Poll finds drugs, crime still top concerns in La.

By CHRISTOPHER BAUGHMAN

Crime and illegal drugs again top the Advocate's survey of problems that trouble Louisiana voters and their concern has risen significantly during the past year.

Meanwhile, slightly fewer voters are expressing concern about seven other issues discussed in the survey.

Neither result surprised LSU Associate Professor of Sociology Thomas Durand.

"Drugs and crime cut across all segments of the population," Durand said.

"But the other issues may only represent special interests and the conditions of individual people."

Besides being asked about illegal drugs and crime, voters were asked to rate health care, political corruption, quality of public schools, unemployment, the economy, college funding and pollution.

Pollsters read the list of problems to voters and asked them to place each issue in one of four categories: extremely serious, serious, not too serious or not at all serious.

The pollsters did not ask the respondents to rank the problems in order of importance, but to give their view of the gravity of each individual problem.

More than three out of four participants termed illegal drugs an "extremely serious" problem, including a whopping 87 percent of black respondents.

That figure amazed Edward F. Remwick, the New Orleans pollster who conducted the statewide survey for The Advocate.

"I don't think I've ever seen an 87 percent" response rate on any topic, Remwick said. "I thought it would be high, but an 87 percent is an almost unbelievable poll figure."

Seventy-four percent of respondents rated crime as an extremely serious problem, a 16 percent leap in the percentage of participants who scored the problem that way in the last Advocate poll, conducted a year earlier.

While crime and illegal drugs soared in their rankings as extremely serious problems, there was a decline in the percentage of voters who consider the other problems extremely serious.
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Taking the greatest plunge was concern over college funding.

The percentage of respondents who rated it as an extremely serious problem declined 12 percent, from 37 percent to 25 percent this time.

However, Renwick and Sammie Cosper, who recently retired as the state’s commissioner of higher education, both said the timing of the poll may have influenced the results.

Both pointed out that 1992’s survey was conducted during a period when budget cuts to the state’s universities were in the news.

The issue may not have been on the minds of people in December, both said.

And the universities’ response to the cuts might have led people to believe the crisis has abated, Cosper said.

“It may well be that people feel we took care of the problem” with tuition hikes, Cosper said.

The related issue of quality of public schools also declined as an extremely serious problem in the minds of respondents.

In the 1992 poll, 43 percent of the participants ranked it an extremely serious problem, while 36 percent rated it that way this time.

District Superintendent of Education Raymond Arveson took heart in the numbers.

“I think that the quality of education is improving, and I think people are aware of that,” Arveson said.

“We’re pleased that there is less concern about that quality and we think that people are responding to the quality.”

Two former perennial leaders in the Advocate poll, unemployment and the economy, declined this year: as issues of extremely serious concern, and for good reason, one economist said.

Unemployment has gone down throughout the state at the same time the economy has picked up, said Loren Scott, professor of economics at LSU.

“Since the beginning of 1988, Louisiana’s economy has been growing,” Scott said. “Most cities are experiencing three, four to five years of good growth.”

In addition, the state has recovered almost all of the 147,000 jobs it lost from 1981-87, and the quality of the new jobs is high, he said.

Despite the current national debate over health-care reform, even the issue of health-care costs declined slightly in the percentage of people deeming it extremely serious.

Fifty-two percent of the respondents rated it an extremely serious problem in the current poll, while 54 percent gave it that ranking the previous year.

The decline surprised Joseph Passman, president of the Louisiana Health Care Alliance, a coalition of 245 employers concerned with health-care costs.

“Health-care costs are definitely too high,” Passman said. “At this point, it’s still affordable, but it won’t be much longer.”

The last two categories, political corruption and pollution, also dropped 2 points this time in the percentage of people considering them extremely serious.

Political corruption declined from 53 percent to 51 percent.

Pollution dropped from 30 percent to 28 percent.

Pollution is an example of an issue with a narrow base, sociologist Durant said.

“Pollution is not an issue that has really caught on,” Durant said. “In the general population, we have yet to generate a movement of people.”

Durant said concern about most of the problems listed in the poll probably did not decrease. The overwhelming anxiety that most people feel about illegal drugs and crime just might have overshadowed them, he said.

“The problems are not less severe,” Durant said. “Public awareness and special interest is less.”