

**To:** *Interested Parties*  
**From:** *Hart Research*  
**Date:** *July 18, 2024*  
**Re:** *Key Findings from a Survey of Residents of Large American Cities*

Earlier this year, Hart Research conducted a survey\* of voters who live in the [35 member cities of the Big Cities Health Coalition](#). The survey aimed to understand the outlook of big city residents; how they view intertwined challenges such as drug overdoses and homelessness; and the degree to which residents are open to solutions to those challenges that are centered in public health. This memorandum highlights the key findings from this research.

## **1) Contrary to the narrative that is put forth in some news media, a majority of big city residents take an optimistic rather than pessimistic view of their cities.**

Fifty-four percent (54%) of residents describe their city as “thriving and successful,” compared to 30% who describe it as “declining and failing” (16% say both phrases describe their city). Residents across various demographic groups express this “thriving and successful” optimism:

- A majority of men (59%) and women (51%)
- Across racial and ethnic groups: majorities of white residents (57%), Black residents (52%), Latino residents (53%)
- A majority of homeowners (60%) and plurality of renters (49%)
- A majority of Democrats (62%) and plurality of Republicans (49%)

## **2) At the same time, city residents are realists who recognize the challenges facing their cities—they almost uniformly see crime, homelessness, and drug use as local problems.**

They have high hopes and positive outlooks for their cities, but residents are not burying their heads in the sand. More than nine in 10 say each of these is a problem in their city: crime (95%), homelessness (96%), and drug addiction and overdoses (91%). Indeed, these include over 40% who say crime and homelessness are problems in their own neighborhoods and 33% who say it of drugs. Lower-income residents and renters are more likely than average to say each one of these is a problem in their own neighborhood.

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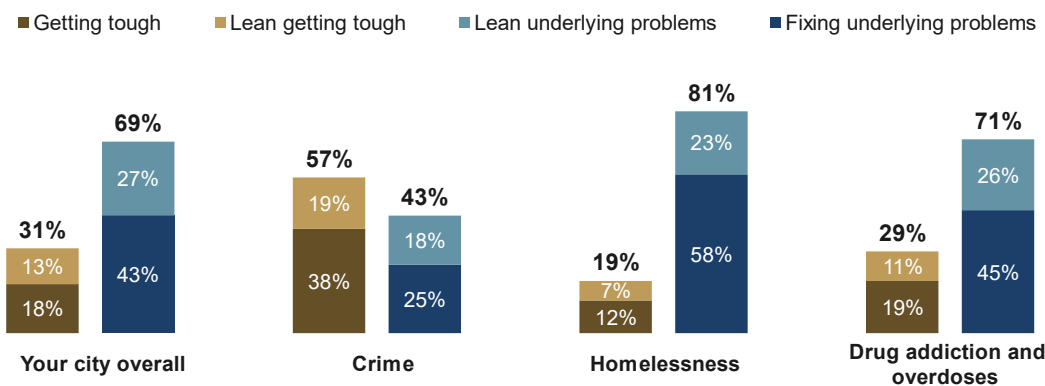
\* Online survey of 1,268 residents of these cities, conducted May 13-20, 2024. The credibility interval (similar to margin of error) for this survey is  $\pm 2.75$  percentage points for the full sample and is higher for subgroups of the sample.

**3) But the wide recognition of these problems should not be confused with defeatism or vengefulness—most residents would prefer to fix these issues by addressing their root causes rather than through punitive action.**

In order to make their city a better place to live overall and to best address these problems, residents generally believe the best approach is focusing more on fixing the underlying problems that lead to these issues rather than on “getting tough” and making people face consequences for their actions. This is overwhelmingly the case with drugs and homelessness. A majority take the opposite position for crime, though even in that case two in five residents believe a “fix underlying problems” approach would be more fruitful.

**City residents are broadly supportive of an “underlying problems” rather than punitive approach.**

*Which of the following do you think is the best approach for...?*



Residents clearly view crime differently from these other issues. But even larger majorities—across *all* demographic and ideological groups—say it would be better to fix the underlying problems that lead to homelessness and drug addiction and overdoses. And, crucially, seven in 10 say that this approach would be more likely to make their city a better place to live overall.

**4) While residents do not feel their city’s policies to address these problems are entirely on point, they believe the services needed to do so are underfunded.**

City residents tend to register negative assessments of their city’s policies in these areas:

- *Drug addiction and overdoses* – 28% say they are about right, 48% say policies are too permissive
- *Homelessness* – 20% say they are about right, 52% say policies are too permissive
- *Crime* – 29% say they are about right, 56% say policies are too permissive

Ten percent (10%) or fewer in each case say policies are too strict.

In one sense, this response may be self-evident: the fact that these issues exist in these cities to the extent that they do could be seen as evidence that the policies to address them are misguided.

