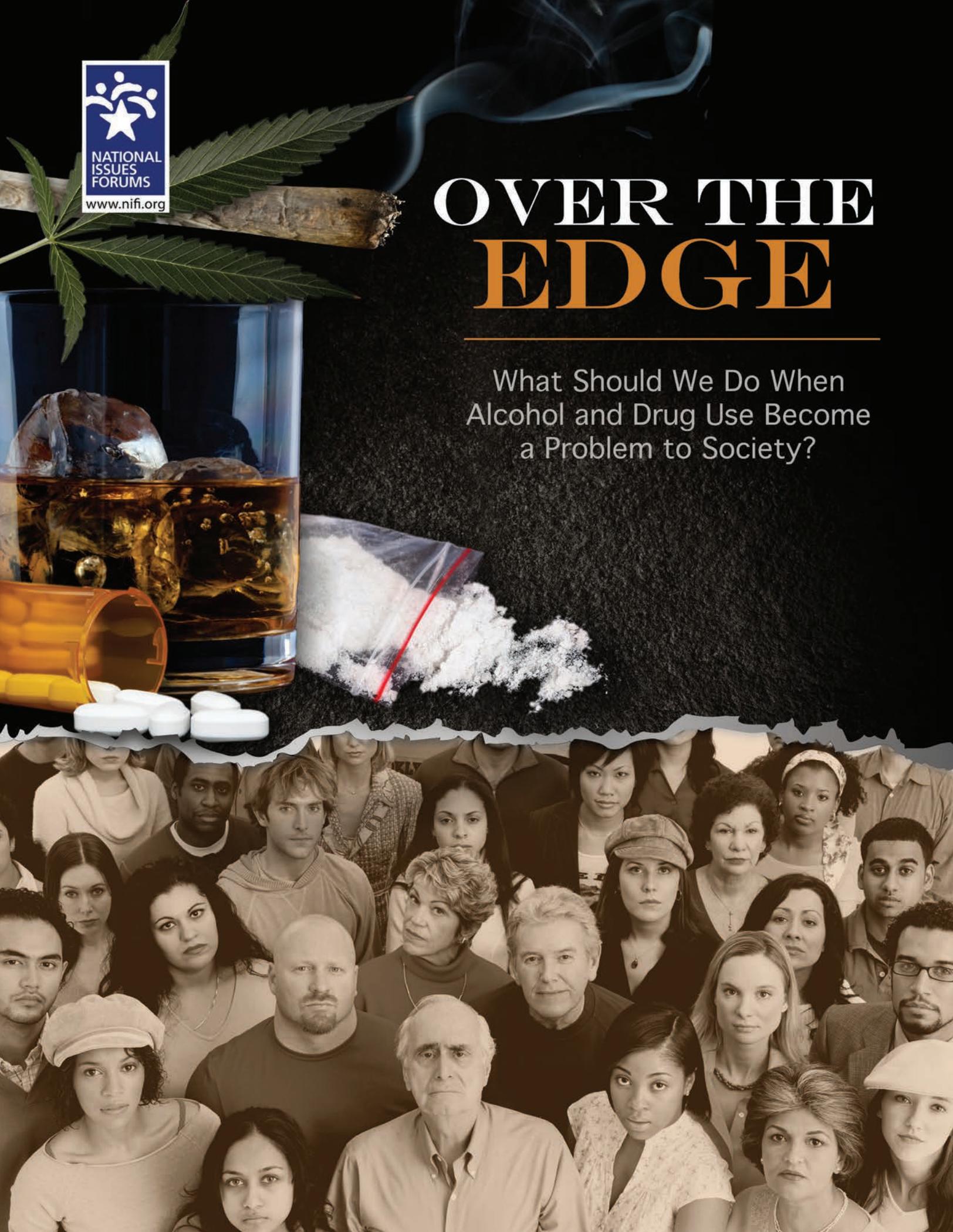




OVER THE EDGE

What Should We Do When
Alcohol and Drug Use Become
a Problem to Society?



ABOUT THIS ISSUE GUIDE

There are no easy answers to deep-seated public problems like substance abuse. In order to make progress on such issues, we need to tap the experience, wisdom, and hopes of people in communities who are concerned about the issue. Why does this issue matter to people? What roles can different people and organizations play? What actions would make the most difference? What are the potential drawbacks and trade-offs of different approaches?

The purpose of this issue guide is to help people talk together about what we should do when alcohol and drug use becomes a problem to society. It begins with an overview of substance use and abuse in the United States and the impact this has on individuals, families, and communities. It then offers three options for addressing the issue, along with potential actions that could be taken. These are starting points for the conversation, which may lead to other insights and possibilities.

People from seven organizations across the country participated in developing the guide, conducting interviews, surveys, and conversations with diverse people in their communities to capture different views on the issue. The organizations included the Community College of Baltimore County, San Diego Deliberation Network, Tennessee State University, University of Alaska Anchorage, Walden University, SUNY Broome Community College, and the West Virginia Center for Civic Life.

