



# Public Opinions on and Perceptions of Drugs and Crime in Missouri

## Summary of Findings

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COLLEGE OF URBAN AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS  
UNIVERSITY of LOUISVILLE



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DRUGS AND CRIME IN MISSOURI**

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Prepared by

Bert Useem, Ph.D.  
Co-Investigator

Knowlton Johnson, Ph.D.  
Principal Investigator

Linda Burgess, M.A.  
Co-Investigator

Angela Lewis-Klein, M.B.A.  
Sr. Research Analyst

Brenda Curry-White, M.A.  
Sr. Research Analyst

Urban Research Institute  
College of Urban and Public Affairs  
University of Louisville  
Louisville, Kentucky 40292

for

Missouri State Highway Patrol  
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## AUTHORS' NOTES

The research team for this study consisted of Dr. Knowlton Johnson (Principal Investigator), Ms. Linda Burgess (Co-Investigator), Dr. Bert Useem (Co-Investigator), Ms. JoAnna Hunter-Manns (Sr. Research Analyst), Ms. Angela Lewis-Klein (Sr. Research Analyst), Ms. Brenda Curry-White (Sr. Research Analyst), Ms. Sandra Cleary (Sr. Data Technician), Ms. Sharon Mader (Production Coordinator), Ms. Betty G. Ash (Editor), Ms. Angela Keene, Ms. Angela White, and Ms. Stephanie M. Morris (Information Processors), and Ms. Betsy Jones (Printing Coordinator).

**Dr. Johnson** was responsible for directing all aspects of the survey. He worked closely with the Missouri SAC in designing the survey, prepared sections of the final report, and made the final presentation of the results to the Missouri Statistical Analysis Center staff. **Ms. Burgess** worked with Dr. Johnson in designing the survey, directed the collection of the data using the Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) system, and assisted in preparing the methods and procedures section of the final report. **Ms. Hunter-Manns** was responsible for designing the telephone interview schedule for CATI, **Ms. Cleary** supervised the data collection, and **Ms. Lewis-Klein** supervised the data processing and wrote a section of the final report. **Dr. Useem** directed the data analysis and wrote much of the final report. **Ms. Curry-White** assisted Dr. Useem in conducting the analysis and prepared the tables presented in the final report. **Ms. Mader** coordinated all stages of production, **Ms. Ash** edited the final report, **Ms. Keene**, **Ms. White**, and **Ms. Morris** were the information processors, and **Ms. Jones** was responsible for printing.

Assistance was also provided by the Missouri SAC throughout the study. Additionally, assistance in questionnaire construction was provided by the Criminal Justice Statistics Association and Missouri's Department of Public Safety; Department of Social Services, Division of Youth Services; Department of Corrections; Attorney General's Office; Department of Mental Health, Division of Alcohol and Drug Abuse; Department of Health, Division of Health Resources; and the Missouri State Highway Patrol's Research and Development Division and Safety and Information Division.

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## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

In July 1990 a scientifically selected random sample of 478 Missouri residents were interviewed over the telephone. They were asked about a range of public issues. The findings concerning the use of illicit drugs are summarized here. The appendix presents findings in table form.

### Drugs and Crime

Drugs and crime are linked. Drug abuse, of course, is illegal. Drugs also contribute to crime by fostering a criminal subculture and making criminal activity more profitable. Because of this link, this report reflects the extent to which both drugs and crime are a major concern of Missouri residents.

Missouri residents consider crime and drugs as the most serious problems facing America today. Thirty-six percent of the respondents mentioned drug abuse as the most serious problem; twenty-seven percent consider crime the most serious problem. (See Table 1.) Considered less serious are the problems related to the environment, the economy, care for the needy and the elderly, and alcohol abuse. Thirty-one percent also perceived drug involvement to be the number one cause of juvenile crime. (See Table 2.)

But do Missouri residents feel crime is mainly a problem elsewhere and not in their own state? No. When asked the extent to which they think crime is a serious problem in Missouri, over half (54%) of the respondents rate crime a serious problem in Missouri, not just a moderate problem. (See Table 3.) Only 6 percent of those responding consider crime a slight problem or not a problem at all in Missouri.

What about the future? Do Missouri residents perceive the crime problem in the future as getting worse, staying about the same, or decreasing? Seventy-four percent of the residents feel that crime in the future will either increase or greatly increase. (See Table 4.) Only a small minority (9%) believe that crime will decrease.

