

Worries about Fentanyl Ingestion Beget Fentanyl Abuse Problem in County

Asians, Latinos Touched by Drug Addiction Less Often, but Latino Community on Edge

By John Nienstedt and Rachel Lawler, CERC

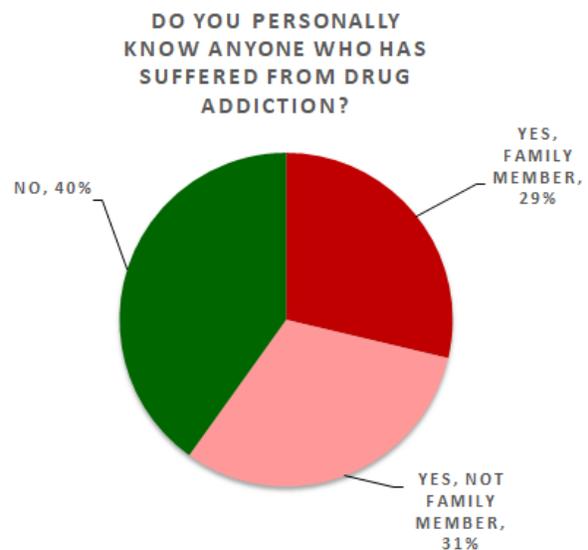
Accelerating overdose deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a growing national conversation on fentanyl – a synthetic opioid designed to treat severe pain – and its misuse. San Diego is in the thick of this epidemic. The county recorded more than 800 fatal fentanyl overdoses last year, and the drug is now the number one killer of 18- to 45-year-olds locally and nationally. The San Diego County Board of Supervisors responded to these sobering facts by unanimously declaring illegal fentanyl a public health crisis on June 28.

Personal Ties with Drug Addiction

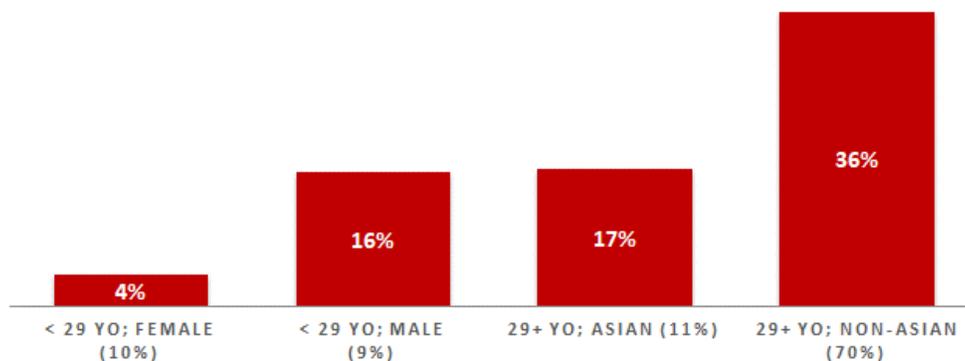
Although almost no San Diegans believe fentanyl abuse -- or drug addiction -- is the county's most important issue, most personally know someone who has suffered from drug addiction. The issue is far from being relegated to society's fringe; *it's now the norm*.

Twenty-nine percent have a family member who has dealt with drug addiction, with age, gender, and ethnicity all factors. Residents 28 or younger are far less likely to have drug addiction in their family and young women are nearly immune to familial drug addiction.

Those older than 28 more often deal with the scourge of addiction within their family, although Asian American/Pacific Islander (AAPI) residents are an exception.

