

# Burden of Illicit Drug Use La Crosse County April 2017

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Heroin and Other Illicit Drug Task Force:  
Community stakeholders identifying and implementing community-based strategies that  
reduce the public health burden of heroin and other illicit substance use in La Crosse  
County.

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## Executive Summary

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In recent years, Wisconsin, along with the rest of the United States, has experienced increasing rates of illicit drug use. The county of La Crosse has identified similar trends.

An increased number of overdose deaths has brought attention to the issue of illicit drug use in La Crosse County. This Report will discuss the impacts on both individuals and the community from use/misuse of prescription opioids, heroin, marijuana, cocaine, methamphetamines, and other illicit substances.

Opioids are most often powerful prescription medicines used to treat pain. Examples include hydrocodone, oxycodone, morphine, fentanyl, and many other pain relievers. Opioids are generally safe when prescribed by a doctor and taken for a short time, however, regular use can produce dependence and/or addiction. In addition to pain relief, opiates produce euphoria and as a result, may be abused or misused potentially leading to a fatal overdose.

Another type of opiate is the highly addictive, illegal substance, heroin. Heroin is made from morphine taken from the Asian opium poppy plant and can be injected, snorted, or smoked. Just like prescribed opioids, heroin binds to opioid receptors in the brain and produces pain relief and euphoria; heroin also has the potential to cause an overdose leading to a lack of oxygen to the brain, which may lead to many adverse health effects including death.

### **Burden to the Individual:**

- Although the rate seems to be decreasing, there are still La Crosse County high school students that have participated in illicit drug use by using marijuana, heroin, meth, and prescription drugs. At the time of the most recent survey recording (2017), 8% of high school students report being offered, sold, or given an illegal drug on school property in the past year.
- Rates of HIV seem to be decreasing, however, La Crosse County has seen a significant increase in Hepatitis infections since 2014. The transmission of these blood borne infections may or may not be related to injection drug use. Refer to Figure 2.1.
  - To prevent the transmission of HIV, Hepatitis, and other infectious diseases to those who use drugs, sterile syringes are distributed by the AIDS Resource Center of Wisconsin (ARCW). The number of syringes distributed has increased every year since 2008. Refer to Figure 1.
- Other infectious diseases that may be correlated with illicit drug use include sexually transmitted infections. Those who abuse drugs are more likely to participate in risky sexual behavior. Refer to Figure 2.2.
- Narcan is a safe and effective opiate overdose reversal drug. Gundersen Health System has reported increases in total doses of Narcan administered (521%) and the total amount of patients receiving Narcan (431%) since 2007 in the La Crosse area. A slighter increase in the amount of patients who experienced improved breathing or consciousness was also reported. Refer to Figure 3.

- Drug hospitalizations are more common in people 25 years or older than in younger populations. As shown by 2016 Gundersen Health System data, cannabis, stimulants, and opioids seem to be the most common substances involved in drug related hospitalizations. Refer to Figures 4.1 and 4.2.
  - There were also 17 cases of neonatal withdrawal symptoms caused by maternal substance abuse in 2016.
- Drug or Alcohol problems made up the majority of the workload for Child Protective Services in 2016.
- The amount of drug related deaths has increased every year since 2014 and adds up to a total of 46 deaths.
  - The toxicity screenings establish that 100% of these drug overdose deaths were related to prescription drugs while 45.7% were related to illicit drugs.
    - Often times, overdose death victims test positive for more than one substance, and as a result, the death-causing drug is difficult to determine.
  - The average age of overdose death victims in 2016 was 46 years.

**Burden to the Community:**

- Heroin charges, at the time of booking, have increased 46% from 2013 to 2016. There has also been a 100.7% increase in the combination of phencyclidine, amphetamine, methamphetamine, bath salts, plant food, and LSD charges since 2013. The total number of La Crosse County illicit drug booking charges have decreased 2.7% since 2013.
- The amount of poundage collected from the prescription drug drop boxes increased 29% from 2015 to 2016. These drop boxes are crucial in keeping prescription pills from contaminating the community drinking water sources and out of the streets, where they have the potential to be abused.

**Community Perception of Problem:**

- The rate of La Crosse County residents that believe illicit drug use is a moderate or serious problem has increased from 70% in 2009 to 83% in 2014.
- The majority of La Crosse County residents also feel that marijuana and prescription drug abuse is a moderate or serious problem.

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## Introduction

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During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, use of drugs such as cocaine and opiates required almost no regulation in La Crosse, Wisconsin. Many widely used medications contained doses of cocaine, morphine, heroin, and other opiates and were sold in general stores and pharmacies. However, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, drug use began to be associated with criminal activity.

The Harrison Narcotics Tax Act, signed in December 1914, brought production and distribution of cocaine and opiates under federal control. These drugs were now only available with a prescription and under strict circumstances. Authorities claimed that drug addiction would be eradicated in the United States with the passage of this act. Nevertheless, addiction remained while La Crosse crime rates rapidly increased as addicted individuals turned to the black market and drug distributors accommodated to meet the rising demand for the now illegal substances. Positioned between two major metropolitan areas, La Crosse acted as a rendezvous site for drug deals, distributions, and other black marketed business arrangements between Chicago and Minneapolis or St. Paul.

Illicit drug use was, and continues to be, a burden on La Crosse County. The prevalence of adverse health effects related to substance abuse has increased in recent years and drug related mortality rates were the highest in 2016 than ever before. Transmission of infectious disease, increased crime rates, and many other community concerns may also accompany illicit drug use.

## Burden to the Individual

### Youth Risk Behavior Surveys

A La Crosse County Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) was completed by students in Bangor, Holmen, La Crosse, Onalaska, West Salem, and Onalaska Luther school districts in 2013, 2015, and then again in 2017. In the spring of 2015, 3,336 high school students completed the survey; in 2017, 3,265 high school students completed the survey in February and March.

**Table 1: Youth Risk Behavior Survey Results Related to Drug Use**

	Among La Crosse County High School Students...	2013	2015	2017
Drugs	Used marijuana in lifetime	33%	31%	23%↓
	Used heroin one or more times in lifetime	3%	3%	1.3%
	Used meth in the past 30 days	NA	NA	1.5%
	Used prescription drug without a doctor's permission in lifetime	16%	14%	10%↓
	Were offered, sold, or given an illegal drug by someone on school property in the past 12 months	16%	13%	8%↓

Table 1 includes the results of the YRBS relative to this report. The arrow (↓) represents at least a 2% decrease in student behavior trends from previous years. The most recent YRBS, distributed in 2017, was the first survey to include a question specifying use of methamphetamine. In general, the prevalence of drug use among La Crosse County high school students seems to have decreased since 2013.

