



To: The Pew Charitable Trusts in Support of the West Virginia Intergovernmental Task Force on Juvenile Justice
From: The Mellman Group and Public Opinion Strategies
Re: West Virginia Voters Strongly Support Comprehensive Juvenile Justice Reform
Date: January 26, 2015

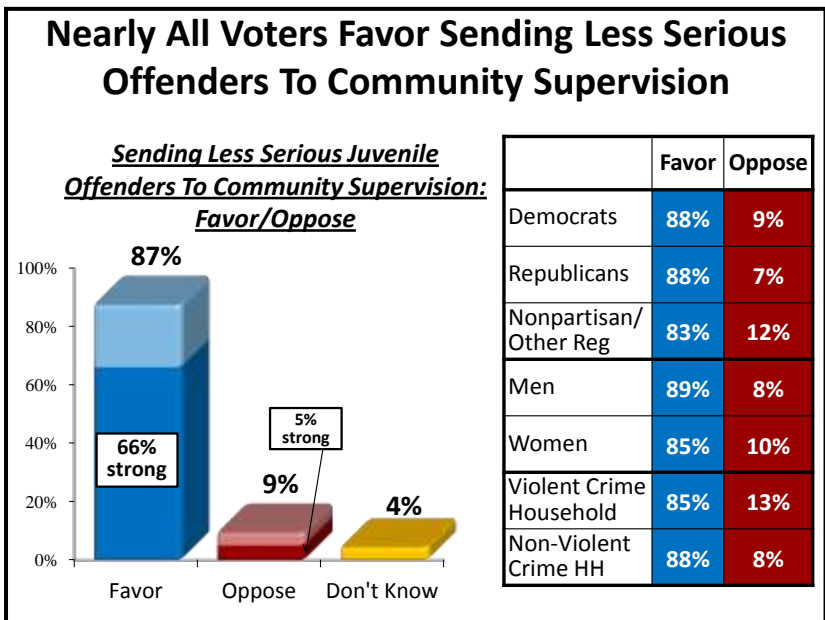
The Pew Charitable Trusts, a nonpartisan charitable organization, commissioned this survey as part of its technical assistance to the West Virginia Intergovernmental Task Force on Juvenile Justice. This survey was conducted to examine public opinion on juvenile justice policy in West Virginia utilizing a bipartisan polling team. This analysis represents the findings of a statewide survey of the likely November 2016 electorate in West Virginia using a registration-based sample including cell phones and landlines. 600 interviews were conducted by telephone January 14-18, 2015. The margin of error for each question is +/-4.0% at a 95% level of confidence, higher for subgroups depending on their size.

Our recently completed survey demonstrates West Virginians strongly support comprehensive reform of the state’s juvenile justice system. Voters across the political spectrum support reducing the use of costly state-funded facilities, reinvesting the savings into community supervision and mental health treatment for less serious offenders, and reserving state-funded facilities for juveniles who commit serious crimes, not status offenses like skipping school.

VOTERS OVERWHELMINGLY SUPPORT SENDING FEWER LOW-LEVEL JUVENILE OFFENDERS TO STATE-FUNDED RESIDENTIAL FACILITIES AND STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY SUPERVISION

West Virginia voters are clearly supportive of reforms that reduce the use of expensive state-funded facilities. Nearly nine in ten (87%) favor a proposal to place less-serious juvenile offenders in community supervision instead of placing them in state-funded facilities and reinvest the savings in substance abuse and other services, with two-thirds (66%) supporting it strongly (see question wording in footnote).¹ Only one in ten (9%) oppose the plan—5% strongly.

Support for this proposal crosses traditional partisan lines, with 88% of registered Democrats joining 88% of Republicans and 83% of independents. Moreover, households with a victim of a violent crime (85%) are almost equally likely to favor the proposal as the electorate as a whole (87%).