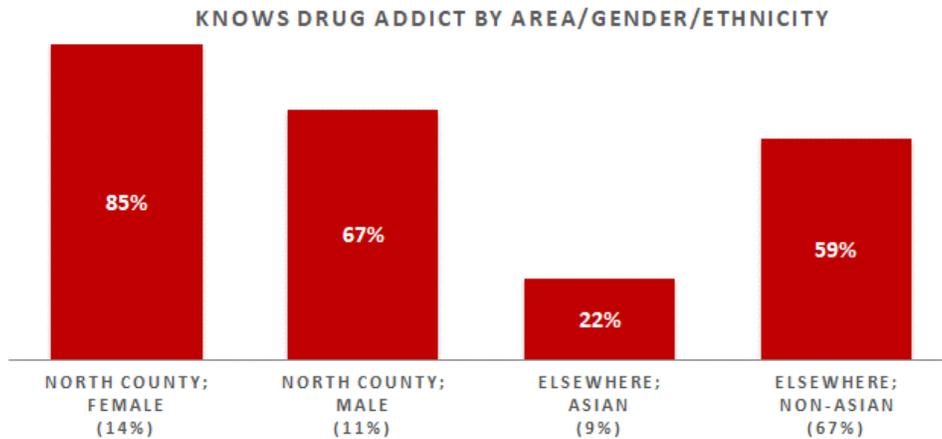


FAMILY MEMBER DRUG ADDICT BY AGE/GENDER/ETHNICITY



Another 31% know someone outside their family – a friend, colleague, or neighbor – who has struggled with a drug habit.

North County is a hotspot and knowing an addict – family member or otherwise – is incredibly common for North County women: an eye-popping 85% of them know someone grappling with drug dependence. Outside North County, it’s non-AAPI residents who most often know someone addicted to drugs.

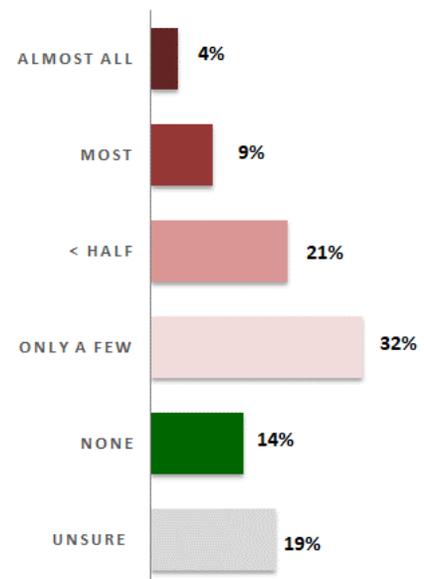


AAPI and Latino residents are much less likely than others to know someone with a drug addiction. A cultural element seems to be at work when it comes to personal connections to addiction, yet it is valid to ask whether drug addiction is truly less pervasive in Asian and Latino communities or whether folks in these communities are simply less aware of it. An aside: the data also show that residents who don’t know an addict are much more upbeat about the county’s direction, suggesting exposure to drug addiction negatively affects residents’ civic mood.

Impact of “Gateway” Substances

Recreational marijuana has been legal in California since 2016. Alcohol and tobacco are other heavily regulated substances that have long been legal. All these have been dubbed “gateway drugs” to illicit substances. However, while most San Diegans acknowledge that progressing to fentanyl, heroin, cocaine or other illegal drugs is *possible*, that’s considered unusual. Just 14% think “most” or “almost all” people who consume alcohol, tobacco, or weed move on to using illegal drugs. It’s possible this notion has less traction these days now that marijuana is mainstream. It was much easier for local leaders, law enforcement, and health officials to make this claim when marijuana was illegal because residents were less exposed to it. However, 18% who personally know a drug addict do believe most “soft” drug users go on to abuse hardcore substances. That’s twice what we find for those who don’t know an addict, suggesting those who have been around drug dependency perceive more severe consequences for dabbling in legal drugs. That said, even most people who have a relationship with an addict don’t take the gateway as gospel truth and half think “only a few” or “none” progress to hardcore drug abuse.

HOW MANY PEOPLE WHO START USING ALCOHOL, TOBACCO, OR MARIJUANA MOVE ON TO USING FENTANYL, HEROIN, COCAINE OR OTHER ILLEGAL DRUGS?



