

Messaging Guidance on Drug and Opioid Overdose Narratives Prepared For:



Adults across the country are open to narratives that acknowledge drug and opioid abuse and addiction as serious health problems and respond favorably to harm reduction programs that prioritize the health of individuals. They are aware of the issue of drug and opioid abuse and addiction both nationwide and in their communities, so we do not need to spend time proving the problem exists. Rather, we need to dedicate time and energy into moving people toward supporting public-health oriented solutions and away from accepting punitive approaches. To do this, messaging needs to 1) establish a shared value surrounding collective struggle or coming together to overcome the problem 2) define the villains, be it the prescription drug corporations or their lobbyists and highlight the role they play in this crisis, 3) highlight shared humanity and make addiction relatable by underscoring the collective struggles we all face in accessing the care we need, and 4) highlight evidence-based solutions grounded in harm reduction practices that we should be implementing in order to save lives and ensure people see overdose as the public health issue it is.

Our greatest challenge is that people are comfortable and willing to blame individuals for drug addiction and overdose. People are most likely to list individual factors such as personal choices and “addictive personalities” as reasons people become addicted to opioids. In addition, adults nationwide are conflicted about what or who is most to blame for the drug and opioid crisis. To move people away from viewing addiction and overdose through an individualistic frame, the narrative should provide an alternative definition of how we got here – who or what is at fault, how we should hold bad actors accountable, and how reducing harm and increasing support for individuals will benefit all of us.

Public opinion is on our side when it comes to incarceration and drug and opioid addiction/overdose. People overwhelmingly view *the issue of drug and opioid addiction and overdose as a public health issue that should be solved through policies that prioritize access to care and treatment rather than incarceration.* Although we face resistance among those who think criminalization needs to be an option for instances of drug use, majorities agree the best solution prioritizes access to treatment and care rather than punishments.

Adults support solutions focused on health and treatment. However, they do so with the assumption that the goal is to get people off of drugs. Instead of framing the argument as people can continue to live healthy and successful lives while on drugs, it is more effective to say *complete abstinence is not the only measure of success and an abstinence-based approach may not work for everyone.* We need to provide examples of success as people have mixed feelings about the success of treatment.

Our greatest opportunity for success is to build upon a public health frame and increase support for harm reduction policies that call for increased access to health care. We can do this in messaging by increasing awareness of harm reduction programs, explaining how they help people through the recovery process, defining the actors causing this crisis and how we need to fix the problem, and emphasizing how by *coming together* to address this national crisis we can prevent addiction and save lives. This messaging will need a two-pronged approach – one that includes both values-oriented messaging and education. Educating the public moves people on policies, but education alone cannot move people in our direction on overall orientation toward the issue – that takes a values-based narrative.

Core Messaging Recommendations

Core Messaging Recommendations

First, Establish the Shared Value

- Establish a shared value surrounding collective struggle or coming together to overcome the problem. Strong language includes:
 - *“Imagine a world where we **treat each other with care**”*
 - *“No matter what we look like or where we come from...at our core we are all human”*
 - *“To pull through this crisis by pulling together”*

Second, Name the Villains, their Tactics, and their Motives

- In addition to naming the villain/opposition, it is important to explain the underlying motives behind their tactics. Strong language includes:
 - *“Prescription drug corporations and lobbyists have written the rules in their favor, peddling addictive painkillers while pricing life-saving medicines out of our reach”*
 - *“A powerful few try to distract us from the role they have played in letting drug corporations flood our communities with painkillers while healthcare lobbyists deny us the treatments we need”*
 - *“It is time to hold drug corporations, the healthcare industry, and the politicians who enable them accountable for their role...”*

Third, Highlight Link to Collective Health and Wellbeing

- Shift the problem from an individual perspective to one that is collective and structural.
- Point out the importance of access to care for people who use drugs as well as evidence-based public health solutions. Treatment is popular. Strong language includes:
 - *“When we join together, we can make this a place where we have the support that we need to recover from addiction”*
 - *“Where rehab and treatment are widely available”*
 - *“We can ensure our loved ones have access to healthcare, the chance to receive treatment, and safeguard against lethal overdose so our families can get and stay well.”*

