

FOCUS

Views from the National Council on Crime and Delinquency

Attitudes of US Voters toward Youth Crime and the Justice System

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Findings in Brief

- Of those polled, 9 out of 10 agree that youth crime is a major problem in our communities.
- By more than a 15 to 1 margin (92% to 6%), the US voting public believes that decisions to transfer youth to the adult court should be made on a case-by-case basis and not be governed by a blanket policy.
- A majority of 9 to 1 (91%) believes that rehabilitative services and treatment for incarcerated youth can help prevent future crimes.
- More than 80% of respondents think that spending on rehabilitative services and treatment for youth will save tax dollars in the long run.
- Approximately 7 in 10 feel that putting youth under age 18 in adult correctional facilities makes them more likely to commit future crime.
- Of those polled, more than two-thirds (68%) disagree that incarcerating youth in adult facilities teaches them a lesson and deters them from committing future crimes.
- Voters are about twice as likely to agree (60%) than disagree (32%) that non-white youth are more likely than white youth to be prosecuted in the adult criminal justice system.

Introduction

In January, 2007, NCCD commissioned Zogby International to conduct a national public opinion poll about American attitudes toward our nation’s response to youth crime. The results of this poll showed that striking majorities favor rehabilitative services for young people and, despite a lack of confidence in the juvenile system, are largely opposed to prosecuting youth in the adult court and incarcerating youth in adult facilities.

The public apparently recognizes that young people need and deserve assistance and forbearance on the part of society and its institutions. It is clear from the survey responses that most of the American voting public thinks that giving young people the help they need to mature, learn, and overcome the mistakes of youth is key to enhanced public safety.

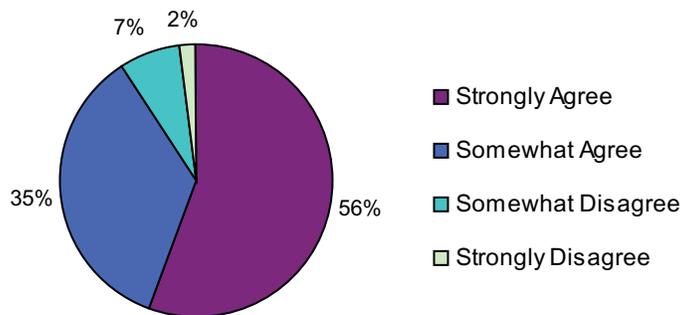
Method

This survey of likely voters was conducted by telephone according to a methodology approved by the American Association for Public Opinion Research. Zogby uses validated weighting and sampling procedures. The sample size was 1,043 interviews drawn at random. As many as six calls were made to reach a sampled telephone number. The margin of error is +/- 3.1 percentage points. (Margins of error are slightly higher in sub-groups.) The sample was drawn from an extremely varied group of voters with respect to age, geography, political persuasion, gender, income, religious affiliation, marital status, and ethnicity.

Survey Questions

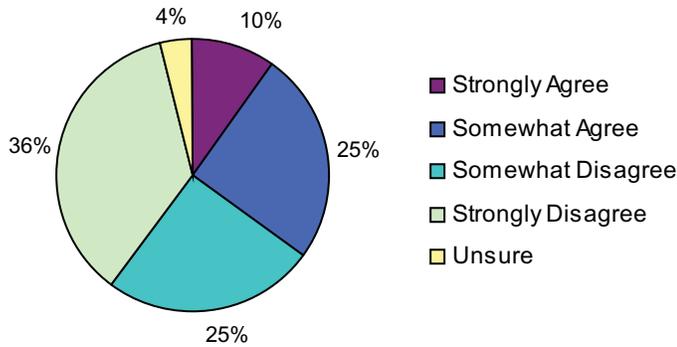
Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statements?

1: Crime committed by young people is a major problem in our communities.

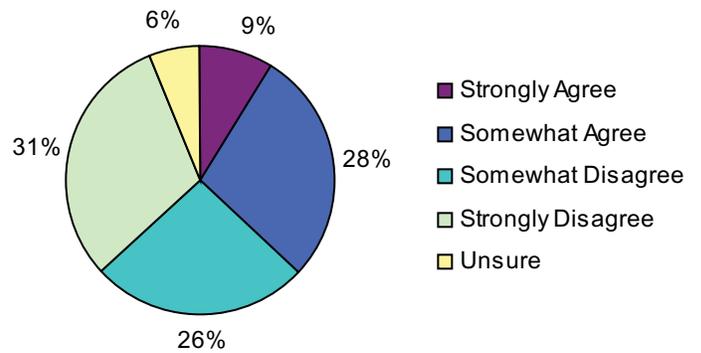


Of those polled, 9 in 10 feel that crime committed by young people is a major problem in our communities. There is *strong* agreement with this statement by 56% of the respondents.

