
**Rosenthal Center
for
Addiction Studies**

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**Survey on Perceptions of
Drug Use in America**

December 14, 2016

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Introduction

What do Americans know about drugs, drug use, and addiction? More importantly, what do they believe? And how does this influence their behavior, the behavior of their children, and the parent-child relationship? What is the impact of drug use on families, on communities, and on society?

These are questions that prompted the Rosenthal Center for Addiction Studies to commission this survey by Schoen Consulting. In March of 2016 Schoen Consulting conducted interviews with 800 respondents nationwide gauging the perception of drug use in America—not its prevalence. We are all too aware of the increased sanctioned and unsanctioned use of mind—and mood—altering substances and an epidemic of opioid addiction that has raised overdose deaths to catastrophic levels (28,000 in 2014). Learning how the beliefs of individual Americans contribute to this crisis is central to the mission of the Rosenthal Center, for what people believe determines, in large measure, what they will do and what may be done for them or to them by government, the healthcare industry, or the criminal justice system.

Their beliefs constitute the raw material of public opinion. As such, they are a dominant influence on public policy and determine, to an enormous degree, what treatment services are available for drug disorders, for whom they are available, and whether or not government and health care insurers will pay for them.

Most of our survey findings were predictable, some were surprising, many were troubling, and a few challenged academic or bureaucratic dogma.

The survey focused sharply on drugs and the family. It found two in five Americans have dealt with drug abuse within their families, but barely one in three sought outside help or support. Most striking was the disparity between what parents recalled about drug use by their children and what today's young adults recall doing as children. Twenty one percent of parents reported that their children had used drugs, while nearly half again as many young adults (30 percent) remembered using drugs as adolescents.

Asked about teen use of specific substances, parents were generally aware that their children smoked cigarettes, less aware of marijuana use, and surprisingly unaware of how many of their children drank alcohol. There was great disparity, however, between the level of parent awareness and the level of nonmedical teen use of prescription stimulants (such as Ritalin and Adderall) and opioid painkillers. Only 9 percent of parents reported stimulant use by their teen children, while 23 percent of young adults admitted having used these drugs. The disparity was even greater for opioid painkillers. Just 8 percent of parents believed their children used them, but more than three times that number of young adults, 28 percent, said they had indeed done so.

Although more parents said they spoke to their children about drugs than young adults recalled hearing from parents, the gap was not vast. But while the greatest number of parents reported starting these talks appropriately early, when their children were between nine and twelve, the greatest number of young adults recalled talks starting substantially later—when they were between 13 and 17. The good news from this segment of the survey, however, was finding an overwhelming number of both parents (90 percent) and children (83 percent) calling the talks “positive.”

Less encouraging was discovering how lightly parents take marijuana use by their teenage children. There is growing evidence that regular use of marijuana during the adolescent years can have profoundly damaging consequences later in life. Although two out of three parents believe teen marijuana was a serious concern, barely one in five (22%) claimed to be “very familiar” with the greater vulnerability of teens to marijuana addiction and the threat of lasting brain damage. Only a quarter of parents would deal with marijuana use by their teen with more than a one-on-one talk, and only one in five would warn of health consequences (including brain damage). So, it was not surprising that when asked which toxic substance—cigarettes, alcohol, or marijuana—they would rather their children indulged in, it was marijuana, at 44 percent, that was chosen by the greatest number of parents.

The survey found Americans with conflicting views about the nature of addiction and the stigmatization of addicts in recovery. They thought stigma was a useful social instrument and might help reduce marijuana use (as it has the use of cigarettes). While they believed addicts in recovery to be less trustworthy than social drinkers or alcoholics in A.A, two out of three thought that defining addiction as a “chronic relapsing” condition contributed to stigmatization.

In a set of clearly conflicting opinions about addiction: survey participants split almost evenly over whether or not addicts were “powerless before their addiction”; slightly more than half (53 percent) believed relapse was a part of the addiction disorder; more than two out of three (67 percent) called addiction “chronic;” and yet a shade short of three out of four (74 percent) said addiction was curable.

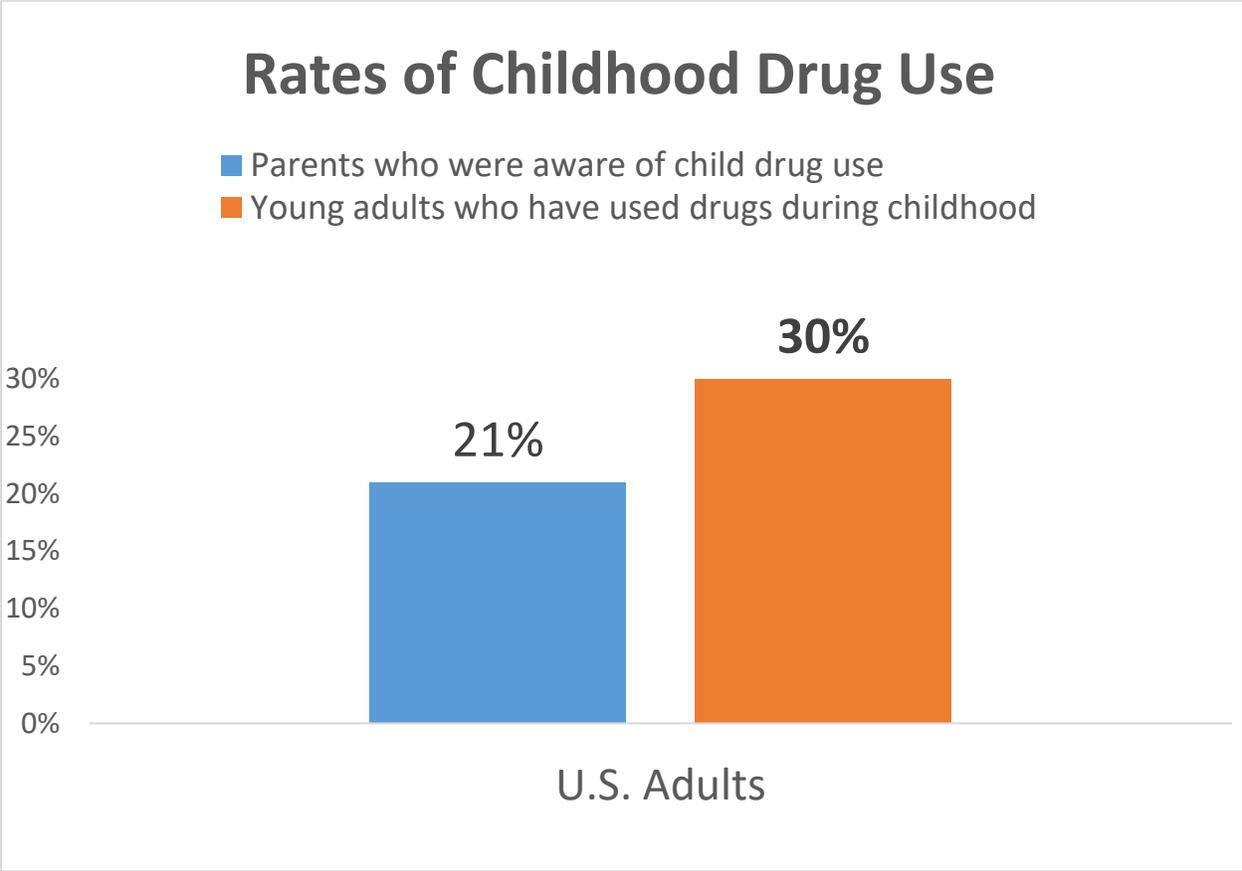
What these findings reveal is the need for clarity and broad-based understanding of the issues, for our society is engaged in a conflict against the waste, disorder, and tragedy that are the products of drug misuse. Essential to the success of this endeavor is knowledge of the forces arrayed against us. The single clearest revelation of this survey, however, is how little knowledge Americans bring to their beliefs about drugs, drug use, and addiction. In the Internet age and 24/7-news cycle, there is no shortage of information, facts, factoids, and opinions. But what the military call “intelligence,” the hard, cold, indisputable facts that commanders count on, that is hard to find among the welter of material on the Internet and in the increasingly partisan press and parochial media. This reality defines the mission of the Rosenthal Center. It is the search for truth and revelation of error in what Americans believe about issues that influence behavior, public opinion, public policy, and what we do and fail to do to arrest the spread of addiction and care for its victims.

Executive Summary

While a majority of respondents say that they have discussed drug use within the family, there were **distinct differences** between **parents and young adults in their answers on drug use and awareness**.

Young adults reported **higher frequencies of drug use by a margin of +9 points** compared to what parents indicated they were aware of.

Indeed, **actual rates of use may be higher** due to **reluctance to self-report** childhood drug use.



The **top three drugs** that parents were aware of and what young adults reported that they used were **marijuana, alcohol, and tobacco/nicotine**.

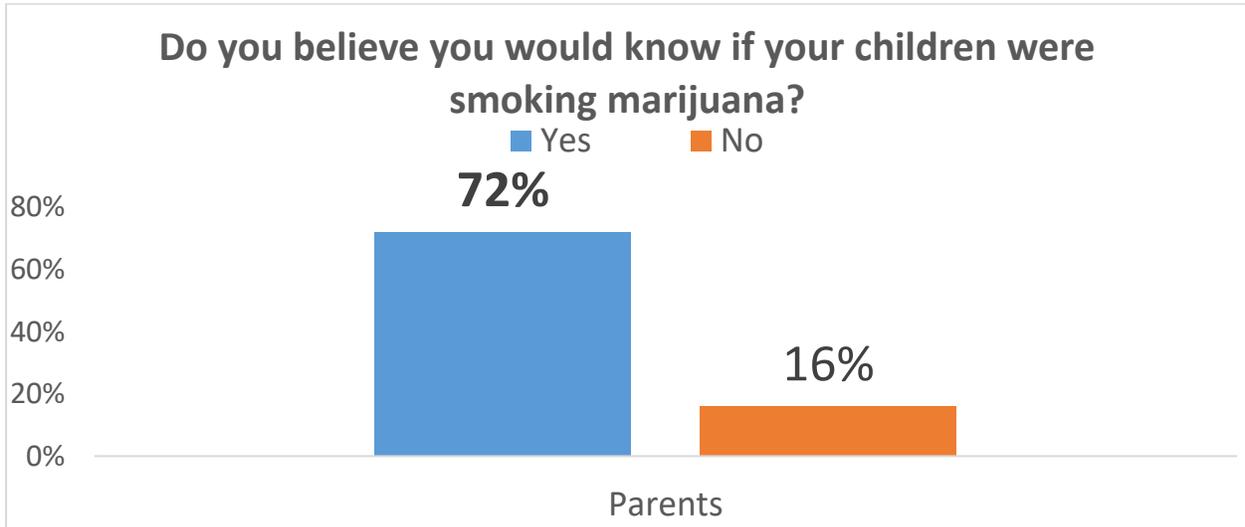
However, **young adults reported greater use of alcohol (+24 points) and marijuana (+10 points)** than parents indicated that they were aware of.

Additionally, young adults reported that they also abused **prescription opioids, prescription stimulants, and hallucinogens**—which **parents were not aware of by differences of 14-20 points**.

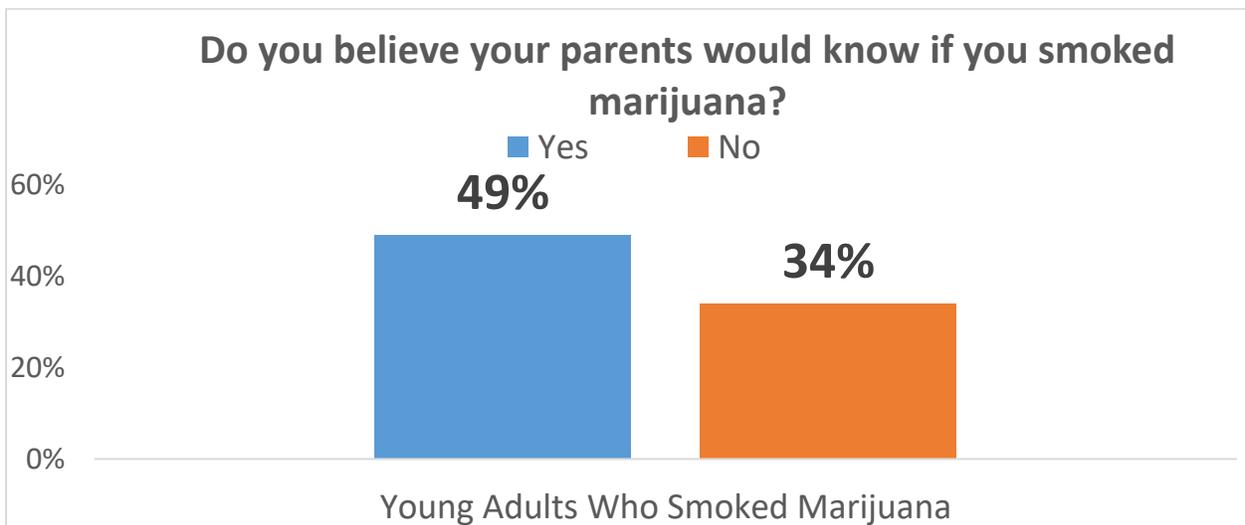
Top Six Drugs Abused by Young Adults: <u>Self-Reported vs. Parent-Reported</u>		
<u>What types of drugs did you/your children use?</u>	<u>Young Adult Self-Reported</u>	<u>Parent-Reported</u>
1. Marijuana	88%	78%
2. Alcohol	72%	48%
3. Tobacco / Nicotine	28%	29%
4. Prescription opioids (Vicodin, Oxycontin, Morphine)	28%	8%
5. Prescription stimulants (Ritalin, Adderall)	23%	9%
6. Hallucinogens (MDMA, LSD, PCP)	22%	8%

We found that **72% of parents say that they would know** if their child was using marijuana.