The guide may be used to support a single conversation or a series of conversations. The following suggestions can help you get started:

- Invite participants to share how substance use and abuse has affected them, their families, and others they know. Many will have direct experiences and are likely to mention concerns identified in the guide.
- Consider each option one at a time, using the actions and drawbacks as examples to illustrate what each option entails.
- Review the conversation as a group, and identify areas of common ground as well as disagreement. Talk about possible next steps, individually and as a group.

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Over the Edge: What Should We Do When Alcohol and Drug Use Become a Problem to Society?

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The National Issues Forums Institute

This issue guide was prepared for the National Issues Forums Institute in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation. Issue guides in this series are used by civic and educational organizations interested in addressing public issues. These organizations use the books in locally initiated forums convened each year in hundreds of communities. For a description of the National Issues Forums, go to www.nifi.org.

Other Topics and Ordering Information

Recent topics in this series include mental health, America's energy future, and the future of work. For more information, please visit www.nifi.org, or contact NIF Publications at **800-600-4060** or info@ait.net.

Founded in 1927, the Kettering Foundation of Dayton, Ohio (with offices in Washington, D.C., and New York City), is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research institute that studies the public's role in democracy. It provides issue guides and other research for the National Issues Forums. For information about the Kettering Foundation, visit www.kettering.org or contact the foundation at 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459.

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By all accounts, America is a nation of substance users. More than two-thirds of us are taking at least one prescription drug, and more than half drink alcohol on a regular basis. Marijuana consumption is on the rise as more states relax their laws on its medicinal and recreational use. But even legal substances, when misused, can result in serious problems. Beyond the human suffering, the abuse of legal and illicit substances is costing the nation more than \$400 billion dollars each year due to lost productivity, health problems, and crime.	
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INTRODUCTION

American culture is saturated with substances that have the capacity to enhance, as well as harm, our lives. From prescription medications to alcohol to street drugs, the array and accessibility of mood-altering and performance-enhancing chemicals continues to grow. Many people use legal substances, like alcohol and prescribed drugs, without negative repercussions to themselves or others. But even legal substances, when misused, can result in serious problems with health, jobs, relationships, and the law.

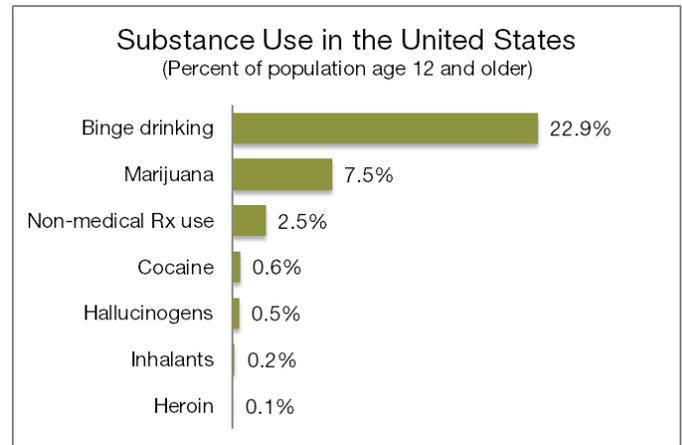
This issue guide explores the question of what we should do about substance use when it becomes a problem to society. It was developed by a team of people from Alaska, California, Tennessee, Kentucky, West Virginia, Maryland, and New York, based on interviews with more than 1,000 people in their home states. Excerpts from the interviews, coupled with other research and expert opinions, are included in the guide.

America's Relationship with Alcohol and Drugs

Substances—both legal and illicit—are woven into the fabric of life in the United States. “My doctor told me I had to lower my cholesterol, and that I could do it by exercising or by taking a pill,” said a store manager in West Virginia. “I took the pill.”

Nearly 70 percent of Americans are taking at least one prescription drug, according to a Mayo Clinic/Olmsted Medical Center study. More than half of us drink alcohol, and almost half of all drinkers engage in binge drinking. One in ten people uses drugs illegally, with marijuana and the nonmedical use of prescription drugs being the most common.

Throughout our nation's history, the habit-forming nature of alcohol and drugs has affected not only the people who use them, but also the industries that profit from them and the governments that rely on the revenues from their taxation. Jamestown, for instance, was saved from economic collapse by tobacco plantations. The New England colonial economy relied on rum-producing distilleries. Opium production increased when wounded Civil War soldiers came home addicted to morphine.



Based on data from 2013 *National Survey on Drug Use and Health*, US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Today, alcohol and drugs remain big business. According to the US Beverage Alcohol Forum, Americans spent nearly \$200 billion on alcoholic beverages in 2012, including beer, wine, and distilled spirits, and the US Office of National Drug Control Policy estimates that \$100 billion is spent on cocaine, heroin, marijuana, and methamphetamines.

“Drugs and alcohol are everywhere we look, and so easy to get,” said a father in California. “I’m concerned about my kids, that it will be pushed upon them as they get older.”

Costs and Consequences

With these industries have come serious social problems. Historians widely note that the quest for cheap labor by tobacco growers and rum distilleries led to the enslavement of African people by American colonists. And according to analysts, industry profits, which depend on attracting more users to their products, have led to more people with addictions and other health problems.