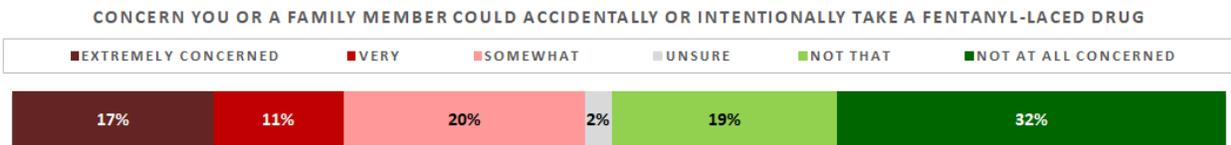
Overall, a slim majority think less than half or only a few people go on to become hardcore drug users, while 14% believe it never happens. South suburban residents who don't personally know anyone struggling with addiction often fall into this category: two-thirds don't think any "gateway" drug users progress to other narcotics.

Although most San Diegans know someone battling addiction, that's not enough to convince them "soft" drugs lead to more fentanyl use and, ultimately, to overdose deaths. They've had far too much mundane experience with (or exposure to) weed, alcohol, and tobacco.

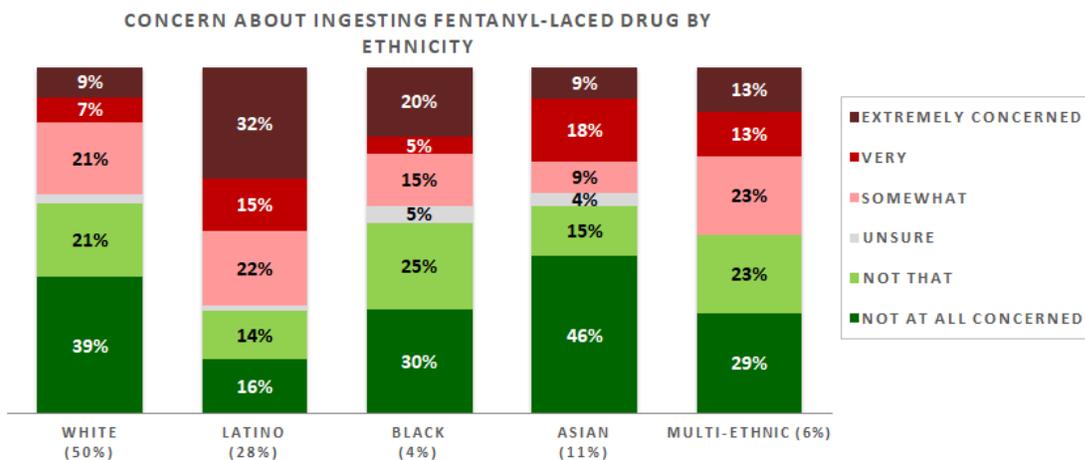
Concerns About Fentanyl Ingestion

Street drugs like cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine now frequently contain fentanyl. The drug can also be made to look like legitimate prescription pills. Overdoses often occur because users believe they are taking a completely different – possibly prescribed -- drug but ingest lethal amounts of fentanyl.

Most other residents aren't worried about the risk of fentanyl ingestion and 32% are not at all concerned about it. Only 17% of San Diegans are *extremely* concerned they or a family member could accidentally or intentionally take a fentanyl-laced drug, so intense worry isn't widespread (yet). That said, 48% countywide are at least somewhat concerned and some communities are scared.