### Communicable Disease Cases

Injection drug use acts as a significant risk factor for the transmission of infectious disease. The phrase *injection drug use* includes three routes: intravenous (IV), subcutaneous, and intramuscular. Due to the rapid onset of euphoria (15-30 seconds) resulting from injecting a drug into the vein, the IV route is often preferred. However, if the needle misses or cannot penetrate the vein due to redundant venous destruction, the drug may be injected subcutaneously (under the skin) or intramuscularly (inside the muscle).

All three approaches of injection drug use require the involvement of a syringe, a type of medical equipment not legally available to persons without a prescription. As a result, needles are regularly shared among users which extensively increases the probability of transmitting communicable diseases. Infections transmitted via blood, like Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), and Hepatitis B and C are just some of the diseases that often accompany injection drug use.

To reduce the harmful effects of illicit drug use, the AIDS Resource Center of Wisconsin (ARCW) oversees the Lifepoint Needle Exchange Program. This program offers access to sterile syringes, training and distribution of naloxone (reversal drug), and drug dependency treatment options. Syringe access programs have been proven as effective tools to prevent the spread of HIV and Hepatitis for people who use drugs.



**Figure 1: Sterile Syringes Distributed by ARCW**

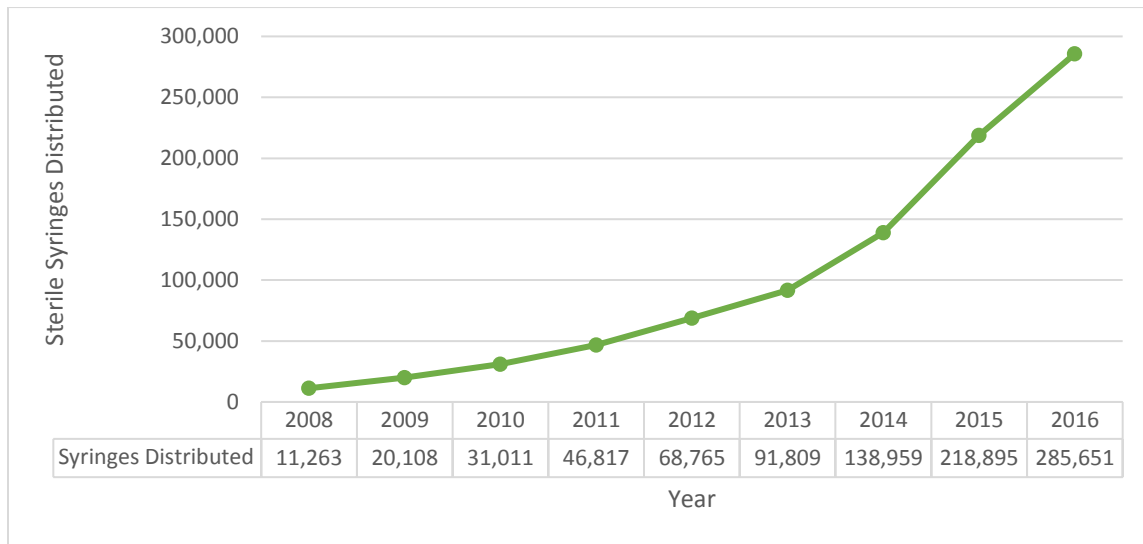


Figure 1 shows the amount of sterile syringes that were given out by the Lifepoint Needle Exchange Program from 2008 to 2016. There has been a significant increase in the amount of needles distributed. This may not mean that the prevalence of injection drug use has increased throughout the past 8 years, but possibly that more individuals are becoming aware of the resources, including sterile syringes, offered by the AIDS Resource Center of Wisconsin.

**Figure 2.1: Blood Borne Infections**

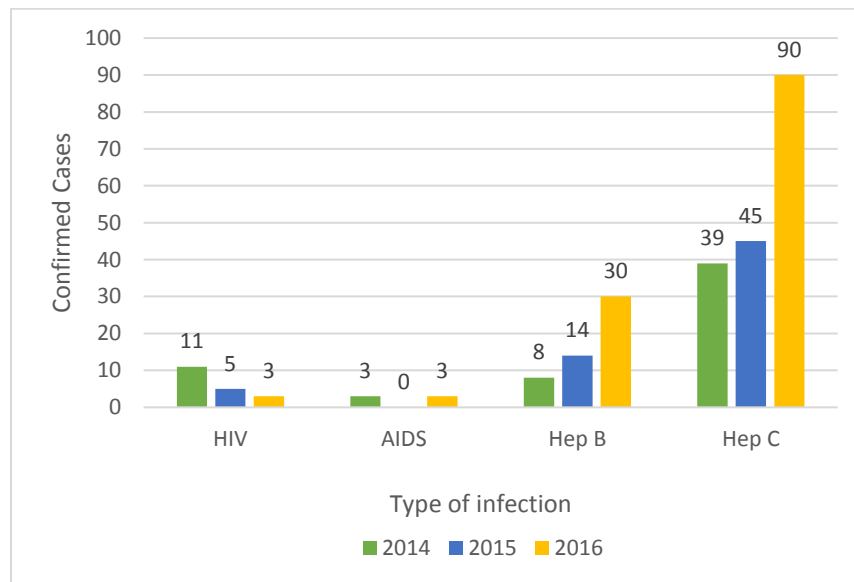


Figure 2.1 provides a visual for new blood borne infections diagnosed in 2014, 2015, and 2016. These cases may or may not be related to injection drug use, and can also be transmitted via sexual activity, or any accidental exposure to infected bodily fluids. Confirmed cases of HIV decreased while prevalence of AIDS remained relatively constant throughout the three years. La Crosse County has experienced a significant increase in Hepatitis infections; cases of both Hepatitis B and Hepatitis C about doubled from 2015 to 2016.

