National Survey on Drug Policy Shows Education and Insurance-Paid Treatment Best Tools for Curbing Abuse

Assessing support for changes in U.S. drug abuse policy

SUMMARY

From February 2001 through February 2004, researchers at the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) surveyed 1,004 adults across the country to determine their preferences regarding education, interdiction (preventing drugs from entering the country), law enforcement and treatment alternatives for addressing the nation's drug problem.

They also studied whether respondents' political beliefs, attitudes towards substance abusers and demographic characteristics influenced their policy preferences.

The study was funded under the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) national program Substance Abuse Policy Research Program (SAPRP) (for more information see Program Results).

Key Findings

This section includes one key finding from each of four papers/analyses. For a fuller set of findings, see Findings.

From an article entitled "Five Grams of Coke: Racism, Moralism and White Public Opinion on Sanctions for First Time Possession" published in the International Journal of Drug Policy:

- The relationship between racial beliefs of white respondents and punitive attitudes toward people with drug addiction was indirect. Racial sentiments influenced beliefs about the morality of drug use, and beliefs that drug use is immoral influenced attitudes regarding punitive sanctions.
From an unpublished article entitled "Public Support for Substance Abuse Policy: Results of a National Survey":

- Some 46.7 percent of respondents chose drug education in schools as the most important drug policy, followed by interdiction (23.2%), law enforcement (18.6%) and treatment (11.4%).

From an unpublished article entitled "Public Support for Substance Abuse Treatment Coverage: Results of a National Survey":

- Two-thirds of respondents felt that insurance should provide at least some coverage for drug treatment.

From a report to the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment entitled "Stigma Associated with Drug Addiction: Report of a Language Audit Based on the Results of a National Survey of Drug Policy":

- Holding stigmatizing attitudes towards drug addicts was related to:
  - More support for criminalization of drug offenses.
  - Less support for insurance coverage for drug addiction treatment.
  - A stronger belief that it is risky to hire a person who has had a drug addiction.

**Funding**

RWJF supported the project with a solicited grant of $342,647 between February 2001 and February 2004.

**THE PROBLEM**

In 1998, the U.S. government spent about $16 billion on programs designed to deal with the drug problem, according to the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy. According to researchers at the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago, between 1981 and 1998:

- Federal spending on criminal justice programs related to drugs grew from 30 percent of the drug control budget to 52 percent.
- Federal spending on drug treatment programs declined from 31 percent to 18 percent.

While the public appears to believe that government should address the drug problem, according to researchers, little is known about what kinds of strategies Americans prefer, or whether they favor law enforcement over alternative policies such as treatment,
education or interdiction (the prevention of drugs from entering the country through border control and reduction of supply in drug-producing countries).

Obtaining a public perspective on drug program policy would help to determine whether federal priorities are in line with strategies the public supports.

**CONTEXT**

With prior support from RWJF, researchers at NORC conducted two surveys to ascertain trends in public support for drug spending. NORC conducts social science research in the public interest.

- One survey (ID# 031608) found that, between 1973 and 1998:
  - Public support for increased spending on the drug problem has been constant.
  - Support for spending varied by respondents' characteristics and values.
  - There was more support for spending on the drug problem in general than there was for spending on rehabilitation programs.

- The second survey (see Program Results on ID# 034179) found that most people living in Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, New York and Philadelphia who viewed the March 1998 Bill Moyers television series, "Bill Moyers on Addiction: Close to Home," felt they learned some or a lot from the program.

**THE PROJECT**

This project aimed to:

- Determine public opinion on substance abuse policy options.
- Explore the factors that influence public opinion.
- Compare public opinion to government spending priorities.

**Methodology**

Researchers at the NORC surveyed a national random sample of 1,004 adults by telephone (a response rate of 54%). They used the survey they previously created to evaluate viewer responses to the Bill Moyers series, with questions added regarding drug policy alternatives, race and ethnicity, political beliefs and stigma related to drug addiction.