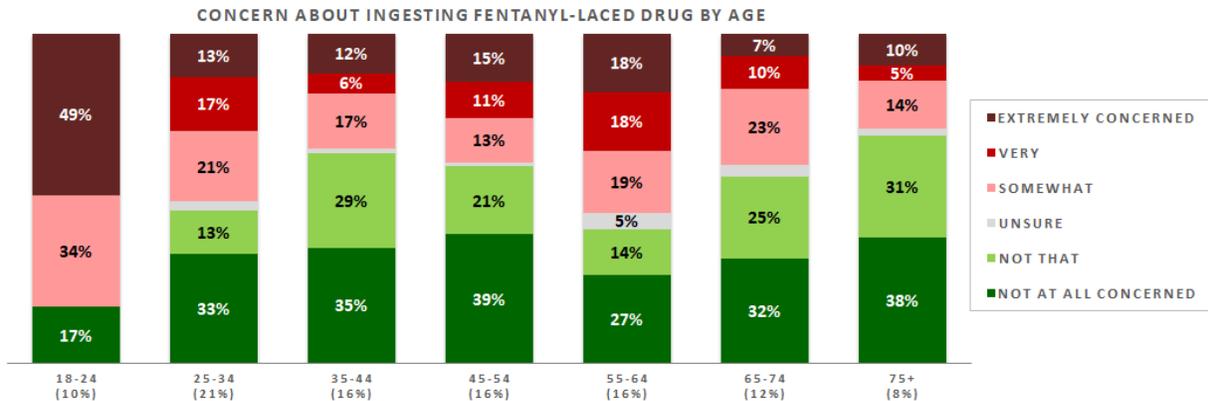


Although they less often know someone suffering with drug addiction, fentanyl risks are a pervasive worry for the Latino community. Concern ratchets up among South Suburban Latino residents, where a massive 61% are *extremely* concerned. Fake painkillers made with fentanyl are frequently manufactured in Mexico and lots of locals have family there or cross the border themselves for their own medical care.



Republican women are also highly sensitive to the issue. Sixty-three percent are concerned about ingestion, and they are more than twice as likely as others to be *extremely* concerned about it. Traditionally, many women care for family members – particularly children – so this may contribute to their anxiety.

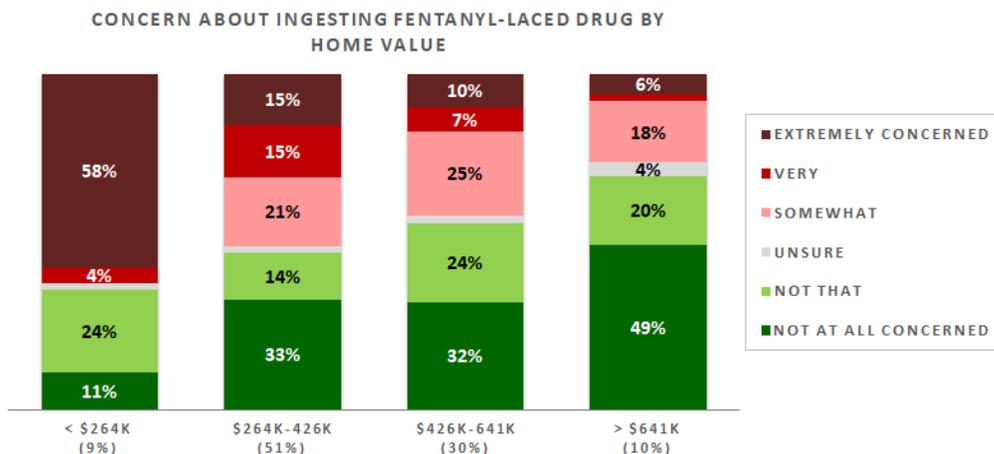
Age is another factor. Very young adults – arguably the group most likely to be peer-pressured into drugs experimentation – are panicked: 49% of 18-to-24-year-olds are *extremely* concerned. Intense worry is rare beyond age 25 and dwindles significantly as people get older.



A majority of those who know an addict are concerned about unintentional fentanyl ingestion. After all, illicit drug users are the most at-risk for fentanyl overdose. Geographically, coastal North County residents express more concern than residents elsewhere.

Registering to vote acts as a balm for fentanyl concerns. Regardless of their age, more civically engaged residents are less worried about ingesting fentanyl. Just 10% of very reliable voters are *extremely* concerned compared to 29% of non-registrants. This may be a reason fentanyl-related deaths are not a hotter political topic.

Finally, those residing in areas with very high home values are much less concerned about ingesting fentanyl, and concern increases as values drop. In poor neighborhoods, a gigantic 58% are *extremely* concerned about fentanyl-laced drugs!