Another major concern is the increased crime and violence associated with alcohol and illicit drugs. “We’ve seen plenty of robberies, assaults, and

“Drugs and alcohol are everywhere we look, and so easy to get. I’m concerned about my kids, that it will be pushed upon them as they get older.” – A father from California

murders happen in our area as a result of substance abuse,” said a military veteran in New York. “The drug trade brings in gangs and violence and can turn towns into ghettos.”

The response to alcohol and drug-related crime has had troublesome consequences of its own. Drug crime sentencing policies enacted in the 1980s resulted in dramatically more people behind bars, and for longer periods of time, according to the US Department of Justice. Over the past three decades, the nation’s jail and prison population incarcerated for drug offenses has soared from 41,000 in 1980 to half a million in 2011. The United States now has the highest incarceration rate in the world. “Our prison and jail cells are constantly packed with people that have been prosecuted for their addictions,” said a student in Tennessee.

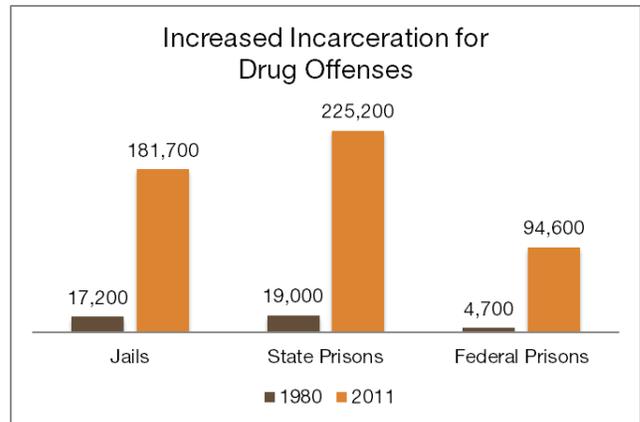
In addition, some are concerned that the patterns of such drug sentences are not fair. Sixty percent of prison inmates are people of color. The nonprofit Sentencing Project reported that “racial minorities are more likely than white Americans to be arrested; once arrested, they are more likely to be convicted; and once convicted, they are more likely to face stiff sentences.”

Beyond the human suffering caused by substance abuse, and the individual costs borne by those who end up in the justice system, there is also the high financial toll it imposes on society. Studies have identified costs in excess of \$400 billion annually. The largest of these is the cost of lost productivity due to lower employment rates, higher absenteeism, incarceration, and premature death. Health costs include emergency room, hospital, and outpatient care. Crime costs include law enforcement, the courts, prisons, jails, probation, and parole.

Despite the massive expenditures on penalties for substance abuse, widespread shortages of affordable treatment options remain. “Instead of my tax dollars going to an institution that simply locks people away for addictions, they should go towards treating them,” said a student in New York. “Consider it an investment.”

Taming the Dragon

Efforts to reduce substance abuse have included education, prohibition, regulation, and economic deterrents. The brief prohibition of alcohol from 1920 to 1933 failed to stop people from drinking, just as the criminalization of heroin in the 1920s and of marijuana



Source: The Sentencing Project, based on information from Carson, E.A. and Sabol, W.J. (2012). *Prisoners in 2011*. Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics; Mauer, M. and King, R. (2007). *A 25-Year Quagmire: The War on Drugs and its Impact on American Society*. Washington, D.C.: The Sentencing Project.

in the 1930s failed to eliminate their use. In fact, the US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration cites an increase over the past decade in the number of Americans using alcohol, heroin, and/or marijuana on a regular basis.

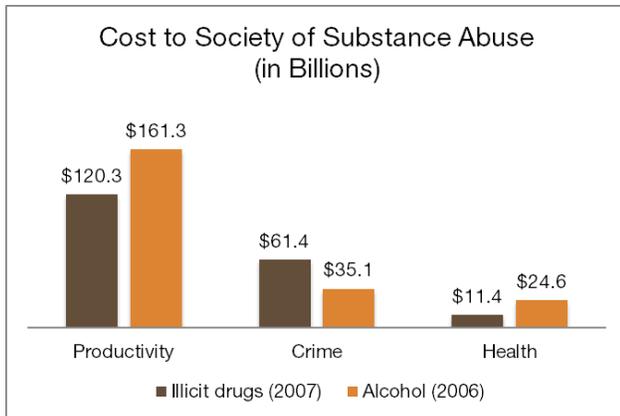
Other campaigns to curb substance use have met with more success, particularly in the case of tobacco. Since the US Surgeon General released *Smoking and Health* in 1964, tobacco control supporters have worked to educate the public on the dangers of tobacco, restrict the places where people can smoke, impose hefty taxes on tobacco products, and sue the manufacturers of tobacco products for the damages they cause. Fifty years later, in 2014, the US Surgeon General reported that the result of these combined efforts was a steep drop in the percentage of adults who smoke cigarettes—from 42 percent in 1964 to 18 percent in 2012.

In contrast to tobacco, restrictions on the use of marijuana are being relaxed in many states. State-centered advocacy efforts have led to the legalization of marijuana for medical use in 22 states. Colorado, Washington, Oregon, Alaska, and the District of Columbia have passed laws to legalize or reduce penalties for recreational marijuana use by adults. Proponents of legalization cite research findings that the ill effects of marijuana are far less than those of its legal cousins, tobacco and alcohol.