**Figure 2.2: Sexually Transmitted Infections**

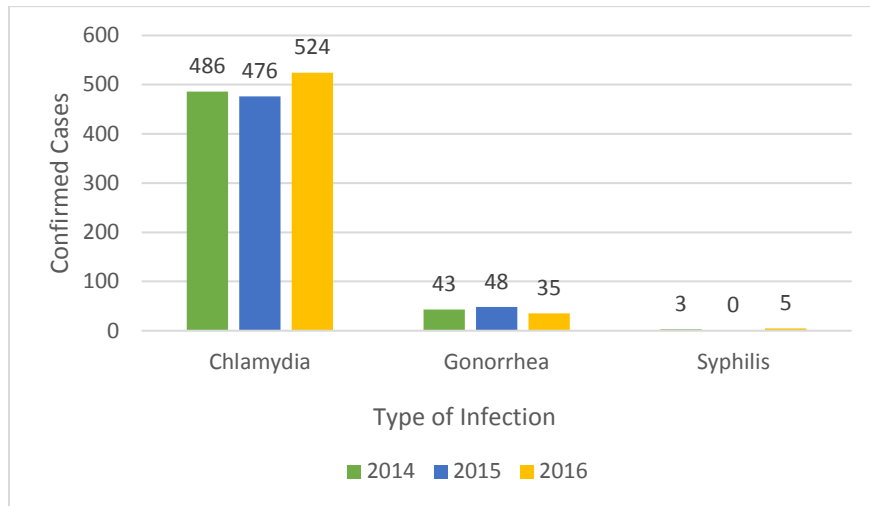


Figure 2.2 shows the new La Crosse County chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis cases reported in 2014, 2015, and 2016. Sexually transmitted infections (STI) are another type of communicable disease that may be related to illicit drug use. Substance users engage in risky sexual practices at a substantially higher rate than non-users. Those who use illicit drugs have a higher chance of exposure to STI risk factors including unprotected sexual activity, multiple partners, and commercial sex work than those who do not use.

**Narcan Administration**

Narcan is a prescription nasal spray or injection form of the opiate overdose emergency treatment naloxone hydrochloride. It was developed so first responders have the ability to reverse the effects of an opiate overdose in a home setting. Narcan must be delivered as soon as an opiate overdose is suspected, but does not take the place of emergency medical care. Multiple doses may be given if necessary and there is no effect on individuals who have not taken opioid medicines. Narcan is a safe and effective opiate overdose reversal medicine.

**Table 2: Naloxone Trainings Conducted by the ARCW**

Year	Naloxone Trainings
2008	4
2009	9
2010	20
2011	30
2012	44
2013	51
2014	56
2015	48
2016	183

The AIDS Resource Center of Wisconsin Lifepoint is just one organization that provides training for Narcan administration. The La Crosse office provides service to Monroe, Jackson,

Trempealeau, and Vernon counties as well as La Crosse. Table 2 displays the number of naloxone trainings leaving the La Crosse ARCW office from 2008 to 2016.

**Figure 3: La Crosse Area Narcan Use and Results, 2007-2016**

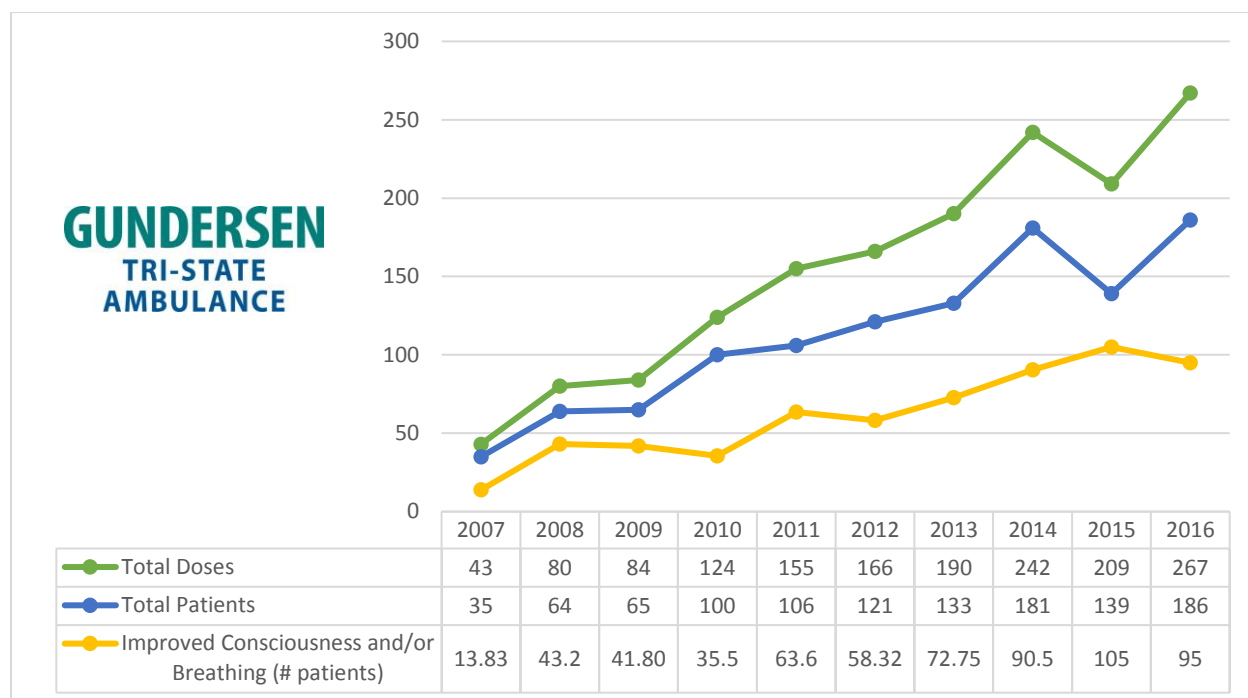


Figure 3 shows the administration of Narcan from 2007 through 2016 in the La Crosse area. Total doses of Narcan given, the total number of patients that received the doses, and the number of patients that experienced improved consciousness and/or breathing are shown. As made visible by the data table, multiple patients received more than one dose of Narcan.

### Drug Related Hospitalizations

Gundersen Health System provided data of all 2016 drug related hospital admissions, including inpatient and emergency. There were a total of 2,944 individuals hospitalized and 3,985 diagnoses, signifying that numerous patients had more than one diagnosis or hospital admission.

The hospitalizations were categorized based on diagnosis, age group, and drug type. For the purpose of this report, diagnoses included drug use/abuse and drug dependency. Individuals were placed into age groups: less than 12 years, 12 to 24, and 25 years or older. The drug types included cannabis, stimulants and other psychoactive substances, opioids, cocaine, sedatives and hypnotics, and hallucinogens. The results of this categorization can be seen in the figures below.

Not included in this report are drug poisonings. This diagnoses was analyzed with more specific age groups and drug subgroups (heroin, amphetamines, methadone, benzodiazepines, etc.), location, whether or not intentional self-harm was involved, and other significant variables.