Almost all parents (97%) who say they would know, also say they would be certain about their knowing.



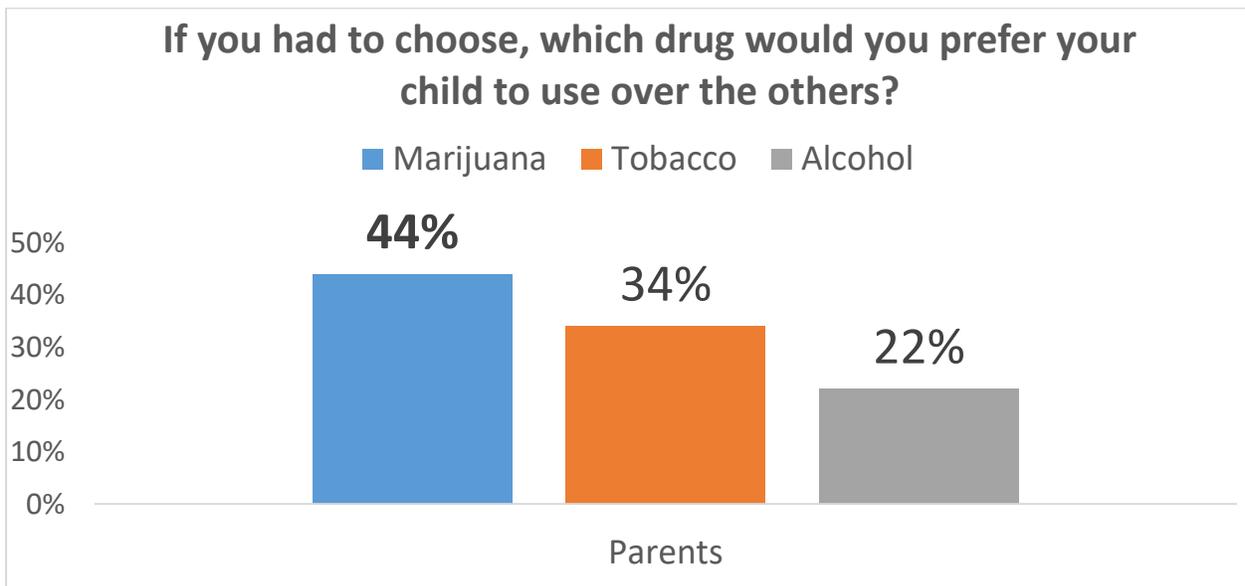
However, **only 49% of young adults who have used marijuana said their parents would know**, with **34% saying their parents would not know**—even though a majority (71%) say it would be a serious issue should their parents find out.



Less than a quarter of the parents interviewed **would take action beyond a one-on-one talk** with their children, indicating that they **do not think marijuana use would require outside assistance or counseling**.

What Parents Would Do if Child Was Smoking Marijuana	
<u>What would you do if you knew your child was smoking marijuana?</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Sit them down for a one-on-one talk	75%
Stage a family intervention	23%
Seek therapist's / counselor's advice	23%

Indeed, a **plurality (44%) of parents would prefer their children to use marijuana** over tobacco or alcohol, indicating a more relaxed attitude towards marijuana use.

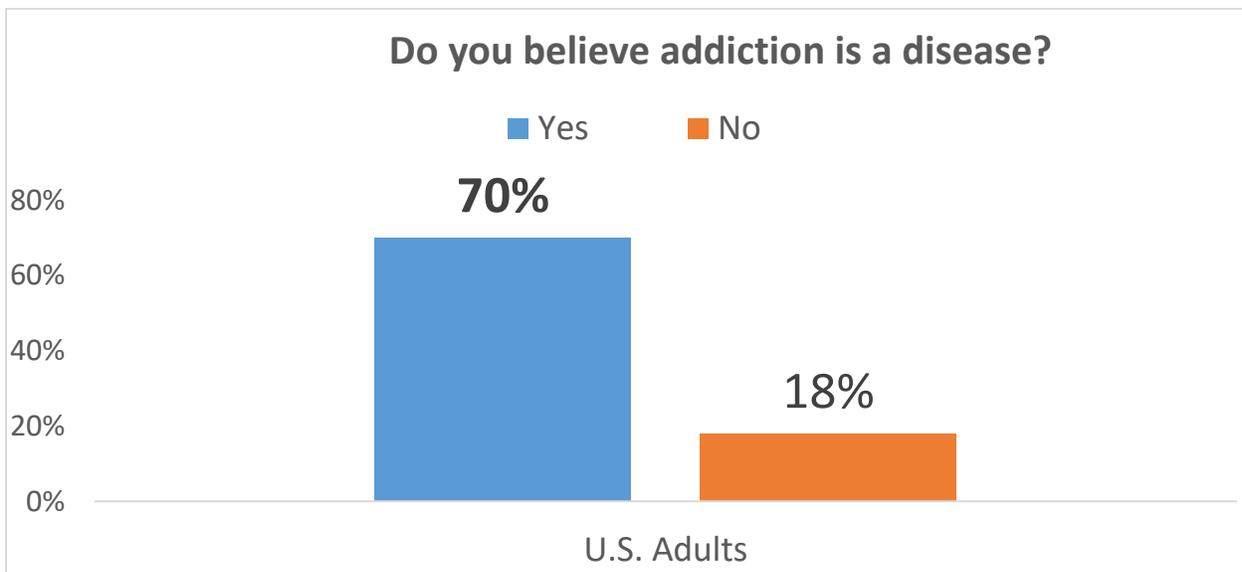


When it came to addiction and recovery, we found that **the public does not have a common understanding** of these issues and there exists a **diverse array of views on drug addiction and recovery**.

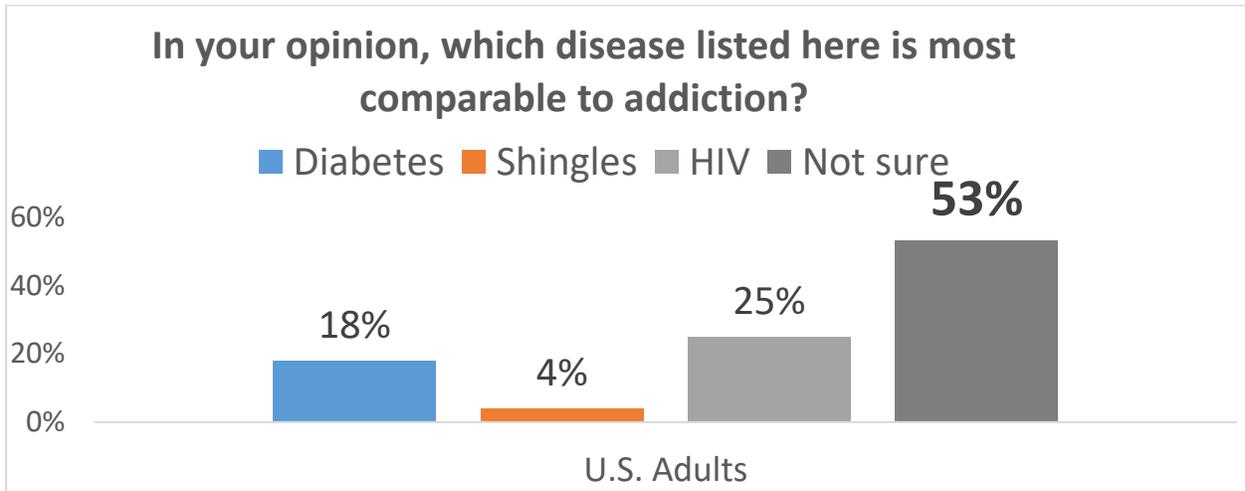
There was a **three-way split** on how respondents defined addiction, with a **35% plurality** leaning towards defining it as a **physiological condition**.

<u>Defining Addiction</u>	
<u>Which description of addiction do you agree with the most?</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Addiction is a physiological condition	35%
Addiction is a psychological condition	27%
Addiction is a form of compulsive behavior	25%

We found that a **majority (70%) of respondents** agree that **addiction is a disease**.

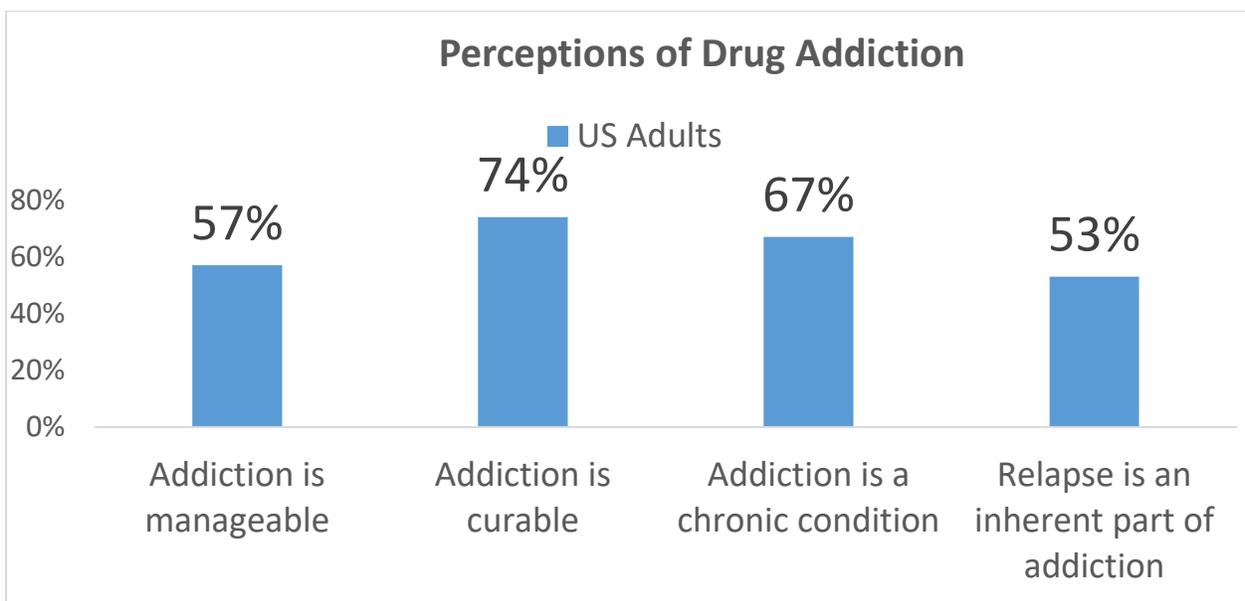


However, they **do not have any comparable disease as a point of reference**, making the condition of addiction **more difficult to understand**.



Respondents hold **heterogeneous views** on addiction, with majorities viewing it as curable but also a chronic condition.

It is clear that there is a **lack of common understanding about addiction**.