AND Affirm a Stance Against Criminalization

- In addition to highlighting the health and wellbeing link, underscore the need to move away from our system of criminalization, which is counterproductive and harmful. Instead, affirm how we should be moving toward a public health approach. Strong language includes:
 - *“We need to end the criminalization of drugs and people who use them, prioritize proven treatments and harm reduction, and remove barriers for people to get and stay well.”*
 - *“A world where people aren’t locked away for our mistakes but offered a way to heal.”*

Finally, Provide a Collective Call to Action to Achieve a Better Future through Specific, Proven Policies

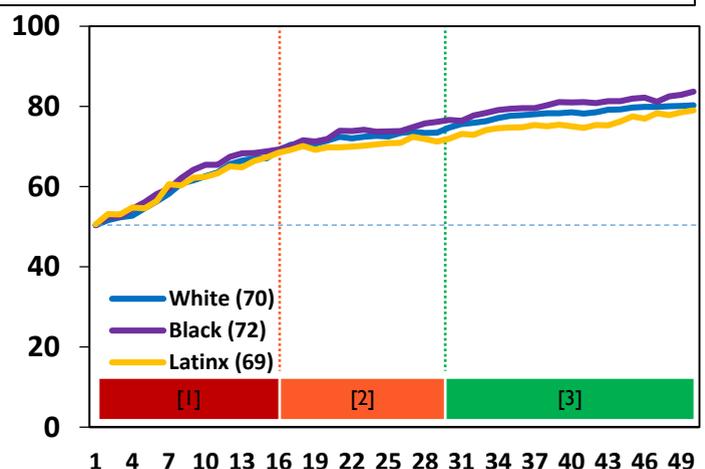
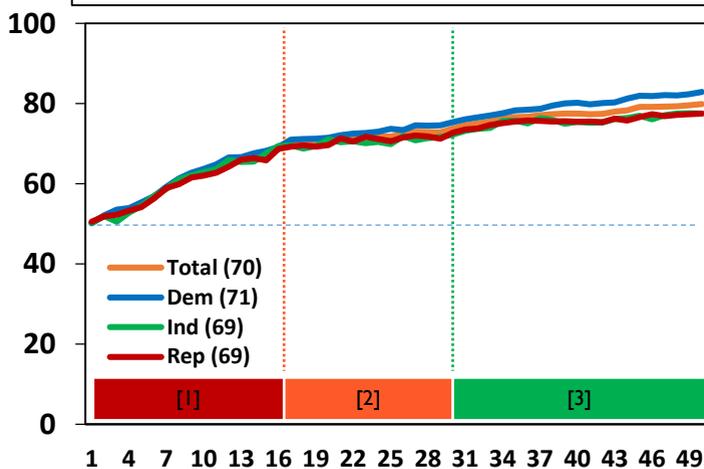
- In addition to highlighting the health and wellbeing link and affirming our stance against criminalization, shift the narrative away from the individual to the collective frame. Provide a vision for the future and a positive call to action that highlights specific policies that ensure people receive the care they need. Strong language includes:
 - *“By joining together, we can ensure our loved ones have access to healthcare...”*
 - *“We need to embrace smart, evidence-based approaches that save lives and give our loved ones the chance to heal and recover”*
 - *“Stand up and demand proven solutions like accessible healthcare, medical treatments for addiction, measures to stop preventable overdose deaths, and to pull through this crisis by pulling together”*

Top Message

Villain Focused

Messages were tested for moment-to-moment responses in the online survey. Below is a top testing message. The lines on the graphs are the moment-to-moment reactions to an audio recording of each message by party identification and race. People dialed positively (above 50) when they had a favorable reaction to the words, and negatively (below 50) when they had an unfavorable reaction. The number in parentheses represents the mean dial rating for that message.

“Villain Focused” places blame on drug corporations and lobbyists and details their tactics. It also highlights the value of collective struggles by pitting “everyday Americans” against the “profitable industry.” It ends with a call to action that requires accountability and increasing access to prevention and treatment efforts.



Text of Message

[1] Prescription drug corporations and lobbyists have written the rules in their favor, peddling addictive painkillers while pricing life-saving medicines out of our reach.

