Louisianians blame drugs for violent tide

By STEVE WHEELER
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Crime and drugs are closely linked in the minds of Louisiana voters: Nearly half say drug abuse is the most important cause of violent crime.

Respondents to The Advocate's annual year-end poll were read a list of five factors and asked which they think is the most important cause of violent crime.

Drug abuse tops the list, followed by declining family values, availability of handguns, poverty and the criminal justice system, in that order.

Some 47 percent of the respondents ranked drug abuse first.

In a poll conducted last December, Col. Mike Barnett said respondents are "right on target." He said surveys taken at the East Baton Rouge Parish Prison show that more than 75 percent of people arrested were either under the influence of drugs at the time of their offense or were committing the crime to obtain money for drugs.

"Reduce drug abuse, you reduce the crime rate," Barnett said.

Thomas Durant, an LSU associate professor of sociology and criminology, said he is not surprised that so many people see drug abuse as the leading cause of violent crime because it is a pervasive problem that crosses all social boundaries.

Indeed, poll results show that people in nearly every demographic category -- geography, age, income, race and sex -- think drug abuse is the most important cause of violent crime.

Declining family values is something that wouldn't have come out as high 10 years ago," Durant said.

Edward R. Renwic, Advocate pollster

Declining family values ranked first only among respondents with post graduate college degrees, Republicans and fundamentalists/evangelicals, and each of those groups lists drug abuse second.

Durant said he would rank declining family values as the leading cause of violent crime and said he believes respondents have underestimated the importance of handgun availability as a cause of violent crime.

"When you combine guns with motives with targets, it equals violence," Durant said.

Blacks far more than whites see drug abuse as the No. 1 problem. Some 69 percent of blacks and 42 percent of whites say drug abuse is the No. 1 cause of violent crime.

White voters are more likely to see declining family values as an important cause of violent crime. Some 33 percent of whites ranked family values first, compared with 14 percent of black voters.

Another 14 percent of black voters chose availability of handguns as the leading cause of violent crime. Only 7 percent of whites picked handgun availability as factor No. 1.

Pollster Ed Renwick of New Orleans, who conducted the poll for the Advocate, said the poll shows family values is becoming a more important issue among voters.

"Declining family values is something that wouldn't have come out as high 10 years ago," he said.

Voters were also asked which of those same factors was the least important cause of violent crime.

One-quarter of all respondents said poverty is the least important cause of violent crime; followed by the availability of handguns, 23 percent; the criminal justice system, 20 percent; declining family values, 12 percent; and drug abuse, 3 percent.

Voters also were asked a list of selected problems and asked if they feel those problems were extremely serious, serious, not too serious or not at all serious.

Drugs is at the top of the list, with a whopping 98 percent saying illegal drugs are either an extremely serious or serious problem.

Following closely behind is drugs in crime, with 97 percent of the respondents saying crime is either extremely serious or serious, poll results show.

By a huge margin -- more than 20 percentage points -- drugs and crime outranks other problems: the cost of health care; political corruption, unemployment, quality of public schools, the economy in Louisiana, pollution, and funding for universities.

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