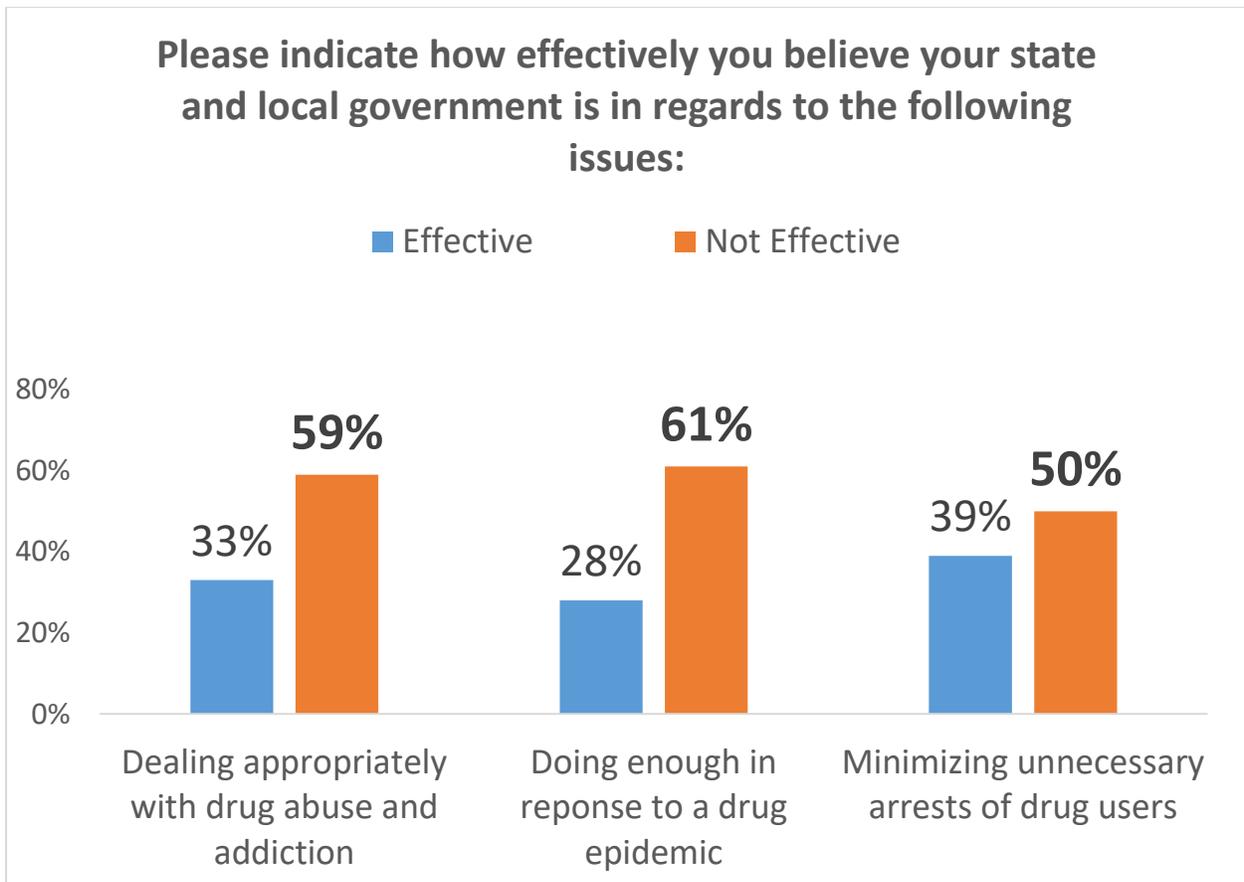
Even with perceptions of addiction as a medical condition, a **large plurality (45%) of respondents still view individual responsibility as most important** when it comes to dealing with drug abuse and addiction.

<u>Roles in Dealing with Drug Abuse & Addiction</u>	
<u>Please rank the following on importance when it comes to their role in addressing drug abuse and addiction in our society:</u>	<u>Percentage (Top Rank)</u>
Individual responsibility	45%
The healthcare system	23%
The education system	17%
The criminal justice system	10%
Nonprofits	6%

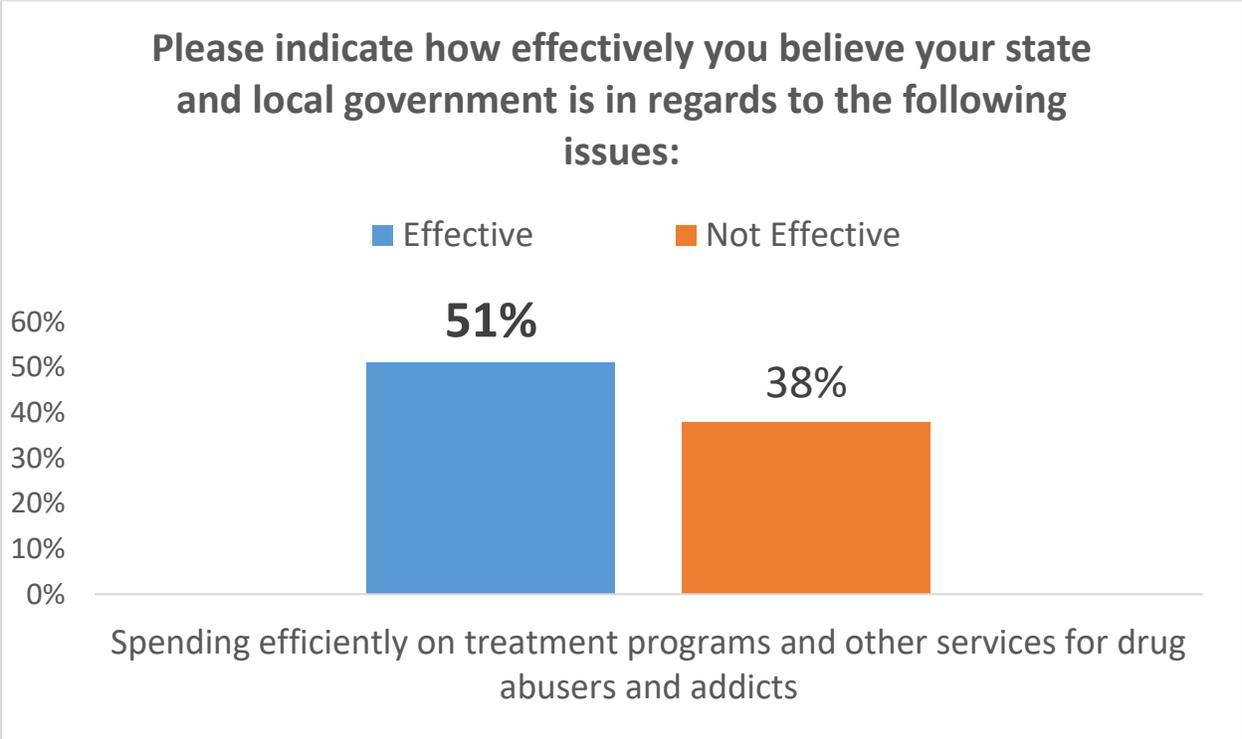
On the role of government in dealing with drug abuse and addiction, we also **found differing views**.

While **majorities say that their state and local governments are not doing enough** when it comes to dealing with drug abuse and addiction, **majorities also say that their governments are spending enough on programs** for drug addicts.

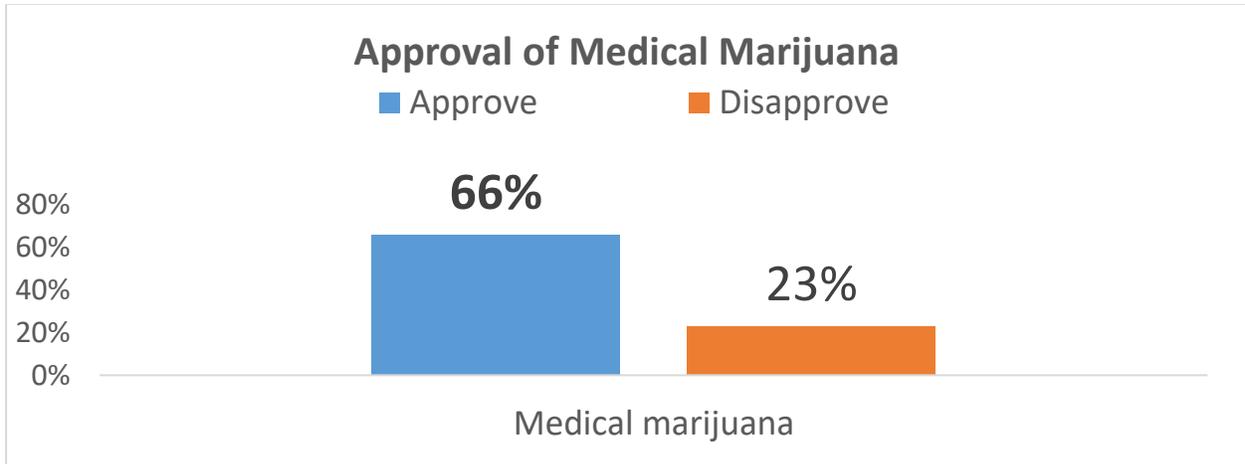
People **do not believe that their state & local governments are doing enough** to deal with drug abuse and addiction, and that they are **failing to minimize unnecessary arrests of drug users**.



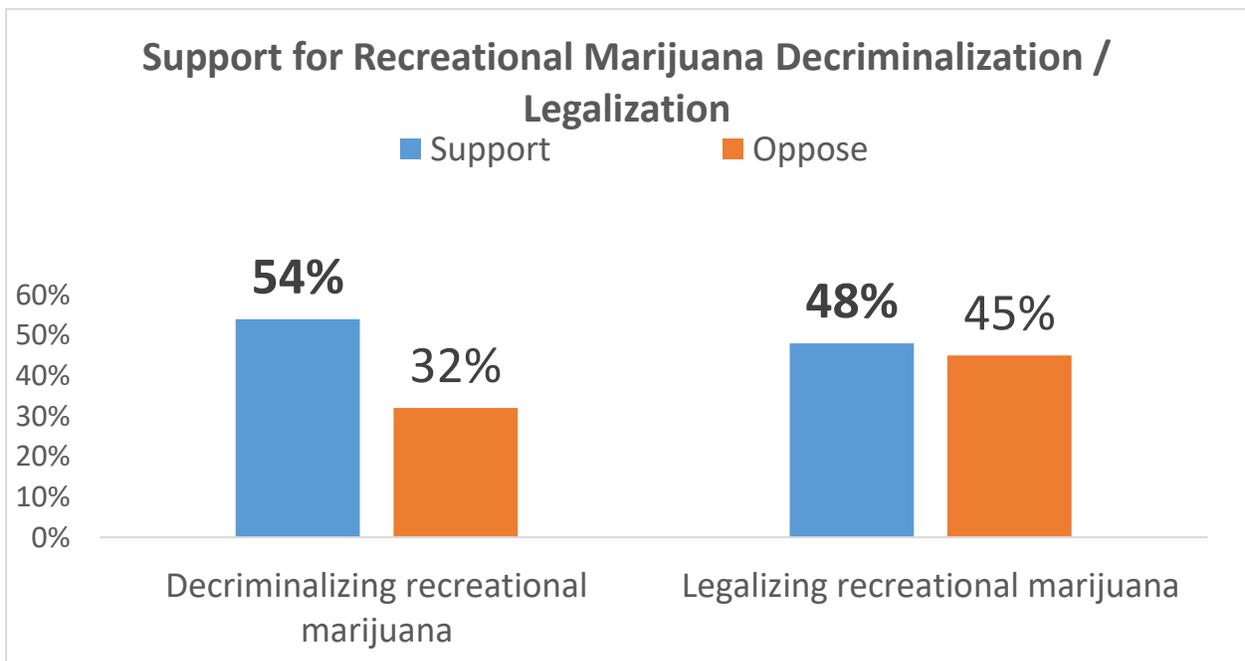
At the same time, a **majority (51%) of respondents** believe that their state and local governments are **effective when it comes to spending efficiently on treatment programs** and other services for drug addicts.



We found that **two-thirds of respondents** say that they **approve the use of medical marijuana**.

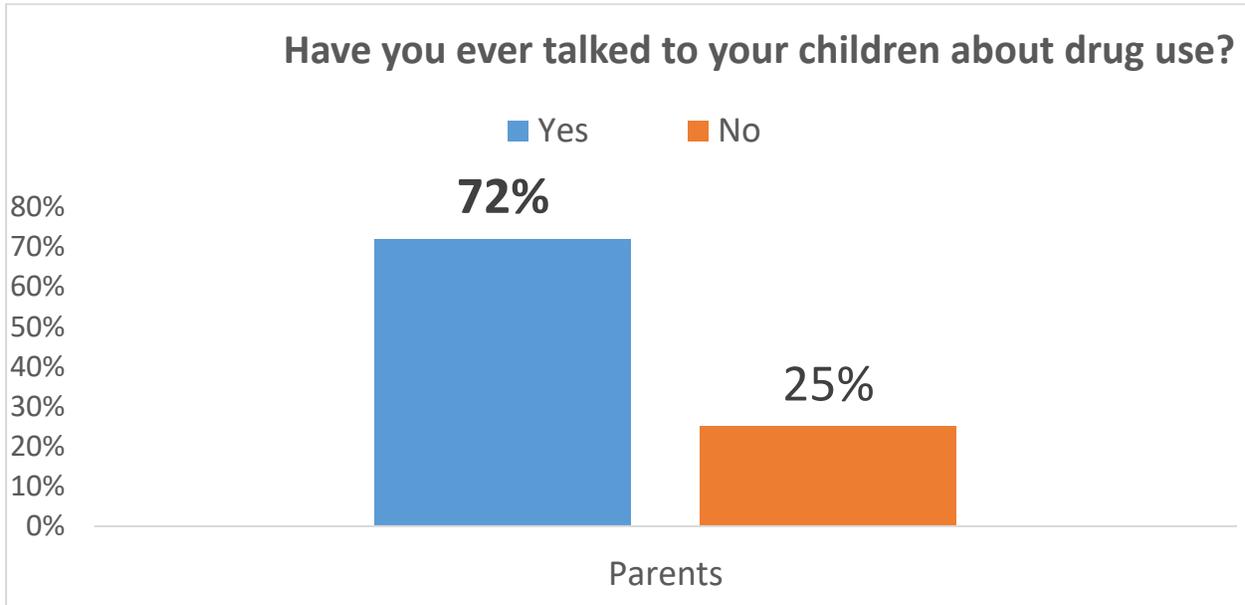


A majority (**54%**) support **decriminalizing recreational marijuana** while a plurality (**48%**) support **legalizing recreational marijuana**, indicating a shift in views over the past decade towards general approval of marijuana.