**Figure 4.1: Combined Hospitalizations Due to Drug Use/Abuse in La Crosse County, 2016 Gundersen Health System**

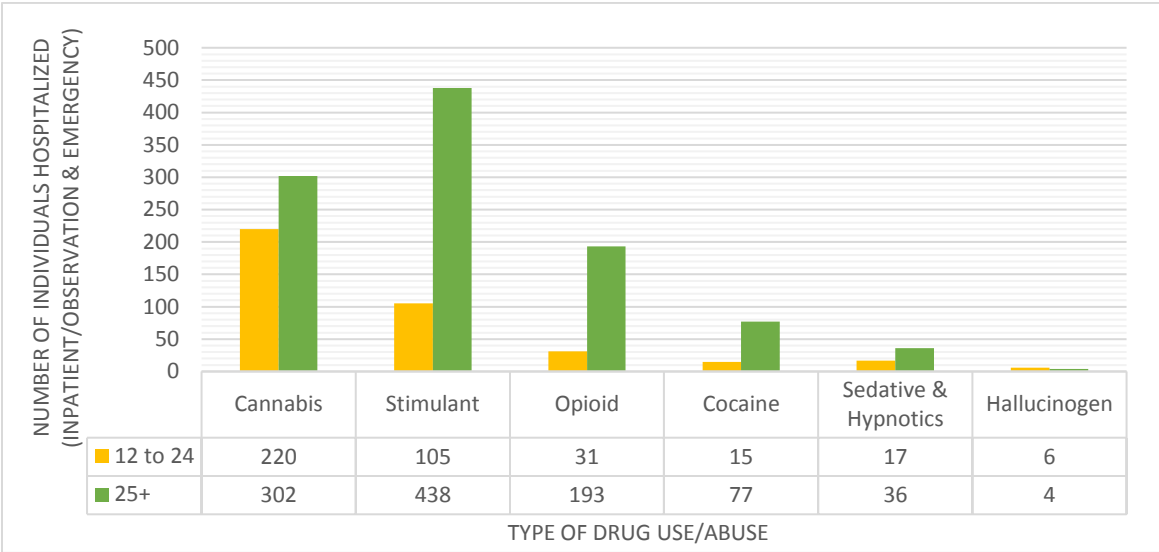


Figure 4.1 shows all 2016 Gundersen hospitalizations in La Crosse County related to drug use and/or abuse. Number of individuals hospitalized included inpatient/observation and emergency admissions.

**Figure 4.2: Combined Hospitalizations Due to Drug Dependency in La Crosse County, 2016 Gundersen Health System**

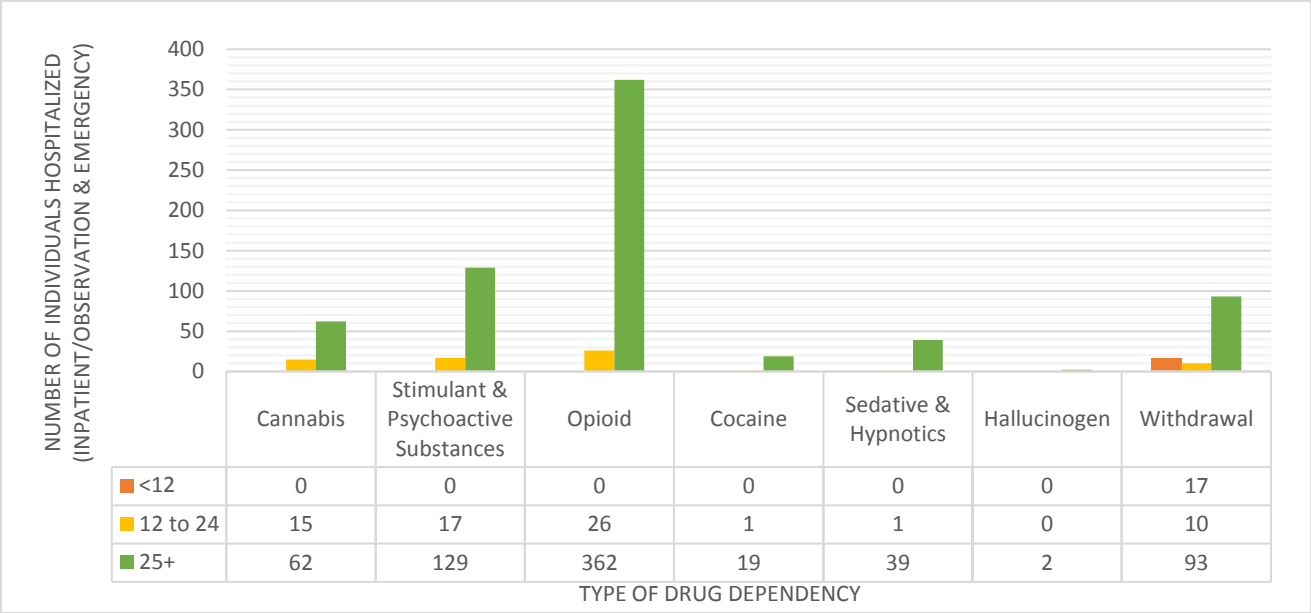


Figure 4.2 shows all 2016 Gundersen hospitalizations in La Crosse County related to drug dependency.

All 17 admissions related to withdrawing patients under 12 years of age were cases of neonatal withdrawal from maternal use of drugs of addiction. Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS) is a

diagnosis that describes a newborn’s exposure to addictive opiate drugs while in the womb. Substances such as heroin, oxycodone, and methadone permeate the placenta causing drug dependency or addiction in the unborn baby. Because the baby is no longer exposed to the drug after birth, withdrawal symptoms occur as the drug is slowly cleared from the baby’s system. Categorized separately from cases of neonatal withdrawal symptoms, were an additional 2 cases in which a newborn was affected by maternal use of cocaine.

### Child Protective Services

The Human Services Department of La Crosse County handles many services and focus areas including Children and Youth. Child Protective Services cases relative to this report include those related to substance abuse. These types of cases fall under the category of ‘neglect’ and in 2016, 77 families were opened for ongoing services. Alcohol or drug issues were the primary reason for 46 out of these 77 cases. Alcohol or drug issues made up 68% of the Child Protective Services workload in 2016.

