Public Opinion on Juvenile Justice in America

Overview

Voters support sending serious juvenile offenders to corrections facilities, but they favor a range of less-costly alternatives for lower-level offenders, according to a nationwide poll conducted in 2014 by a bipartisan team of pollsters, the Mellman Group and Public Opinion Strategies. Voters see juvenile corrections facilities as government programs that should be subject to a basic cost-benefit test, and they strongly support a more robust probation system and more intervention by families, schools, and social service agencies. When it comes to the juvenile justice system, voters want offending youth to get the services and supervision they need to change their behavior and stop committing crimes—even if that means less incarceration.

Key findings

1. Voters support diverting lower-level juvenile offenders from corrections facilities and investing the savings into probation and other alternatives.
2. Support for juvenile justice reform is strong across political parties, regions, and age, gender, and racial-ethnic groups.

Figure 1
Voters Prioritize Services and Supervision Over Incarceration for Juvenile Offenders

“Which of the following is more important to you personally?”

| Statement A | 75% Total treatment and supervision | 64% Strongly treatment and supervision |
| Statement B | 21% Total punishment | 14% Strongly punishment |

Party affiliations represent Democratic, independent, and Republican voters.

© 2014 The Pew Charitable Trusts
Underlying attitudes

Figure 2

Voters Say Juvenile Offenders Should Be Treated Differently From Adult Offenders

“Generally speaking, do you think the justice system should treat adult offenders and juvenile offenders the same, or should it treat juvenile offenders differently from adult offenders?”

![Chart showing 24% of voters think the justice system should treat adult and juvenile offenders the same, and 65% think it should treat them differently.]

Party affiliations represent Democratic, independent, and Republican voters.

© 2014 The Pew Charitable Trusts

Figure 3

Voters Say the Juvenile Corrections System Should Focus on Rehabilitation

“In your opinion, what should be the main purpose of placing a juvenile offender in a juvenile corrections facility, such as group homes, boot camps, and secure facilities similar to adult prisons? What is the second most important purpose?”

![Bar chart showing the main and second purposes of juvenile corrections facilities.]

© 2014 The Pew Charitable Trusts
Figure 4
Voters Care Less About Whether or How Long Juvenile Offenders Are Incarcerated Than About Preventing Crime

“It does not matter whether a juvenile offender is in a juvenile corrections facility for 6 or 12 or 18 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.”

Northeast Midwest South West
88% 87% 83% 88%

Geographic region

Note: Party affiliations represent Democratic, independent, and Republican voters.

© 2014 The Pew Charitable Trusts
Figure 5
Voters Are Sensitive to the Costs of the Juvenile Corrections System

“We should save our expensive juvenile corrections facilities for more serious juvenile offenders and create alternatives for less serious juvenile offenders that cost less.”

Total
90% agree
75% Strongly agree

Total by party affiliation

Note: Party affiliations represent Democrat, independent and Republican voters.
© 2014 The Pew Charitable Trusts

Figure 6
Voters Want a Strong Return on Their Investment in Juvenile Corrections Facilities

“State-funded juvenile corrections facilities are government programs, and just like any other government programs, they need to be put to the cost-benefit test to make sure taxpayers are getting the best bang for their buck.”

Total
85% agree
68% Strongly agree

Total by party affiliation

Note: Party affiliations represent Democratic, independent, and Republican voters.
© 2014 The Pew Charitable Trusts
Policy solutions

Figure 7
Voters Support Reducing the Number and Time Served of Low-Level Juvenile Offenders Sent to Corrections Facilities and Using the Savings to Improve Probation

“As a way to reduce the cost of the juvenile corrections system in your state, do you believe sending fewer less-serious juvenile offenders to juvenile corrections facilities and using some of the savings to create a stronger probation system that holds juvenile offenders accountable for their crimes in the community is generally acceptable or generally unacceptable?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Geographic region</th>
<th>Northeast</th>
<th>Midwest</th>
<th>South</th>
<th>West</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>81%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“As a way to reduce the cost of the juvenile corrections system in your state, do you believe reducing the time that less-serious juvenile offenders spend in juvenile corrections facilities and using some of the savings to create a stronger probation system that holds juvenile offenders accountable for their crimes in the community is generally acceptable or generally unacceptable?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Geographic region</th>
<th>Northeast</th>
<th>Midwest</th>
<th>South</th>
<th>West</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>79%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Party affiliations represent Democratic, independent, and Republican voters.

