioid abuse,” *Boston Globe*, May 16, 2015, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2015/05/16/opioid-abuse-considered-widespread-serious-poll-finds/GbvBiLJDROWq42850i5UVJ/story.html>

other hand, are significantly *less* likely to say they know someone who has abused prescription painkillers in the past five years, as compared to adults ages 18-29 (46%), ages 30-49 (48%) or ages 50-64 (38%). However, those ages 65 and older are *more* likely to say prescription painkiller abuse led to the user's death (27%), as compared to adults ages 18-29 (12%).

Poll results indicate that these personal experiences with prescription painkiller abuse profoundly shape how Americans think about solutions to and causes of the problem. Adults who know someone who has recently abused prescription painkillers are significantly more likely to believe heroin and prescription painkiller abuse are extremely serious problems where they live, believe the risk of addiction while taking a strong prescription painkiller is high, and believe the government does not spend enough on treatment programs (*Table 1*).

TABLE 1. Percent of adults in the U.S. who indicated the following beliefs, by whether or not they know someone who has abused prescription painkillers in the past five years.

	Know someone who has abused prescription painkillers in the past five years	Do not know someone who has abused prescription painkillers in the past five years
Abuse of <i>strong prescription painkillers</i> is a serious problem in the state where they live	71%	37%
Abuse of <i>heroin</i> is a serious problem in the state where they live	60%	46%
It is <i>likely</i> that someone taking a strong prescription painkiller will become addicted	87%	71%
The amount of money the government currently spends on treatment programs for people addicted to prescription painkillers or heroin is <i>too low</i>	52%	33%

PERCEIVED SERIOUSNESS

A majority of Americans (51%) say the abuse of **strong prescription painkillers** such as Percocet, OxyContin or Vicodin are an extremely or very serious problem in the state where they live, while more than a third (36%) say it is a somewhat or not too serious problem. Poll results indicate that self-identified Republicans (27%) are significantly more likely to believe that abuse of strong prescription painkillers is an *extremely* serious problem in the state where they live than self-identified Democrats (19%). Only four percent of adults in the U.S. believe prescription painkiller abuse is *not* a problem in the state where they live. These results closely reflect findings from the May 2015 poll, which suggests that overall concern regarding prescription drug abuse remains as vivid today as it was almost a year ago.³

When it comes to **heroin**, awareness and concern has risen slightly since last year. More than half (52%) of adults in the U.S. say they believe heroin abuse is an extremely or very serious problem in the state where they live, up from 45% ten months ago. Women (56%) who responded to the poll were

³ Brian MacQuarrie, "Poll finds great awareness — and fear — of opioid abuse."

significantly more likely than men (47%) to say heroin abuse is a serious problem in the state where they live, whereas men were more likely to say it is not too serious a problem or not a problem at all.

The perceived seriousness of the problem is likely influenced by the **perceived addictiveness** of prescription painkillers. Nearly four in five (78%) Americans believe it is likely that a person taking a strong prescription painkiller will become addicted to it — 42% believe it is very likely while 36% believe it is somewhat likely. In contrast, just one in six (17%) adults say it is unlikely that someone taking a strong prescription painkiller will become addicted to it — 12% say somewhat unlikely and 5% say very unlikely. Women (82%) are more likely than men (73%) to believe addiction is likely; as are Democrats (81%), as compared to Republicans (66%); and adults in households with annual incomes below \$50,000 (86%), as compared to those living in higher-income households (71%).

IMPLICATIONS

On almost every measure in this survey, including views on government funding of treatment programs, incarceration or treatment for those found with strong prescription painkillers or crack cocaine, government prescribing guidelines, and perceived seriousness of the problem, there are no significant differences in the views of Democrats and Republicans. This makes prescription painkiller and heroin abuse a rare area of bipartisan agreement — when it comes to how both parties perceive the problem and how they believe it should be fixed.

Republicans and Democrats substantively disagree on only two major issues surrounding prescription painkiller abuse — primary responsibility for the problem and incarceration versus treatment (*Table 2*). First, Republicans (49%) are more likely than Democrats (32%) to believe doctors who inappropriately prescribe painkillers bear primary responsibility for the growing problem of prescription painkiller abuse; whereas Democrats (15%) are more likely than Republicans (4%) to ascribe responsibility to pharmaceutical companies. Second, Republicans (20%) are more than twice as likely as Democrats (8%) to say that people found possessing small amounts of heroin should serve jail time.