### Drug Overdose Deaths

The following tables depict the La Crosse County deaths related to drug use from 2014, 2015, and 2016. The only categorization variables included in this report are gender and type of drug present. If the deceased had a drug present in their system at the time of autopsy, the word ‘yes’ was placed under the corresponding column. If the same type of drug was not present, the word ‘no’ was listed. Because the majority of drug related death victims had multiple substances in their system, the exact death-causing drug cannot be determined. Causes of death included: anoxic brain injury, acute respiratory failure, cardiac arrest, cardiac arrhythmia, mixed drug intoxication, and several other diagnoses.

The last row in each table states the totals, including the total amount of overdose deaths, as well as the total amount of positive toxicity screenings, or ‘yeses,’ for each column/drug type.

**Table 3.1: 2014 La Crosse County Drug Related Deaths**

Gender	Heroin Present	Fentanyl Present	Opioids Present	Meth Present	Cocaine Present	Prescription Drugs Present	Illicit Drugs Present
Female	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Male	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Male	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Male	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Female	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Female	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Female	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Male	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Female	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
<b>9</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>5 (56%)</b>	<b>1 (11%)</b>	<b>2 (22%)</b>	<b>9 (100%)</b>	<b>4 (44%)</b>

**Table 3.2: 2015 La Crosse County Drug Related Deaths**

Gender	Heroin Present	Fentanyl Present	Opioids Present	Meth Present	Cocaine Present	Prescription Drugs Present	Illicit Drugs Present
Female	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Female	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Male	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Male	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Female	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Female	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Male	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Female	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Male	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Male	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Male	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Female	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
<b>12</b>	<b>1 (8%)</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>6 (50%)</b>	<b>3 (25%)</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>12 (100%)</b>	<b>3 (25%)</b>

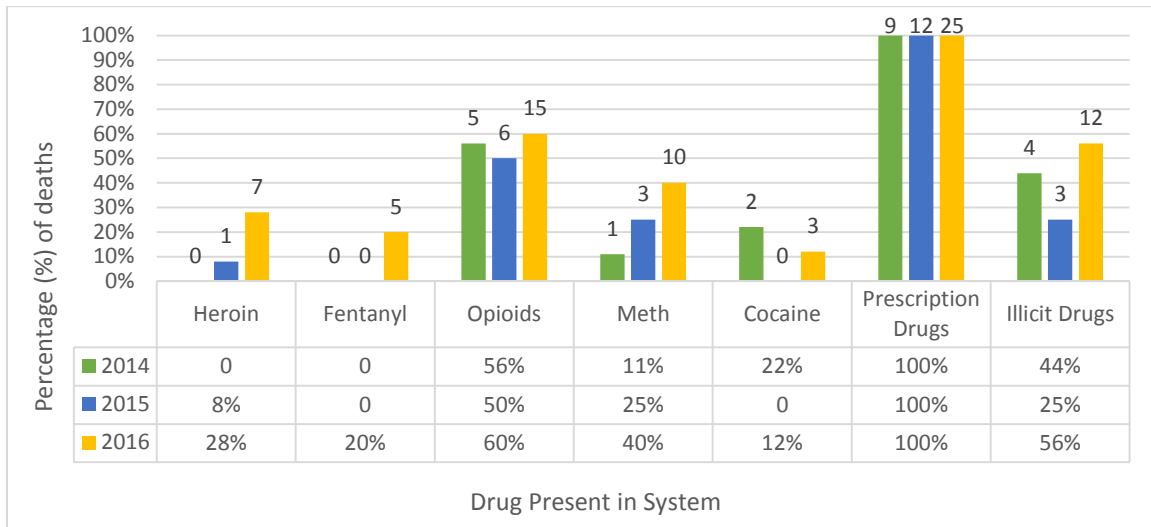
**Table 3.3: 2016 La Crosse County Drug Related Deaths**

Gender	Heroin Present	Fentanyl Present	Opioids Present	Meth Present	Cocaine Present	Prescription Drugs Present	Illicit Drugs Present
Female	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Female	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Male	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Male	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No
Female	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Female	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Female	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Female	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Female	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Male	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Female	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Female	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Male	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Male	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Male	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Male	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Female	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Male	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Male	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Male	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Male	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Male	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Male	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Female	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Female	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
<b>25</b>	<b>7 (28%)</b>	<b>5 (20%)</b>	<b>15 (60%)</b>	<b>10 (40%)</b>	<b>3 (12%)</b>	<b>25 (100%)</b>	<b>14 (56%)</b>

The average age of the drug related death victims in 2016 was 46 years.

The amount of drug related deaths seems to be increasing every year. In 2016, there were more overdose deaths in La Crosse County than ever before.

**Figure 5: Drug Related Deaths, La Crosse County**



The data table in Figure 5 shows the percentage of the drug related deaths testing positive for a certain drug during the toxicity screenings for each year. For example, “In 2015, 50% of overdose death patients contained opiates in their systems.” Most deaths were related to more than one substance. Figure 5 also includes the exact number of positive toxicity screenings above each corresponding column.

All drug related death victims in all three years had some sort of prescription drug in their system at the time of autopsy. The percentage of deaths related to heroin, fentanyl, opiates, methamphetamines, and illicit drugs in general were higher in 2016 than in the two previous years.

The following figures are maps of the city of La Crosse and La Crosse County divided into the 2010 census tracts. The 2016 overdose deaths were placed in the census track in with the death occurred. Each red number displays the total drug overdose deaths to take place in the corresponding census tracts.