What about crime in one's own neighborhood? Just over a fourth (27%) of the respondents said that crime is a serious or a moderate problem in their neighborhood; about a quarter (23%) of the respondents stated that crime is not a problem in their neighborhood. (See Table 5.) The remaining half of the respondents answered that crime is a slight problem in their neighborhood.

Taking a final step closer to home, to what extent do Missouri residents consider themselves likely crime victims? About 7 percent of those interviewed considered themselves very likely to become victims; another 45 percent consider themselves somewhat likely to be victimized; and 48 percent believe they are unlikely to become victims. (See Table 6.)

In sum, compared to other social issues, crime and drugs are seen as the most pressing issues facing Americans and Missouri residents. Missouri residents feel somewhat more secure about the situation in their own neighborhood and the chances of their own victimization. Still about half of the respondents believe that they are somewhat likely or very likely to be victimized by crime during the next year.

### **Perceived Risks of Taking Drugs and What Should Be Done About Them**

How do Missouri residents perceive the risks of taking various illicit drugs and what do they think should be done about the drug problem? The survey asked each respondent if he or she thought a person who takes a series of specified illegal drugs was at no risk, slight risk, moderate risk, or great risk, physically or otherwise. The responses indicated that the vast majority of Missouri residents believe that taking drugs is dangerous. (Note: The question was worded to allow not only for physical danger but also for the danger of arrest and prosecution). Sixty-six percent of the respondents believe that using marijuana even once or twice poses a moderate or great risk. (See Table 7.) Eighty-three percent of the respondents reported that using marijuana occasionally poses a moderate or great risk.

The responses also show that Missouri residents are much more leary of cocaine and heroin than of marijuana. Eighty-nine percent of the respondents believe that using cocaine even once or twice poses a great risk; 94 percent of the respondents believe that using heroin once or twice poses a great risk.

To help provide a context, respondents were asked about the perceived risks of consuming alcohol. A significant proportion of the respondents, 82 percent, believe that even an occasional drink at a party puts an individual at least at slight risk. (See Table 8.) Here the respondents might have in mind the dangers of alcohol consumption per se and/or the risks of drinking and driving. Of the respondents, more than half (55%) believe that five or more drinks each weekend poses a great risk. Further, it was found that attitudes toward drugs and alcohol are correlated with demographic variables. In general, respondents who are more educated, younger, and with higher incomes tend to associate less risk with taking illicit drugs

and alcohol consumption. It should be kept in mind that all groups associate considerable risk with taking illicit drugs and abusing alcohol; still, the more educated, younger, and higher the income the respondent, the more likely he or she is to minimize the risk.

For example, 84 percent of the respondents with a grade school education believe people are at great risk if they try marijuana once or twice, compared to 34 percent of the people with a college education. (See Table 9.) Twenty-eight percent of the respondents with an income of \$35,000 or more, compared to 57 percent of the respondents with an income of \$15,000 or less, believe that smoking marijuana once or twice poses a great risk. Seventy-two percent of the respondents 61 years or older believe that people who smoke marijuana are at great risk, compared to 26 percent of the respondents 30 or younger.

What is to be done about illicit drug usage? This question can be further broken down into: (a) Who should lead the fight against drug usage and with what means? (b) What punishment should be given out for illicit drug usage? (c) How many public funds should be devoted to the effort?

Some political leaders and academic analysts have argued that the war against illicit drugs is a losing war, one that should be abandoned. Legalization of drugs, it is claimed, would take the profits and violence out of the drug trade; the damage done by the war against drugs is greater than the risk of legalization. The respondents were asked if they think illicit drugs should be legalized. The vast majority said no. Three-quarters of the respondents rejected the argument without qualification. (See Table 10.) A minority (16%) favors the legalization of only marijuana.

Given that the vast majority reject the legalization argument, who can help the most against drugs? Interestingly, over half (55%) of the respondents stated that the family is the group best able to combat drug abuse. (See Table 11.) Nearly a quarter (23%) feels schools can play this role; only 5 percent of the respondents believe that enforcement officials could help the most.

Respondents were also asked how people who use illegal drugs should be handled and which method of combating drugs should receive the most money and effort. Surprisingly, a slight majority (57%) favors treatment as the best way to handle drug users as opposed to a sizable minority (40%) who favors arrest and prosecution. (See Table 12.) On the other hand, Missouri residents are equally divided in their preferences to spend public funds on treatment efforts (drug treatment and rehabilitation; drug abuse education and prevention, 50%

combined) and enforcement efforts (arrest and prosecution of drug law violators; stopping the flow of illegal drugs into the country, 50% combined).

