

August 18, 2008

# Reforming DC's Youth Incarceration System

## Strong Support for Rehabilitating Convicted Youth

## Strong Support for Keeping Charged Youth in Juvenile Facilities

**To:** Interested Parties

**From:** Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research

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### Introduction

Amidst the recent debate about the placement of arrested youth in the District of Columbia, the public has now weighed in. In a new poll of 820 registered voters in the District, 77 percent believe youth who are arrested and awaiting trial should be placed in a juvenile facility, not in the DC jail, an adult facility.

Moreover, the public overwhelmingly believes that youth should be rehabilitated and not merely incarcerated. There is a strong consensus that rehabilitating youth helps prevent future crimes and will ultimately save taxpayer money in the long run.

Voters believe the most effective ways to rehabilitate youth involve providing them with opportunities to better themselves – vocational training, high school degree assistance, and mental health treatment.

DC voters do not have a firm knowledge of youth placement in adult jails, with more than a quarter unsure about whether or not youth are ever placed in DC jail, and nearly half believing that youth are never incarcerated in DC jail.

The following are key findings from a survey conducted July 31 – August 6, 2008 of 820 registered DC voters by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research. The survey is subject to a margin of error of 3.5 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level.

### Key Findings

- **Overwhelming majority believes that youth should be placed in juvenile facilities when arrested and awaiting trial.** More than three out of four DC voters (77 percent) believe that youth who are arrested and awaiting trial should be held in a juvenile facility, rather than being held in DC jail. This contrasts to only 8 percent who believe that these

youth should be held in DC jail, while the rest are unsure or believe it depends on the circumstances. Voters of all demographic types overwhelmingly believe that arrested youth belong in a juvenile facility.

DC voters also believe that youth who are held in adult jails when awaiting trial are more likely to go on and commit future crimes than if they were held in a juvenile facility (62 percent – 26 percent who believe that they are less likely to commit crimes in the future).

- **Voters believe strongly that DC youth should be rehabilitated and not just incarcerated after committing a crime for a multitude of reasons.** DC voters strongly believe that rehabilitating youth yields a stronger benefit than just incarcerating them in a prison system.
  - Fully, 84 percent believe rehabilitating youth will save money in the long run (84 percent believe it will save money – 12 percent who believe it will waste tax dollars).
  - Voters believe that in addition to saving taxpayer dollars, rehabilitating youth also prevents future crimes (62 percent believe prevents crime – 26 percent believe it does little to prevent crime).
  - Voters also believe that by rehabilitating youth, they can be reintroduced to society as responsible contributors (82 percent – 11 percent who believe they should be held in jail) and that they are capable of achieving positive growth and potential to improve for the better (77 percent – 16 percent who believe they will not change).
- **DC residents believe the most effective ways to rehabilitate youth involve providing them with opportunities to better themselves.** DC voters strongly feel that rehabilitating youth hinges on giving them the tools to improve themselves and lead a productive life, rather than merely punishing.
  - *Education and vocational training.* More than three quarters of voters (77 percent) believe that providing vocational training to youth who are charged with or convicted of committing crimes is a very effective way of rehabilitating them – and, voters almost universally agree that it is an effective way to rehabilitate (95 percent). Similar margins also feel that helping convicted youth earn a high school degree is an effective way to rehabilitate (76 percent very effective, 95 percent effective). Among voters who personally knew a youth placed in DC jail or a juvenile facility, support for these measures jumped to 83 and 84 percent very effective, respectively. Ward 8 voters believe these rehabilitation measures are especially effective (82 percent very effective), and white women show higher than average levels of support for these measures, with 87 percent believing that providing vocational training and high school diploma opportunities are very effective methods of rehabilitation.
  - *Mentoring, treatment, counseling.* Following closely behind, voters believe that pairing youth with an adult mentor (65 percent very effective, 91 percent effective), ensuring access to mental health treatment (64 percent very effective, 93 percent effective), helping youth receive family counseling (61 percent very

effective, 92 percent effective) and helping youth make the transition back to life in the community (61 percent very effective, 91 percent effective) were very effective methods for rehabilitation.

- **The public rejects putting convicted youth in an adult facility as a means to rehabilitate.** Voters overwhelmingly subscribe to methods of rehabilitation that provide youth with opportunities to better themselves and go on to lead productive lives. Voters do not believe that placing youth in an adult detention facility is an effective method of rehabilitation. Only 25 percent believe this method is effective, while 71 percent believe that it is only a little or not at all effective in rehabilitating youth.
- **DC voters have a low awareness of youth placement in adult jails.** Only 25 percent of voters correctly understand that youth charged or convicted with committing a crime are sometimes placed in DC jail, an adult facility. Forty-nine percent do not think that youth are ever put in DC jail, while 26 percent are unsure.

DC residents' lack of awareness of the juvenile justice system carries over to opinions of the Department of Corrections and the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services. Nearly one-third of voters are unable to rate the performance of the DoC or DYRS, however only a slim minority rated their performance excellent or good. Eighteen percent of voters give the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services an excellent or good job performance rating, 26 percent just fair, while nearly a quarter (24 percent) give it a poor rating.

Similarly, voters give the Department of Corrections a 17 percent excellent or good rating, 29 percent just fair, with a quarter (25 percent) rating it as poor.

While these ratings are not particularly good, they do not reflect on the changes undertaken to the youth justice system during Mayor Fenty's first term. In fact, those who give DYRS and DoC the worst ratings are nearly as supportive of placing youth in juvenile facilities as those who give these departments good ratings. The same is true regarding rehabilitation programs.