

## Background

There is a shortage of mental health providers – in Indiana, the United States, and worldwide. Based on 2020 data, approximately 55.9% of adults with a mental illness in Indiana did not receive treatment.<sup>1</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has only heightened the need for mental health care - the prevalence of major depressive disorder has increased by about 7% since the start of the pandemic<sup>2</sup> and, in 2021, drug overdoses in the United States exceeded 100,000 annually for the first time.<sup>3</sup> With already less-than-ideal access to mental health care, the pandemic has only increased the need for mental health providers. Increasing this workforce is imperative.

Recruitment into psychiatry is one possible way to increase the mental health workforce, and exploring medical students' attitudes, perceptions, and biases towards mental health and psychiatry are consequently of importance. Previous studies have shown that medical students with less favorable views towards psychiatry are less likely to pursue it as a specialty.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, as many patients with mental health complaints present to primary care physicians, it is also important to be aware of their perceptions about those with mental illness.<sup>5</sup>

In the context of ongoing revisions to the Neuroscience and Behavior (MED-X660) psychiatry curriculum and the ongoing mental health crisis, we endeavored to understand how IUSM students perceive psychiatry. The Attitudes Towards Psychiatry (ATP-30) survey consists of 30 statements regarding perceptions towards psychiatry with responses on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Answers are then scored and totaled. Neutral responses are scored a 3; if the respondent answers "neutral" to every question, they would receive a score of 90. Higher scores indicate a more positive perception of psychiatry.

The ATP-30 survey is the most studied survey of health care providers' views towards the field. Multiple studies have used the ATP-30 to measure medical students' perceptions of psychiatry, but such work in the US is limited. We identified only one US medical student ATP-30 survey paper with average score of 113.9, with 43 respondents. More generally, students in western countries tend to have more positive perception than those from non-Western countries. Specifically, European countries have average scores ranging from 104-112,<sup>6-7</sup> as compared to Saudi Arabia having scores of 97 (female) and 94 (male),<sup>8</sup> and China with an average score of 103.<sup>9</sup> We endeavored to use the ATP-30 to understand IUSOM student's perception of psychiatry.