TABLE 2. Percent of adults in the U.S. who indicated the following beliefs, by party.⁴

	Democrats	Republicans
<i>Doctors</i> who inappropriately prescribe painkillers are mainly responsible for the growing problem of prescription painkiller abuse	32%	49%
<i>Pharmaceutical companies</i> that sell prescription painkillers are mainly responsible for the growing problem of prescription painkiller abuse	15%	4%
<i>People who take prescription painkillers</i> are mainly responsible for the growing problem of prescription painkiller abuse	36%	37%
The U.S. <i>Food and Drug Administration</i> , which approves prescription painkillers before they can be sold, are mainly responsible for the growing problem of prescription painkiller abuse	6%	3%
People found possessing small amounts of <i>heroin</i> should serve jail time	8%	20%
The amount the government currently spends on treatment programs for people addicted to prescription painkillers or heroin is <i>too high</i>	17%	16%
The amount the government currently spends on treatment programs for people addicted to prescription painkillers or heroin is <i>too low</i>	45%	37%
The amount the government currently spends on treatment programs for people addicted to prescription painkillers or heroin is <i>about right</i>	26%	27%
<i>Agree</i> with proposed government guidelines that doctors should prescribe strong painkillers for three days or less when treating acute pain, unless the pain results from trauma or major surgery	68%	64%
<i>Agree</i> with proposed government guidelines that doctors should prescribe strong painkillers for chronic pain only after trying alternative therapies	73%	69%
Are <i>concerned</i> that new government guidelines will make it too difficult for people who need prescription painkillers for medical reasons to get them	57%	53%

⁴ Shading indicates a statistically significant difference at the $p < 0.05$ level.

METHODOLOGY

This poll was conducted by *Stat* and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. Representatives of the two organizations worked closely to develop the survey questionnaire and analyze the results of the poll. *Stat* and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health paid for the survey and related expenses.

The project team was led by Robert J. Blendon, Sc.D., Richard L. Menschel Professor of Health Policy and Political Analysis at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, and Gideon Gil, Managing Editor, Enterprise and Partnerships of *Stat*. Harvard research team also included John M. Benson, Caitlin L. McMurtry, and Justin M. Sayde.

Interviews were conducted with a nationally representative sample of 1,011 randomly selected adults, ages 18 and older, via telephone (including cell phones and landlines) by SSRS of Media, Pennsylvania. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish. The interviewing period was March 3-6, 2016. The data were weighted to reflect the demographics of the national adult population as described by the U.S. Census.

When interpreting these findings, one should recognize that all surveys are subject to sampling error. Results may differ from what would be obtained if the whole U.S. adult population had been interviewed. The margin of error is ± 3.7 percentage points for the full sample of respondents.

Possible sources of non-sampling error include non-response bias, as well as question wording and ordering effects. Non-response in telephone surveys produces some known biases in survey-derived estimates because participation tends to vary for different subgroups of the population. To compensate for these known biases and for variations in probability of selection within and across households, sample data are weighted by household size, cell phone/landline use and demographics (sex, age, race/ethnicity, education, and region) to reflect the true population. Other techniques, including random-digit dialing, replicate subsamples, and systematic respondent selection within households, are used to ensure that the sample is representative.



STAT/Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health Poll

Americans' Attitudes about Prescription Painkiller Abuse

This survey was conducted for *STAT* and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health via telephone by SSRS, an independent research company. Interviews were conducted via telephone (cell phone and landline) March 3-6, 2016, among a nationally representative sample of 1,011 U.S. adults. The margin of error for total respondents is +/- 3.7 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. For questions asked of half-samples, the margin of error is approximately +/- 5.3 percentage points; for questions asked of one-third samples, approximately +/- 6.4 percentage points. More information about SSRS can be obtained by visiting www.ssrs.com

ST-04. How serious do you think the following problems are in the state of (INSERT STATE NAME)? How about abuse of (INSERT ITEM)? Do you think that is an extremely serious problem in (INSERT STATE NAME), very serious, somewhat serious, not too serious, or not a problem at all?

a. Heroin

	Extremely serious	Very serious	Somewhat serious	Not too serious	Not at problem at all	Don't know/Refused
3/2016	22	30	23	12	4	9
4/2015 *	19	26	23	13	6	13

b. Strong prescription painkillers such as Percocet, OxyContin or Vicodin

	Extremely serious	Very serious	Somewhat serious	Not too serious	Not at problem at all	Don't know/Refused
3/2016	21	30	26	10	4	9
4/2015 *	21	30	27	10	3	9

* Trend from Boston Globe/Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health poll, April 15-19, 2015.