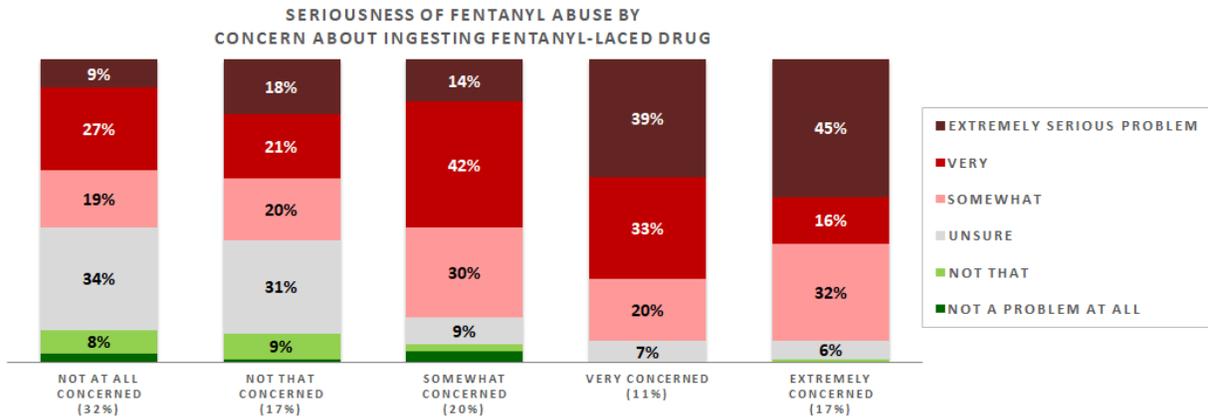


Seriousness of Local Fentanyl Abuse

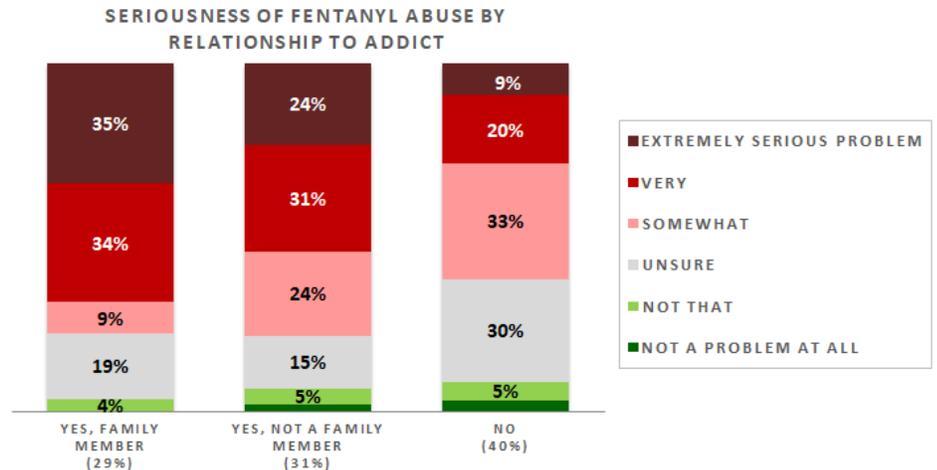
While it may not be top of mind (no respondent mentioned fentanyl as the county’s most important challenge), most San Diegans feel fentanyl abuse is a problem in the county. Only 7% of the population discounts the issue, so public sentiment generally aligns with the County Board of Supervisors’ decision to declare it a public health crisis. However, many only regard fentanyl abuse as somewhat serious and a substantial 21% are unsure about its severity, so the issue is not white hot.



Concerns about fentanyl ingestion mainly drive opinions about the issue’s seriousness. Most who are highly concerned about ingestion think it’s a *very* or *extremely* serious problem. Even those who are only *somewhat* concerned typically think it’s a problem, albeit much less severe. Negative assessments taper off from there, and one-third who are unconcerned about ingesting fentanyl are unsure about the extent of the fentanyl abuse problem. Without more apprehension for personal safety, the issue will struggle to get to white hot status.



Experience with a drug addict also amplifies the seriousness of the problem. Most who know someone struggling with addiction think fentanyl is at least a *very* serious problem, and those with an addict in the family are the most likely to feel this way. By comparison, just 29% of San Diegans with no personal connections to an addict say the same. The closer someone is to an individual



suffering from addiction, the more likely they are to see fentanyl abuse as a serious problem because it has a direct, real-life impact on them and their loved ones.