[2] Big drug corporations are now the most profitable industry in America while everyday Americans struggle to get care. Meanwhile, the threat of overdose has made its way from our city centers to the backroads of rural America.

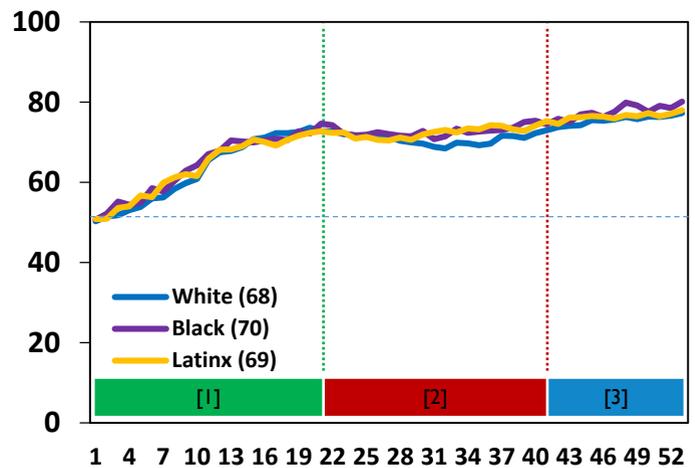
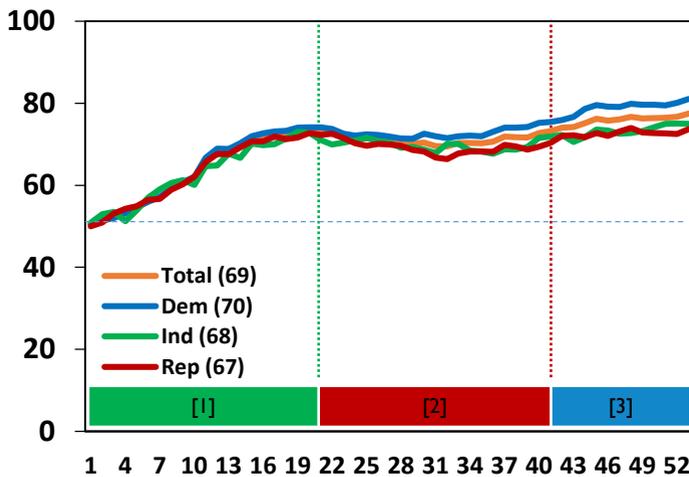
[3] It is time to hold drug corporations, the healthcare industry, and the politicians who enable them accountable for their role in our overdose and addiction crisis. We must make prevention and treatment widely available instead of letting the healthcare industry profit off of putting our lives and health up for sale.

Messaging Notes

- Names the villain at the start.
- Calls out prescription drug corporations and lobbyists and pivots to their divisive tactics.
- Highlights how those actions have kept life-saving medicines out of our reach.
- Pivots the message to the shared problem of the common struggle to access care by doubling down on the bad actors and drawing a financial distinction between them and everyday Americans.
- Points out how all areas and everyone are being affected by the overdose crisis.
- Ends with a solution that prioritizes prevention and treatment.
- Note: A call to action is important and it can be made even stronger by ending with a positive call. Adding specific policies people like and approve would also make this stronger.
- Note: The villains’ broad “role” can be made stronger by naming specific actions, like over-prescribing and accepting kickbacks.

Top Message RCN COVID

“RCN COVID” unites people with the common struggles we are all facing during the pandemic and connects the illness to addiction. It defines villains and how they divide us, and calls for proven solutions so we can pull through this crisis together.



Text of Message

[1] No matter what we look like or where we come from, the COVID-19 pandemic reminds us that at our core we are all human. Our ability to get and stay well depends on everyone having what we need to prevent, treat, and recover from illness.

[2] But when it comes to the addiction and overdose crisis ravaging our communities, a powerful few try to distract us from the role they have played in letting drug corporations flood our communities with painkillers while healthcare lobbyists deny us the treatments we need.

[3] Now is the time to stand up and demand proven solutions like accessible healthcare, medical treatments for addiction, measures to stop preventable overdose deaths, and to pull through this crisis by pulling together.