Drug Use in the Family

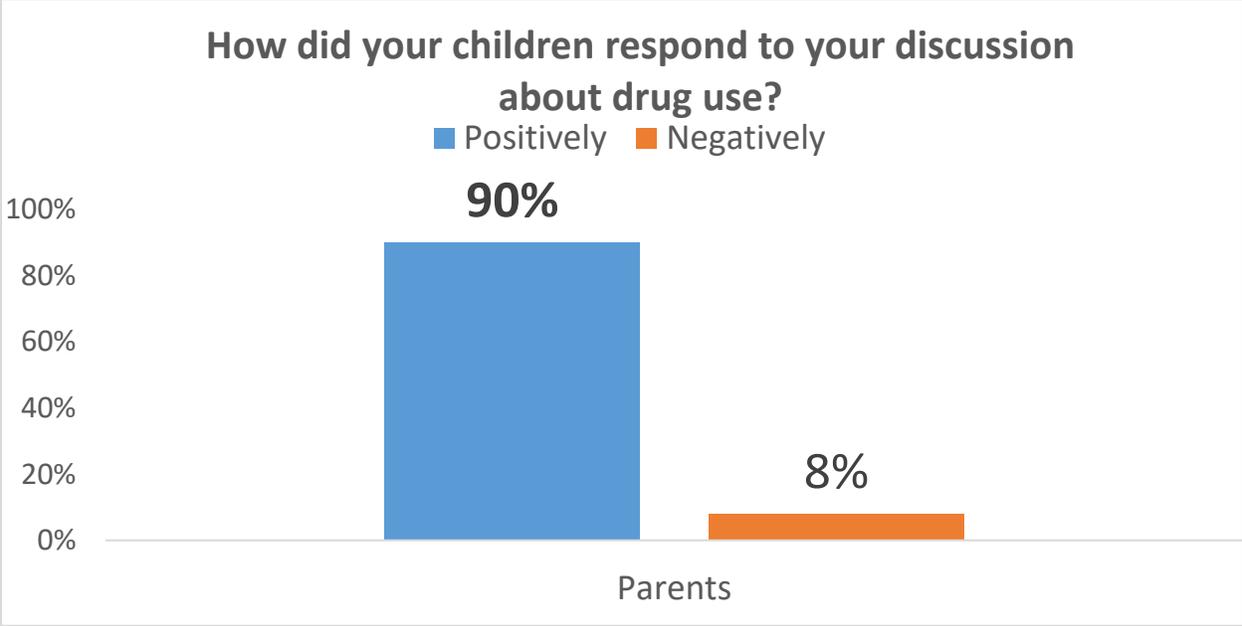
A majority of parents (72%) say that they have talked to their children about drug use.



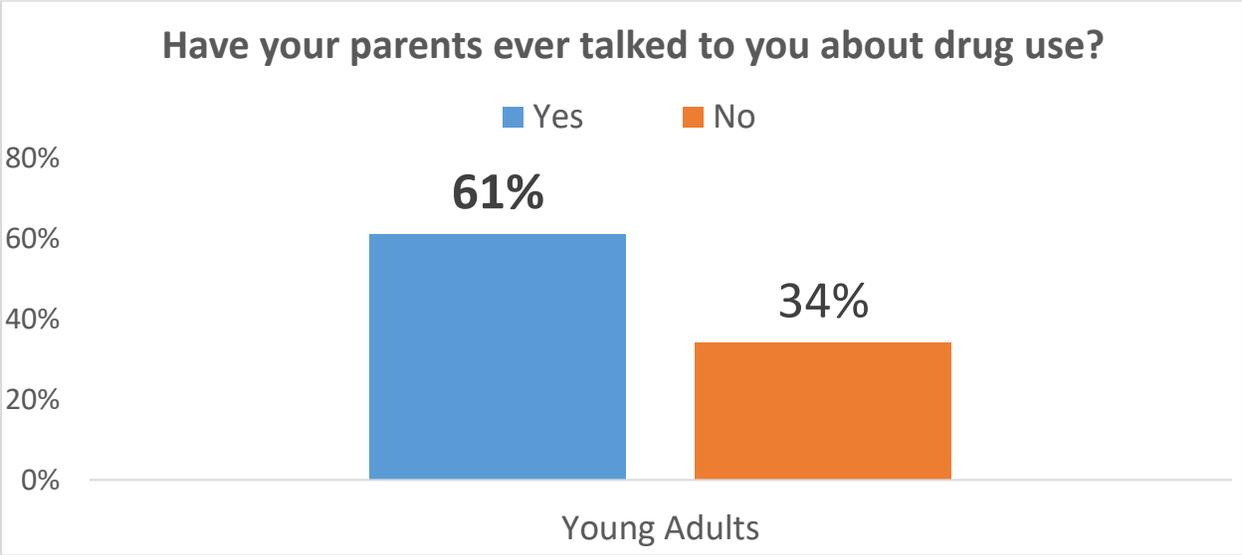
Parents say that they emphasized the **health effects**, **relationship effects**, and **criminality** of drugs, perceiving their talk as an **overall positive experience**.

<u>Topics of Discussions on Drug Use</u>	
<u>What was the emphasis of your discussion with your children?</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Impact of drug use on personal health	72%
Impact of drug use on personal relationships	59%
Impact of drug use on mental health	59%
Dangers of drug dealers / criminals	51%
Risk of arrest / encounters with law enforcement	50%

A large majority (89%) of parents say that their children responded positively to their discussion about drug use.



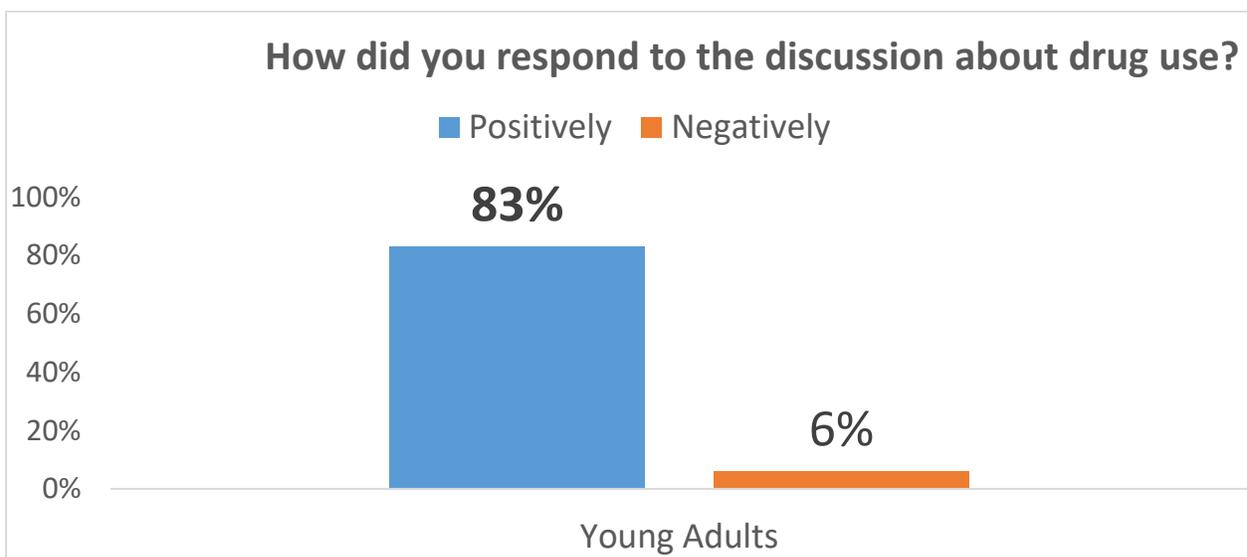
A smaller share (61%) of young adults who were surveyed said that their parents talked to them about drug use.



The topics that young adults say that their parents discussed primarily focused on **health effects of drug use**, indicating a **disparity** between **what parents talk about** and **what children hear and retain** from these discussions.

Topics of Discussions on Drug Use	
<u>What was the emphasis of your discussion with your parents?</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Impact of drug use on personal health	65%
Impact of drug use on mental health	49%
Dangers of drug dealers / criminals	41%

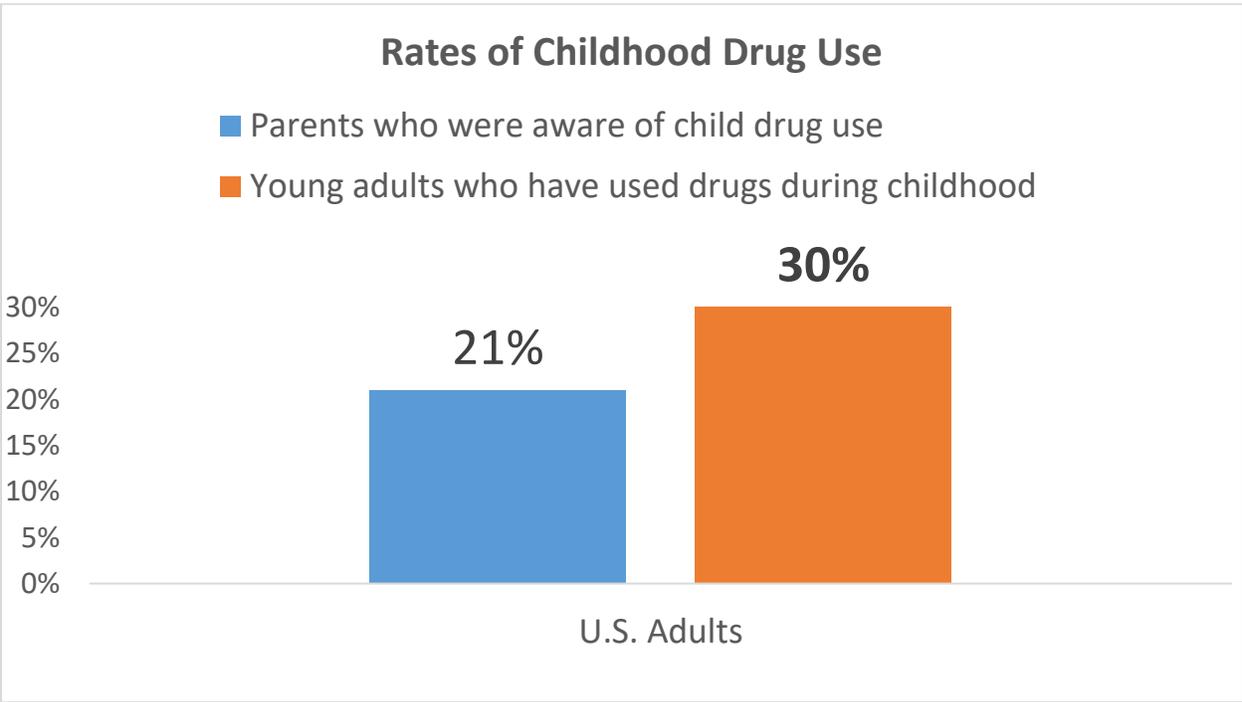
At the same time, a **large majority (84%)** of young adults say that they **responded positively** to their discussion about drug use with their parents.



Childhood Drug Use

Young adults reported **higher frequencies of drug use by a margin of +9 points** compared to what parents indicated they were aware of.

Indeed, **actual rates of use may be higher** due to **reluctance to self-report** childhood drug use.



The **top three drugs** that parents were aware of and what young adults reported that they used were **marijuana, alcohol, and tobacco/nicotine**.

However, **young adults reported greater use of alcohol (+24 points) and marijuana (+10 points)** than parents indicated that they were aware of.

Additionally, young adults reported that they also abused **prescription opioids, prescription stimulants, and hallucinogens**—which **parents were not aware of by differences of 14-20 points**.

