



**TO** Interested Parties

**FROM** Dave Metz, Miranda Everitt, and Denny Han  
FM3 Research

**RE:** Voter Support for Drug Decriminalization in D.C.

**DATE** July 30, 2021

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Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (FM3 Research) recently completed a survey of 402 Washington, D.C. voters to assess views of a potential City policy that would remove criminal penalties for personal use possession of small amounts of commonly-used controlled substances, while increasing funding for substance use treatment, healthcare, housing, and other services.<sup>i</sup> **The survey found majority support across all major demographic groups for decriminalizing drug possession, support which remains broad even after an exchange of pro and con arguments.**

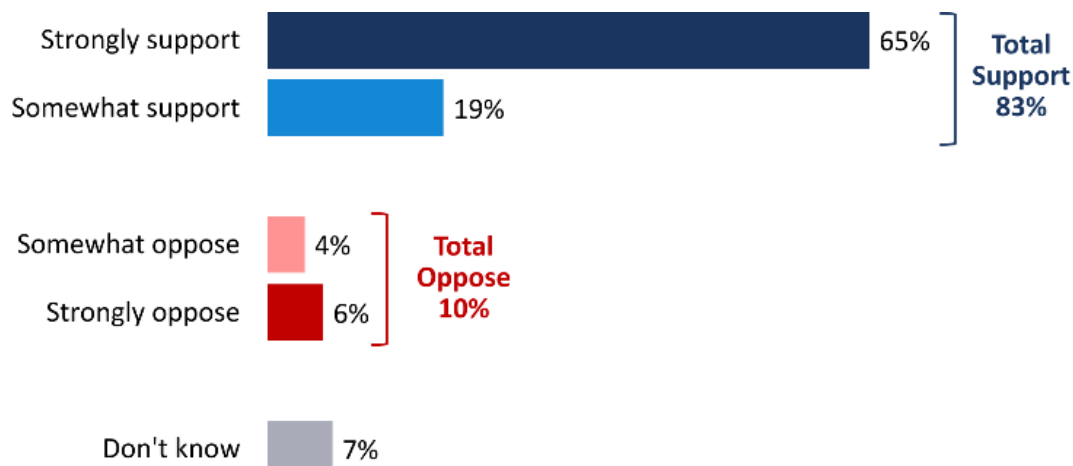
Specific survey findings include the following:

- **Voters are overwhelmingly supportive of a policy to remove criminal penalties for possession of small amounts of drugs and invest in services.** As shown in **Figure 1**, more than four in five (83%) support the City Council passing such a policy when initially asked; two-thirds (65%) "strongly" support it.

**Figure 1: Initial Support for Decriminalizing Drug Possession**

*This policy would remove criminal penalties for possession of small amounts of commonly-used controlled substances consistent with personal use. It would also increase funding for substance use treatment, healthcare, housing, and other services for individuals struggling with addiction, underlying health conditions, or poverty.*

*Would you support or oppose the City Council enacting this policy?*

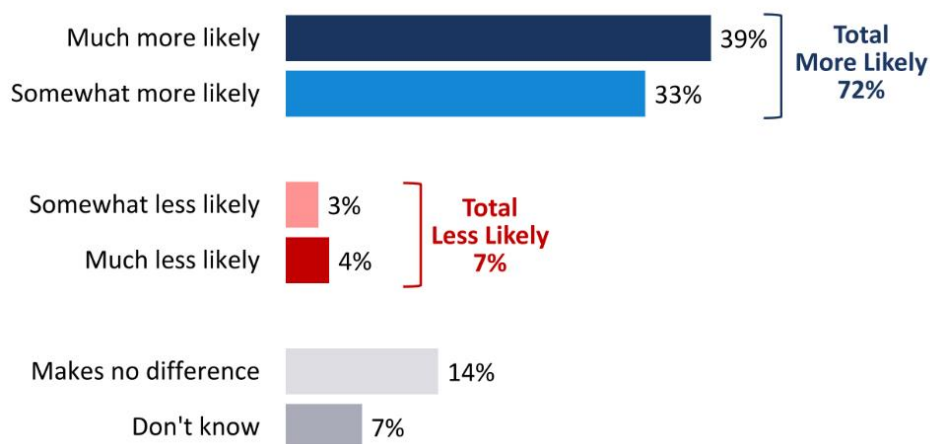


Support cuts across all major demographic groups as follows:

- 88% of liberals, 84% of moderates, and 50% of conservatives;
  - 85% of women and 81% of men;
  - 89% of voters under 50, 73% of voters ages 50-64, and 84% of voters age 65 and older;
  - 87% of voters of color and 81% of white voters; and
  - At least 74% of voters in each ward – including 93% of voters in Ward 7 and 96% of voters in Ward 8.
- **More than seven in ten say they would be more likely to vote for a council candidate who supported the decriminalization policy.** Just seven percent said they would be less likely to support a candidate who supported the policy. In every ward, at least 64% of voters said they would be more likely to vote for someone who supported decriminalization; in Wards 7 and 8, 78% of voters said this position would be a positive.