© 2014 The Pew Charitable Trusts
Figure 8
Voters Say That Nonviolent Juvenile Offenders Should Not Be in Corrections Facilities for More Than 6 Months

“There may be some circumstances where a nonviolent juvenile offender should be placed in a juvenile corrections facility, but they should never be removed from their homes for more than six months for a nonviolent crime.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Geographic region</th>
<th>Northeast</th>
<th>Midwest</th>
<th>South</th>
<th>West</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household type</th>
<th>Violent crime victim</th>
<th>Non violent crime victim</th>
<th>Law enforcement member</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Party affiliations represent Democratic, independent, and Republican voters.
© 2014 The Pew Charitable Trusts
Figure 9
Most Voters Say Juvenile Corrections Facilities Should Be Used Only for Felony-Level Offenders

“For what kind of offenses do you think judges should be allowed to send juvenile offenders to juvenile corrections facilities?”

69% Felonies only
36% Only violent felonies
33% For any felony, violent or nonviolent, but not for misdemeanors or status offenses like skipping school or running away
18% For misdemeanors or felonies, but not status offenses like skipping school or running away
9% For any violation, regardless of the type

Note: Party affiliations represent Democratic, independent, and Republican voters.
© 2014 The Pew Charitable Trusts
Figure 10
Most Voters Say Status Offenders and Technical Violators Should Not Go to Corrections Facilities

“Juveniles should never be placed in juvenile corrections facilities for status offenses like skipping school or running away, which would not be a crime if they were an adult.”

“Technical violations of probation and other types of community supervision, such as violating curfew or testing positive for drugs, should not result in placement in a juvenile corrections facility.”

Total agree 85%
Strongly agree 73%

Total by party affiliation
Democratic 85%
Independent 85%
Republican 85%

Total agree 63%
Strongly agree 45%

Total by party affiliation
Democratic 67%
Independent 62%
Republican 59%

Note: Party affiliations represent Democratic, independent, and Republican voters.
© 2014 The Pew Charitable Trusts

Figure 11
Most Voters Support Reinvesting Savings From Reducing Juvenile Facility Populations Into County Programs That Contribute to State-Level Savings

“It has been proposed that the state reward counties that send fewer less-serious offenders to state-funded juvenile corrections facilities by sharing some of the savings with the counties to reinvest into their local public safety programs. Would you favor or oppose this proposal?”

Total favor 80%
Strongly favor 62%

Total by party affiliation
Democratic 84%
Independent 79%
Republican 77%

Note: Party affiliations represent Democratic, independent, and Republican voters.
© 2014 The Pew Charitable Trusts
Figure 12
Nine in 10 Voters Want Families, Schools, and Social Service Agencies to Take More Responsibility for Youth Who Commit Low-Level Offenses

“Schools should be expected to address offenses that occur at school, such as damaging property or acting out, and only involve the juvenile justice system in extreme cases.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Geographic region</th>
<th>Northeast</th>
<th>Midwest</th>
<th>South</th>
<th>West</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total agree</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household type</th>
<th>Violent crime victim</th>
<th>Nonviolent crime victim</th>
<th>Law enforcement member</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total agree</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Schools should be expected to address offenses that occur at school, such as bullying or fighting, and only involve the juvenile justice system in extreme cases.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Geographic region</th>
<th>Northeast</th>
<th>Midwest</th>
<th>South</th>
<th>West</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total agree</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household type</th>
<th>Violent crime victim</th>
<th>Nonviolent crime victim</th>
<th>Law enforcement member</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total agree</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Parents and social service agencies need to take more responsibility for less-serious juvenile offenses like using drugs or running away, rather than turning them over to the juvenile justice system.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Geographic region</th>
<th>Northeast</th>
<th>Midwest</th>
<th>South</th>
<th>West</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total agree</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household type</th>
<th>Violent crime victim</th>
<th>Nonviolent crime victim</th>
<th>Law enforcement member</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total agree</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Party affiliations represent Democratic, independent, and Republican voters.
© 2014 The Pew Charitable Trusts
Figure 13

Voters Say Families, Schools, and Social Service Agencies Should Handle Low-Level Offenses and the Justice System Should Be Involved Only With More Serious Offenses

“Please tell me whether you believe schools, families, and social service agencies should deal with these behaviors or offenses themselves or these behaviors or offenses should be turned over directly to the juvenile justice system.”

*Differentials may not add up due to rounding.

© 2014 The Pew Charitable Trusts
Methodology

On behalf of The Pew Charitable Trusts’ public safety performance project, the Mellman Group and Public Opinion Strategies conducted phone interviews with 1,200 registered voters nationwide from June 21 to 26, 2014. The survey’s margin of error is plus or minus 2.8 percent, with a higher margin for subgroups.

Poll respondent demographics

36% identified as politically conservative
32% identified as politically moderate
32% identified as politically liberal
17% identified as victim or immediate family member of victim of violent crime
45% identified as victim or immediate family member of victim of nonviolent crime
11% identified as member of law enforcement household
For further information, please visit:
pewtrusts.org/publicsafety