2: The juvenile justice system is effective in getting youth to stop committing **violent** crimes.

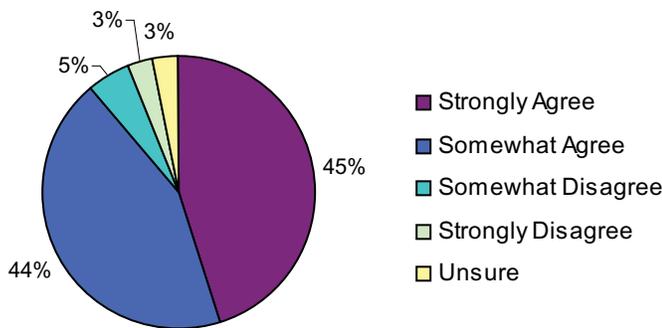


3: The juvenile justice system is effective in getting youth to stop committing **nonviolent** crimes.



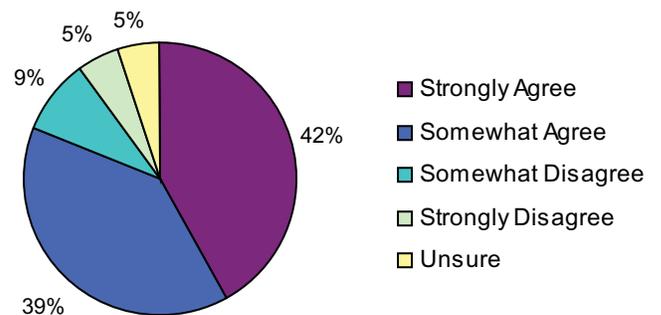
Clearly, there is doubt among the voting public that the juvenile justice system is doing an effective job in reducing crime, both violent and nonviolent. Only slightly more (37% v. 35%) feel that the juvenile system is effective in stopping nonviolent crime as in stopping violent crime. Our subsequent questions give a more detailed picture of what the public wants for young people.

4: Rehabilitative services and treatment for incarcerated youth can help prevent future crimes.



A vast majority of 89% thinks that rehabilitative services and treatment will help reduce crime. About half of those polled are in strong agreement that rehabilitation and treatment can help prevent youth from committing future crime.

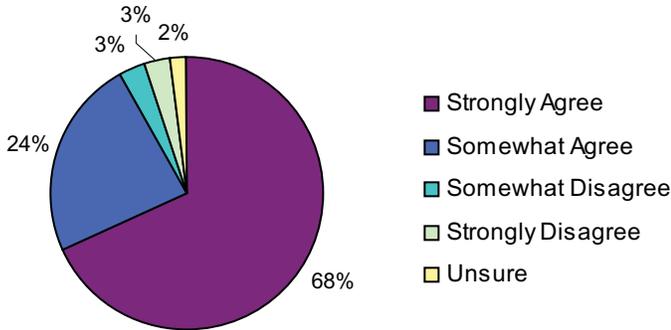
5. Considering taxpayer resources, spending on enhanced rehabilitation services for youth in the juvenile justice system will save tax dollars in the long run.



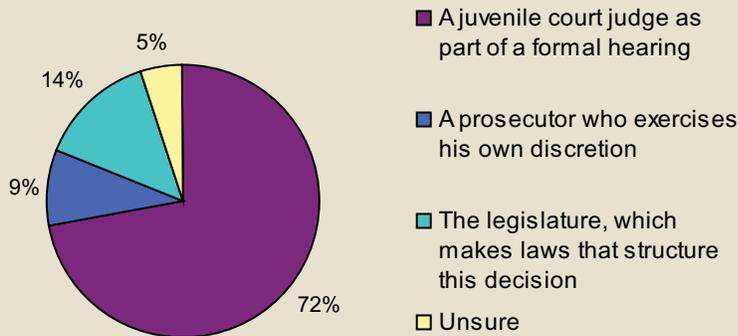
Over 80% of respondents believe that spending on enhanced rehabilitation services for youth in the juvenile justice system will save tax dollars in the long run. In comparison, only 1 in 7 (14%) disagrees.

