

NATIONAL JUVENILE JUSTICE NETWORK

Polling on Public Attitudes

TREATMENT OF YOUTH IN TROUBLE WITH THE LAW

FACT SHEET | OCTOBER 2016 UPDATE

Recent studies and polls on public attitudes toward youth who break the law, the juvenile justice system, and rehabilitation consistently suggest the public understands that the toughest posture on youth crime is not the smartest one. Recent polls show:

Voters Want More Youth Crime Dealt with in the Community, and Fewer Youth Incarcerated

A national poll conducted in 2016 by Gerstein, Bocian and Agne Strategies (GBA) for the Youth First initiative found that voters:

- Want jurisdictions to invest in alternatives to youth incarceration, such as intensive rehabilitation, education, job training, community services, and programs that provide youth the opportunity to repair harm to victims and communities (83 percent).
- Believe that teaching youth who commit an offense to take responsibility for their actions does not require incarceration (73 percent).
- Seven out of 10 Americans want states to be required to reduce racial and ethnic disparities in the youth justice system, while nearly as many believe that more funding should be found to pay for additional public defenders to represent children in court.¹

Voters Believe Young People Can Change

- GBA's 2016 survey of 1,000 adults found nearly 8 out of 10 survey participants believe that youth who commit delinquent acts have the capacity to grow and change, and have the ability to change for the better (78 percent).²

¹ Gerstein, Bocian and Agne Strategies, "Poll Results on Youth Justice Reform" (January 2016), at <http://bit.ly/2dzm3hX>. (Referred to as "GBA 2016 Poll" hereafter.) The finding in the first bullet are echoed in a 2014 poll here: Pew Charitable Trusts, "Public Opinion on Juvenile Justice in America" (Public Safety Performance Project, December 2014), at <http://bit.ly/1BlbcY7>.

² GBA 2016 Poll; the result was almost identical to GBA's 2011 poll, "Campaign for Youth Justice System Survey" (October 2011), <http://bit.ly/2dQYso7>.

- In 2007, a survey of 500 adults found 89 percent of those surveyed agreed that “almost all youth who commit crimes have the potential to change” and more than 70 percent agreed that “incarcerating youthful offenders without rehabilitation is the same as giving up on them.”³
- A 2006 Florida poll found 64 percent agreed or strongly agreed that youth who commit violent offenses can be rehabilitated.⁴

The Public is Willing to Pay for Rehabilitation

- In a series of 2007 state polls, respondents were more willing to pay for additional rehabilitation than for additional punishment. Furthermore, the average amount they were willing to pay was almost 20 percent greater for rehabilitation than for incarceration.⁵

Conservatives and Liberals Agree Youth Should Be Treated as Youth

- A 2014 poll by the Pew Charitable Trusts found that a majority of voters of all party affiliations believe that youth who commit crimes should be treated differently from adults.⁶
- The 2016 GBA poll found that a clear majority of Americans (77 percent) favored shifting the youth justice system from incarceration and punishment to prevention and rehabilitation. This was true regardless of party affiliation (Democrats 79 percent; Independents 80 percent; Republicans 71 percent).⁷

Lastly, public opinion has remained solidly supportive of rehabilitation for youth regardless of public perceptions about the rate or severity of youth crime. A majority of the public maintains this support for the juvenile justice system even though it thinks (incorrectly) that youth violence is a major problem and that youth crime rates are increasing.⁸

³ Center for Children’s Law and Policy, “Potential for Change: Public Attitudes and Policy Preferences for Juvenile Justice Systems Reform,” Executive Summary (Chicago: The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Models for Change initiative, November 1, 2007), at <http://www.modelsforchange.net/publications/121>.

⁴ Daniel P. Mears et al., “Public Opinion and the Foundation of the Juvenile Court,” *Criminology* 45, no. 1 (2007).

⁵ Alex R. Piquero and Laurence Steinberg, “Rehabilitation Versus Incarceration of Juvenile Offenders: Public Preferences in Four Models for Change States,” Executive Summary (Chicago: The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Models for Change initiative, Nov. 1, 2007), at <http://bit.ly/1KgI8IA>.

⁶ Pew Charitable Trusts (December 2014), at <http://bit.ly/1B1bcY7>.

⁷ GBA 2016 poll.

⁸ In actuality, total arrests of youth for violent crime are at 20-year lows and are still falling nationwide. See Jeffrey A. Butts, “Total Youth Arrests for Violent Crime Still Falling Nationwide,” *Research and Evaluation Data Bits* (New York, NY: Research and Evaluation Center, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York, September 27, 2016), accessed at <http://bit.ly/2dYvxil>.