Although less fearful of ingestion, most San Diegans aged 35-plus see fentanyl abuse as a highly serious problem. Although younger residents are the age group most concerned about ingestion, they tend to downplay fentanyl abuse; their worries appear to be more about *accidental* ingestion than intentional *abuse*.

Fentanyl abuse is a huge concern in Carlsbad, as 53% in this hot spot think it's *extremely* serious. That's 2.5 times more than the overall County population, suggesting usage and abuse of the drug, or awareness of it, is far more frequent here.

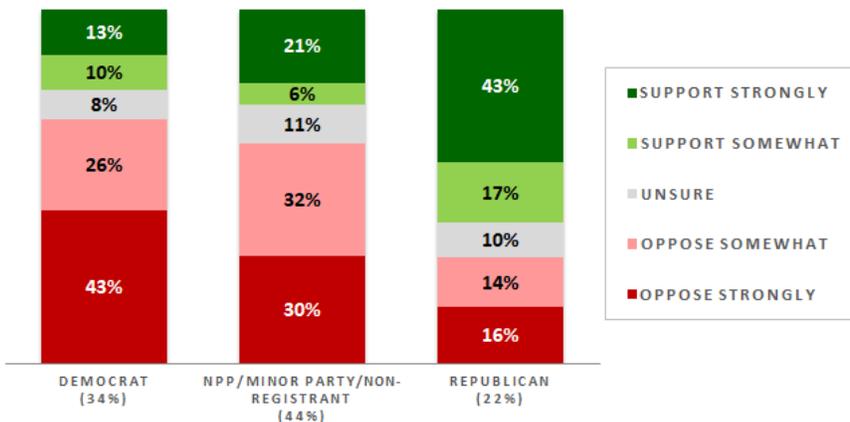
White residents tend to feel fentanyl is an *extremely* serious issue while non-whites more often believe it's a *somewhat* or *very* serious issue.

Death Penalty for Fentanyl Overdose Deaths?

Despite the issue's seriousness, 57% San Diegans oppose the death penalty for someone convicted of selling fentanyl to a person who then fatally overdoses on it. Unlike other felonies, the choice of a user to buy and take an illegal drug despite the risks, as well as the possibility of someone unknowingly selling a drug – illegal or prescription – laced with fentanyl are potentially mitigating factors. Just one-third favor the ultimate penalty for fentanyl dealers. Ten percent are unsure.



SUPPORT DEATH PENALTY FOR SELLING FENTANYL TO OVERDOSE VICTIM BY PARTY



Views on the death penalty are tinged by partisanship. Most Republicans support executing fentanyl dealers who contribute to a user's death, but others are mostly opposed. Given the Democratic registration advantage, a state ballot measure to implement capital punishment for offenders would almost certainly fail.

Women 54 or younger also adamantly oppose the death penalty in these circumstances; a gigantic 71% are against it.

Views on "gateway" substances also play a role. Residents who believe they often lead to harder substances strongly support the death penalty for selling a fatal fentanyl dose. But with most unconvinced of the "gateway" drug thesis, support for the death penalty is limited.

Opinions of the appropriate punishment for dealing a lethal fentanyl dose are tied to how bad residents think the abuse problem is. However, support for the death penalty fails to reach majority support even among those who think abuse is an *extremely* serious problem; just 47% favor it. So, even if the problem worsens, the public will likely remain opposed to applying capital punishment.

The concerned there is about a family member ingesting fentanyl, the more favorable they are toward the death penalty for fentanyl dealers. Again, however, even most who are *very* or *extremely* worried about ingestion don't support the ultimate penalty.

