

# **OPIOID MISUSE IN WILMINGTON, NC: WHAT DOES THE PUBLIC THINK?**

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SOC/CRM 496: Public Sociology & Criminology Practicum (Spring 2018)

## **BACKGROUND**

In 2016, an article was published by Wilmington, NC's local newspaper, StarNews, mentioning a Castlight Health study which reported that Wilmington has the highest rate of opioid abuse in the United States (Stephen, 2016). The standards these researchers used to study opioid abuse were not realistic: "receiving greater than a cumulative 90-day supply of opioids and receiving an opioid prescription from four or more providers over the five-year period between 2011 and 2015" (Stephen, 2016).

The citywide conversations about this report have provided a unique opportunity to research whether the community's understanding of opioid abuse matches what is actually going on. Nationally, ages 18-55, 18-25 specifically, are associated with a high risk for opioid misuse, women are more likely than men to misuse opioids, and White people are most likely to use opioids in general (Ahrnsbrak et. al., 2017, Harrel et. al., 2009, McCabe et. al., 2007, Lankenau, et al, NIDA). According to Kennedy-Hendricks et al. (2017), individuals have generally high levels of stigma toward those with Opioid Use Disorder, and higher levels of stigma are linked to support for disciplinary policies as a solution to Opioid Use Disorder (Kennedy-Hendricks et al. 2017). Ferrari, Janulis, and Fowler (2013) found that familiarity with heroin dependence was related to lower levels of stigma. In this study, we compare what the community thinks about opioid use in Southeastern NC to the reality of opioid use in the community. Two main questions will be asked: What is the nature of opioid use and misuse in Wilmington, NC? Additionally,

how do community members, including both users and nonusers, perceive the misuse of opioids?

## METHODS

To test these questions, we conducted a telephone survey. For research purposes, we consider anyone who has used an opiate “without a doctor’s prescription, in greater amounts, more often, or longer than prescribed, or for a different reason than a doctor prescribed,” to be someone who misuses opioids. We tested perceptions of community members by asking our sample of 171 respondents the following questions:

- How widespread do you believe opioid use is in Wilmington, NC?
- Which do you think is more widespread in Wilmington, NC, prescription painkillers or heroin/street drugs?
- Do you think the misuse of opioids should be dealt with through the criminal justice system or through the medical system?
- How much media coverage do you believe opioid use is receiving?
- How willing are you to work closely with someone who misuses opioids?
- How likely are you to support harm reduction efforts such as a needle exchange, treatment programs, naloxone distribution, etc. for opioid use?