Performance-enhancing substances have been used for centuries in sports, school, the workplace, and war.

“Our prison and jail cells are constantly packed with people that have been prosecuted for their addictions.”

– A student from Tennessee



Based on data from Bouchery, Ellen, et al. "Economic Costs of Excessive Alcohol Consumption in the U.S., 2006," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, November 2011 (2006 data) and *The Economic Impact of Illicit Drug Use on American Society*, US Department of Justice, 2011 (2007 data)

Coffee and cigarettes were basic rations in both world wars, creating millions of tobacco-addicted veterans. Caffeine and other stimulants have long been encouraged or at least condoned among people who study or work long hours. The long-running debate on the use of steroids and growth hormones in sports intensified when bicyclist Lance Armstrong was stripped of his Tour de France titles in 2012 for leading a massive doping program on his teams.

Using, Abusing, and Addiction

When it comes to mood-altering substances, how much is too much? It is easy to find 20-question surveys in magazines and on websites that help people evaluate their own substance use. For health professionals, the "go to" reference is the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*, published by the American Psychiatric Association. The *DSM* uses 11 indicators to classify "substance-use disorders" on a continuum from mild to severe. The indicators include symptoms like using the substance in larger amounts than intended, and having drug or alcohol-related problems on the job or in relationships. The indicators help determine the extent of the problem, if any, and what might be done to address it.

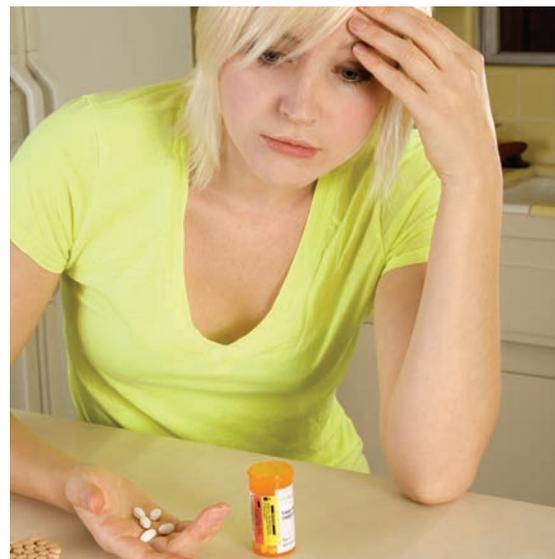
Some groups are more prone than others to substance-use disorders. For example, people with a family history

of addiction have a greater risk of becoming addicted if they use alcohol and drugs. Studies have shown that 40 to 60 percent of the predisposition to addiction is genetic, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

Teenagers are more susceptible to ill effects from substance use because their brains are still developing. People who start using alcohol or drugs as young teenagers are far more likely to abuse substances as adults—sometimes with tragic consequences.

"My daughter died from a heroin overdose," said a mother in West Virginia. "She'd been battling an addiction to painkillers that started as a legitimate prescription for a sports injury. A few weeks later when I realized she was using more than she should, we discontinued her refills. But she was already hooked. She would be clean for a while, then she'd relapse, and her final relapse killed her. There's a lack of awareness that individuals and families are battling addiction every day right in our own community."

Stress, anxiety, and mental illness are also risk factors. One in four people with serious mental-health problems also have problems with substance abuse, often because they are using alcohol and drugs to self-medicate.



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"My daughter died from a heroin overdose. She'd been battling an addiction to painkillers that started as a legitimate prescription for a sports injury. A few weeks later when I realized she was using more than she should, we discontinued her refills. But she was already hooked." – A mother from West Virginia



WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

The evidence is clear: alcohol and drugs, when abused, are taking a heavy toll on our health, safety, productivity, and economy. It is a problem with no easy solution. This guide offers three options to help start the conversation about how we should respond to the problem of substance abuse. While not entirely mutually exclusive, each provides a different lens on the nature of the problem and the kinds of actions that would have the greatest impact.

1

OPTION ONE: Keep People Safe

According to this option, the main problem is that substance abuse threatens our safety and well-being. “The rise in crime in this area and others won’t decline until the problem is eradicated,” a police investigator said. “We need to get help for the addict, get him or her off the street and go after the dealers and players.”

This option says we need to tightly regulate and control the production and use of alcohol and drugs. We must impose fair punishments for people who break the rules and assure treatment for substance abuse for those who need it. We must not become complacent about the serious harm that substance abuse can cause to individuals and society.

2

OPTION TWO: Address Conditions that Foster Substance Abuse

According to this perspective, the main problem is that we are ignoring the social issues that contribute to substance abuse. “Substance abuse is not a contagious disease, and no one says, ‘I want to be a substance abuser when I grow up.’” a nurse said. “Life circumstances have put these people in the situation they are in.”

This option says we need to recognize that discrimination creates a society where people may self-medicate with drugs and alcohol because they lack power and opportunities. We should stop placing all the blame on individuals and demand more accountability from drug companies, the media, and society at large. We must strengthen local economies and create better jobs to reduce the incentive to sell drugs illegally, and reduce the discrimination that can lead people to use substances as an escape.