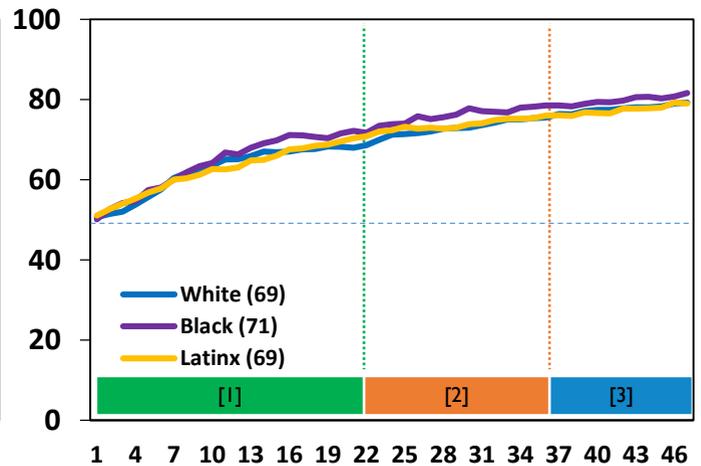
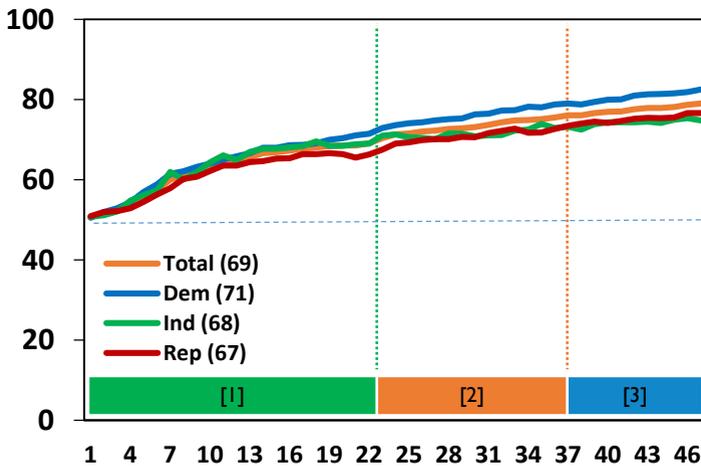
Messaging Notes

- The message starts with a core value and shared experience of coming together to get and stay well.
- Ties the issue to the current COVID-19 pandemic ensuring the message is timely, but the message is likely strong without it as well.
- Names the problem of addiction and overdose second after introducing a core value statement.
- Pivots to defining clear villains, naming how they distract and divide us, and explaining their underlying motives by pointing out how the “powerful few” and “healthcare lobbyists” have contributed to the problem, which encourages people to draw the connection between the crisis and the creators.
- Returns to the theme of shared social concern toward desired outcomes.
- Includes a call for collective action and “pulling together” in support of proven solutions.
- Attaches treatment to the broader policy of healthcare which is quite strong.

Top Message

Imagine a World

“Imagine A World” calls for health-based solutions rather than punitive ones. Adults respond well to language that highlights collective challenges and struggles, and agree people struggling with addiction need support and care.



Text of Message

[1] Imagine a world where we have what we need to overcome our challenges, where we can get and stay well. The truth is life is hard. We all struggle with something and for many this includes addiction.

[2] Imagine a world where we treat each other with care. A world where people aren't locked away for our mistakes but offered a way to heal. Where rehab and treatment are widely available, helping people overcome these challenges.

[3] When we join together, we can make this a place where we have the support that we need to recover from addiction and shape our lives into what we imagine they can be.

- Messaging Notes**
- Opens with a positive, desirable vision balanced with reality of hardship.
 - Makes addiction relatable by positioning it within the broad spectrum of common human struggle.
 - Makes our solutions desirable both by rooting them in the shared values of care for each other and by conveying the outcomes they can provide - a core values contrast that works to our advantage.
 - Ends with a call to action that puts the audience at the center of the solution.
 - Includes the method through which change can happen, providing a strong ending for this message.
 - Note: This message would be stronger if specific policies were highlighted.