<u>Top Six Abused Drugs as Self-Reported by Young Adults</u>		
What types of drugs did you use?	<u>Young Adults</u>	<u>Parents</u>
1. Marijuana	88%	78%
2. Alcohol	72%	48%
3. Tobacco / Nicotine	28%	29%
4. Prescription opioids (Vicodin, Oxycontin, Morphine)	28%	8%
5. Prescription stimulants (Ritalin, Adderall)	23%	9%
6. Hallucinogens (MDMA, LSD, PCP)	22%	8%
4. Synthetic Marijuana	11%	10%
5. Over-The-Counter (OTC) Medications	11%	10%
6. Inhalants	5%	9%

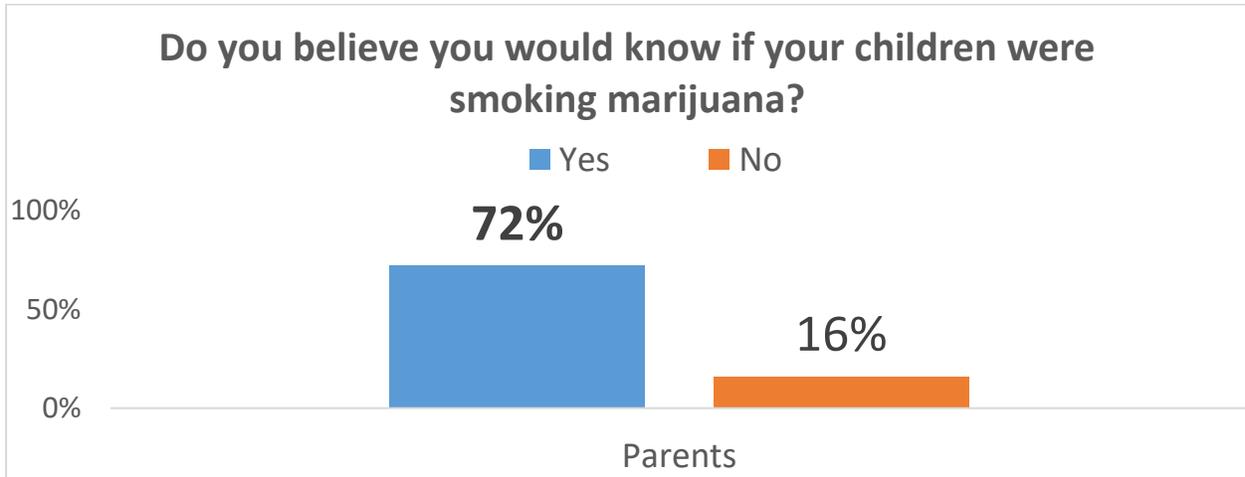
Instead, parents were more likely to be aware of their children using **synthetic marijuana, over-the-counter medications, and inhalants**.

The implications of these findings indicate that **much drug use is still hidden from parents** and even common drugs are **abused at higher rates** than parents are aware of.

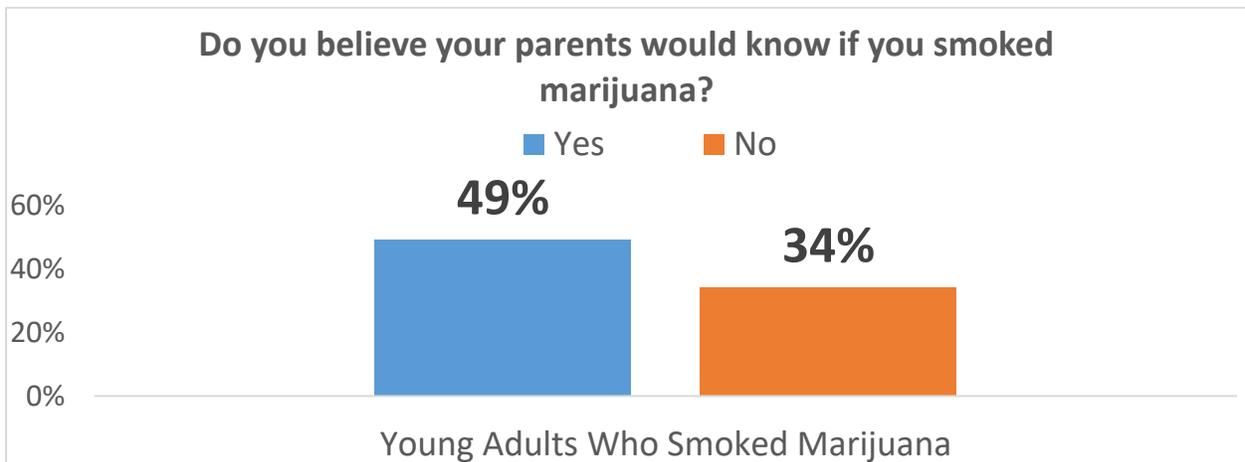
The types of drugs that children abuse **without parental knowledge** include **prescription opioids & stimulants** and **hallucinogens** which may lead to **further abuse of “harder” drugs** if left unaddressed.

Childhood Use of Marijuana

We found that **72% of parents say that they would know** if their child was using marijuana, with **97% of them certain** that they would know.



However, only 49% of young adults who have used marijuana said their parents would know, with **34% saying their parents would not know**—even though a majority (71%) say it would be a **serious issue** should their parents find out.



Young adults who used marijuana rationalized their use by viewing it as a **harmless and non-habit forming drug**.

Young Adult Rationalization of Childhood Marijuana Use	
<u>How did you rationalize marijuana use?</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
That it is a harmless drug	63%
That it is non-habit forming	63%
That other peers are also using marijuana	38%

Parents also view rationalization of marijuana use as a result of **peer pressure** and the perception that **other drugs are “more harmful”** than marijuana.

Parental Rationalization of Childhood Marijuana Use	
<u>How do you believe that your children would rationalize marijuana use?</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
That it is a harmless drug	28%
That other peers are also using marijuana	26%
That other drugs like alcohol are more harmful	21%
That it is non-habit forming	19%

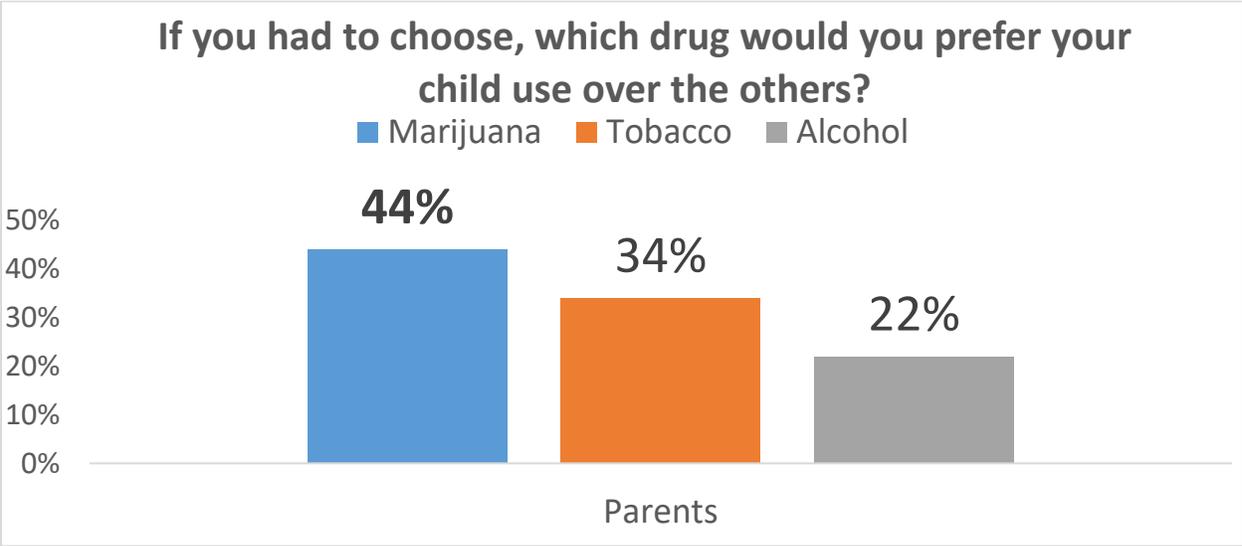
However, when it came to discussing marijuana with children, **parents only focused on general negatives** of marijuana rather than **addressing specific rationalizations** such as **peer pressure** and its **potential to be as harmful as other drugs**.

Topics Parents Would Discuss with Children on Marijuana	
<u>What would you tell a child about smoking marijuana?</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
General negative mentions (i.e. it is not good, it is bad, etc.)	24%
Can cause health problems/affect the brain	20%
Not to do it / indulge with it	18%

Less than a quarter of the parents interviewed **would take action beyond a one-on-one talk** with their children, indicating that they **do not think marijuana use would require outside assistance or counseling**.

What Parents Would Do if Child Was Smoking Marijuana	
<u>What would you do if you knew your child was smoking marijuana?</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Sit them down for a one-on-one talk	75%
Stage a family intervention	23%
Seek therapist's / counselor's advice	23%

Indeed, a **plurality (44%)** of parents would prefer their children to use marijuana over tobacco or alcohol, indicating a more relaxed attitude towards marijuana use.



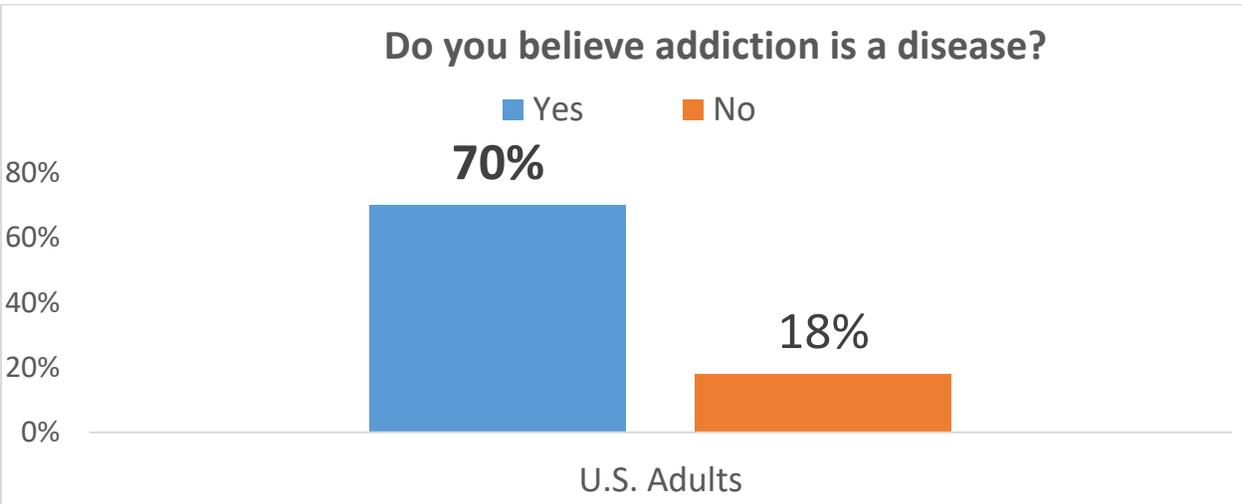
Drug Addiction

There was a **three-way split** on how respondents defined addiction, with a **35% plurality leaning towards defining it as a physiological condition**, meaning the body reacts to withdrawal.

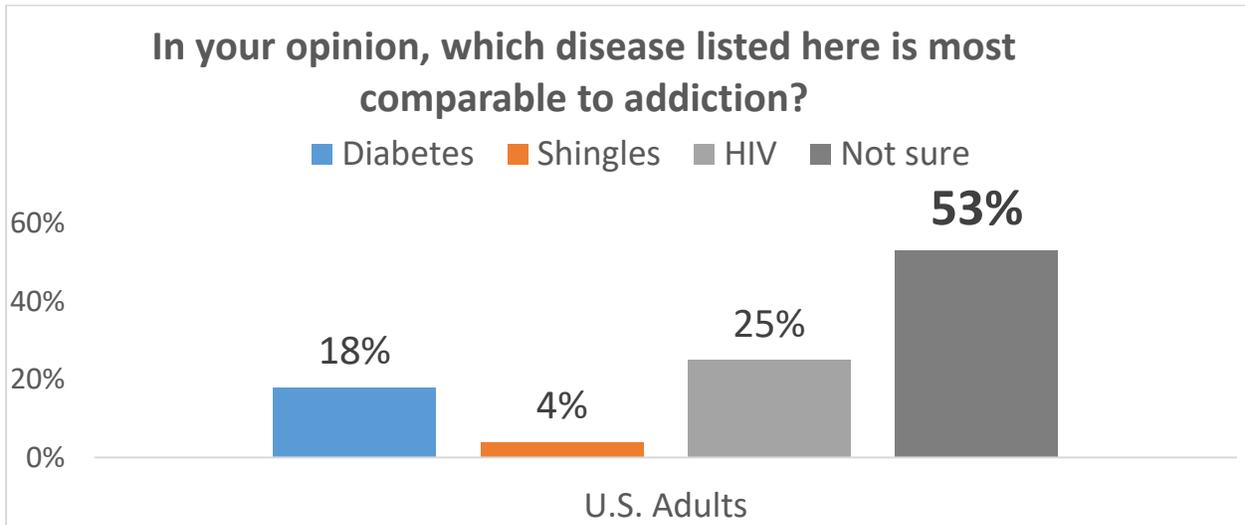
Others define addiction as a **psychological condition**, meaning the mind reacts to withdrawal, or a form of **compulsive behavior**, involving less withdrawal symptoms, and more overwhelming and irresistible impulses to act.