3

OPTION THREE: Uphold Personal Freedom

According to this view, the main problem is that current efforts to control substance use infringe on people’s rights and are ineffective. “The idea that law enforcement can take care of this problem on their own, even if they had more resources, is a complete fallacy,” said a board member of a nonprofit agency.

This option says we need to ease up on overregulation and focus instead on providing accurate information so people can make their own choices about substance use. We must also protect the legal and civil rights of people arrested for drug-related crimes and reform laws that are unduly intrusive or unfair.

Additional options may surface during the conversation, and no option is without drawbacks. For example, a college student observed, “Harsher enforcement could lead to police being overzealous. And if insurance companies started covering more rehab, people might be upset because they’re paying for the consequences of someone else’s drug use.”

A mother talked about the real-life trade-offs she experienced regarding legalized marijuana during a discussion on NPR station KCRW’s news show *To the Point*: “Initially I supported the legalization of marijuana in my state of Washington; it made sense to me. Now that it is legalized, marijuana use is everywhere—at the park, the playground, at our favorite restaurants—places that I take my children for family outings.”

While people bring diverse views to the issue of substance abuse, many agree we need to think, talk, and act together to address it. “There is no community in this country that is immune to this problem,” said a doctor in West Virginia. “It’s time for us as a community to gather our resources and begin to understand the issue and develop strategies to deal with it.”

OPTION ONE

Keep People Safe



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Our top priority must be to protect people from the dangers posed by substance abuse, according to this option. Whether the threat comes from sharing the same roads and highways with people under the influence, living in communities under siege by drug trade, or having our families devastated by a child or adult who is addicted, the potential for harm is real. In order to keep people safe, we need to tightly regulate and control the production and use of alcohol and drugs, as well as impose penalties for people who break the rules.

Limiting Access to Reduce Problems

The relationship between substance abuse and crime is complex. Not all individuals who use substances become addicted, nor do they commit violent crime. However, the Drug Enforcement Administration argues, “Drug use often causes an individual to do things they normally wouldn’t do if they were free of the influence of drugs. Violent crime is often committed not because people want to buy drugs, but because people use drugs. Drug use changes behavior and exacerbates criminal activity.”

In this view, enforcing laws, whether to regulate legal substances or to eradicate the use, manufacture, or trafficking of illicit substances, saves lives. For example, crackdowns on Florida pain clinics that dispensed high volumes of painkillers resulted in a 26 percent drop in deaths due to OxyContin, Vicodin, and other narcotics over two years, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Protecting Youth

When law enforcement and community groups (parents, teachers, churches, employers, social

welfare agencies) work together to support laws against substance abuse, social standards are reinforced and potential abuse is discouraged. This effort is critical in targeting use by underage minors. If substance use starts in adolescence or childhood, it can have negative lifelong consequences. Heavy drug or alcohol use during times of critical brain development may cause permanent changes in the way the brain works.

“Often parents think they are in control,” said a director of research and injury prevention at a San Diego hospital. “But in a world with smart phones and social networking, news of a party can go viral in an instant.”

But adults often send mixed messages regarding substance use, sometimes breaking the law by allowing underage drinking in their homes. Massachusetts is one of 31 states that have social-host liability laws that apply to underage drinkers or all drinkers. Yet at Marshfield High School near Boston, more than half of the 11th graders had attended a party where the parents were present and aware of underage drinking, based on their responses to a 2012 Youth Risk Behavior Survey administered by the school.

Preserving the Rule of Law

According to this option, law enforcement must be armed with sound laws and methods to collect measurable evidence. As restrictions on marijuana use are being relaxed, definitive field tests are needed to determine driver or worker impairment, such as measuring the level of THC (Tetrahydrocannabinol), marijuana’s main mind-altering ingredient.

Without tough punishments, laws and regulations intended to keep us safe are meaningless. Minimum sentences should reflect the magnitude of the crime when violence or death is involved. But, how safe can we be if we just lock up addicts and let them out when their time is served, without any treatment for the condition that led them to crime? Drug courts, designed to handle addicted individuals through treatment, close monitoring, and restitution to victims can stop the revolving door and also must be a part of the mix.

For those who agree with this option, enforcing laws and imposing significant penalties can protect us from the effects of substance abuse in our society.



Potential Actions

1. Reduce substance use and abuse in the workplace.

Business owners and law enforcement agencies should work together to tackle substance abuse. For example, the Marinette, Wisconsin, Chamber of Commerce convened local companies, law enforcement, and other groups to develop a comprehensive approach, including drug testing, to combat the drug problem facing local manufacturers. According to one employer, “The goal is not to force them out of work, the goal is to get them help, rehabilitate them, and get them back into the workplace.”

2. Assume responsibility for at-home drinking parties.

Parents should abide by “social host” laws and be accountable for any underage drinking that takes place on their property. According to the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, researchers in 50 California communities found that the number of teens who reported drinking at parties on weekends was reduced when they lived in towns with strong social-host laws.

3. Reserve harsh penalties for serious harm.

Prosecutors should aggressively pursue stiff penalties for large-scale drug dealers and others found guilty of alcohol and drug-related offenses that result in serious harm or loss of life to others. Even as sentencing guidelines across the country are being revisited, the Department of Justice has already prioritized the most severe penalties for serious, high-level, or violent drug crimes.