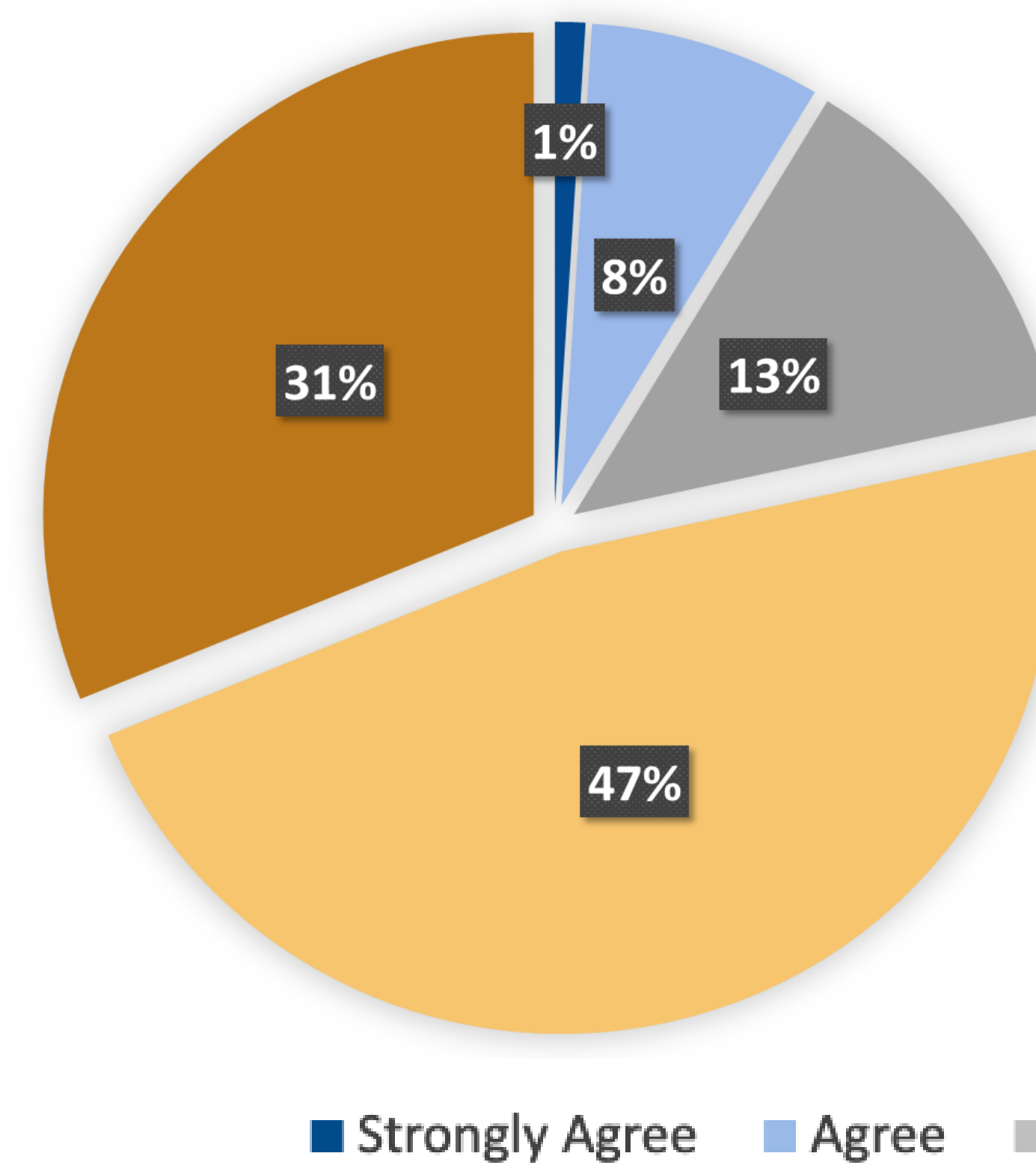
## Methods

The ATP-30 survey was given to 1<sup>st</sup> year, pre-clinical medical students anonymously via a Qualtrics link prior to the psychiatry portion of the Neuroscience and Behavior course. We augmented the survey with a few questions of our own, including a 'free response' answer; these questions were not included in scoring.