**Figure 2: Policy Impact on Elections for City Council**

*If a candidate for City Council supported this policy, would you be more likely, or less likely to vote for that candidate?*



- **The decriminalization proposal retains strong support even after an exchange of positive and critical messaging.** As shown in **Figure 3** on the next page, the proposal retains more than three-quarters (77%) overall support and three-fifths (59%) "strong support" after even after voters have heard a balanced set of pros and cons.

**Figure 3: Progression of Support for the Decriminalization Policy**

*Supporters say that our current drug laws can ruin lives. If a young person makes one mistake with drugs, the current laws can land her or him in jail - with a lifelong criminal record that can make it hard to get a job, an apartment, student loans, or a credit card. We need to stop wasting money and time on the War on Drugs, and reinvest in what's most effective, which is better access to drug treatment and education, not harsh criminal punishments. Cities and states around the country have great success in adopting similar policies, and it's time DC tried a new approach.*

*Opponents say that taking away even minor punishments for possession of drugs is the first step toward full legalization of all drugs. Government should not be sending a signal that drug use is okay - we need tough criminal penalties to discourage drug use. And we shouldn't spend our time on reforming drug laws when the District has more important issues to deal with, like crime and recovering from the coronavirus pandemic.*

Vote	Total Support	Total Oppose	Undecided
Initial Opinion	83%	10%	7%
After Positive and Critical Messages	77%	16%	7%

- **Each potential component of the proposal has widespread support; voters near-universally back providing additional funding for services and harm-reduction centers in particular.** As shown in **Figure 4** below and on the next page, each component of the policy has support from at least three quarters of voters. More than nine in ten support additional funding for outreach services (95%) and 24/7 harm-reduction centers (93%).

Notably, while nearly four in five (78%) of voters support “establishing an advisory board to set thresholds to determine personal use amounts” that includes experts in a variety of fields, an even greater share (86%) supports a board that also contains people who use drugs as members.

**Figure 4: Support for Policy Elements**

*I'm going to read you a list of elements of this policy. Please tell me if you would strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose each one.*

Potential Policy Element	Strongly Support	Total Support
Providing additional funding to connect individuals suffering from addiction, health problems, and needs relating to poverty to services like healthcare and substance use disorder treatment	79%	95%

Potential Policy Element	Strongly Support	Total Support
Establishing 24/7 centers to provide harm reduction, health, and overdose prevention services to people who use drugs	72%	93%
Eliminating criminal penalties for small amounts of drugs for personal use	63%	83%
Establishing an advisory board to set thresholds to determine personal use amounts, consisting of experts in substance use, harm reduction, substance use disorder treatment, and criminal justice system reform <u>as well as people who use drugs</u>	61%	86%
Requiring a study to identify the cost savings achieved by decriminalization, which would then be reinvested into expansion of harm reduction and treatment services to better protect public health and safety	56%	84%
Establishing an advisory board to set thresholds to determine personal use amounts, consisting of experts in substance use, harm reduction, substance use disorder treatment, and criminal justice system reform	52%	78%
Referring people who possess small amounts of drugs to a voluntary health needs screening	51%	84%

In conclusion, **Washington, D.C. voters are strongly in favor of the City Council decriminalizing possession of personal-use amounts of controlled substances and investing in outreach and treatment services for addiction and related health disorders.** This support cuts broadly across all major demographic groups -- including 50% of conservatives -- and that support remains solid after an exchange of pros and cons. Voters are also broadly in favor of all specific aspects of the policy, including outreach services and 24/7 harm-reduction centers. Seven in ten are more likely to vote for a candidate who backs the decriminalization proposal.

<sup>i</sup> **Methodology:** From June 30 - July 8, 2021, FM3 completed 402 online and telephone (landline and wireless) interviews with likely November 2022 voters in Washington, D.C. The margin of sampling error for the study is +/-4.9% at the 95% confidence level; margins of error for population subgroups within the sample will be higher. Due to rounding, not all totals will sum to 100%.