4. Treat users to reduce prisoner recidivism.

Health providers and corrections officials should assure that prisoners addicted to alcohol or drugs participate in treatment programs, whether they are institutional or organized by community or church groups. With the lowest reported recidivism rate of 22.4 percent among 41 states reporting in a 2010 Pew Research study, Oregon assesses inmates’ risks and needs at intake, targets case management during incarceration, and details a transition plan six months before release. Participants in diversion programs like Brooklyn, New York’s Drug Treatment Alternative to Prison (DTAP) have shown a 26 percent lower arrest rate two years after leaving the program than those of a matched comparison group two years after leaving prison.

5. Develop methods for determining marijuana impairment.

Neuroscientists, medical device manufacturers, and government researchers should develop a reliable method for measuring impairment. For example, blood-alcohol content can be reliably tested on the side of the road with a breathalyzer. However, marijuana’s THC levels must be measured from blood or urine samples, which can return a positive result long after someone has actually smoked.



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Drawbacks and Trade-offs of this Option

Some may say this option takes too much of a “nanny state” approach and infringes on individual privacy and choice. Its focus on rules and punishment discourages people and communities from coming up with their own solutions to the problems created by substance abuse. This option is also likely to result in even higher incarceration rates, leaving fewer resources for treatment and recovery programs.

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QUESTIONS FOR COMMUNITIES

- What are we currently doing in our community to keep people safe from harm associated with substance abuse?
- What more could we be doing, as individuals, businesses, community organizations, and public agencies?
- What are the drawbacks or trade-offs of this option for our community?

OPTION TWO

Address Conditions That Foster Substance Abuse



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We must recognize the critical role society plays regarding how and why people use drugs and alcohol, according to this option. It is too easy to blame the individual, to say that if a person had just been stronger, smarter, or had more willpower, they would not get involved in dangerous substance use. Instead, we need to focus on the broader context and take responsibility for changing the social, cultural, and economic conditions that foster widespread substance use and abuse.

Reforming Media

We need to reduce the overwhelming presence of alcohol and drugs in popular media. It is easy to find numerous examples of drug and alcohol use glamorized in television, films, video games, and music. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that young children should not be exposed to substance-related content, yet it is pervasive and our children are being bombarded with imagery that makes substance use seem fun, sexy, and problem-free. We should promote a cultural shift towards positive, substance-free stories and heroes in the media. If substances are abused, the results must be portrayed in realistic and nonsensational ways, so we can have honest conversations that promote healthy behaviors towards substance use.

The role of media does not stop with the entertainment industry. It has also insinuated itself into the marketing campaigns of pharmaceutical companies. Turning on the television or flipping through a magazine, we are inundated with the message that pills can make our lives better. Researchers Donald Light and Joel

Lexchin found that the pharmaceutical industry spends about 19 times more on marketing efforts, including developing minor variations on existing drugs, than on basic research. Such marketing can convince people that prescription drugs can solve all their problems, and increases the amount of drugs in the community.

Increasing Opportunity and Building Community

This option also calls on us to recognize that people may turn to drugs and alcohol because they lack power and opportunities. There is an increased risk of alcohol and drug use among those who have experienced discrimination. This option holds that strengthening programs and laws that increase different groups' access to power and guarantee their rights can reduce the use of substances used for escape. Furthermore, we should offer free or affordable treatment options that are tailored to the needs of different populations, according to this perspective.

Finally, we need to offer viable alternatives to substance use. Communities need to develop their economies in order to provide legal jobs that pay enough to support families. Findings from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health suggest that people are more likely to use drugs and alcohol in times of high unemployment. According to this option, areas that have experienced long-term poverty and limited economic opportunities should be provided additional assistance to develop social and business supports that create healthy communities. Furthermore, we need to help communities create alternative activities for youth, including recreational and leadership opportunities, so they do not start drinking alcohol or using drugs out of boredom or despair about their future.

This option argues that if we do not change our approach to addressing substance use, we cannot fix the problems we face. "Like many issues, this one is not isolated," said an elementary school teacher in Alaska. "It is not a stand-alone problem. As long as we treat social issues as discrete problems to be dealt with one at a time, we will continue to face an overwhelming and constantly changing set of issues."



Potential Actions

- 1. Reduce glamorization of substance use in entertainment.** People should pressure advertisers to withdraw support from media that portrays substance use without showing the results, or that is aimed towards youth. MTV, one of the most recognized networks among children as young as 12, creates and broadcasts reality television shows that showcase alcohol use and even identify specific brands of alcohol to drink.
- 2. Promote alcohol-free activities.** Community, school, and faith-based organizations should sponsor alcohol-free events to provide safe entertainment for youth and young adults. This practice is common on college campuses, with positive results. Club NDSU events, at North Dakota State University, combine fun activities, prizes, and alcohol education, and have reduced the number of alcohol-related violations.
- 3. Limit advertising of prescription drugs.** County, state, and federal governments should force pharmaceutical companies to reduce advertising of duplicative or unnecessary medications. In May of 2014, two counties in California filed a lawsuit against the five largest pharmaceutical companies, alleging they used false advertising to create a demand for opioid painkillers (such as OxyContin, Percocet, and Vicodin) that resulted in increased health-care costs, addiction, and death for users.
- 4. Create more and better jobs in disadvantaged communities.** Residents, small businesses, and local governments should partner to establish economic and community development initiatives. Successful efforts across the country have developed jobs, youth leadership programs, and social connections that have revitalized communities and their residents.
- 5. Offer substance-abuse treatment that is culturally sensitive.** Community organizations and governments should sponsor affordable treatment and recovery programs that address the discrimination that various populations have experienced. One example of such a program is White Bison, a nonprofit organization that has been offering culturally based substance-treatment programs to Native American communities since 1988.