In other words, Missouri residents distinguish between measures they wish applied to an individual drug user and measures appropriate to an overall drug strategy. They tend to lean toward treatment in the handling of an individual user but are about equally divided between treatment and enforcement as on overall strategy.

What do Missouri residents feel is the appropriate response to students found to be using drugs on school premises? What if a student is found to be selling drugs to other students? A slight majority (55%) believe that the student using drugs should be kept in school and provided either counseling or handled by his/her parents. (See Table 13.) The remaining 45 percent think such a student should be either expelled from school and/or turned over to the police and the courts.

A majority (55%) believe that students discovered selling drugs on school premises should be expelled or turned over to law enforcement officials. The remainder favor a more treatment-like orientation.

In addition, the respondents were asked if they favored or opposed a series of currently debated laws which, if enacted, would impose various sanctions for drug usage. The strongest support (94% of those responding) is for a law that would require those convicted of drug offenses to participate in a drug treatment program. (See Table 14.) Almost as much support (91%) is for a law that would seize the property and money of convicted drug dealers. Taking away the professional licenses of practitioners such as doctors, lawyers, and nurses who are convicted of drug crimes is favored by 85 percent of the respondents. Suspending driving privileges of persons arrested for possession of illegal drugs is favored by 83 percent of the respondents.

A smaller majority (69%) said that they favored a law that would deny public housing benefits to persons convicted of drug offenses. Sixty-two percent of those answering said that they favored denying scholarships to college students convicted of drug crimes or whose driver's license has been revoked for possession of drugs.

Another set of drug-related questions asked the respondents if they had any friend, relative, or acquaintance who currently uses or sells various specified drugs. This set of questions does not measure actual drug usage since people vary in the number of people they

know. Rather, the importance of these questions relates to whether Missouri residents have access to drugs.

Research has shown that it is a myth that drug users are hooked by pushers who give them their first doses free. In fact, drug sellers are reluctant to deal with nonusers since the buyer may be a police agent. Rather, drug addiction is spread much like any other fad or behavior: A friend urges another to try it or an eager learner picks it up from just watching. Drug taking is not a solo affair. Thus, the greater the proportion of the population who knows others using and selling drugs, the greater is the risk.

A quarter of the respondents reported having a friend, relative, or acquaintance who currently uses illegal drugs on a regular basis. (See Table 15.) Just over seven percent reported that they knew someone who sells illegal drugs. For purposes of comparison, respondents were asked if they had a friend, relative, or acquaintance who abused alcohol on a regular basis. Almost four out of ten respondents (39%) reported that they knew such an individual.

Are the illegal drugs used or sold by friends, acquaintances, and relatives primarily marijuana, cocaine, crack, heroin, and/or PCP or angel dust? Clearly, the leading drug of choice is marijuana. Of the respondents' friends, acquaintances, and relatives who use or sell drugs, 89 percent use or sell marijuana. (See Table 16.) Thirty-five percent of these individuals use or sell cocaine, making it the second most frequently used/sold drug. Sixteen percent of this group use or sell crack. Fourteen percent of the others with drug involvement sell or use PCP or angel dust; 11 percent use or sell heroin.

In sum, Missouri residents are deeply worried about the drug problem and favor both more punitive measures and more treatment measures. But are they willing to pay the bill? We asked the respondents if they favored or opposed devoting a greater amount of public funds to the fight against drugs. The vast majority, 81 percent, favored more money being spent to fight drug abuse. (See Table 17.)

And where should these funds come from? A majority of the respondents (54%) believe that stronger drug programs should be funded by a combination of increased taxes and by transferring funds from other existing government programs. Seventeen percent favor increasing taxes alone; 29 percent favor transferring existing funds to the antidrug effort without raising taxes.

## **Conclusions and Policy Implications**

Missouri residents are deeply worried about crime and drugs. These issues, more than any others, are uppermost in their minds.

One proposed solution, the legalization of currently illicit drugs, is opposed by the vast majority of Missouri residents. Instead, the majority favors both tougher laws and more treatment. The public seems unsure of the best way to think of drug users: Are they criminals who deserve punishment, or are they damaged, sick individuals who deserve a chance to rehabilitate themselves? Is society best served by sending them to a prison or to a therapeutic environment? Missouri residents seem to want both more punishment and more substance abuse therapy. Political leaders would do well to specify when rehabilitative efforts are effective and just and when more purely punitive measures are effective and just.

The public seems willing to pay for enhanced antidrug efforts, both in increased taxes and in the transfer of funds from other public programs. If someone were somehow able to come up with a solution, even a partial solution, to Missouri's drug and crime problems, he or she would certainly deserve the gratitude of the state's residents.