6: Instead of a blanket policy about trying youth in adult court, these decisions should be made on a case-by-case basis.

An overwhelming 9 in 10 majority (92%) thinks that instead of a blanket policy about trying youth in adult court, these decisions should be made on a case-by-case basis. Moreover, nearly 7 in 10 (68%) are in strong agreement with this statement.



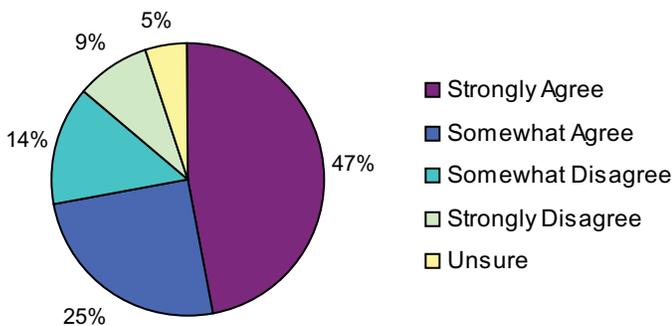
The decision to try a person under age 18 in the criminal court system should be made by which of the following?



Respondents overwhelmingly agree that a juvenile court judge should be the one who decides to try a person under age 18 in the criminal court system. Nearly three in four (72%) choose this option. People are much less likely to say this decision should be made by the legislature, which makes laws that structure the decision (14%) or by a prosecutor who exercises his or her own discretion (9%).

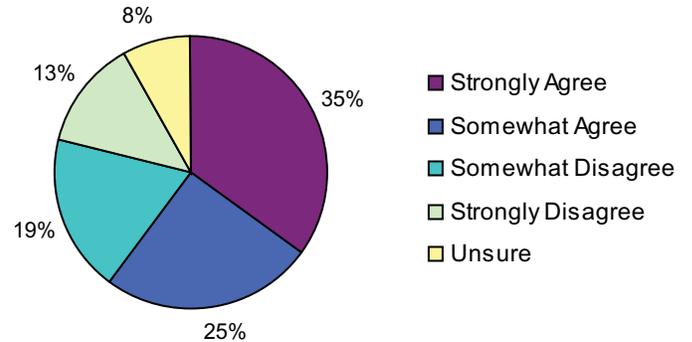
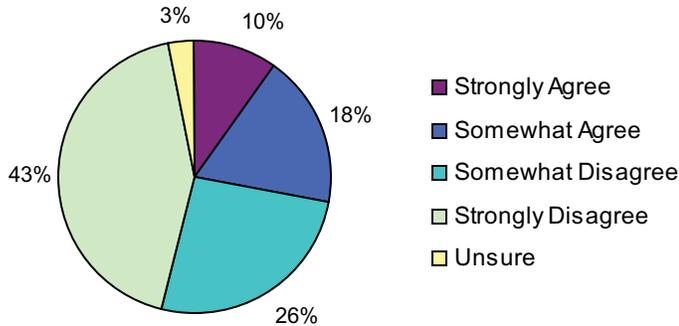
7: Putting youth under age 18 in adult correctional facilities makes them more likely to commit future crime.

Of those polled, a significant majority (72%) feels that incarcerating youth in adult correctional facilities contributes to them committing crimes after their eventual release. Almost half (47%) agree strongly with this statement.



8: Incarcerating youth with adults in adult prisons or jails teaches them a lesson and deters them from committing future crimes.

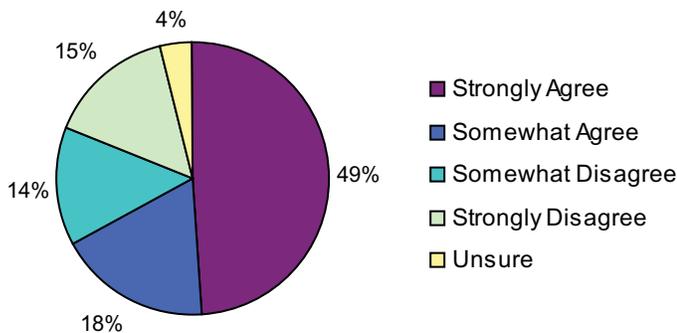
10: Non-white youth under age 18 are more likely than white youth to be prosecuted in the criminal justice system.