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Drawbacks and Trade-offs of this Option

This option suggests that people bear little responsibility for their choices when it comes to using substances. It also requires too much time and too many resources to turn around impoverished communities when people need help now. The multitude and complexity of social factors defy clear-cut remedies. This option also invites too much government control over private businesses and could limit our access to products, such as entertainment and prescription drugs.



QUESTIONS FOR COMMUNITIES

- What are we currently doing in our community to address the social factors that contribute to substance abuse?
- What more could we be doing, as individuals, businesses, community organizations, and public agencies?
- What are the drawbacks or trade-offs of this option for our community?

OPTION THREE

Uphold Individual Freedom



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We must respect people's freedom while offering them the means to act responsibly, according to this option. Overzealous efforts to control substance use infringe upon our rights, are often ineffective, discourage sick people from seeking treatment, and have led to large-scale incarceration of Americans for nonviolent drug offenses. Instead, we must provide the information and treatment options people need to make their own choices, as well as reform laws that are unduly intrusive or unfair.

Relaxing Regulations

Pharmaceutical companies and physicians need the freedom to produce and prescribe drugs that help Americans. Relaxing regulations on prescription drugs offers doctors and patients more options for treating illnesses. Additionally, changing marijuana laws reflect shifting attitudes toward both medicinal and recreational drug use. Since 1996, 23 states, the District of Columbia, and Guam have passed laws allowing or regulating the medical use of marijuana. In 2012, voters in Colorado and Washington State also passed initiatives that legalized the consumption of marijuana for adults, followed by Alaska and Oregon in 2014.

Emphasizing Treatment Over Punishment

For people who have problems with substance abuse, two-thirds of Americans favor treatment over punishment, according to a 2014 survey by the Pew Research Center. The costs of the US "war on drugs" have been high for Americans who end up in the judicial system, and for Americans paying for prisons holding convicted offenders. Three-strikes laws have led to lifetime incarceration for some nonviolent drug

offenders. According to the US Department of Justice, more than 1.5 million Americans were arrested for nonviolent drug offenses in 2012. By redirecting the billions of dollars being spent on prosecuting people for their addictions, that money could be spent preventing substance abuse and providing better treatment for those who continue to use.

Informing Ourselves

People should be able to make their own choices, according to this option, and should also have the tools to seek help if that is what they need. Treatment programs and ongoing support should be more widely available. More money should be spent on medical research to determine which treatment options and recovery programs work, and why, so these personal decisions can be better informed. Rather than marginalizing and penalizing users, for example, research showing the strong influence of genetic predisposition on addiction could be shared more widely to help young people make healthy choices and avoid becoming addicted.

The lack of accurate and widely available information about mood-altering substances and their risks has deadly consequences. A recent case in which a young man died after trying synthetic marijuana shows this need. In an interview with KTLA News, his father said, "In a moment of peer pressure, he gave into that, thinking that was OK, it was somehow safe, and one hit later, he goes to sleep and never wakes up."

Public service announcements and harm-reduction programs, such as designated-driver or needle-exchange programs, maximize attention to individuals' rights and support their ability to make good choices, while acknowledging the possibility that substance use can have harmful effects.

Individuals should be allowed the freedom to determine what they will consume. A graduate student from Alaska put it this way: "Prevent completely? Nothing could do this short of full-on lockdown in a society with no personal freedom. Harm can be greatly reduced, however, with decriminalization, education that is real, and a change of mentality away from the idea that drugs are some bad thing that bad people do." This option says that reforming our drug laws, coupled with accurate information and effective treatment, will allow Americans to exercise their freedoms responsibly.



Potential Actions

1. Legalize and regulate certain less-harmful substances.

Federal and state governments should decriminalize the recreational and medical use of marijuana and other substances that are less addictive than alcohol and opioid drugs. This would allow individuals to make choices for themselves and law enforcement and incarceration resources to be directed elsewhere. In a recent study, the *Christian Science Monitor* estimated that cash-strapped states across the United States stand to collect over \$3 billion in tax revenue from legal marijuana sales.

2. Increase research on potentially hazardous substances.

Research organizations and pharmaceutical companies, both private and public, should provide scientifically accurate information about substances, their benefits, effects, risks and harms, so that individuals may make informed decisions about which substances to consume and under what circumstances. For example, a growing trend of academic doping with drugs like Ritalin or Adderall has generated studies and debates on the physiological effects on users' brains.