APPENDIX

Table 1

Rank-Ordering of Most Problematic Issues in America Today

	Total Respondents			Respondents Ranking Issue as One of Three Most Serious
	Ranking Issue as Most Serious			
	1st	2d	3d	
Drug Abuse	36%	26%	14%	76%
Crime	27	19	14	60
Care of the needy and elderly	10	14	23	47
Damage to the environment	14	16	16	46
Public education	6	10	9	25
Problems relating to the economy	6	6	12	24
Alcohol Abuse	2	9	11	22
Base (excluding "Don't Know")	(473)	(473)	(471)	(473)*

\*Two respondents answered the questions about the first and second most problematic issues, but not the third. Those two respondents are included in this base.

Table 2

Perceived Frequency of Issues as Causes of Juvenile Crime

	Total Respondents			Respondents Ranking Issue as One of Three Most Serious
	Ranking Issue as Most Frequent			
	1st	2d	3d	
Drug involvement	31%	30%	16%	76%
Lack of parental care/discipline	34	16	20	69
Dropping out of school	10	16	20	44
Alcohol involvement	8	19	16	41
Gang membership	7	6	7	20
Violence on TV and in movies	5	7	11	23
Unemployment	6	6	11	22
Base (excluding "Don't Know")	(478)	(478)	(478)	(478)

Table 3

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Extent of Crime as a Problem in Missouri

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	<u>Total Respondents</u>
Not a problem	*
Slight problem	6%
Moderate problem	40
Serious problem	54
Base (excluding "Don't Know")	(474)

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\*Denotes less than 0.5%.

Table 4

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Future Tendency of Crime in Missouri

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	<u>Total Respondents</u>
Greatly increase	10%
Increase	64
Stay the same	18
Decrease	8
Greatly decrease	1
Base (excluding "Don't Know")	(464)

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Table 5

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Extent of Crime as a Problem in Respondent's Neighborhood

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	<u>Total Respondents</u>
Not a problem	23%
Slight problem	50
Moderate problem	21
Serious problem	6
Base (excluding "Don't Know")	(477)

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Table 6

Perceived Likelihood of Being Victimized by Crime in Next Year	
	<u>Total Respondents</u>
Very likely	7%
Somewhat likely	45
Not likely	48
Base (excluding "Don't Know")	(462)

Table 7

Drug Type/Perceived Risk	Frequency of Drug Use		
	<u>Once or Twice</u>	<u>Occasionally</u>	<u>Regularly</u>
<u>Marijuana</u>			
No risk	8%	4%	1%
Slight risk	25	10	3
Moderate risk	22	24	10
Great risk	44	59	86
Base (excluding "Don't Know")	(465)	(470)	(470)
<u>Cocaine</u>			
No risk	1	*	*
Slight risk	2	1	—
Moderate risk	9	3	1
Great risk	89	96	99
Base (excluding "Don't Know")	(475)	(475)	(475)
<u>Heroin</u>			
No risk	—	*	*
Slight risk	2	1	—
Moderate risk	4	2	—
Great risk	94	98	100
Base (excluding "Don't Know")	(474)	(475)	(475)

\*Denotes less than 0.5%.

NOTE: Respondents who perceived using a drug once or twice to be a "great risk" were not asked the two questions that followed concerning higher dosage. Also, respondents who perceived using a drug occasionally to be a "great risk" were not asked the final questions concerning regular dosage. It is assumed that if a respondent perceived a great risk at a lower level of frequency, he or she would perceive a great risk at higher levels of frequency.

Table 8

Perceived Risk of Using Alcohol by Frequency of Alcohol Use

<u>Perceived Risk</u>	<u>Frequency of Drug Use</u>				
	<u>Occasional Drink At Party</u>	<u>5 or more Drinks/ Weekend</u>	<u>1 or 2 Drinks Every Day</u>	<u>4 or 5 Drinks Nearly Every Day</u>	<u>More than 5 Drinks Nearly Every Day</u>
No risk	17%	3%	1%	*	*
Slight risk	41	13	8	2%	*
Moderate risk	24	29	17	5	2%
Great risk	17	55	74	93	97
Base (excluding "Don't Know")	(471)	(473)	(474)	(475)	(475)

\*Denotes less than 0.5%.

NOTE: Respondents who perceived using a drug once or twice to be a "great risk" were not asked the two questions that followed concerning higher dosage. Also, respondents who perceived using a drug occasionally to be a "great risk" were not asked the final questions concerning regular dosage. It is assumed that if a respondent perceived a great risk at a lower level of frequency, he or she would perceive a great risk at higher levels of frequency.

