

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/with-public-support-states-continue-to-embrace-drug-reform-and-save-lives>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

New [reporting from the New York Times](#) yesterday estimates that more than 59,000 people died from drug overdoses in 2016, the largest annual jump ever recorded in U.S. history.

With drug overdoses now the leading cause of death for Americans under 50, the consequences of these numbers cannot be underestimated. However, despite new federal sentencing guidelines from the Department of Justice encouraging harsher drug law enforcement, a majority of Americans from across the political and ideological spectrum favor more compassionate responses to drug use.

A 2014 [poll from the nonprofit research organization PRRI](#) revealed that 77 percent of Americans believe mandatory minimum sentences should be eliminated for nonviolent offenses. Another [poll that same year from Pew Trusts](#) showed 67 percent of Americans support treatment, not incarceration, for drug use.

These opinions evolved not only as U.S. violent crime rates dropped, but as evidence mounted that [the tough-on-crime policies of previous decades did not deter drug use nor make us safer](#).

Indeed, while federal policy is focusing on enforcement, red and blue states across the country are adopting other ways to fight the drug overdose crisis with approaches that are compassionate, humane, and life-saving.

My home state of Iowa is an example of governments understanding the importance of addressing this issue with fair and practical solutions. Before being tapped by the Trump Administration as ambassador to China, [Iowa Governor Terry Branstad announced in November a new statewide policy](#) allowing pharmacies to sell naloxone (a medicine that can ease the effects of a heroin overdose) over the counter. First responders in the state also have the right to carry and administer naloxone, and have received increased overdose prevention and treatment training in recent years.

Leah Pope, acting director of Vera's Substance Use and Mental Health Program, commented on the *New York Times* revelations:

Other states have adopted similar policies to Iowa's, and more [including an increased use of diversion to treatment rather than incarceration](#). Vera's [recent report](#) and [explainer video](#), *A New Normal: Addressing Opioid Use Through the Criminal Justice System*, outlines some of these approaches being piloted across the country. Such actions can, and should, inspire more states to push for reform.

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