Defining Addiction	
<u>Which description of addiction do you agree with the most?</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Addiction is a physiological condition	35%
Addiction is a psychological condition	27%
Addiction is a form of compulsive behavior	25%

We found that a **majority (70%) of respondents** agree that **addiction is a disease**.

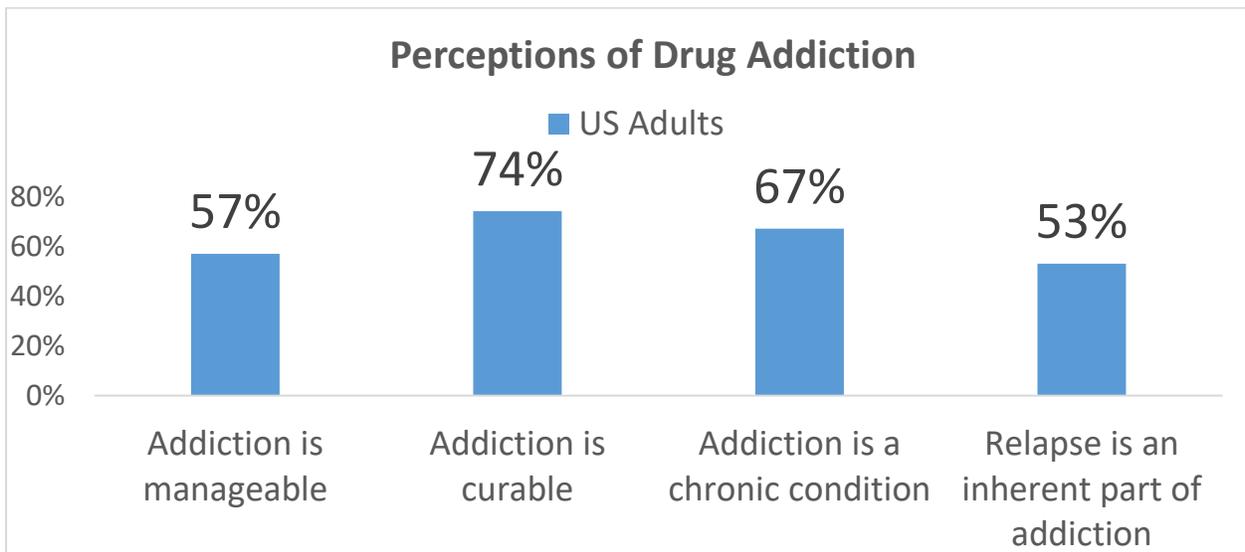


However, they **do not have any comparable disease as a point of reference**, making the condition of addiction **more difficult to understand**.

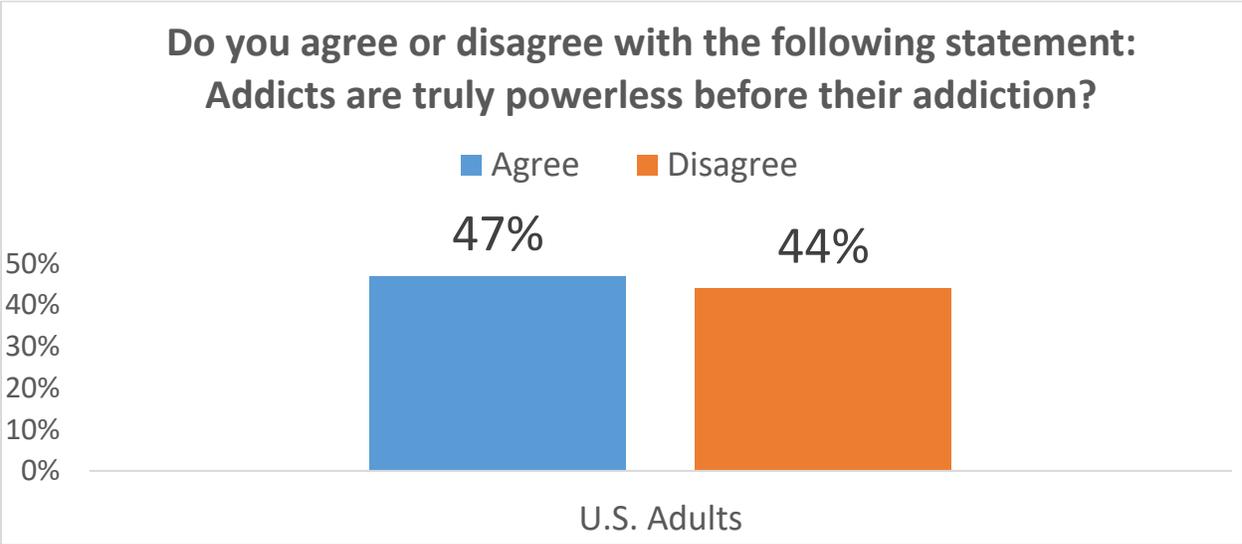


Respondents hold **heterogeneous views** on addiction, with majorities viewing it as curable but also a chronic condition.

It is clear that there is a **lack of common understanding about addiction**.



Indeed, respondents **were split over whether they agreed or disagreed** with the statement that addicts are truly powerless before their addiction.



Stigma

A plurality (46%) of respondents say that there is active stigmatization of former drug addicts in society, indicating a general awareness of social stigma behind addiction.

Stigma of Former Drug Addicts	
<u>Do you believe that...</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Former drug addicts are actively shunned/stigmatized	46%
People do their best to reintegrate former drug addicts	33%
Not sure	21%

Indeed, respondents view former drug addicts and recovering alcoholics as significantly less trustworthy than either social drinkers or teetotalers in the context of a potential employee.

Trustworthiness of Former Drug Addicts	
<u>Please indicate how likely you are to trust each of the following as people who you would employ:</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
A social drinker	75%
A totally abstinent person	74%
An alcoholic in Alcoholics Anonymous	59%
A former addict in recovery	51%

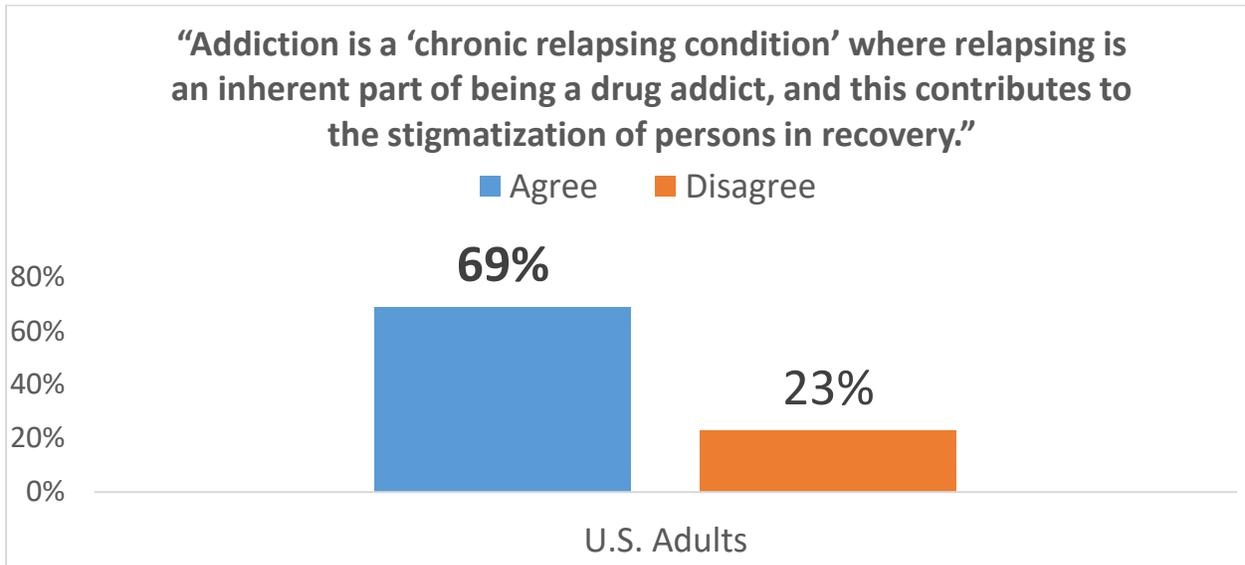
Trustworthiness of recovering alcoholics and former drug addicts falls dramatically when respondents were asked whether they **would trust individuals as a potential spouse** for their child.

Trustworthiness of Former Drug Addicts	
<u>Please indicate how likely you are to trust each of the following as a potential spouse for your son / daughter:</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
A totally abstinent person	69%
A social drinker	59%
An alcoholic in Alcoholics Anonymous	43%
A former addict in recovery	31%

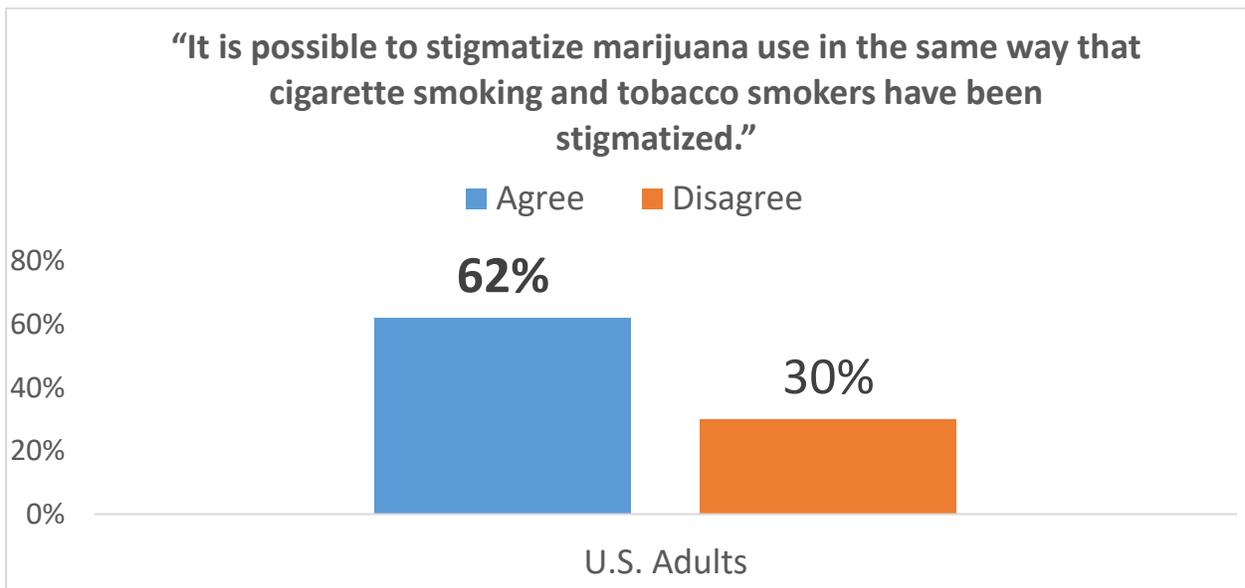
Respondents also believe that **there is a difference** between **using illegal drugs** and **using prescribed drugs** to treat the **same symptoms**.

Differences Between Illegal & Prescribed Drugs	
<u>Which statement do you agree with more?</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
There is a difference between an addict who uses illegal drugs to self-medicate and a patient who uses physician-prescribed drugs to treat the same symptoms.	63%
There is no difference between an addict and a patient who use the same substances to treat the same symptoms.	43%

A majority of respondents agree that relapse contributes to the stigmatization of persons in recovery.



At the same time, a majority (62%) of respondents also view stigmatization as a potentially positive social tool to reduce marijuana use.