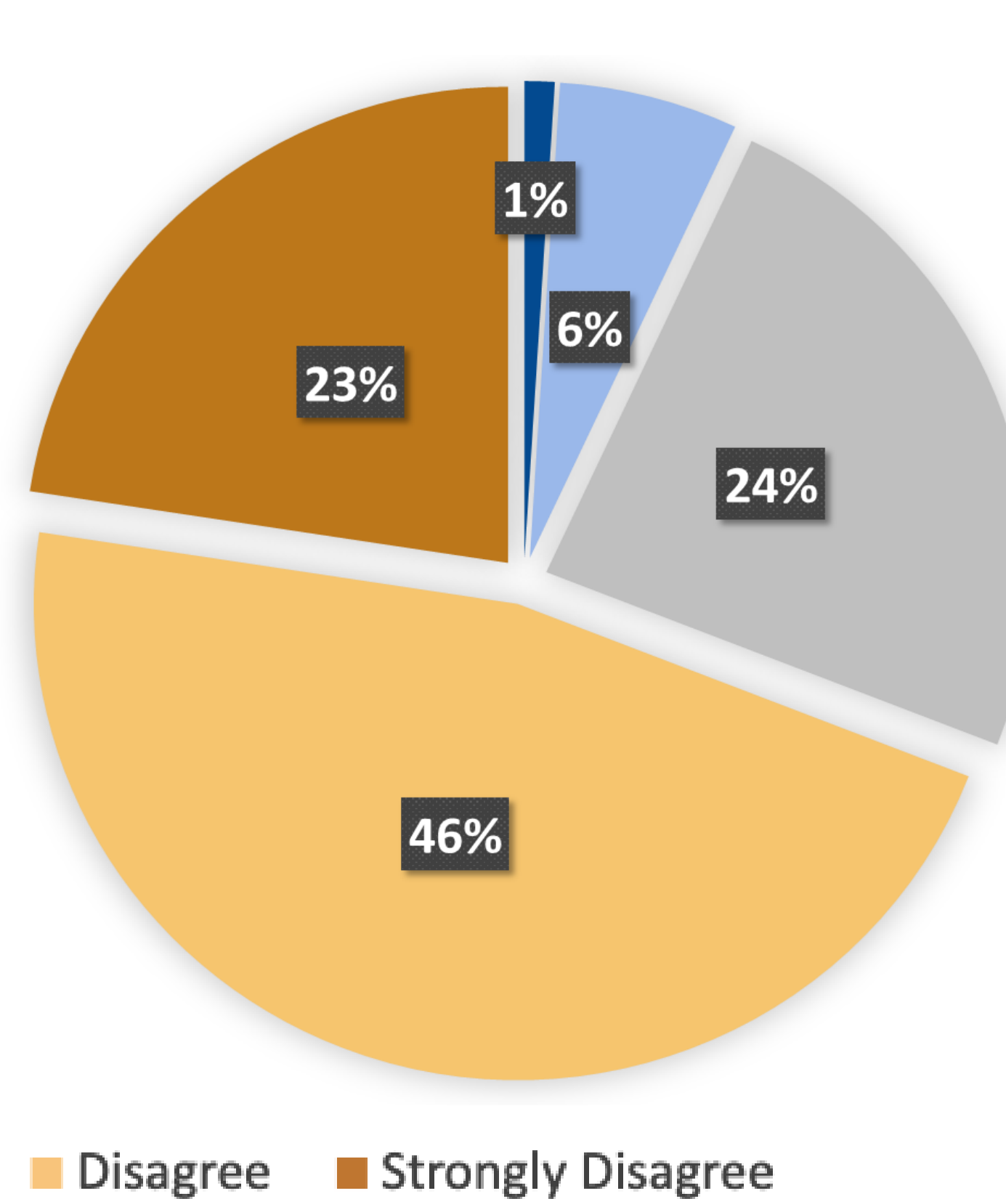
## Results

With 300 total responses, our survey, to our knowledge, is the largest US ATP study, and one of the largest ATP-30 studies found in literature. Our average score of 113.5 (S.D. 12.7) suggested a positive perception of psychiatry. However, further review suggested significant variability in the perceived value of mental health care and comfort working with those who suffer from these conditions. Further, review of the 'free response' unfortunately also suggested that significant biases remain.