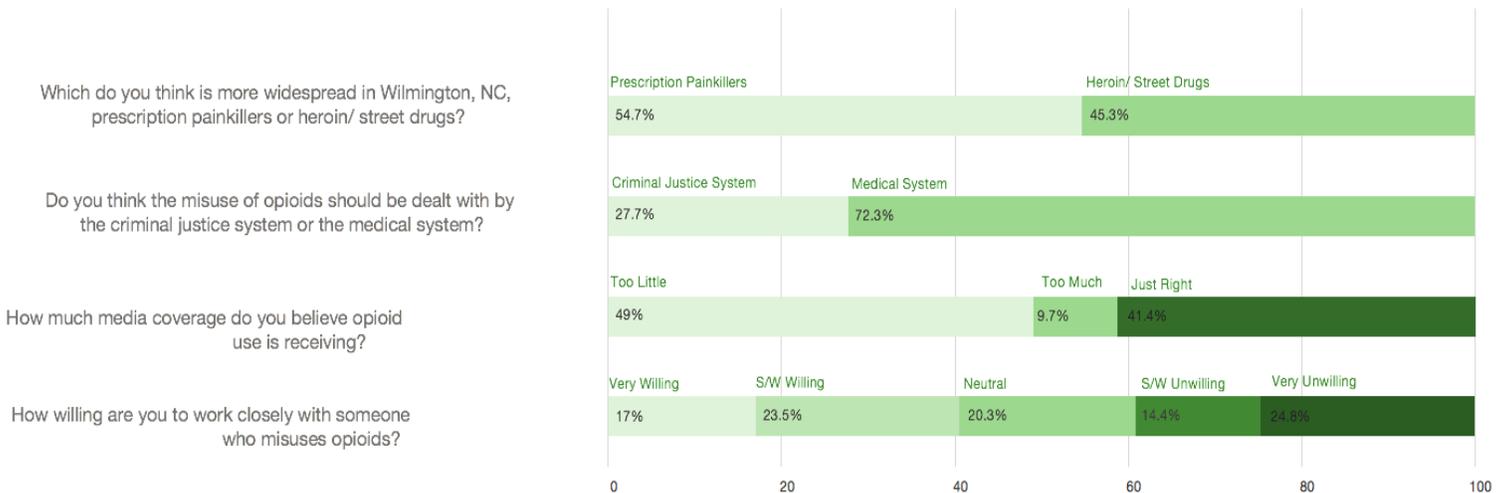
## RESULTS

Data concerning perceptions reveals that 72.3% of respondents indicated that the medical system is better equipped compared to the criminal justice system to handle opioid misuse. When asked how much media coverage respondents feel opioid use is receiving, 41.4% indicated “Just Right” and 49% indicated “Too Little.”

Furthermore, 60.8% of respondents indicated that they were at least neutral toward

working closely with someone who misuses opioids. Finally, 68.2% of respondents felt either somewhat likely or very likely to support harm reduction efforts such as needle

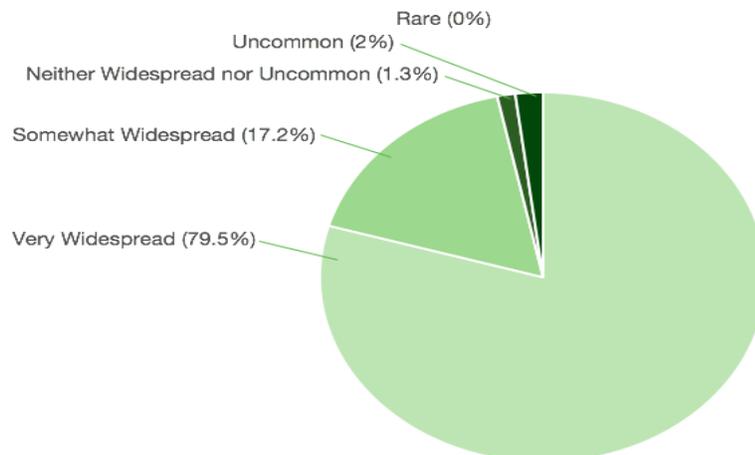
Figure 1. Survey Questions & Answers Concerning Perceptions of Opioid Misuse



exchanges and naloxone distribution.

When asked about the prevalence of opioid use in Wilmington, NC, 96.7% of respondents revealed the perception that opioid abuse is either somewhat widespread or very widespread. To determine if this 96.7% were accurate, we compared this finding with responses to the question specifying opioid misuse (Figure 2.). We found that 62.6% of the 171 people in our survey have used opioids, and that 6.4% have misused opioids.

Figure 2. How widespread does r believe opioid use is in Wilmington, NC?



Respondents were also asked to rank prescription painkillers and heroin/street drugs in order of prevalence. Of the 139 respondents who answered this question, 54.7% believed prescription painkillers were more prevalent while 45.3% believed heroin & street drugs were more prevalent. Our use of the term prescription painkillers in this context refers to painkillers that were prescribed by a doctor but ultimately misused. We cannot necessarily speak to the prevalence of what we called "street drugs," but our data on opioid type reveals that 88.7% of the 62.6% who have taken an opioid specified that their initial source of opioids was through a personal prescription. Furthermore, 4.1% of those who have used opioids indicated heroin use. From this, we may suggest that the use of prescription painkillers is more prevalent than the use of heroin.

## DISCUSSION

The majority of respondents were accurate in their indication that opioid use is widespread in Wilmington, NC. Almost half of respondents shared the inaccurate perception that heroin/street drugs are more widespread than prescription painkillers. The common indication that there is "Too Little" media coverage may suggest interest in more coverage on opioids. Our data concerning perceptions reveals an optimistic view on treatment for opioid misuse and the status of opioid misuse in general, as well as a slightly flawed understanding of opioid use in Wilmington, NC.

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