3. Expand education and harm-reduction efforts. Community groups should circulate accurate information about substances, their effects, and their risks, including age-appropriate information for children. Given the facts, groups could then develop their own harm-reduction strategies. One example is to provide Naloxone, a medication used to reverse otherwise fatal opioid overdoses, and educate lawmakers, physicians, and first responders on its use.

4. Offer treatment and recovery programs to all who seek help. Treatment centers should provide programs that offer positive alternatives to substance abuse as well as strategies to reduce harm to self and others. Health-care and community-based organizations should educate the public about the mental-health and substance-abuse services that health plans must provide under the Affordable Care Act.

5. Reform drug sentencing laws. Policymakers, law enforcement agencies, and the courts should reduce the incarceration of nonviolent drug offenders and apply sentencing laws in a fair manner to everyone. Citizen groups, such as the Stanford Three Strikes Project, are working to fix past harms in conjunction with California's 2012 "Three Strikes Reform Act" (Proposition 36), which allows some nonviolent offenders sentenced to life in prison under three-strikes law to petition for a reduction in sentencing.



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Drawbacks and Trade-offs of this Option

This option places too much confidence in the hope that people will use substances responsibly, thereby increasing the potential risk to others, especially the children in their care. Without serious penalties, people have little incentive to change their behavior. Also, this option hinges on government and industry to provide unbiased research into substances and their effects.

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QUESTIONS FOR COMMUNITIES

- What are we currently doing in our community to uphold individual freedom while addressing substance-abuse issues?
- What more could we be doing, as individuals, businesses, community organizations, and public agencies?
- What are the drawbacks or trade-offs of this option for our community?

Think. Talk. Reflect. Act.

Summary of the Options

The evidence is clear: alcohol and drugs, when abused, are taking a heavy toll on our health, safety, productivity, and economy. History has proven that it's a problem with no easy solution.

During the dialogue, we considered different perspectives on what to do when alcohol and drug use becomes a problem to society. Our task now is to reflect on our conversation and weigh the advantages and drawbacks of different approaches to the issue.

OPTION ONE Keep People Safe	OPTION TWO Address Conditions that Foster Substance Abuse	OPTION THREE Uphold Individual Freedom
<p>Our top priority must be to protect people from the dangers posed by substance abuse, according to this option. To keep people safe, we must tightly regulate and control the production and use of alcohol and drugs, as well as impose penalties for people who break the rules.</p>	<p>We must recognize the critical role society plays regarding how and why people use drugs and alcohol, according to this option. It is our shared responsibility to change the social, cultural, and economic conditions that foster widespread substance use and abuse.</p>	<p>We must respect people's freedom while offering them the means to act responsibly, according to this option. We must provide the information and accessible treatment options people need to make their own choices, as well as reform laws that are unduly intrusive or unfair.</p>
<p>Potential Actions </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce substance use and abuse in the workplace. • Assume personal responsibility for at-home drinking parties. • Reserve harsh penalties for serious harm. • Treat users to reduce prison recidivism. • Develop methods for determining marijuana impairment. 	<p>Potential Actions </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce glamorization of substance use in entertainment. • Promote alcohol-free activities. • Limit advertising of prescription drugs. • Create more and better jobs in disadvantaged communities. • Offer substance-abuse treatment that is culturally sensitive. 	<p>Potential Actions </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legalize and regulate certain less-harmful substances. • Increase research of potentially hazardous substances. • Expand education and harm-reduction efforts. • Offer treatment and recovery programs to all who seek help. • Reform drug sentencing laws.
<p>Possible Drawbacks and Trade-offs </p> <p>This option takes too much of a “nanny state” approach and infringes on individual privacy and choice. Its focus on externally imposed rules discourages people and communities from coming up with their own solutions to the problems created by substance abuse. This option is also likely to result in even higher incarceration rates, leaving fewer resources for treatment and recovery programs.</p>	<p>Possible Drawbacks and Trade-offs </p> <p>This option suggests that people bear little responsibility for their choices when it comes to using substances. It also requires too much time and too many resources to turn around impoverished communities when people need help now. This option invites too much government control over private businesses and could limit our access to products, such as entertainment and prescription drugs.</p>	<p>Possible Drawbacks and Trade-offs </p> <p>This option places too much confidence in the hope that people will use substances responsibly and increases the potential risk to others, especially the children in their care. Without serious consequences, people have little incentive to change their behavior. Also, this option hinges on government and industry to provide unbiased research into substances and their effects.</p>



Reflection Questions

- What new information or insights did we gain?
- What approaches are we most willing to support, and why?
- What approaches are we least willing to support, and why?
- What tough choices do we still need to grapple with?



Moving to Action

What opportunities for action emerged from the dialogue? *(See inside back cover for more questions.)*

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Think. Talk. Reflect. Act.

Moving to Action

Most people who participate in community dialogues want to do more than talk about the problem; they also want to consider actions that will improve the situation. What are the opportunities for action that emerged from this forum?



WHAT CAN WE DO?

- What can we each do personally to address alcohol and drug abuse?
- What can our communities do about the issue?
- What policies—local, state or national—should be created or changed?



WHERE SHOULD WE START?

- What actions are most likely to have the greatest impact?
- What actions are the most doable in terms of time, resources, and public will?
- Who needs to be involved?
- What will be our next steps?

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