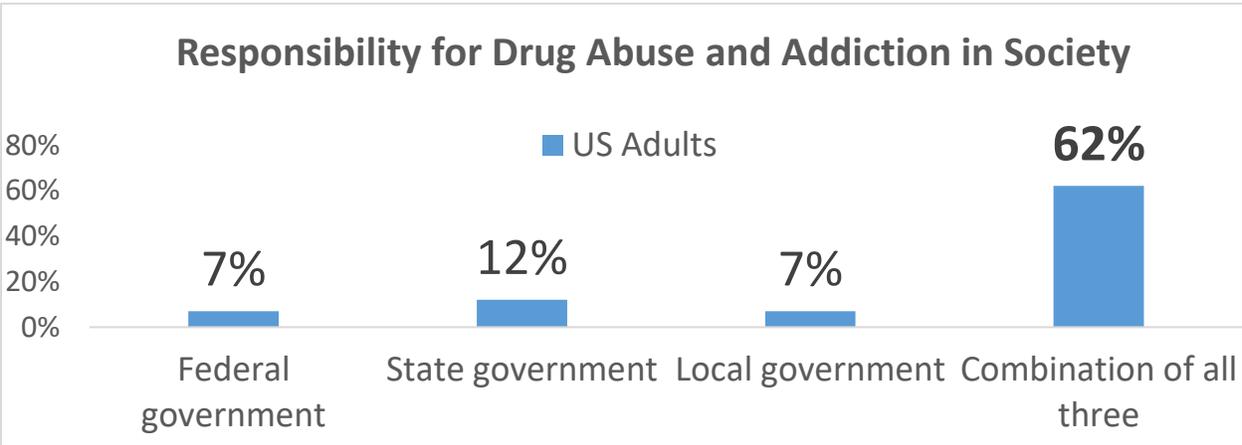


Institutions & Roles in Drug Abuse

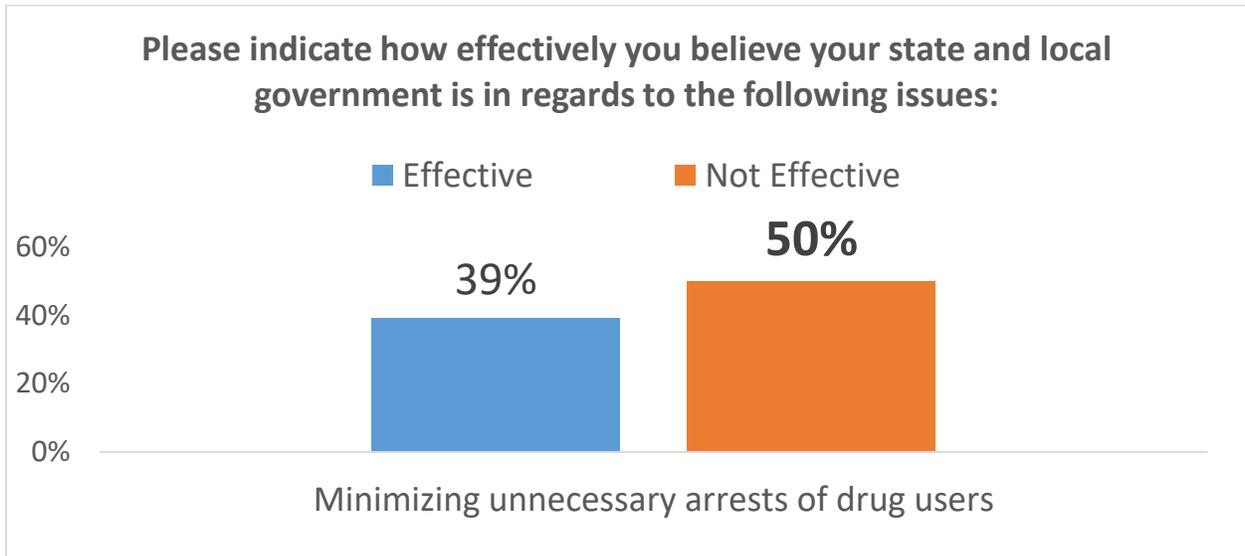
Even with perceptions of addiction as a medical condition, a **large plurality (45%) of respondents still view individual responsibility as most important** when it comes to dealing with drug abuse and addiction.

Roles in Dealing with Drug Abuse & Addiction	
<u>Please rank the following on importance when it comes to their role in addressing drug abuse and addiction in our society:</u>	<u>Percentage (Top Rank)</u>
Individual responsibility	45%
The healthcare system	23%
The education system	17%
The criminal justice system	10%
Nonprofits	6%

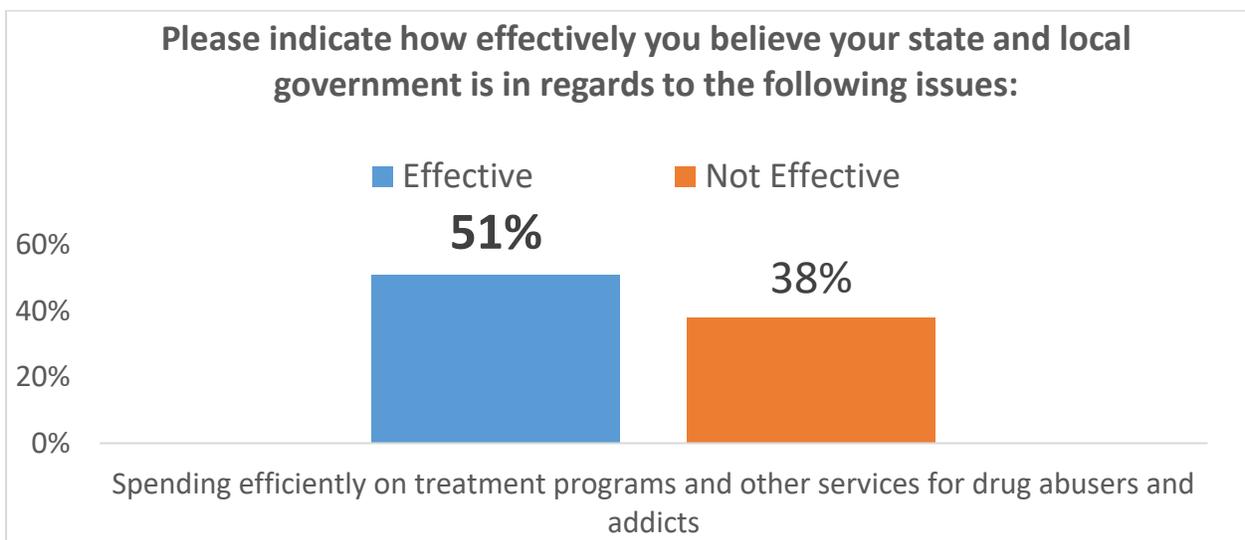
At the same time, respondents also believe that **federal, state, and local governments should be collaborating to address drug abuse and addiction** in society.



People **do not believe that their state & local governments are doing enough** to deal with drug abuse and addiction, and that they are **failing to minimize unnecessary arrests of drug users**.

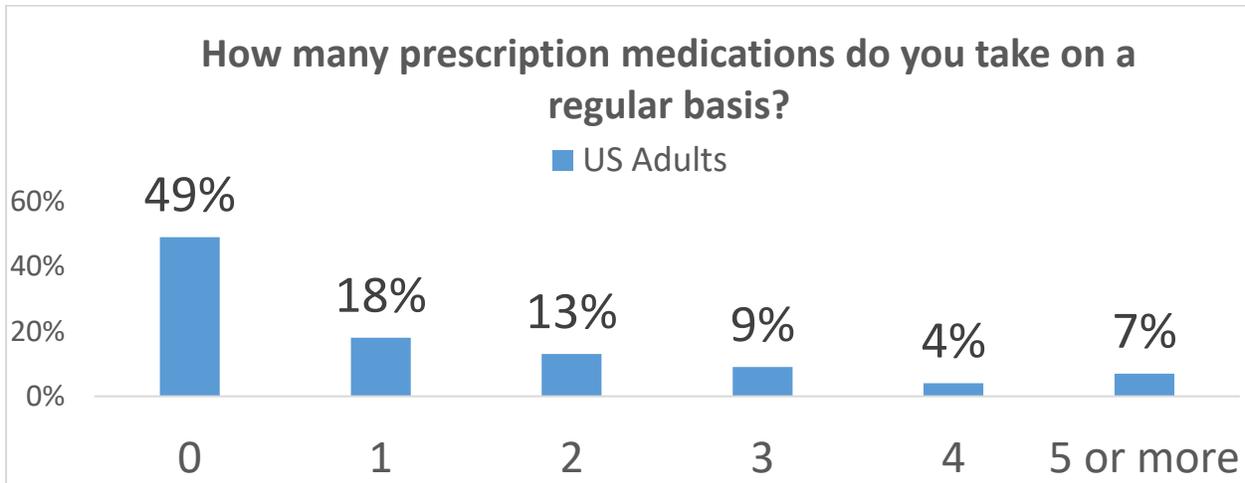


However, a **majority (51%) of respondents** believe that their state and local governments are **effective when it comes to spending efficiently on treatment programs** and other services for drug addicts.

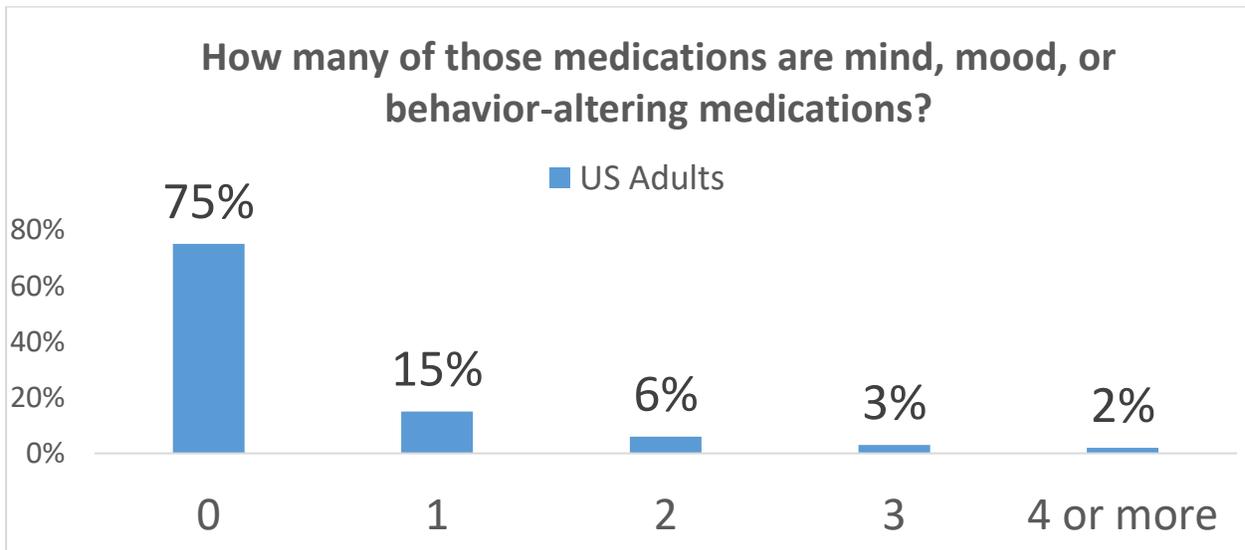


Prescription Drugs

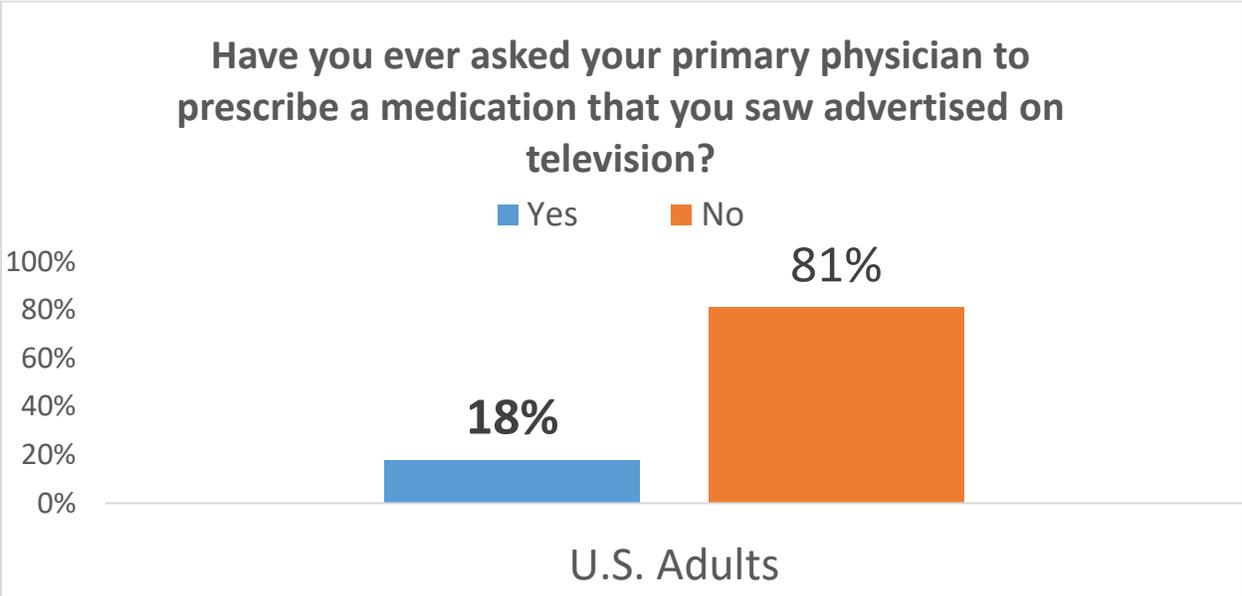
51 percent of respondents said that they took **one or more prescription medications** on a regular basis.



