



BROAD SUPPORT FOR PUBLIC HEALTH SOLUTIONS TO DRUG USE, HOMELESSNESS

The Big Cities Health Coalition polled residents in its member jurisdictions* about how local governments should address key health issues. Our polling found broad support for harm reduction and other public health strategies. On the next page, we describe how these findings can inform messaging.



70%

see their city as either thriving and successful (54%) or showing mixed signs of thriving and decline (16%).

More than $\frac{2}{3}$

point to unaffordable housing (72%), high inflation and cost of living (69%), and the mental health crisis in the US (67%) as major causes of homelessness, drug use, and community safety problems in their city.

Photo credits: Columbus Public Health's Wednesday Walk-in for Recovery clinic (top left); San Francisco Department of Public Health street medicine team (right)

KEY SURVEY FINDINGS

- ▶ City residents believe in a public health approach to drug use and homelessness (i.e., focusing on systemic changes and prevention strategies). They do not believe punishing people for either of these things is effective in the long run.
- ▶ Despite a narrative to the contrary, most city residents see their cities as thriving and successful. Still, city residents view overdose and homelessness as crises and want them treated as such.
- ▶ They view homelessness, overdose, and community safety as tightly interrelated issues primarily caused by economic strain and insufficient mental health supports.
- ▶ They see lack of affordable housing and insufficient housing stock as a major hindrance to their cities further thriving.

>70%

favor a public health approach (“fixing the underlying problems”) to drug use and homelessness issues in their city (as opposed to “getting tough” on people with SUDs / experiencing homelessness).



* BCHC conducted an online audience segmentation and attitudes survey with 1,511 city residents, four virtual focus groups, and an online survey of 1,268 city residents that focused on attitudes and messaging. Participants were recruited from [BCHC's 35 member cities](#), who collectively represent one fifth of the US population.

MESSAGING MINDSET

This research points to six strategic recommendations for messaging on these issues.

1

Acknowledge city residents' views that cities are facing a multipronged crisis of homelessness, overdose, mental health, and community safety.

2

Avoid getting bogged down in a debate about responses to crime more broadly; pivot to arguments that match residents' beliefs that a public health approach is the best solution to these issues.

3

Focus on values public health practitioners share with city residents: people who are struggling need opportunities and support rather than being treated like criminals.

4

Emphasize that individual and community health are affected by many factors, including the extremely high cost of living, which is taking a toll that can lead to significant health consequences.

5

Share specific examples of how prioritizing a public health approach yields both short-term impact and long-term solutions.

6

Turn the need for public investment into a rallying cry. City residents do not think their cities invest enough in public health and mental health.

STRATEGIC MESSAGING RECOMMENDATIONS

The four messages below made the most convincing case for a public health approach to tackle the crises facing cities. Most of the top-performing messages from our polling emphasize the importance of housing solutions as well as sustained investment in public health for short- and long-term impact.

We Are in Crisis: Act Now, and Secure our Future

Our city is facing interlocking crises of homelessness, drug overdoses, and mental health. We all want healthier and safer communities, so **we need both short- AND long-term approaches.** Short term, we must invest more in and expand access to effective treatment programs. Long term, we must continue to make housing more affordable and create more better-paying jobs.

Fix the Foundation to Improve Our Communities

Every house needs a strong foundation. We must apply the same principle to our city. For instance, to make our community safer and healthier, we must not only help people experiencing homelessness right now, but also address the underlying causes of homelessness to eliminate it in the future. Building more affordable housing, creating good-paying jobs, and expanding mental health services can all help strengthen the foundation of our cities, now and into the future.

Help Our City Thrive

Our city should be a place where all residents can be healthy and financially secure. But these goals become very challenging when housing is too expensive and wages are so low. We can fix this by tackling the underlying causes of homelessness and investing in good-paying jobs. That is the public health approach we need to ensure our city works for everyone.

Be Proactive, Not Just Reactive

We need a proactive approach to address homelessness, drug overdoses, and mental health in our city. For decades, cities have responded to these problems primarily through arrests and incarceration, but that approach has failed. **A public health approach that invests in people and families and prevents problems before they occur is the most effective and compassionate strategy.** That means we must actively invest in people and prevention to make an impact now and in the future. We also need to address the underlying causes of these problems with proven solutions that take time to work.

The Big Cities Health Coalition is a forum for the leaders of America's largest metropolitan health departments to exchange strategies and jointly address issues to promote and protect the health and safety of their residents. Collectively, BCHC's 35 member jurisdictions directly impact more than 61 million people, or 1 in 5 Americans. bigcitieshealth.org