Figure 6.1: Map of the City of La Crosse 2016 Drug Overdose Deaths

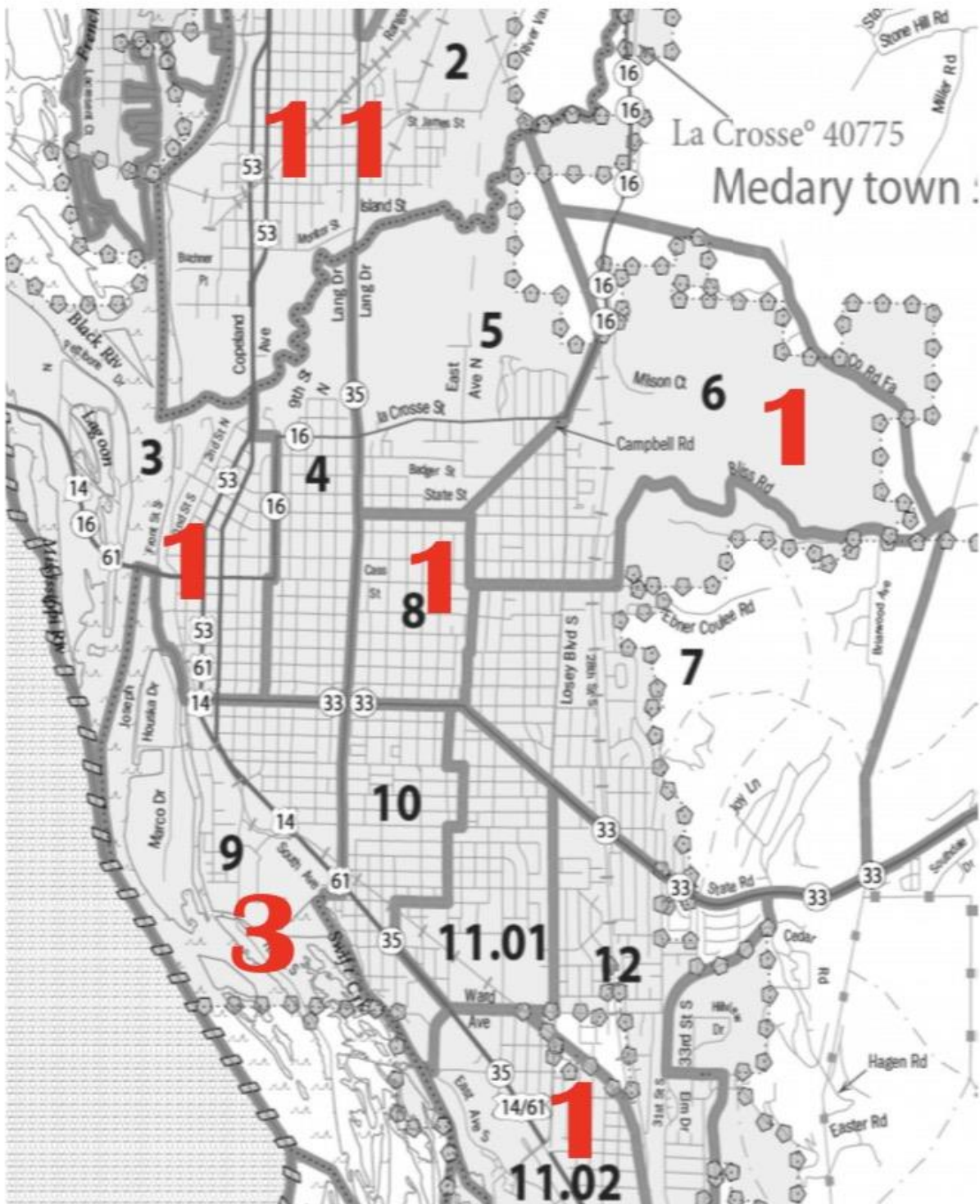
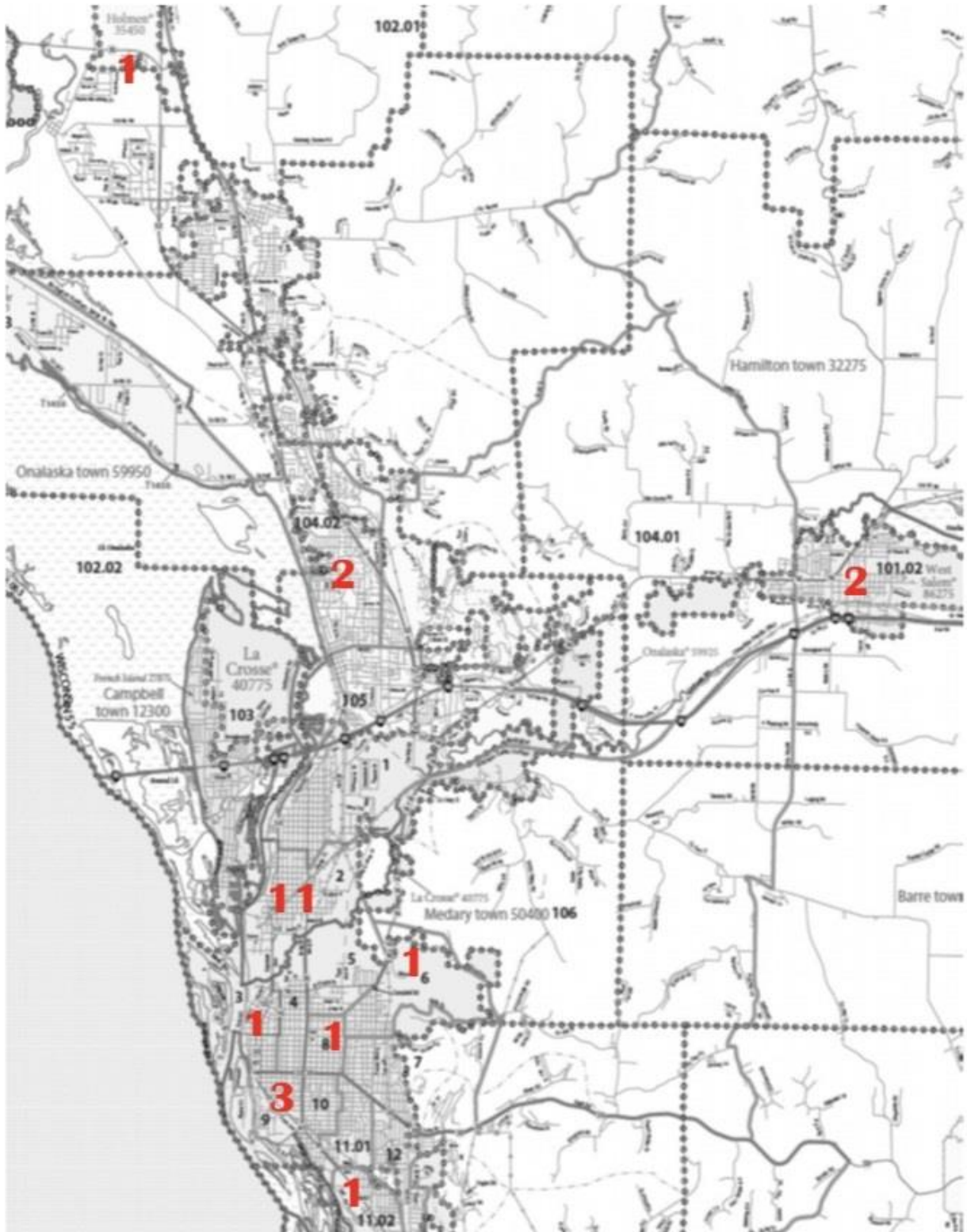