When we ask about prescription painkillers in this poll, we mean strong ones, sometimes called opioids, such as Percocet, OxyContin or Vicodin.

(Asked of Half-Sample C; n=497)

ST-05. How likely do you think it is that a person taking a strong prescription painkiller will become addicted to it?

	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Somewhat unlikely	Very unlikely	Don't know/Refused
3/2016	42	36	12	5	5
4/2015 *	44	36	12	5	3

ST-06. During the past 5 years, have you known anyone who has abused prescription painkillers, or not?

	Yes	No	Don't know/Refused
3/2016	41	59	*
4/2015 *	39	61	*

(Asked of those who have known someone who has abused prescription painkillers during the last 5 years; n=395)

ST-07. Did it lead to their dying, or didn't this happen?

	Yes	No	Don't know/Refused
3/2016	20	79	1
4/2015 *	21	77	2

**ST-06/ST-07 Combo Table
Total Respondents**

	3/2016	4/2015 *
Have known someone who has abused prescription drugs in the past 5 years	41	39
Led to their dying	8	8
Did not lead to their dying	32	30
Don't know/Refused if it led to their dying	1	1
Have not known someone who has abused prescription drugs in the last 5 years	59	61
Don't know/Refused	*	*

* Trend from Boston Globe/Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health poll, April 15-19, 2015.

(Asked of Half-Sample J; n=539)

ST-08. Which ONE of the following do you think is mainly responsible for the growing problem of prescription painkiller abuse?

	3/2016
People who take prescription painkillers	37
Doctors who inappropriately prescribe painkillers	34
Pharmaceutical companies that sell prescription painkillers	10
The US Food and Drug Administration, which approves prescription painkillers before they can be sold	7
Other/none of these	2
All equally	4
Don't Know/Refused	6

ST-09. Do you think most people found possessing small amounts of (INSERT ITEM) should serve jail time or should they be placed in a treatment program without jail time?

(Asked of One-third Sample E; n=348)

a. Heroin

	Should serve jail time	Should be placed in a treatment center without jail time	Don't know/Refused
3/2016	15	80	5

(Asked of One-third Sample F; n=321)

b. Prescription painkillers obtained without a prescription

	Should serve jail time	Should be placed in a treatment center without jail time	Don't know/Refused
3/2016	8	84	8

(Asked of One-third Sample G; n=342)

c. Crack cocaine

	Should serve jail time	Should be placed in a treatment center without jail time	Don't know/Refused
3/2016	22	74	4

(Asked of Half-Sample D; n=514)

ST-10. Do you think the amount of money the government currently spends on treatment programs for people addicted to prescription painkillers or heroin is too high, too low, or about right?

	Too high	Too low	About right	Don't know/ Refused
3/2016	14	41	28	17

(Asked of Half-Sample H; n=502)

ST-11. Do you agree or disagree with proposed government guidelines that doctors should prescribe strong painkillers for three days or **less** when treating acute pain, unless the pain results from trauma or major surgery?

	Agree	Disagree	Don't know/ Refused
3/2016	69	26	5

(Asked of Half-Sample I; n=509)

ST-12. Do you agree or disagree with proposed government guidelines that physicians should prescribe strong prescription painkillers for chronic pain only after trying alternative therapies such as physical therapy and less potent non-narcotic pain medication?

	Agree	Disagree	Don't know/ Refused
3/2016	73	21	6

ST-13. How concerned are you that new government guidelines will make it too difficult for people who need prescription painkillers for medical reasons to get them? Are you very concerned, somewhat concerned, not too concerned or not at all concerned?

	Very concerned	Somewhat concerned	Not too concerned	Not at all concerned	Don't know/ Refused
3/2016	23	32	26	16	3