A majority of 69% does not believe that putting youth in adult facilities is a deterrent to future crime. Of those polled, only 1 in 10 feels strongly that adult facilities teach young people to stop committing crime.

By almost 2 to 1 (60% to 32%) respondents to the poll think that non-white youth are more likely than white youth to be prosecuted in the adult system.* Agreement with this varies among subgroups, from African Americans and progressives (74% and 82%) to Republicans and very conservative people (58% and 52%).

9. Persons under age 18 should not be incarcerated in jails and prisons that hold adults.



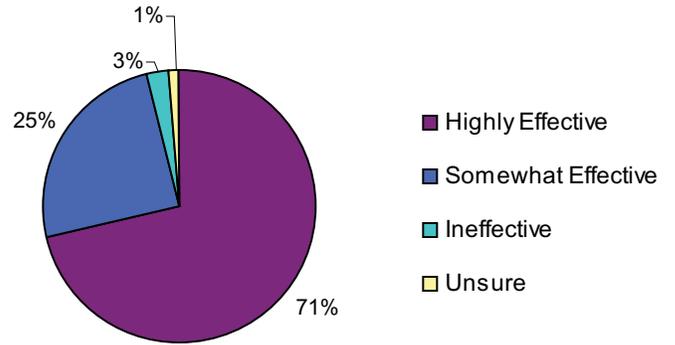
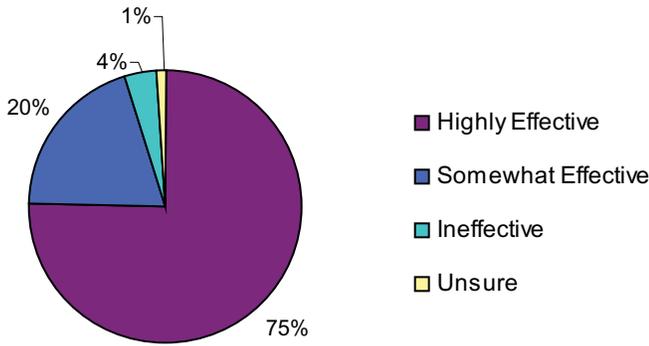
Another clear majority (67%) feels that young people should not be incarcerated in jails and prisons that hold adult prisoners. Again, almost half (49%) agree strongly with this statement.

* It should be noted that statistics show that youth of color are *in fact* more likely to be prosecuted in adult court for the same crimes as white youth. (See NCCD report, *And Justice for Some*, 2007).

11. Please tell me if you think each of the following is a highly effective, somewhat effective, or ineffective way to reduce crime by juveniles.

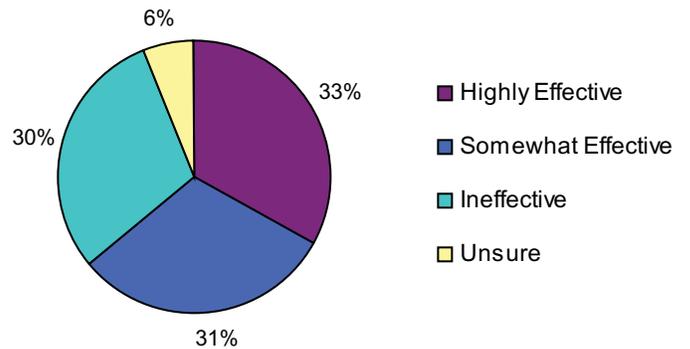
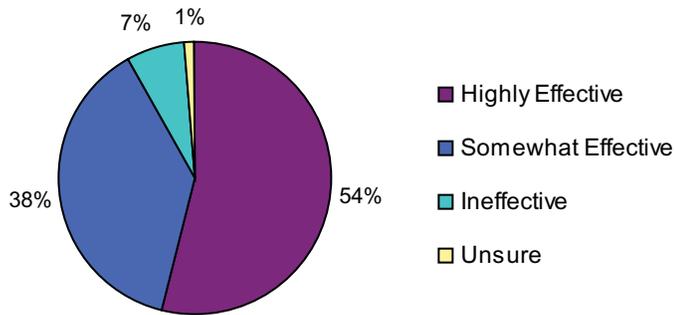
Increasing education and job skills training for youth in the juvenile system.

Increasing prevention services for youth in the community before they get in trouble.