Table 9

Perceived Risk of Trying Marijuana Once or Twice by Education, by Income, and by Age

	Education			Income				Age			
	Grade School	High School	College	Less than \$15,000	\$15,000-\$24,999	\$25,000-\$34,999	\$35,000 or More	30 or Younger	31-40	41-60	61 or Older
Great risk	84%	49%	34%	57%	48%	44%	28%	26%	31%	50%	72%
Moderate risk	7	23	24	16	18	31	24	31	18	22	17
Slight risk	7	20	33	20	22	18	38	32	34	24	10
No risk	3	9	9	7	12	7	9	11	17	5	1

Table 10

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Attitudes Toward Legalizing Drugs

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	<u>Total Respondents</u>
None of the drugs now illegal should be made legal	75%
Sale of all drugs should be legal on the open market	3
Sale of most drugs should be legal, except the two or three most dangerous ones	6
Sale of most drugs should not be made legal except for marijuana	16
Base (excluding "Don't Know/Refused")	(469)

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Table 11

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Opinions As To What Group Helps the Most Against Drugs

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	<u>Total Respondents</u>
Family	55%
Schools	23
Church	9
Treatment Centers	7
Police and Courts	5
Business/Industry	2
Base (excluding "Don't Know")	(469)

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Table 12

Opinions Concerning Handling Drug Offenders  
and Allocation of Monies in Combating Drugs

	<u>Total Respondents</u>
<u>Handling of Drug Offenders</u>	
Should be provided with treatment	57%
Should be arrested and prosecuted	40
Should be left alone	3
Base (excluding "Don't Know")	(469)
<u>Allocation of Most Money and Effort</u>	
Stop flow of illegal drugs	39
Education and prevention	34
Treatment and rehabilitation	16
Arrest and prosecution	11
Base (excluding "Don't Know")	(471)

Table 13

Opinions of Proper Response to Student Using or Selling Drugs

	<u>Student Using Drugs</u>	<u>Student Selling Drugs</u>
Keep the student in school and provide counseling	46%	38%
Keep student in school, but let parents handle any discipline and treatment	9	8
Let police and courts handle the matter	35	47
Expel student from school	10	8
Base (excluding "Don't Know")	(464)	(466)

Table 14

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Percentage of Respondents Who Favor Specific Drug Sanctions

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	<u>Total Respondents Who Favor</u>
Requiring convicted drug offender to participate in drug treatment programs	94%
Seizing of property and money of convicted drug dealers	91
Taking away professional licenses or certificates of persons convicted of drug crimes	85
Suspension of driving privileges for possession of illegal drugs	83
Denying public housing benefits to persons convicted of selling or possessing drugs	69
Denying scholarships to students convicted of drug crimes or whose driver's licenses have been revoked for possession of drugs	62
Base	478

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Table 15

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Percentage of Respondents Who Know Others Who Use/Sell Drugs/Alcohol

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	<u>Total Respondents</u>
Knows a friend, relative, or acquaintance who currently abuses alcohol	39%
Knows a friend, relative, or acquaintance who currently uses illegal drugs on a regular basis	25
Knows a friend, relative, or acquaintance who currently sells illegal drugs on a regular basis	7

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Table 16

Types of Drugs Used or Sold by Friends, Relatives, Acquaintances					
	Total Who Know Someone Who Uses or Sells Drugs				
	<u>Marijuana</u>	<u>Cocaine</u>	<u>Crack</u>	<u>PCP/Angel Dust</u>	<u>Heroin</u>
Use only	56%	16%	2%	5%	4%
Sell only	5	7	6	6	7
Use and sell	27	13	8	3	—*
Total who use, sell or both	89%	35%	16%	14%	11%
Doesn't use or sell this type of drug	11%	65%	84%	86%	89%

\*Based on 114 respondents who report that a friend, relative, or acquaintance either currently uses or currently sells drugs on a regular basis.

Table 17

Percentage of Respondents Who Favor Spending More to Fight Drugs, and Support for Funding Sources	
FAVOR GREATER AMOUNT OF PUBLIC DOLLARS BEING DEVOTED TO FIGHT AGAINST DRUGS	<u>Total Respondents</u> 81%
<u>Funding Source Respondent Would Select:</u>	
Increase taxes as well as reallocate existing dollars	54
Take existing dollars from other government programs	29
Increase taxes to cover total cost of the drug programs	17