Figure 6.2: Map of La Crosse County 2016 Drug Overdose Deaths

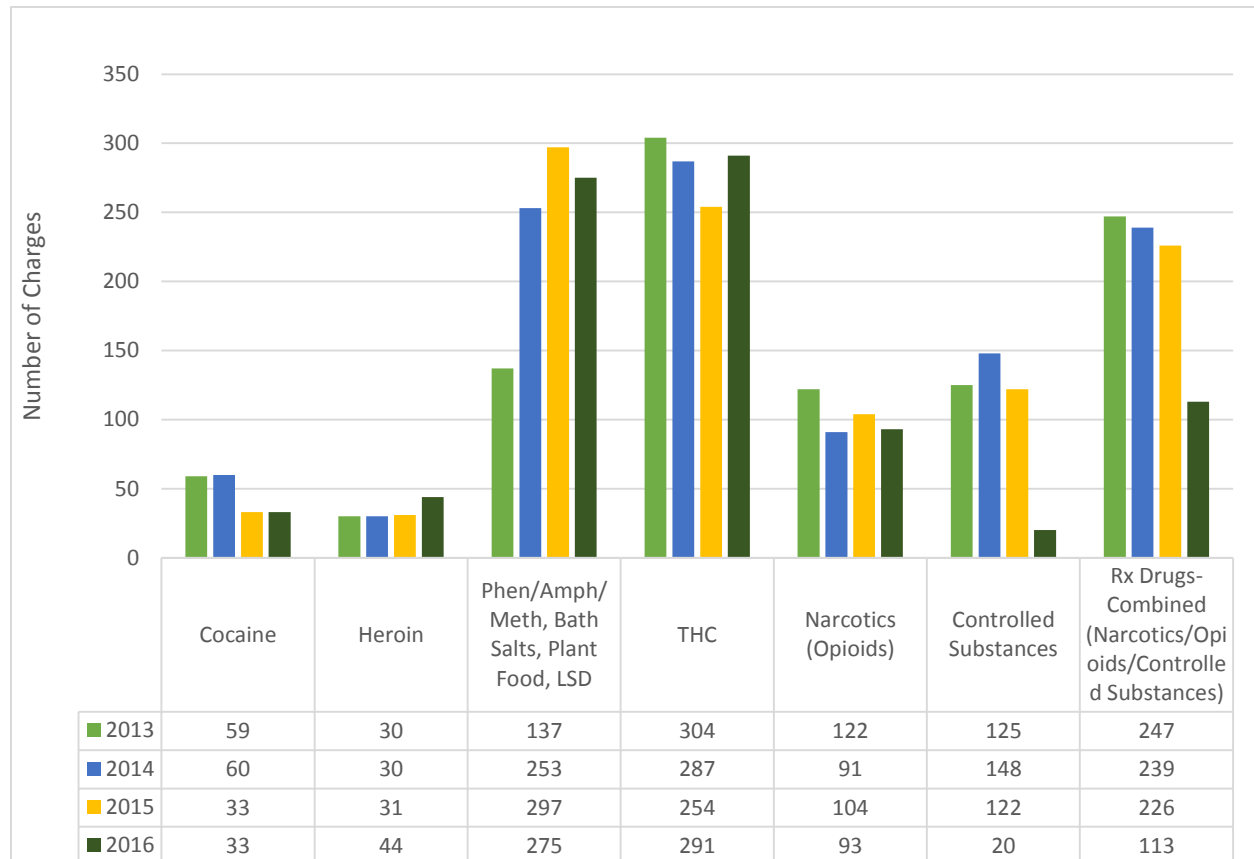


## Burden to the Community

### Drug Charges

The drug charges included in this report were filed at the time of booking. These are drug charges that individuals were booked into jail for, not necessarily convicted of. The following figure displays the number and type of drug charges at the time of booking in La Crosse County from 2013 to 2016.

**Figure 7: Drug Charges at the Time of Booking**



The charges included in Figure 7 consider the manufacture/delivery and possession (with/without intent) of cocaine, heroin, narcotics, controlled substances, THC, and phencyclidine, amphetamine, methamphetamine, bath salts, plant food, and LSD. Drug charges related to narcotics and controlled substances were also combined to form the category *Rx Drugs – Combined*, referring to all prescription (Rx) drugs.

Charges were made by the State Patrol and the following police departments: La Crosse County, La Crosse, Onalaska, West Salem, Shelby, Bangor, Campbell, Holmen, and University of Wisconsin – La Crosse.

**Table 4: Total Drug Charges at the Time of Booking**

Year	Total
2013	1,324
2014	1,390
2015	1,334
2016	1,288

As shown in Table 4, the total amount of drug charges remained relatively constant over the last four years (2013-2016).

### Prescription Drug Drop Boxes

Beginning in July 2014, La Crosse County established seven drop boxes at law enforcement locations hoping to decrease the amount of improperly disposed prescription drugs. Narcotics and other prescribed medicines that are not disposed of properly have the potential to cause physical harm to those that may abuse them, and environmental harm, such as contaminating the community's ground water supply.

The drop boxes are located at the La Crosse County Sheriff's department and six police departments throughout the County and accept any unwanted, unused, and expired prescription pills. In 2015, 1236.5 pounds of prescription drugs were collected from the law enforcement drop boxes; this amount increased to 1673.3 pounds in 2016.

There are also an additional three drop boxes located at Gundersen Health System sites. These boxes collected 4050 pounds in 2015, and 5150 pounds in 2016.

## Community Perception of Problem

In October of 2014, a survey fixated on perceptions of alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use in the community was distributed to 2,400 random households in La Crosse County. Due to a 17% response rate, 405 surveys were analyzed. Respondents were within the age range of 18 to 80, with the majority older than 55 years (58%). Most participants were White (99%) and had attained a higher education and household income level greater than that of the general population. A quarter of respondents (25%) had at least one minor or dependent living in the household. The following figures display results of the community perception surveys relative to this report.