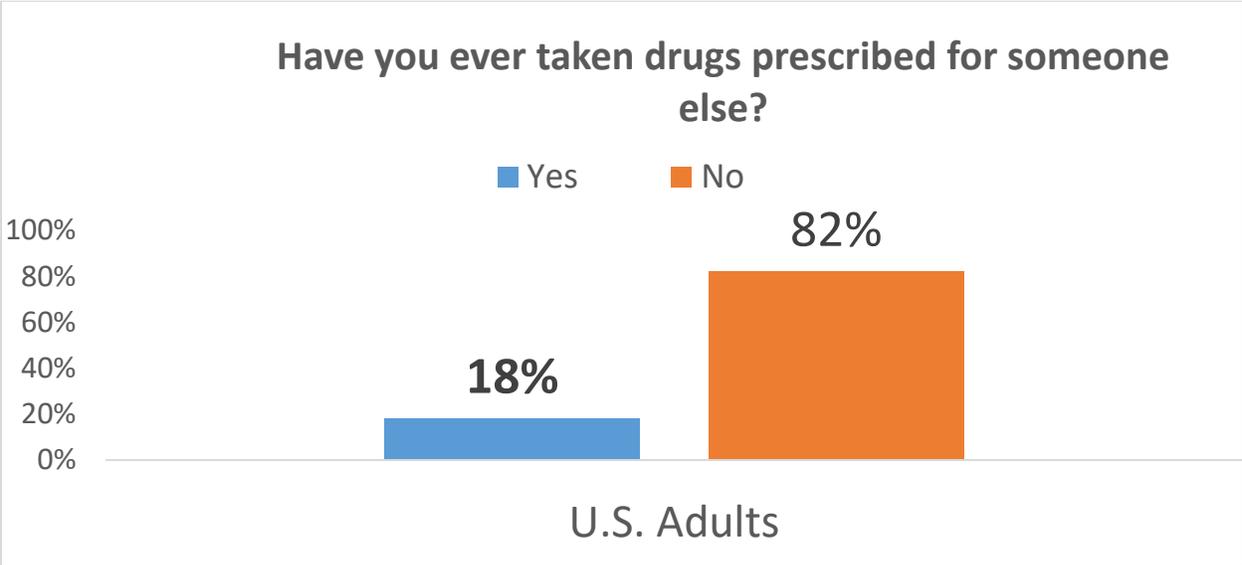
Additionally, **26 percent of respondents** take **one or more mind, mood, or behavior-altering medications**.



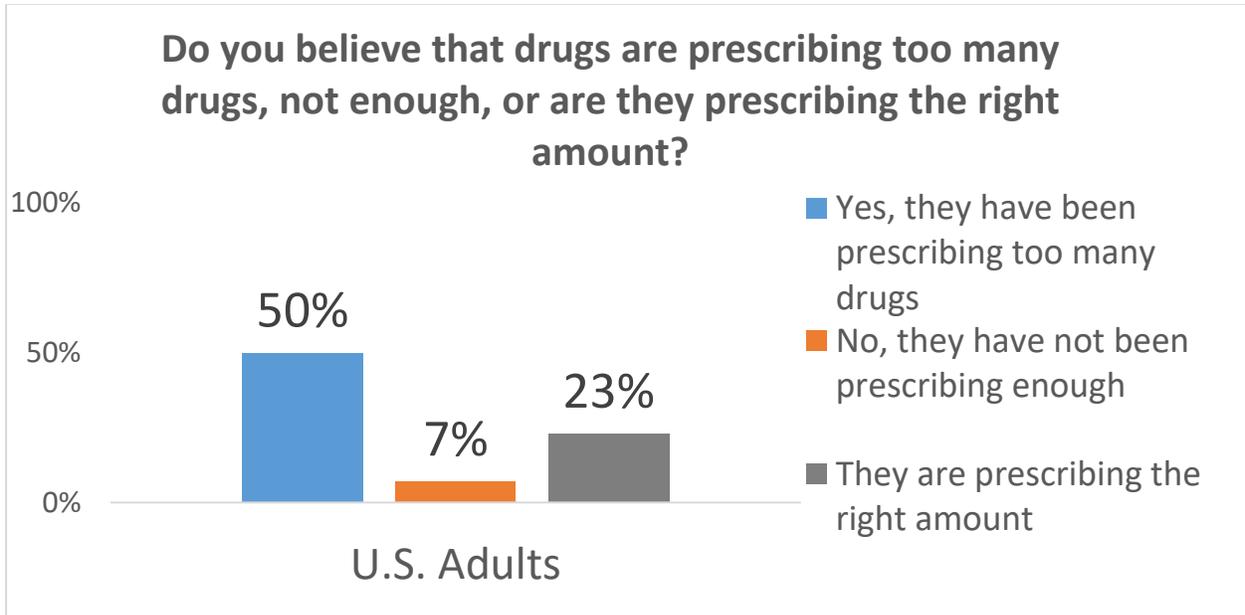
Nearly one-fifth (18%) of respondents have asked their doctor to prescribe a medication that they saw advertised on television.



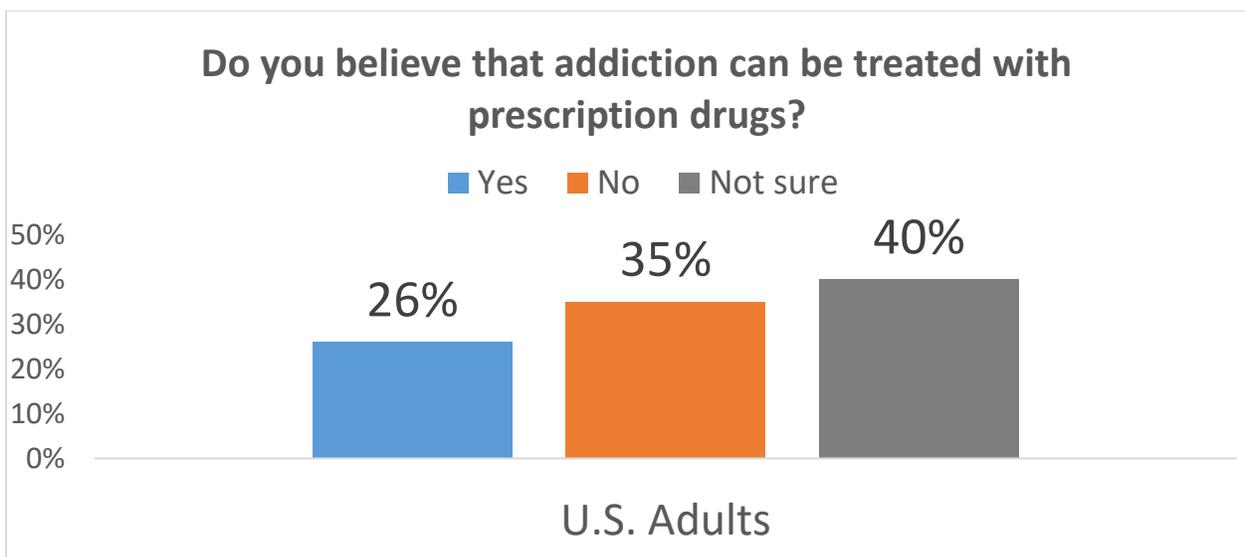
18 percent of respondents also said that they have taken drugs prescribed for someone else.



Half of respondents agree that doctors have been prescribing too many drugs.

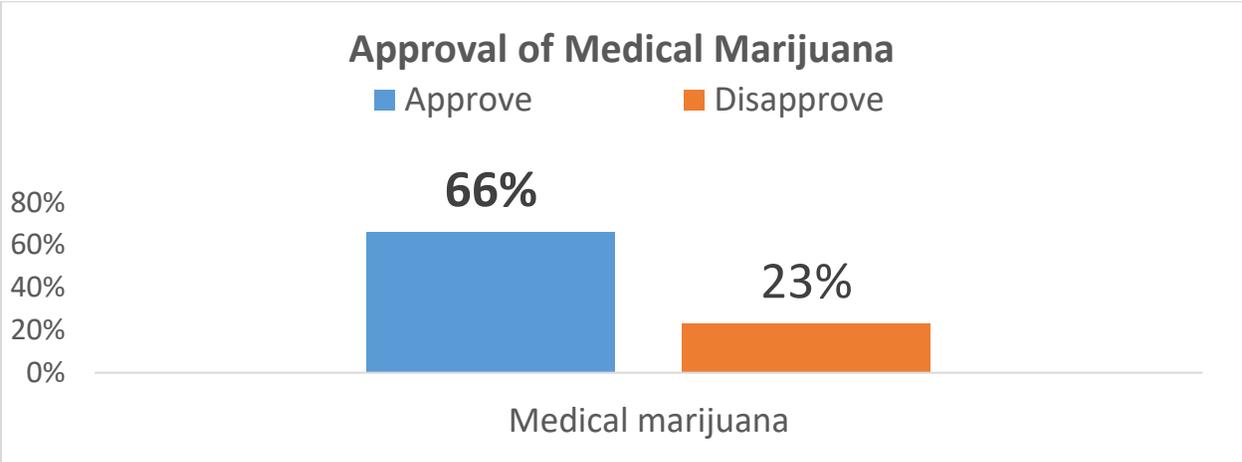


More than one-third (35%) say that addiction cannot be cured with prescription drugs, with 26% saying that addiction can be treated with prescription drugs.



Marijuana Legalization

Two-thirds of respondents say that they approve the use of medical marijuana.



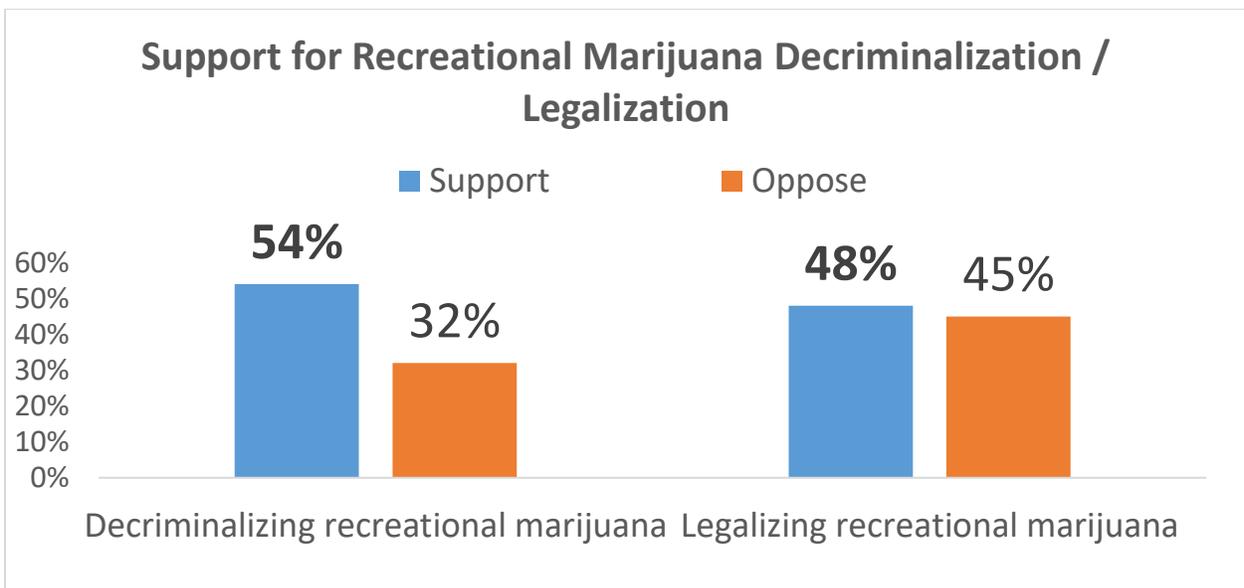
Among those who approve the use of medical marijuana, the dominant reason for approval was that **they believe it serves as a legitimate medical drug.**

Reasons to Approve Medical Marijuana	
<u>Why do you approve of the use of medical marijuana?</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
It serves as a legitimate medical drug	71%
Scientists and doctors support its use	51%
It is a natural plant	45%
It is not as habit-forming as more powerful painkillers	30%

Among those who disapprove the use of medical marijuana, a majority (55%) say that it is as habit forming as other drugs and 40% say that medical marijuana will lead to increased use of marijuana.

Reasons to Disapprove Medical Marijuana	
Why do you disapprove of the use of medical marijuana?	Percentage
It is as habit-forming as other drugs	55%
It will lead to increased use	40%
It doesn't serve as a legitimate medical drug	23%
It is not highly regulated by the government	21%

A majority (54%) support decriminalizing recreational marijuana while a plurality (48%) support legalizing recreational marijuana, indicating a shift in views over the past decade towards general approval of marijuana.



Among those who approve of recreational marijuana, a **majority (53%)** say that it is a **natural substance**, **other drugs are more harmful (45%)**, that they **know marijuana users (44%)**, and **prohibition creates crime (40%)**.

Reasons to Approve Recreational Marijuana	
<u>Why do you approve of the use of recreational marijuana?</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
It is a natural plant	53%
That other drugs like alcohol are more harmful	45%
I personally know people who use marijuana	44%
Prohibition creates crime	40%

Among those who disapprove of recreational marijuana, **52% say that is habit-forming**, **46% say that it harms the body**, and **44% say that it will lead to increased use**.

Reasons to Disapprove Recreational Marijuana	
<u>Why do you disapprove of the use of recreational marijuana?</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
That it is habit-forming	52%
That it harms body / mind development	46%
It will lead to increased use	44%