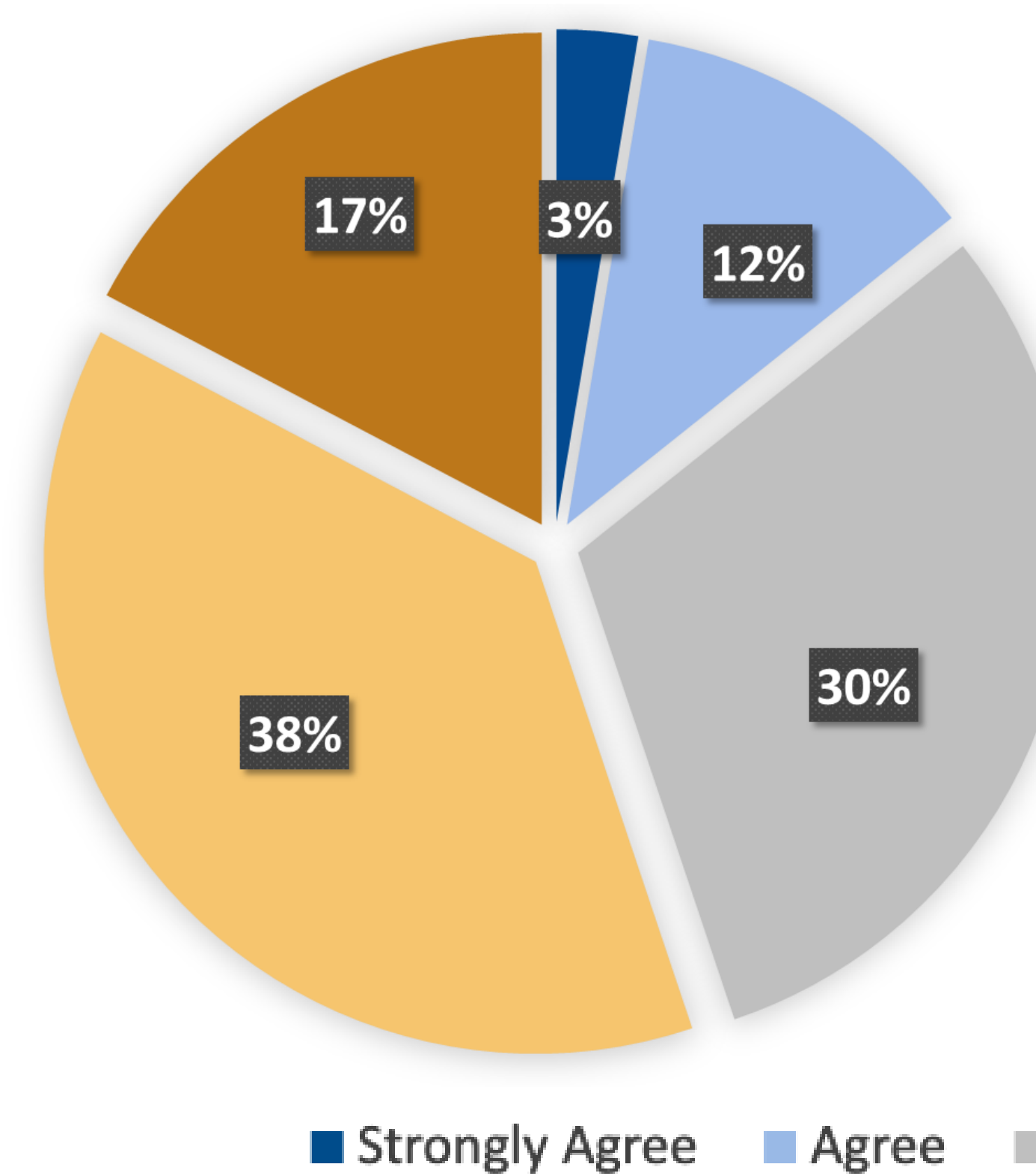
**Figure 1. Q1.** "Psychiatry is unappealing because it makes so little use of medical training".



