

Public Perceptions of Addiction and Recovery: A 20-Year Follow-Up to the Hart Benchmark (2004–2026)

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A joint publication of Faces & Voices of Recovery and Recovery Insights Lab

Research Background

This memo compares two landmark national surveys on addiction and recovery, conducted two decades apart; to measure how American public attitudes have shifted over time.

The 2004 Baseline: Peter D. Hart Research Associates

The original 2004 study was conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates and Coldwater Corporation on behalf of Faces & Voices of Recovery (FVR). It established baseline measurements of public attitudes toward addiction, recovery, stigma, and discrimination at a time when these issues received far less public attention.

- **Sample:** 801 American adults (general population)
- **Field dates:** April 19–22, 2004
- **Methodology:** National telephone survey of adults
- **Focus:** Widespread impact of addiction, public stigma toward addiction and recovery, discrimination against people in recovery, understanding of the term “recovery,” support for policy change

The 2026 Follow-Up: Faces & Voices of Recovery / Recovery Insights Lab

The 2026 survey was designed to revisit and build upon the 2004 Hart Research findings, using updated and expanded questions to measure how attitudes have changed over two decades.

- **Sample:** 846 likely voters (national)
- **Field dates:** February 13–17, 2026
- **Commissioned by:** Faces & Voices of Recovery (FVR)
- **Focus:** All original Hart topics plus policy grid testing, political ideology analysis, harm reduction attitudes, and expanded demographic crosstabs

The data reveals a profound and largely positive transformation in public attitudes towards addiction and recovery over the past two decades. This shift is characterized by a move away from moral judgment towards a public health perspective, increased personal resonance, and growing support for systemic solutions.

1. Behavioral Health Now Dominates Public Concern

Mental health and addiction have undergone a dramatic reprioritization in the public's mind over two decades.

- **Mental illness as top national concern:** 7% (2004) → **52% (2026)**
- **Addiction as a central public health priority:** Below 27% (2004) → **36% (2026)**

Implication: This signifies a crucial re-alignment of public priorities, indicating a receptive environment for behavioral health advocacy and policy.

2. From Individual Blame to Systemic Accountability

The public has moved decisively away from viewing addiction as a moral failure and toward understanding it as a health issue requiring systemic solutions.

- **Addiction viewed as “moral weakness”:** 34% (2004) → **16% (2026)**
- **Viewed as “both equally” disease and moral weakness:** 14% (2004) → **39% (2026)**
- **Concern about lack of treatment for addiction:** 32% (2004) → **59% (2026)**
- **Concern about mental health service gaps:** 33% (2004) → **68% (2026)**

Implication: The public is increasingly viewing addiction through a medical and systemic lens, demanding structural improvements rather than individual blame.

3. Workplace Stigma Has Declined Materially

Hiring discrimination against people in recovery has dropped sharply, while positive regard for recovery has more than doubled.

- **Less likely to hire someone in long-term recovery:** 27% (2004) → **13% (2026)**
- **More likely to hire someone in recovery:** 15% (2004) → **34% (2026)**

Implication: This represents a powerful cultural shift, suggesting that the stigma of recovery in professional settings is eroding, and employers are beginning to recognize the value and resilience of individuals in recovery.

4. Recovery Increasingly Understood as a Stable Outcome

Public understanding of what “recovery” means has shifted meaningfully, and optimism about treatment outcomes has grown.

- **Define recovery as sustained/no longer using:** 22% (2004) → **43% (2026)**
- **Define recovery as “currently trying to stop”:** 62% (2004) → **47% (2026)**
- **Believe majority achieve lifelong recovery:** 31% (2004) → **47% (2026)**
- **Believe majority do not get well:** 50% (2004) → **37% (2026)**

Implication: This broader understanding and optimism can foster greater community support and encourage more individuals to seek help, as recovery is seen as achievable and sustainable.

