

Background and Objectives

Rural communities in Tennessee continue to face major challenges from the opioid crisis. Even though effective treatments like medication-assisted treatment (MAT) exist, stigma toward people who use drugs often prevents individuals from seeking help and limits community support for treatment programs. Stigma can take many forms, such as fear, blame, or the desire for social distance from those affected. Understanding how community members view opioid use disorder (OUD) and MAT is important for reducing stigma and improving access to care. Previous research in Tennessee found elevated stigma toward people who use opioids among both community members and law enforcement (Stone et al., 2024). National data highlight the need for rural-specific strategies to address the opioid crisis (Rural Health Information Hub, 2025).

This project aimed to:

- Assess community perceptions and stigma related to opioid use disorder (OUD).
- Measure awareness of medication-assisted treatment (MAT) and the mobile MAT unit.
- Explore the effect of billboard exposure on awareness and attitudes.

Methods

Design: Cross-sectional household survey (July–August 2025).

Counties: Claiborne, Franklin, Giles, Hickman, Lawrence, and Marshall.

Sampling:

- USPS Every Door Direct Mail (EDDM) program
- 12 residential carrier routes (2 per county)
- 6,887 households reached

Data Collection: Anonymous online survey (1 adult per household, next-birthday method).

Measures:

- 12-item stigma scale (1–5 Likert; lower = more stigma)
- Awareness of billboards and mobile MAT unit
- Attitudes toward OUD and MAT effectiveness

Analysis: Weighted estimates using survey package in R.

Ethics: Respondents could enter a drawing for one of ten \$40 gift cards. MTSU IRB-FY2025-265.

Location of TN Counties Surveyed and Mailed Based Sample

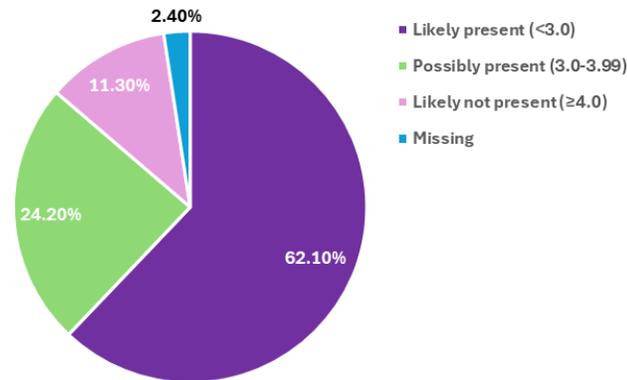


■ Surveyed Counties

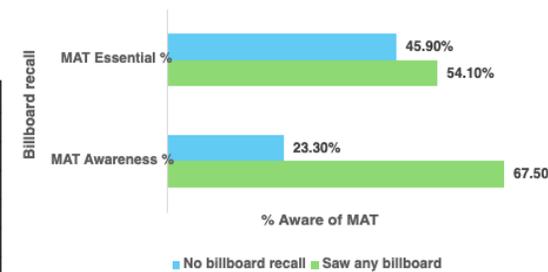
- Memphis
- Nashville
- Knoxville

County	Mailers	Respondents	Response Rate (%)
Hickman	1064	62	5.8
Lawrence	1044	48	4.6
Claiborne	1339	59	4.4
Giles	1008	42	4.2
Marshall	1027	36	3.5
Franklin	1405	46	3.3

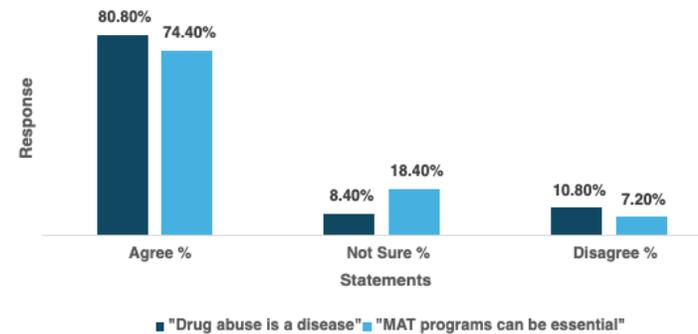
Stigma Prevalence



Billboards BOOST Awareness



Attitudes Toward OUD & MAT



Results

- Response:** 293 responses (4.3%)
- Median age:** 51 years
- Women:** 54%
- Affected by substance use:** 68%
- Overall stigma index:** Mean = 2.82 (1–5 scale; <3 = stigma present)
 - 62% = stigma likely present
 - Strongest domains: Dangerousness & Social Distance
- Attitudes:**
 - 80% agree OUD = disease
 - 75% agree MAT = essential
- Awareness:**
 - 52% aware of mobile MAT unit
 - Billboard recall positively associated with MAT awareness (67.5% vs 23.3%).

Discussion and Conclusions

Results show that while most rural Tennesseans recognize opioid use disorder (OUD) as a disease and support treatment, stigma remains common—especially fears about safety and social distance from people affected by substance use. These attitudes can limit recovery and community support for local treatment programs.

Billboard campaigns and other local outreach efforts appear to improve awareness of medication-assisted treatment (MAT) and may help normalize recovery when messages come from trusted community voices. Continued public education and stigma-reduction initiatives are essential to strengthen treatment acceptance and improve access to care in rural areas.

Key takeaways:

- Stigma reduction should focus on safety and social distance perceptions.
- Local, trusted messengers and visible community campaigns can improve MAT awareness and acceptance.

References:

Stone KW, Chesak GM, Bowman AS, Ayalon M, Chafin C. (2024). A cross-sectional study of stigma towards opioid users among rural law enforcement and community members in Tennessee. *Harm Reduction Journal*, 21(1), 77. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12954-024-01114-7> Rural Health Information Hub. (2025). *Rural response to the opioid crisis: Overview*. <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/topics/opioids>