

SEPTEMBER 2010

# National Research of Public Attitudes on Crime and Punishment

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. Voters are concerned first and foremost with keeping communities and people safe.
2. Without question, voters want a strong public safety system where criminals are held accountable and there are consequences for illegal activities.
3. Voters believe a strong public safety system is possible while reducing the size and cost of the prison system.

### The bottom line... let's reduce crime.

*"It does not matter whether a nonviolent offender is in prison for 21 or 24 or 27 months. What really matters is the system does a better job of making sure that when an offender does get out, he is less likely to commit another crime."*

% Strongly Agree

**75%**

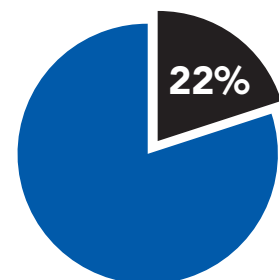
% Total Agree

**91%**

## UNDERLYING ATTITUDES

- Crime is a low concern; only 2% of voters rate crime or drugs/alcohol as the most important problem facing their state.
- Voters believe the primary purpose of prisons is to protect society (31%), followed by rehabilitate (25%) and punish offenders (20%).
- Voters want offenders held accountable for their actions, especially by ensuring they pay child support (79% cite as a top priority) and restitution to their victims (72%).
- Most voters feel safe in their communities, but 42% believe (mistakenly) that violent crime is up.
- There are big perceptual differences in the way people approach violent and nonviolent offenders. From a series of focus groups we learned there is often considerable empathy expressed for nonviolent offenders and their life circumstances. Participants look for punishments that do not include prison, opting for community service or other punishments. Substance abuse treatment and job training are often considered appropriate.

**"What percent of the people currently in prison in the United States do you think could be released from prison who would not pose a threat to overall public safety?"**



**POLICY SOLUTIONS:  
LESS PRISON, MORE ACCOUNTABILITY FOR NONVIOLENT OFFENDERS**

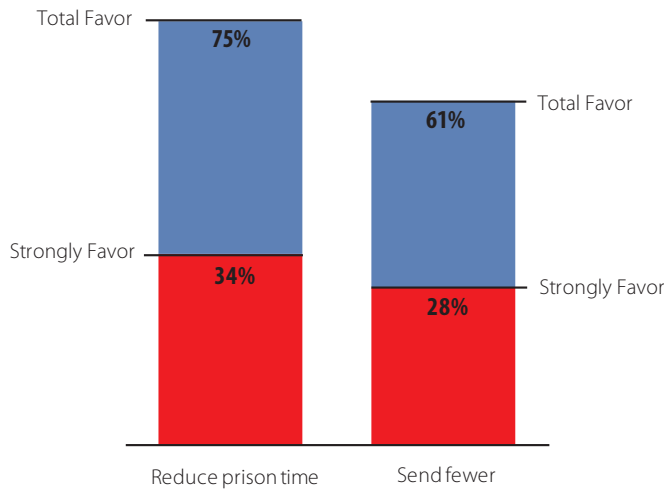
Prison is not always required and voters recognize the important role that probation and parole can play in reducing crime. There is strong support for reinvesting prison savings in prison alternatives that hold offenders accountable. Nearly 9 out of 10 voters (87%) favor reducing prison time for low-risk, nonviolent offenders and reinvest some of the savings to create a stronger probation and parole system that holds offenders accountable for their crimes.

Republicans, Democrats and Independents are all broadly supportive of a reduction of prison time if there are appropriate other consequences. Support is strong across regions of the country as well.

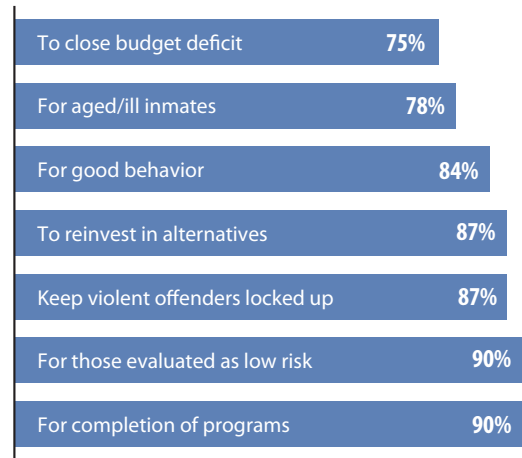
*“An effective probation and parole system would use new technologies to monitor where offenders are and what they are doing, require them to pass drug tests, and require they either keep a job or perform community service.”*

**% Strongly Agree**  
**77%**

**% Total Agree**  
**95%**



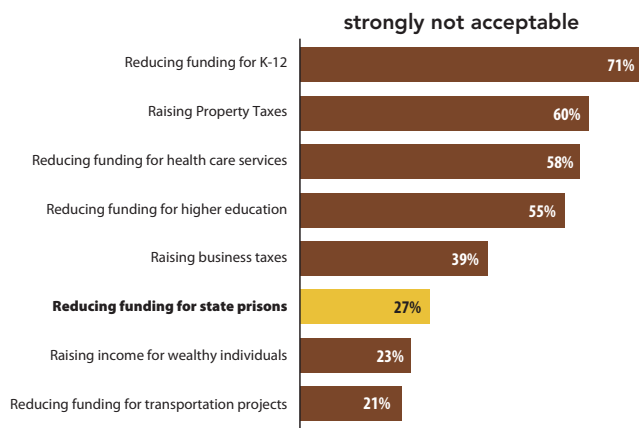
There is broad support for reduced prison emphasis to help close budget deficits. While 61% support sending fewer nonviolent offenders to prison, three-quarters (75%) of respondents favor reducing prison terms for nonviolent inmates to save money.