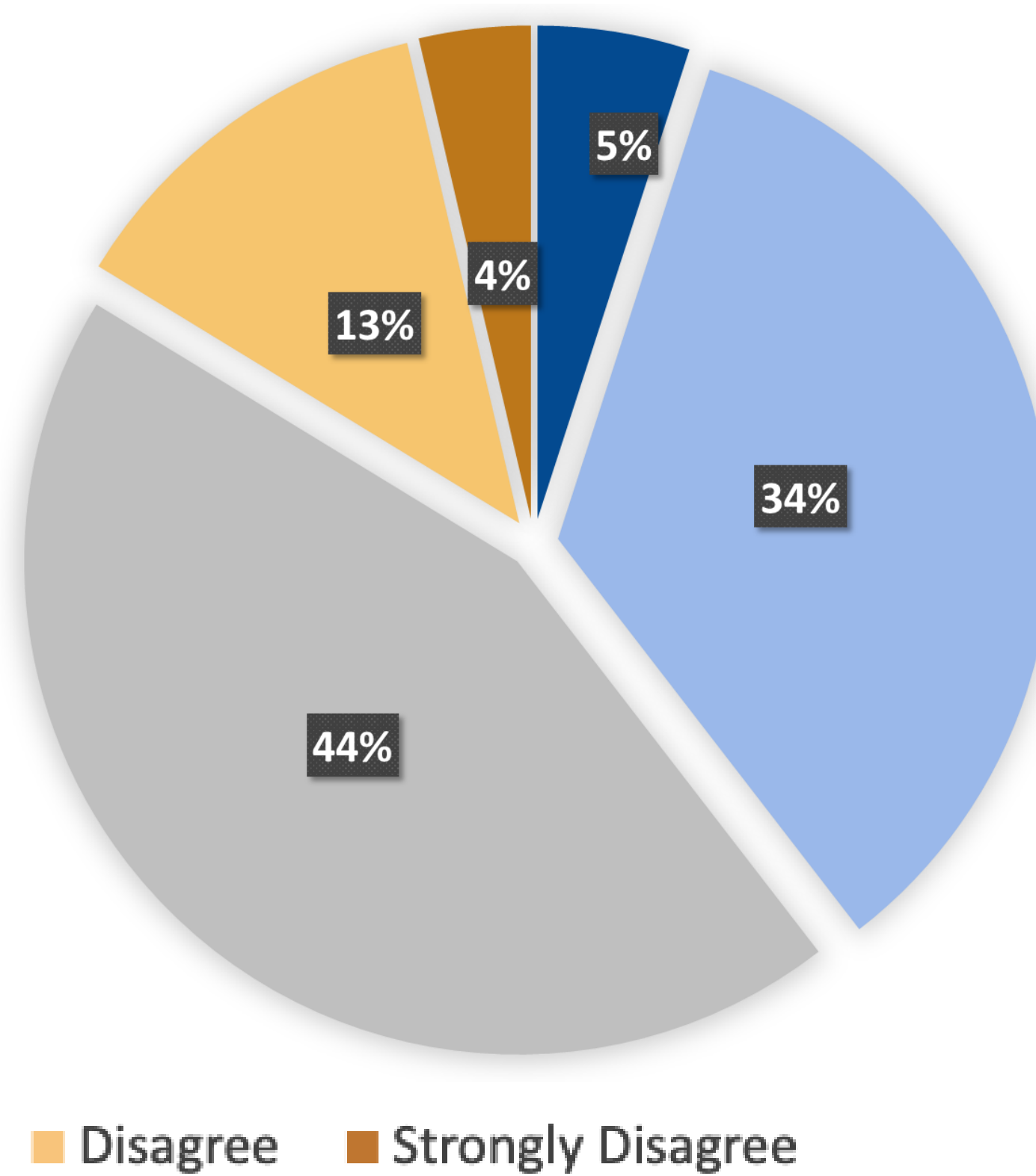
**Figure 2. Q3.** "Psychiatric hospitals are little more than prisons."