A Close Look at San Diego’s Communities of Color

| | | White | Latino | Black | Asian | Mixed | All |
|---|---------------------------|-------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-----|
| <u>Know anyone who has suffered drug addiction?</u> | Yes, family member | 32% | 23% | 46% | 16% | 33% | 29% |
| | Yes, non-family member | 35% | 30% | 15% | 22% | 42% | 31% |
| | No | 33% | 47% | 39% | 62% | 25% | 40% |
| <u>How many people go from alcohol, tobacco or marijuana to illegal drugs?</u> | Almost all | 3% | 4% | 6% | 7% | 7% | 4% |
| | Most | 5% | 19% | 2% | 12% | 3% | 9% |
| | < half | 22% | 13% | 30% | 24% | 38% | 21% |
| | Only a few | 40% | 25% | 30% | 23% | 21% | 32% |
| | None | 7% | 26% | 14% | 18% | 11% | 14% |
| | Unsure | 23% | 14% | 17% | 15% | 21% | 19% |
| <u>Concern you or a family member could take a fentanyl-laced drug</u> | Extremely concerned | 9% | 33% | 20% | 10% | 12% | 17% |
| | Very concerned | 7% | 15% | 4% | 17% | 12% | 11% |
| | Somewhat concerned | 21% | 22% | 15% | 9% | 22% | 20% |
| | Not that concerned | 21% | 14% | 23% | 15% | 22% | 19% |
| | Not at all concerned | 39% | 15% | 32% | 46% | 31% | 32% |
| | Unsure | 2% | 2% | 5% | 3% | 0% | 2% |
| <u>Seriousness of fentanyl abuse in San Diego County</u> | Extremely serious problem | 23% | 18% | 19% | 12% | 31% | 21% |
| | Very serious problem | 33% | 22% | 28% | 20% | 12% | 27% |
| | Somewhat serious problem | 14% | 38% | 24% | 30% | 25% | 23% |
| | Not that serious | 5% | 5% | 3% | 5% | 6% | 5% |
| | Not a problem | 2% | 0% | 3% | 8% | 0% | 2% |
| | Unsure | 23% | 17% | 24% | 27% | 26% | 22% |
| <u>Opinion of death penalty for selling fatal fentanyl dose</u> | Oppose strongly | 37% | 20% | 40% | 32% | 26% | 31% |
| | Oppose somewhat | 19% | 43% | 22% | 22% | 19% | 26% |
| | Unsure | 9% | 8% | 10% | 19% | 11% | 10% |
| | Support Somewhat | 11% | 9% | 4% | 5% | 22% | 10% |
| | Support strongly | 25% | 20% | 24% | 22% | 22% | 23% |

The Black Community

- ✓ Drug addiction is as common in the Black community as it is in the rest of the county.
- ✓ Blacks also share views similar to the overall population on the seriousness of fentanyl abuse, concerns about ingesting fentanyl, the impact of “gateway” drugs, and the punishment for dealers who sell fentanyl to someone who dies from an overdose.

The Asian Community

- ✓ Fewer AAPI residents have a family member struggling with addiction and it’s much less common for them to know anyone struggling with drug addiction.

- ✓ Like others, most believe alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana users go on to abuse illegal drugs infrequently.
- ✓ With drug addiction rarer in the AAPI community, almost half – 46% – are not at all concerned about them or a family member ingesting fentanyl.
- ✓ They also assess the seriousness of the County’s fentanyl problem differently: only 32% think it is a *very* or *extremely* serious issue.
- ✓ AAPI views regarding the death penalty for fentanyl dealers mirror the wider mindset.

The Latino Community

- ✓ Fewer Latinos know someone with an addiction to drugs.
- ✓ Latinos generally don’t believe most “gateway” substance users progress to using other illicit substances.
- ✓ Despite less experience with addiction, a huge 82% of Latino residents regard fentanyl abuse as at least *somewhat* of a problem.
- ✓ 32% are *extremely* concerned about fentanyl ingestion, twice the rate of others.
- ✓ Latinos agree that fentanyl dealers should not be executed for selling a fatal dose of the drug.

Findings are based on the results from our poll of 505 San Diego County adult residents. The poll was conducted in English and Spanish by Competitive Edge Research & Communication (CERC), a national research firm based in San Diego, from June 2 through 7, 2022. The maximum margin of sampling error for the total sample is +/- 4.3%. The margin of sampling error for subgroups is larger. Interviews were conducted by trained professionals at CERC’s El Paso, TX, facility, and via the web for residents with an e-mail address or cell phone number in the sample.