**STRONG SUPPORT FOR REDUCING PRISON STAYS**

The survey demonstrates strong support for reducing length of prison stays for nonviolent inmates when they participate in programs aimed at reducing recidivism, including literacy and substance abuse treatment programs (90% acceptable). Voters also support shortening prison stays by six-months for nonviolent inmates who have behaved well and are low-risk for re-offending (90% acceptable).

**Voters would prefer to cut prison spending than cut K-12 education, higher education or health care, or raise property or business taxes.**



**EFFECTIVE MESSAGES**

**1. Emphasize public safety and offender accountability:**

Although state budgets weigh heavily on voters’ minds, the driving concern in public safety reform is really building a stronger public safety system that keeps people protected. Assured that violent offenders are locked up, voters show their receptivity to reforms, especially those that will reduce recidivism and cost less than prison. Do not frame changes to the corrections system only as a way to save the state money.

**2. Emphasize that we can get a better return on investment:** Voters are impressed with language that suggests they could be getting a better return for their taxpayer dollars in corrections investments.

**3. Use terms that resonate:** Using unfamiliar or technical language can backfire. Instead use language that emphasizes public safety. For example, voters respond more favorably to “mandatory supervision” to describe non-prison sanctions than “community corrections” and similar phrases that they associate with criminals in their neighborhoods. They also respond favorably to the use of technologies to monitor where offenders are and what they are doing.

**4. Use frames that resonate:** Texas is a state with a strong law-and-order reputation. Survey respondents said that the fact that Texas is shifting its emphasis away from prisons was the strongest and most memorable message. Cost-benefit and reinvestment frames also were strong. Arguments based on fiscal issues (that prison spending is crowding out funding for other programs) and racial justice concerns were not as persuasive.

**Reinvestment frame.** There are now more than 5 million people on probation or parole in this country which is twice as many than are now in prison. Yet ninety percent of what we spend on corrections goes to prisons and half of released inmates return to prison within three years of getting out. If we are serious about public safety, we have to do a better job making sure the people on probation and parole stay crime-and drug-free. That means not spending so much to lock up nonviolent offenders and shifting some of those prison dollars into a stronger system of community punishments.

**42% very convincing**  
**86% total convincing**

**Texas frame.** Texas is the very symbol of law and order in this country, but three years ago, leaders in Texas decided to take a very different direction on crime and punishment. Texas leaders said “no” to building eight more prisons at a cost of nearly a billion dollars and instead invested about a quarter of that into alternative programs. Texas has cut its corrections spending and reduced its crime rate at the same time, showing that we can have less crime at a lower cost.

**43% very convincing**  
**86% total convincing**

**Cost/Benefit frame.** Prisons are a government spending program, and just like any other government program, they should be put to the cost-benefit test. It costs about seventy-nine dollars a day to keep someone in prison, but only about three dollars and fifty cents to supervise someone on probation. States should analyze their prison populations and figure out if there are offenders in expensive prison cells who can be safely and effectively supervised in the community at a lower cost. Taxpayers should be getting a better return on their investments in public safety.

**43% very convincing**  
**83% total convincing**

## STATEMENTS THAT TESTED STRONGLY WITH VOTERS

"Ninety-five percent of people in prison will be released. If we are serious about public safety, we must increase access to treatment and job training programs so they can become productive citizens once they are back in the community."

**66% strongly agree**  
**89% total agree**

"We have too many low-risk, nonviolent offenders in prison. We need alternatives to incarceration that cost less and save our expensive prison space for violent and career criminals."

**65% strongly agree**  
**86% total agree**

"Prisons are a government program, and just like any other government program they need to be put to the cost-benefit test to make sure taxpayers are getting the best bang for their buck."

**63% strongly agree**  
**84% total agree**

"There are 5 million offenders who are out of prison and under community supervision. If we are serious about public safety, we need a better system to supervise and track these people."

**64% strongly agree**  
**89% total agree**

## STATEMENTS THAT TESTED WEAKER WITH VOTERS

"It does not matter how much it costs to lock up criminals, we should pay whatever it takes to make sure our communities are safe."

**40% strongly agree**  
**63% total agree**

"Parole and probation are just a slap on the wrist and not a substitute for prison."

**26% strongly agree**  
**45% total agree**

## METHODOLOGY

On behalf of the Pew Center on the States, Public Opinion Strategies conducted phone interviews with 1,200 registered voters (1,080 landline and 120 cell phone only respondents) on March 7-14, 2010 with a margin of error of +2.83%. For this survey, we used a replicate sample format. The total number of 1,200 interviews were segmented into replicate samples of 600 each. The samples thus mirrored each other in terms of demographic and geographic characteristics.

*Focus groups also were conducted in Michigan, Colorado and South Carolina.*

### Poll respondent demographics:

- 20% victim or immediate family member a victim of a violent crime
- 48% victim or immediate family member a victim of a nonviolent crime
- 17% law enforcement households
- 43% self-identified as politically conservative
- 20% self-identified as liberal

*Public Opinion Strategies is a leading national political, public policy, and public affairs research firm. Public Opinion Strategies is widely recognized as the nation's leading Republican polling firm, listing 17 U.S. Senators, 7 Governors, and over 40 Members of Congress as clients. Public Opinion Strategies also works for some of America's largest corporations and associations in the public affairs realm.*

*The Benenson Strategy Group is a globally recognized research and consulting firm with advanced expertise in developing winning strategies based on a clear analysis of the attitudes and beliefs that voters and consumers bring to their decision making. Clients include presidential candidates, governors and members of Congress, as well as international labor unions, Fortune 100 companies and major nonprofits.*