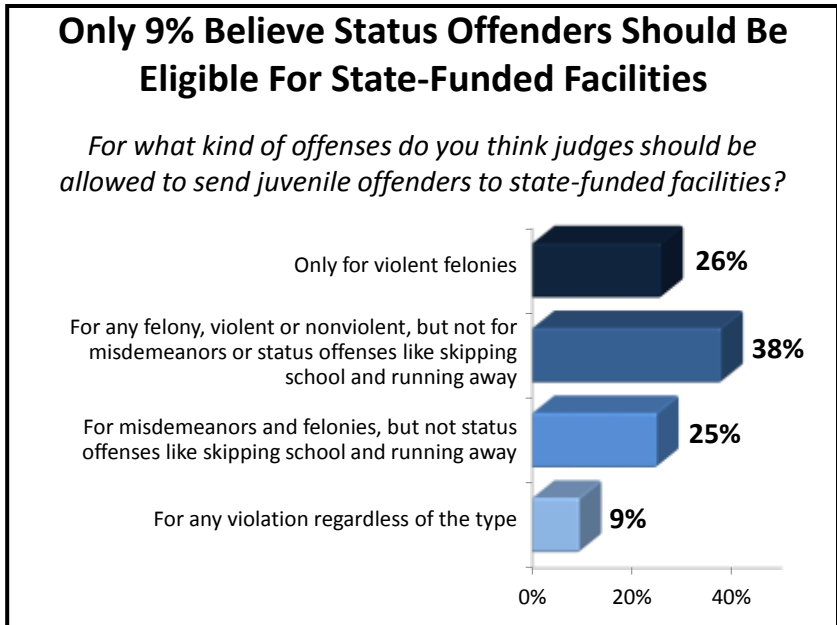
¹ “There are many ways juvenile offenders can be handled by the system, but most options involve supervision in the community, placement in a state funded residential facility, or a combination of both. It has been proposed that juveniles who commit less serious crimes be sent to community supervision and that the savings be reinvested into communities to strengthen supervision and provide mental health, family support and substance abuse services in West Va. Would you favor or oppose this proposal?”

VOTERS VOICE BROAD SUPPORT FOR MORE TARGETED USE OF STATE-FUNDED FACILITIES

West Virginians strongly believe state-funded facilities should be focused on the most-serious offenders. Nine in ten (89%) believe courts should only be able to sentence juvenile offenders to a state-funded facility for committing a felony or misdemeanor offense, but not for status offenses like skipping school and running away. Fully 64% believe that limit should be set at felony offenses *only*.

These views are held by members of both parties, crime victims, and law enforcement. Nearly nine in ten Democrats (88%), Republicans (88%), independents (89%) and 84%

of violent crime victim households believe state-funded facilities should be focused on those who commit misdemeanor or felony offenses, as do 91% of law enforcement households. Majorities of all these groups believe they should be focused on felony offenders: 68% of Democrats, 61% of Republicans, 56% of independents, and 63% of violent crime households.



Accordingly, there is little appetite for involving the justice system in status offenses like skipping school. When asked whether schools, families and communities or the justice system should deal with juveniles who have skipped school, 90% believe schools, families and communities should take the lead in dealing with behavior such as skipping school. Eighty-one percent (81%) take the same view when it comes to skipping school *repeatedly*. Only 9% and 18%, respectively, want to turn truants over to the justice system.

WEST VIRGINIANS ARE FOCUSED ON OUTCOMES, NOT SENTENCE LENGTHS

Nearly nine in ten (88%) agree that “It does not matter whether a juvenile offender is in a state-funded facility for 3 or 6 or 9 months. What really matters is that the system does a better job of making sure that when a juvenile does get out, he or she is less likely to commit another crime.” This is especially the case among Republicans (96% agree) but a large 83% majority of Democrats also agree.

CONCLUSION

West Virginians strongly support juvenile justice reform that focuses expensive state-funded facilities for more serious offenders and reinvests the savings into community supervision and treatment programs. An overwhelming majority favors preventing status offenders from being sent to state-funded facilities; indeed, there is also majority support for placing *misdemeanor* juvenile offenders in community supervision and treatment, sending only felony offenders to state-funded facilities. Instead, voters want a system that holds juvenile offenders accountable while getting them the services and programming they need to ensure they are less likely to commit another crime and more likely to become productive members of society.