5. Discrimination Against People in Recovery Is Widely Recognized

While personal willingness to discriminate has decreased, public awareness of systemic discrimination has grown substantially.

- **Recognize discrimination against people in recovery as a community problem:** 18% (2004) → **46% (2026)**
- **View denial of insurance as a major problem:** 47% (2004) → **53% (2026)**
- **View denial of jobs/promotions as a major problem:** 42% (2004) → **51% (2026)**
- **Lack of treatment programs seen as a community problem:** 61% (2004) → **83% (2026)**

Implication: While personal stigma may be decreasing in some contexts, there is a heightened awareness of systemic discrimination, providing a clear mandate for advocacy focused on equity and access.

6. Addiction's Personal Impact Has Deepened

Addiction's reach into personal and family life has deepened considerably, with far more Americans identifying their own experience.

- **Overall personal impact (great deal or some):** 63% (2004) → **65% (2026)**
- **Identify "Yourself" as the source of impact:** 8% (2004) → **26% (2026)**
- **Impact from parents:** 24% (2004) → **32% (2026)**
- **Impact from children:** 11% (2004) → **17% (2026)**
- **Know someone in recovery:** 38% (2004) → **53% (2026)**

Implication: Addiction is no longer a distant problem for many Americans; it is a deeply personal issue. This broad personal connection is a powerful driver of the observed shifts in public concern and support.

7. "Lack of Affordable Treatment" Emerges as a Dominant Barrier

Access and affordability have overtaken other barriers as the public's primary concern about why people do not get treatment.

- **Lack of affordable, available treatment as barrier:** 25% (2004) → **52% (2026)**
- **Fear of social embarrassment or shame:** 33% (2004) → **42% (2026)**
- **Confidence in knowing where to get help:** 76% (2004) → **63% (2026)**

Implication: Financial and logistical access to care is now a leading and urgent problem that requires significant policy attention. The decline in personal confidence about navigating the system suggests growing complexity in the treatment landscape.

8. Strong Public Support for Comprehensive Policy Solutions

There is broad and consistent support for policies that support recovery and treatment, mandate insurance coverage, and penalize drug distributors. Key 2026 findings:

- **84%** support job skills and employment programs for people in recovery
- **83%** support recovery support programs for young people
- **85%** support requiring private health insurers to cover addiction treatment
- **83%** support requiring Medicaid to cover addiction treatment
- **78%** support tougher criminal penalties for people who sell/distribute illicit drugs
- **Net -14%** oppose a law prohibiting people in recovery from receiving government assistance

Implication: The public desires a multi-faceted approach, emphasizing rehabilitation and comprehensive support while also addressing the supply side of the drug crisis. There is a clear mandate to protect and enable individuals in recovery.

Summary of the 20-Year Arc

Across every major dimension measured, the trajectory from 2004 to 2026 shows meaningful and largely positive movement. The six defining trends are:

1. **Declining stigma in action.** While perceived societal stigma remains high, individual willingness to discriminate in hiring has been cut in half.
2. **Increased optimism.** Belief in the effectiveness of lifelong recovery has notably improved, indicating a more hopeful public outlook.
3. **Enduring misunderstanding of “recovery.”** The public still tends to associate recovery with the process of trying to stop rather than sustained sobriety, though the gap is narrowing.
4. **Widespread impact remains constant.** Addiction continues to touch a vast majority of Americans’ lives, with a dramatic increase in self-identification.
5. **Policy support is consistently progressive.** Public support for treatment-first, recovery-oriented policies has been consistently high for two decades and has strengthened in several areas.
6. **A growing navigation challenge.** Personal confidence in knowing where to get help has declined, suggesting growing complexity or decreased visibility of access points.

This comprehensive view demonstrates that while significant progress has been made in shifting public perception and reducing some forms of stigma, the demand for accessible and affordable treatment, coupled with an increased recognition of systemic barriers, presents clear opportunities for targeted action and advocacy.

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