The survey also included questions designed to address aspects of people's beliefs and values, such as:

- **Morals**—whether people believe that drug use is related to a person's moral character.
● **Blame**—whether people believe that drug addicts are to blame for their addiction.

● **Racism**—including:
  — General hostility toward blacks.
  — The belief that blacks are more likely to use cocaine.

● Beliefs regarding the *effectiveness* of law enforcement policies.

● **Political ideology**, such as personal identification as a conservative.

Researchers originally planned to include vignettes in the survey as a way to examine responses to abstract policy concepts. After attempting to use similar vignettes in an unrelated study, researchers decided not to use them in this survey. Vignettes proved difficult to administer by telephone, added significant time to the interview and yielded responses that were not clear enough to analyze.

**Funding**

A grant under RWJF’s *Substance Abuse Policy Research Program* provided funding for the project. The program funds research that can help reduce the harm caused by the use of alcohol, tobacco and drugs in the United States.

The federal *Center for Substance Abuse Treatment* provided $92,057 to support an analysis of questions concerning stigma associated with substance abuse.

**FINDINGS**

The project director, Kenneth Rasinski, PhD, and colleagues conducted four related analyses of survey findings.

**White Americans' Opinions on Sanctions for First Time Possession of Cocaine**


● About one-quarter of white respondents believed that a first-time charge of **possession of 5 grams of cocaine should result in a prison sentence:**
  — Some 5.5 percent said the appropriate sentence is five years.
  — Some 17.6 percent said the appropriate sentence is one year.
• About three-quarters of white respondents chose less punitive sanctions for a first time charge of cocaine possession:
  — Some 26 percent chose probation.
  — Some 51 percent chose drug treatment.

• Racial attitudes of white respondents significantly influenced judgments about blame for addiction and the morality of addicts, but the relationship between racial beliefs and punitive attitudes was indirect. Racial sentiments influenced beliefs about the morality of drug use, and beliefs that drug use is immoral influenced attitudes regarding punitive sanctions.

• Respondents who blamed addicts for their addiction and believed that addiction results from immorality favored more punitive policies than those who did not attribute blame or immorality to addicts.

• Conservative ideology was positively related to racism, the attribution of blame for addiction to the addict and the belief that addiction reflects the addict's moral character.

Public Support for Substance Abuse Policies

Researchers reported findings in an unpublished article entitled "Public Support for Substance Abuse Policy: Results of a National Survey." See the Bibliography.

• Some 46.7 percent of respondents chose drug education in schools as the most important drug policy overall, followed by interdiction (23.2%), law enforcement (18.6%) and treatment (11.4%).

• Some 60.2 percent of respondents said that law enforcement programs were somewhat or very effective in reducing the supply of drugs. Some 68.7 percent said education was somewhat or very effective in reducing the demand for drugs.

• Significantly more people in urban areas (16.3%) endorsed treatment as a drug policy compared with those in rural areas (10.1%).

• Significantly more college graduates (26.8%) endorsed a combination of education and treatment compared with high school graduates (16.0%).

• Some 24 percent of respondents selected a combination of education and interdiction as their first and second policy choices. Some 23.9 percent selected a combination of education and law enforcement.

• Respondents who agreed or strongly agreed that addicts were to blame for their addiction (51.8%) were less likely to endorse treatment and were more likely to endorse interdiction as a solution to the drug problem.
**Public Support for Health Insurance Coverage of Substance Abuse Treatment**

Researchers reported findings in an unpublished article entitled "Public Support for Substance Abuse Treatment Coverage: Results of a National Survey." See the Bibliography.

- Two-thirds of respondents felt that insurance should provide at least some coverage for drug treatment:
  - Some 37.3 percent felt insurance should cover treatment at the same level as other services.
  - Some 29.3 percent felt insurance should cover treatment but at lower reimbursement levels than other services.
  - Some 33.4 percent felt insurance should not cover treatment.

- Respondents who attributed blame for addiction to addicts were more likely to feel that insurance should not cover treatment than respondents who did not attribute blame to addicts.