Respondents dial up (meaning they responded positively) when they hear the following phrases within the messages tested:

Language that Establishes a Shared Value and Makes Ties to Family/Loved Ones

- *Imagine a world where we treat each other with care*
- *When you or a family member is sick or in pain, the number one priority is getting well*
- *The pain of seeing a loved one struggle with addiction*
- *Most of us want to make critical decisions based on the best information available, especially when it comes to the wellbeing of our loved ones*

Language that Calls out the Actions of the Villain

- *It is time to hold drug corporations, the healthcare industry, and the politicians who enable them accountable*
- *While healthcare lobbyists deny us the treatments we need*
- *Peddling addictive painkillers while pricing life-saving medicines out of our reach*
- *They rake in record profits peddling painkillers and putting treatment out of our reach*

Language that Links to Public Health and Calls for Collective Action

- *We are starting to see drug use for what it is: a health issue that should focus on treatment and recovery*
- *We can ensure our loved ones have access to healthcare, the chance to receive treatment*
- *We should follow the evidence and implement solutions that work in reducing lethal harms*
- *We must make effective treatments accessible and keep families together*

Methodology

Focus Groups:

- Lake Research Partners and HIT Strategies conducted 8 focus groups in Arizona, Ohio, North Carolina, and New Hampshire. Anat Shenker-Osorio of ASO Communications contributed to the development of the language and messages tested in the focus groups.
- The groups were segmented based on the results of a cluster analysis survey conducted by HIT Strategies before the focus groups. The cluster analysis allowed the research team to determine how to group different segments of the population based on their perceptions and attitudes, experiences, and opinions of solutions and policies surrounding the war on drugs and the opioid/overdose crisis. Developing the clusters allowed us to narrow the target populations we wanted to speak to in the focus groups, resulting in more nuanced findings that support our goals of changing narratives and gaining support for policy change.
- The four different clusters are defined based on race, geographic location, issue concerns, and opioid experience, as well as opinions on the causes of the war on drugs and the opioid crisis, who's to blame, the severity of the opioid crisis, potential solutions, and responsibility.
- To segment groups based on the defined clusters, participants were screened based on their opinions of the role of government in dealing with the opioid and overdose problem in the U.S.; their opinions on the level of importance of opioid addiction and overdose and the war on drugs; their experience with opioids and their perception of how opioid addiction and overdose have influenced their communities; who they believe is responsible for the war on drugs and the opioid and overdose crisis; and whether or not they believe the war on drugs and opioid and overdose crisis have predominantly affected people of color.
- The groups were segmented by race and were recruited to reflect a mix of gender unless otherwise specified. The groups were also recruited to reflect a mix in age, marital status, parental status, educational attainment, employment and occupation, party identification, and religion and religiosity. All participants were also screened to ensure they or their family members were not current or retired members of law enforcement or public safety (such as firefighters and EMS/EMT).

Nationwide dial survey:

- Lake Research Partners and HIT Strategies designed and administered this dial survey that was conducted online from April 23 – May 7, 2020. Anat Shenker-Osorio and Jillian Marcellus of ASO Communications did foundational analysis and work to the development of the language and messages tested in the survey, followed by instrumental analysis and recommendations based on the research findings. The survey reached a total of 1,000 adults with oversamples of 100 African Americans, 100 Latinx Americans, and 100 adults in each of the following states: Ohio, North Carolina, Maine, New York, and New Jersey. The sample of respondents was drawn from an online panel of listed adults. The survey also reached a total of 116 Advocates who were drawn from client lists.
- The base sample was weighted by gender, age, race, race by gender, and party identification. The African American oversample was weighted by gender, region, age, and education. The Latinx oversample was weighted by gender, region, age, and party identification. The race/ethnicity oversamples were weighted down into the base to reflect their actual proportion of the national population. Additionally, the Maine oversample was weighted by region, race, and party identification. The North Carolina oversample was weighted by gender, region, age, race, and party identification. The New Jersey oversample was weighted by gender, region, age, race, and party identification. The New York oversample was weighted by gender, region, age, education, race, and party identification. The Ohio oversample was weighted by region, age, education, race, and party identification.
- The margin of error for the total sample is +/- 3.1%.