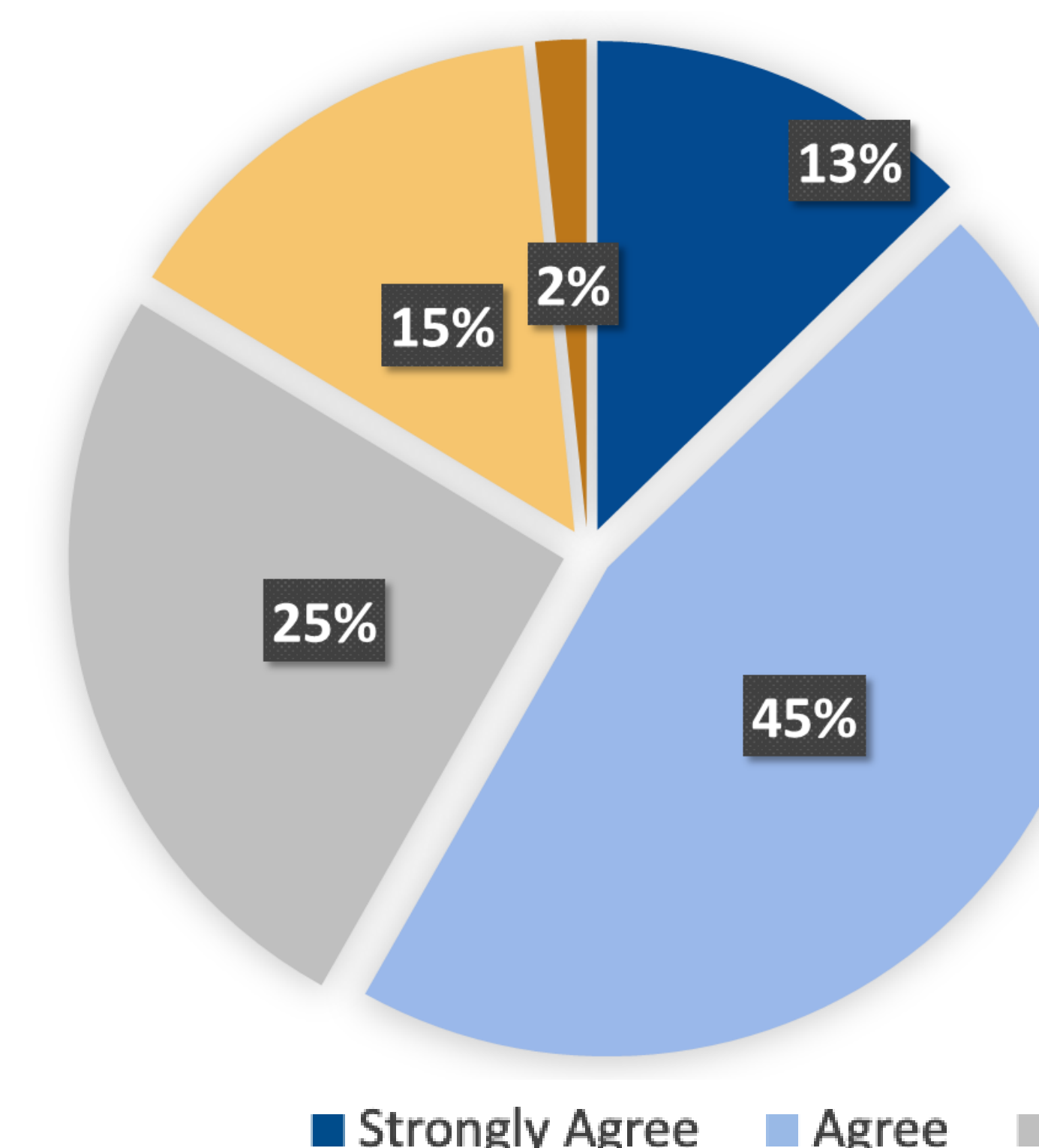
**Figure 3. Q4.** "I would like to be a psychiatrist."



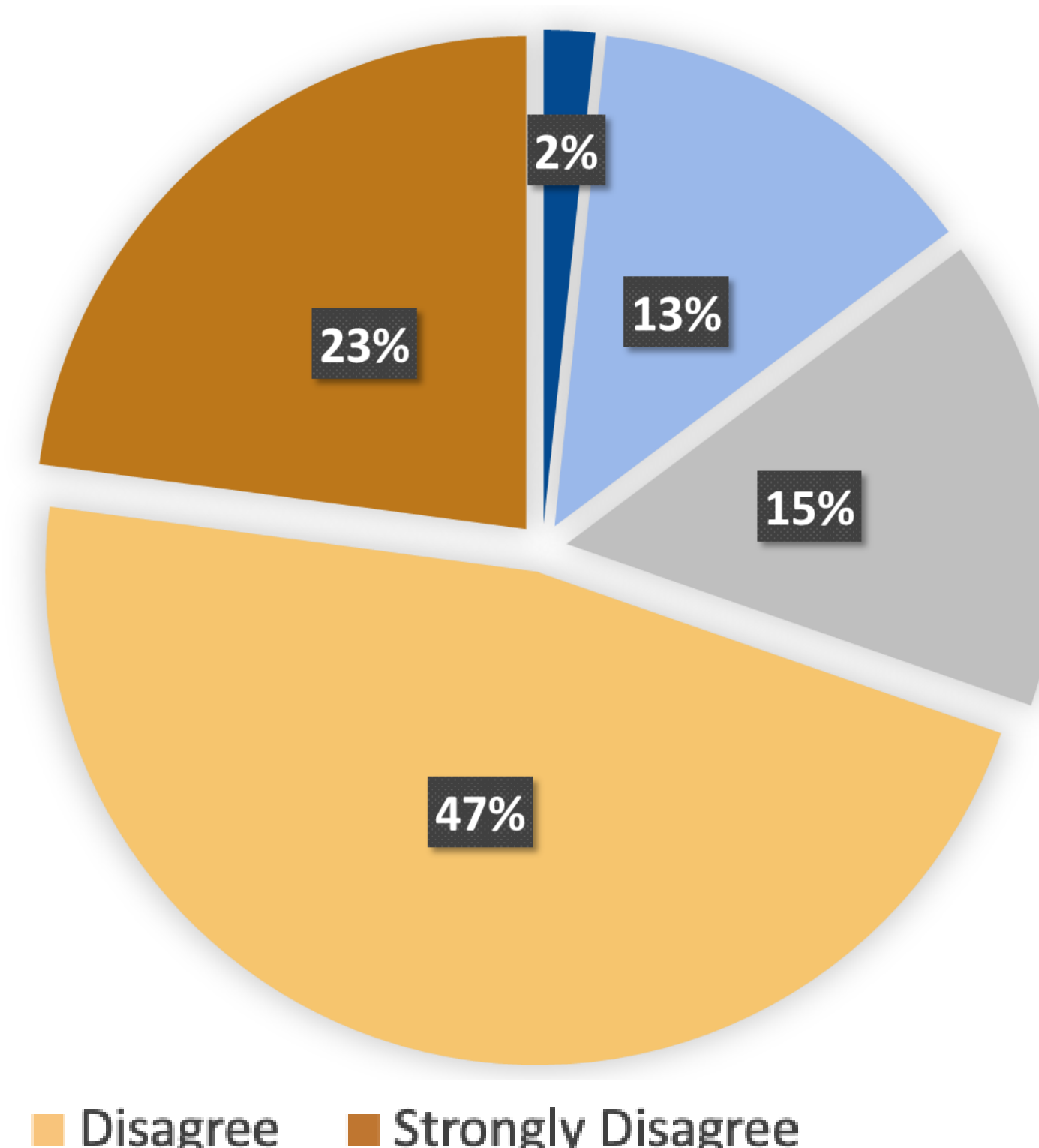
**Figure 4. Q10.** "The majority of students report that their psychiatric undergraduate training has been valuable."