- Respondents who had experienced substance abuse themselves or through watching a close friend or relative were more supportive of full payment compared with those without personal experiences with substance abuse.

**Stigma Associated with Drug Addiction**

Researchers reported findings in a report to the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment entitled *Stigma Associated with Drug Addiction: Report of a Language Audit Based on the Results of a National Survey of Drug Policy*. See the Bibliography.

- Holding stigmatizing attitudes towards drug addicts was related to:
  - More support for criminalization of drug offenses.
  - Less support for insurance coverage for drug addiction treatment.
  - A stronger belief that it is risky to hire a person who has had a drug addiction.

- Respondents ages 18–29 showed fewer stigmatizing attitudes than respondents 30 and older.

- Self-classified political liberals had the lowest stigmatizing attitudes and conservatives had the highest. Moderates fell between liberals and conservatives. Each group differed significantly from the other.
Some 80 percent of people classified as high stigmatizers selected law enforcement as their preferred policy option, compared with 70 percent of low stigmatizers who selected law enforcement. More low stigmatizers selected treatment (37%) than did high stigmatizers (23%).

Some 58 percent of people classified as high stigmatizers believed that insurance companies should pay for drug treatment, compared with 72 percent of people classified as low stigmatizers who said that insurance should cover treatment.

Some 52 percent of respondents overall said they thought possession of small amounts of marijuana should be treated as a criminal offense. High stigmatizers were more likely than low stigmatizers to believe that possession should not be decriminalized (63% compared with 37%).

Limitations

Researchers reported the following limitations to the study in the article published in the International Journal of Drug Policy:

- Data used in the study are cross-sectional, which means that it is hard to determine which factors cause particular beliefs and opinions.

- The survey included only limited measures of racism. If more items were included, it is possible that the measure could have had more variability.

- It is possible that some respondents had used cocaine and it is reasonable to believe that those who had would be less punitive. Therefore, responses suggesting punitive beliefs may have been higher after controlling for respondent's use of cocaine.

Recommendations

Rasinski offered the following recommendation from the study in an interview with the writer of this report:

- Because substance abuse is such a large public health concern and costs so much money, effort should be invested in better understanding the solutions that Americans prefer. Questions regarding policy preferences should not be limited to one or two items in a general survey of the population.

CONCLUSIONS

Rasinski and colleagues reported the following conclusions from the study in their report to the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT) (Stigma Associated with Drug Addiction: Report of a Language Audit Based on the Results of a National Survey of Drug Policy) and in an unpublished paper ("Public Support for Substance Abuse Policy: Results of a National Survey"): 
"There is a prevalent perception that drug addicts are responsible for their own plight and that they are dangerous to others.... There appears to be a religious or moral dimension to public beliefs associated with drug addiction, and the notion that drug addiction is a shameful disorder is also prominent. These perceptions differ significantly but not radically across social groups." (Report to CSAT)

"[D]rug treatment programs may have an overall image problem. Only a minority of Americans think that treatment programs are the solution to the drug problem in America." (Report to CSAT)

"The public has a preference for education-based prevention policies over increased law enforcement. This appears to support a trend that began sometime in the mid-1990s and suggests a change in public priorities." (Unpublished white paper)

LESSONS LEARNED

1. Consider doing rotating topics over a series of surveys, in order to limit the amount of time per survey and increase the response rate. "The response rate of 54 percent is quite respectable given the current state of affairs with telephone surveys. Even though we allowed 25 minutes, on average, for each interview, there are still issues that we would have liked to address that we did not." (Project Director)

AFTERWARD

At the conclusion of the project the grantee institution had no plans for continuation of the work.

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Grant ID # 41644
Program area: Addiction Prevention & Treatment
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(Current as of date of the report; as provided by the grantee organization; not verified by RWJF; items not available from RWJF.)

Articles


Rasinski KA, Gerstein DR and Lee RD. "Public Support for Substance Abuse Treatment Coverage: Results of a National Survey." Unpublished.

Reports


Survey Instruments