**Figure 8.1: Perceptions of Marijuana Use as a Moderate or Serious Problem among Teenagers, Young Adults, and Adults**

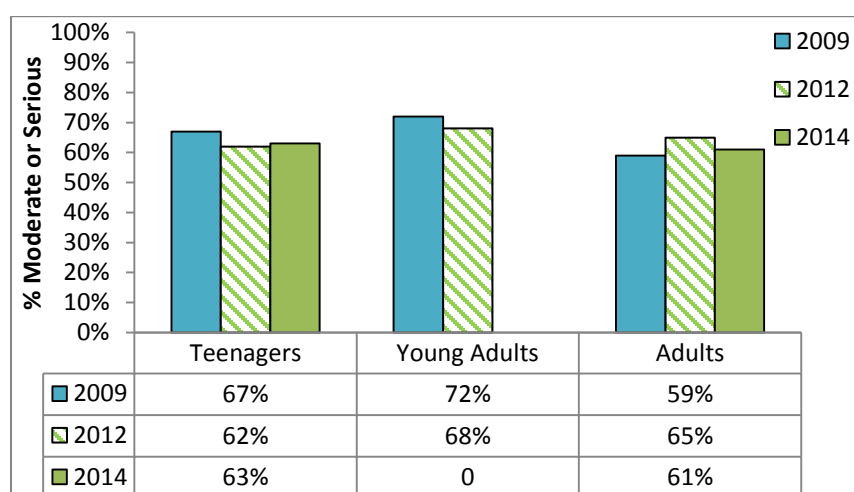


Figure 8.1 shows the majority of respondents felt marijuana use was a moderate or serious problem. In 2014, *young adults* were categorized with *adults* for non-alcohol questions, including this perceptions of marijuana use question.

**Figure 8.2: Community Support for Marijuana Legalization, 2014**

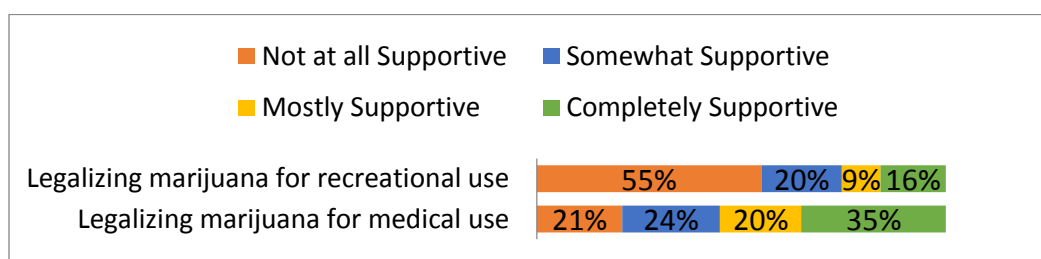
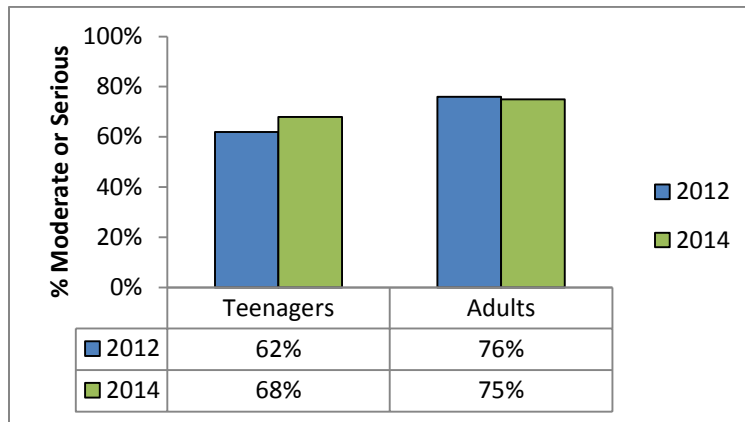


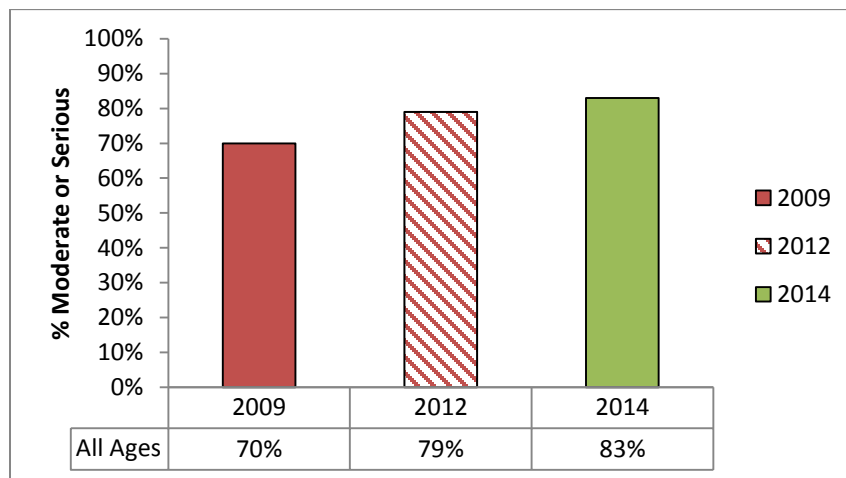
Figure 8.2 shows the community's support for legalizing marijuana. In 2014, La Crosse County residents reported more support for marijuana legalization for medical use (55% completely and mostly supportive) than for recreational use (25% completely and mostly supportive).

**Figure 8.3: Perceptions of Prescription Drug Abuse/Misuse as a Moderate or Serious Problem among Teenagers and Adults**



The majority of respondents reported prescription drug abuse/misuse as being a moderate or serious problem in 2012 and 2014.

**Figure 8.4: Perceptions of Other Illegal Drug Use being a Moderate or Serious Problem Among all Ages**



The majority of respondents reported other illegal drug use as being a moderate or serious problem in 2009, 2012, and 2014. The percentage of La Crosse County residents who felt illegal drug use was a moderate or serious problem among all age groups increased from 2009 to 2014.

## Conclusion

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In general, most La Crosse County residents believe illicit drug use is a problem throughout the area. The County has seen improvement in areas such as substance use among high school students and more poundage of prescription drugs collected from the drug drop boxes. Despite these improvements, numerous adverse effects of illicit drug use remain in the County of La Crosse. Cases of communicable diseases, such as the Hepatitis virus, continue to rise. Every year, there are more and more drug overdose deaths and an increased need for naloxone. These negative repercussions of illegal substance abuse, among many others, persist in the home of over 100,000 Wisconsin residents. Illicit drug use continues to be a burden on La Crosse County.

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For more information regarding illicit substance abuse, the La Crosse County Heroin and Other Illicit Drug Task Force, or community resources/services, please visit:  
<http://www.lacrossecounty.org/htaskforce.Asp>

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