**Figure 5. Q11.** "Psychiatry is a respected branch of medicine."



**Figure 6. Q31.** "Providing medical care to those with mental illness makes me uncomfortable."



## Selected free responses from Q32: "Please comment further about your thoughts towards psychiatry and psychiatric patients"

"I still have hesitancy towards psychiatry due to the history it has of discriminating against the LGBTQ community and women."

"When I think of psychiatry, I think of a doctor who over medicates their patients to control them. I don't see any difference between a mental health counselor, psychologist and a psychiatrist."

"It would appear that a lot of news I hear surrounding the specialty as well as the news regarding psychiatric patients paints a very negative picture. I think psychiatry should be viewed just as importantly as any other branch of medicine, but I can understand why some may not view it favorably."

"There is such a stigma surrounding mental health and it truly saddens me. It is quite literally in the name- health- and should be treated just like any ailment. Patients actively having a heart attack would never try to hide their symptoms for fear of judgement. A psychiatric patient should have the same liberty."

"Nervous about my lack of experience with patient interaction with patients with more severe psychosis"

## Conclusions

Pre-clinical, first-year medical students at Indiana University demonstrate ATP-30 results, on average, better than other western nations; only 12 students (~4%) in our sample had negative (indicated by scores <90) perceptions of psychiatry. However, many students are ambivalent at best about the field, endorse stigma about treating mental illness, and have outdated and at times inaccurate beliefs. For example, 17% did not consider psychiatry as a respected branch of medicine; 31% either agreed or had no opinion regarding psychiatric hospitals as prisons; 15% indicated that treating mental illness made them uncomfortable; and 61% were neutral or negative about their psychiatric education. Unfortunately, individual free responses regarding thoughts towards psychiatry also demonstrate ongoing and significant bias against the field. Additionally, some of the specific responses reveal notable initial perceptions of lack of medical knowledge application in psychiatry and belief that standards of psychiatric care are harmful to patients.

Study of changes in perceptions of students after curriculum exposure and additional survey questions are necessary to determine the ability to change student perceptions of psychiatry as well as to determine best practices to decrease bias. We hope such methods will increase interest in psychiatry and lead to improved care for those in need.

## References & Acknowledgements

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