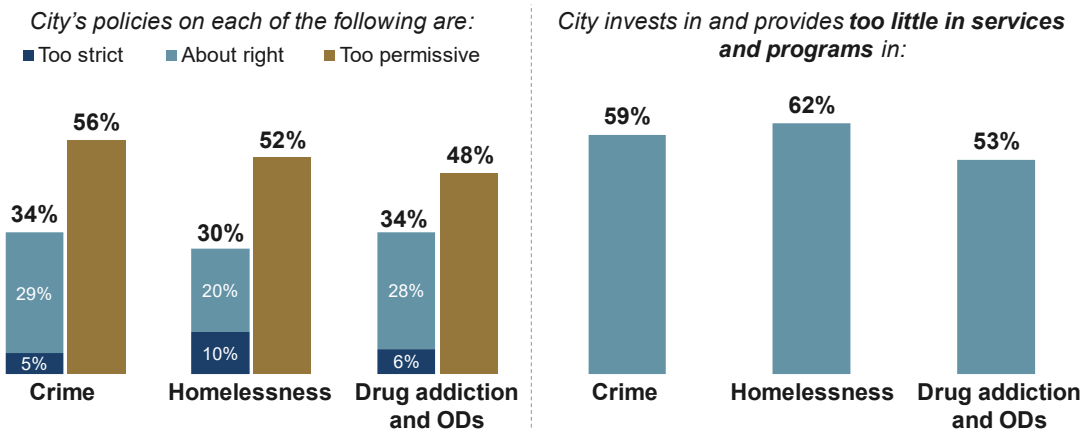
At the same time, it is important to compare these results to those cited earlier in this memo: over 90% of residents consider each of these issues to be a “problem” in their own city, yet only approximately half (slightly more in the case of crime) say that city policies are too permissive, suggesting that wrongheaded policy is not the only problem in residents’ minds.

Indeed, another facet is the level of resources governments commit to dealing with these problems. Residents find that commitment wanting in each case, particularly in the case of homelessness:

- *Drug addiction and overdoses* – 53% say their city invests in and provides too little in services and programs, 28% say it invests about the right amount
- *Homelessness* – 62% say their city invests in and provides too little in services and programs, 22% say it invests about the right amount
- *Crime* – 59% say their city invests in and provides too little in services and programs, 26% say it invests about the right amount

Seven percent (7%) or fewer in each case say the city is investing too much, and approximately 10% say they do not know.

### Many think their city’s policies are too permissive, but as many or more say services are inadequate.



**5) Residents cite numerous causes for these issues, but “underlying problems” like inflation and unaffordable housing and insufficient public health services are chief among them.**

We provided survey respondents with a list of possible causes for issues like homelessness, drug overdoses, and crime. It is clear that people recognize the complexity of these issues, as about half or more identify every factor we asked about as a major cause.

But three factors stand above all: the cost of living in general, and housing specifically; the national mental health crisis; and the lack of permanent housing for chronically unhoused people. Two thirds or more say each of these is one of the main causes or a big cause of these other problems, followed by approximately 60% who cite a lack of quality programs to help those who are struggling and a lack of funding for such programs.

Percent (%) Who Say Each is <u>One of the Main Causes</u> or a <u>Big Cause</u> of Homelessness, Drug Use and Overdoses, and Crime in their City	
Housing and rent are expensive and not affordable	72
High inflation and cost of living	69
The mental health crisis in the United States	67
Lack of permanent housing solutions for people who are chronically homeless	64
Not enough funding for programs meant to help people who are struggling	61
There are not enough quality programs to help people who are struggling	59
We rely too much on putting people in jail rather than getting them the health and social services they need to address these issues	55
People do not have to face consequences for their bad actions	49
A struggling economy with high unemployment and failing businesses	49
People expect things to be handed to them without putting in the work themselves to help improve their situations	47
People who are struggling with these problems are unwilling to get help	47
We rely too much on law enforcement rather than health and social work professionals to address these issues.	47
Not enough policing and law enforcement	47

To be sure, these types of “macro” factors are not the only causes people see. Fully half of respondents say lack of individual-level accountability—such as people not having to face consequences for their actions or being unwilling to seek help—have a role. But that does not change the fact that a substantial majority of residents believe that foundational solutions are required if there is any hope of solving crime, homelessness, and drug use and overdoses in their cities.

## 6) City residents see merit in treating drug users as fellow humans by taking a public health approach to dealing with drug overdoses.

As noted, people's views on the issues we focused on this survey are complex and nuanced—most are unhappy with their city's policies, but they also believe that a lack of funding and services and greater macro issues are at the root of these problems, while still others believe there is an element of personal responsibility. We can add to this nuanced perspective that residents are compassionate and desire to see their neighbors who may be suffering treated as human beings rather than as criminals or just a statistic.

To that point, in the survey, we provided a basic description of a “public health approach” to preventing drug overdose deaths and asked for respondents' reaction:

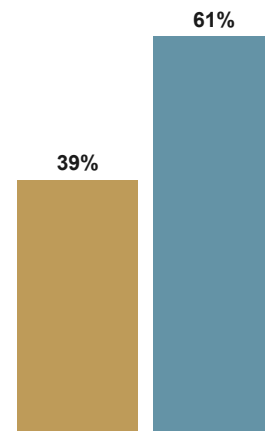
### City residents endorse a public health approach to dealing with overdoses.

Drug overdose deaths in big cities have more than tripled in the past decade. In response, many city governments have implemented a public health approach to prevent drug overdose deaths and diseases associated with some types of drug use. This approach makes services available without requiring people to stop using drugs before receiving support.

Which of the following statements do you agree with more?

This approach is not a long-term solution for addressing drug overdose deaths in cities. Because it does not require people to get treatment for addiction, **it enables people who use drugs like heroin, fentanyl, or meth to continue using these drugs** even after overdosing.

This approach **treats people who use drugs as people, rather than as criminals**. We cannot always control the people we love and know use drugs, but this approach reduces the chances that they will die if they do.



Majorities of residents across gender, age, racial/ethnic, and socioeconomic groups view a public health approach to overdoses more as humanistic than as enabling. While this does not erase feelings of personal responsibility, those feelings are tempered by not wanting to take punitive action against those who need help, and by viewing saving lives as an important end in and of itself.