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 believe that juveniles are fundamentally different from adults and want policymakers to invest in programs that help prevent youth from reoffending.
2. Voters support diverting lower-level juvenile offenders from corrections facilities and investing the savings into probation and other alternatives.
3. 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
“Getting juvenile offenders the treatment, counseling, and supervision they need to make it less likely that they will commit another crime, even if that means they spend no time in a juvenile corrections facility.”

Statement B
“Making sure juvenile offenders receive a serious punishment and not just get a slap on the wrist, even if that means they are sent to a juvenile corrections facility.”

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<td>B</td>
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Total by party affiliation:

- Democratic: 78% (A), 19% (B)
- Independent: 75% (A), 18% (B)
- Republican: 70% (A), 26% (B)

Party affiliations represent Democratic, independent, and Republican voters.

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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?”

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“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?”

- To rehabilitate the juvenile so he or she might become a productive citizen: 71%
- To deter future crimes: 8%
- To keep the juvenile locked up in order to protect society from crimes he or she might commit: 8%
- To provide justice for victims: 5%
- To punish the juvenile: 6%

- Second purpose: 84%
  - To rehabilitate the juvenile so he or she might become a productive citizen: 41%
  - To deter future crimes: 24%
  - To keep the juvenile locked up in order to protect society from crimes he or she might commit: 24%
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 sent to a juvenile corrections facility or supervised in the community. What really matters is that the system does a better job of making sure that he or she is less likely to commit another crime.”

“This 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.”

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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 agree 90%  
Strongly agree 75%”

Total by party affiliation

Democrat 91%  
Independent 89%  
Republican 89%  

Note: Party affiliations represent Democrat, independent and Republican voters.  
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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 agree 85%  
Strongly agree 68%”

Total by party affiliation

Democrat 81%  
Independent 86%  
Republican 88%  

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

![Circle chart showing voter support](chart)

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“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?”

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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.”

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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?”

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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.”

85% Total agree
73% Strongly agree

“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.”

63% Total agree
45% Strongly agree

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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?”

80% Total favor
62% Strongly favor

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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.”

“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.”

“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.”

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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.

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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

Contact: Christina Zurla, communications manager Email: czurla@pewtrusts.org Project website: pewtrusts.org/publicsafety

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