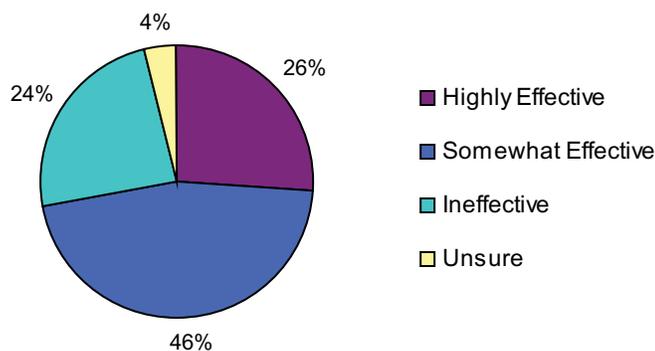


Increasing counseling and substance abuse treatment through the juvenile justice system.

Harsher penalties for offenders under age 18.

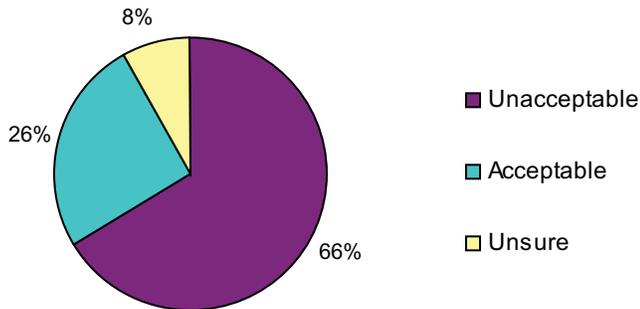


Prosecuting more youth in the adult criminal justice system.



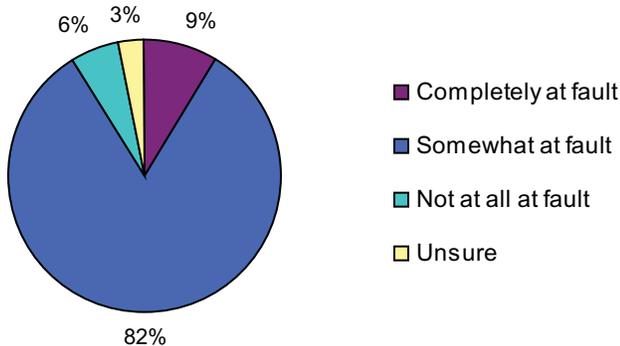
Two of these methods stand out above the rest for their estimated effectiveness, as more than 7 in 10 voters think it would be highly effective to reduce juvenile crime by increasing prevention services for youth in the community before they get in trouble (71%), and by increasing education and job skills training for youth in the juvenile system (75%). Only 4% of respondents or less think these two methods would be ineffective in reducing crime by juveniles.

12: Do you think it is unacceptable or acceptable that criminal convictions of youth under age 18, even for minor crimes, should negatively impact their future opportunities for jobs and education?



Voters are much more likely to find it unacceptable than acceptable that criminal convictions of youth under age 18, even for minor crimes, should negatively impact a youth’s future opportunities for jobs and education. Two in three (66%) say this is unacceptable, while one in four (26%) do think it is acceptable. Eight percent are not sure.

13: Do you think that the parents of youth that have committed crimes are completely at fault, somewhat at fault, or not at all at fault for the behavior of their children?



Most people put some of the blame on the parents of youth who have committed crimes. Over four in five (82%) say that these parents are somewhat at fault. On opposite ends of the spectrum are 9% who say the parents are completely at fault, and 6% who say they are not at fault.

Conclusion

In the 1990s, driven by media accounts and political discussions about the rise of a generation of “superpredators,” 40 states changed laws related to the treatment of youth. Many instituted harsher penalties and lowered the age of jurisdiction of the criminal court system. Nearly the entire nation moved in this new direction.

It is important to take stock of where we are and whether the public continues to support these policies. According to the results of this recent poll, the public is clearly concerned about youth crime, feels that young people should be held accountable for misconduct, and has limited confidence in the effectiveness of the juvenile system. However, by large majorities, US voters do not think that trying youth in adult court and incarcerating them in adult prison are appropriate responses. Nor do they think that an adult conviction should hamper a youth for the rest of her life. They do believe that any decision to remand a youth to adult court should be made by a judge and not by policy, and that prevention efforts and effective services for young people already in trouble are the best ways to enhance public safety.

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Continuing the Struggle for Justice

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