

TO: Interested Parties
FROM: Danny Franklin, Benenson Strategy Group
RE: Nationwide Polling Results
DATE: July 15, 2015

Methodology

Benenson Strategy Group conducted 1050 telephone interviews from June 2-6, 2015 on behalf of the American Civil Liberties Union. All respondents were registered voters who are likely to vote in the 2016 presidential election. The sample included oversamples of African-Americans and Hispanics to ensure adequate representation within the survey. The margin of error for the data set is $\pm 2.94\%$ at the 95% confidence level and it is higher among subgroups.

Key Findings

- With increasing attention from leaders across the political spectrum, a wide majority of American voters believe that it is important to reduce the prison population and that doing so could make communities safer.
 - ✓ Republicans and Democrats alike say that communities will be safer when the criminal justice system reduces the number of people behind bars and increases the treatment of mental illness and addiction, which are seen as primary root causes of crime.
 - ✓ Majorities show strong support for reforms that reduce sentences or divert offenders away from incarceration and into treatment.
- Reducing the country's prison population is a bipartisan issue.
 - ✓ Overall, 69% of voters say it is important for the country to reduce its prison populations, including 81% of Democrats, 71% of Independents and 54% of Republicans.
- In a sharp shift away from the 1980s and 1990s, when incarceration was seen as a tool to reduce crime, voters now believe by two-to-one that reducing the prison population will make communities safer by facilitating more investments in crime prevention and rehabilitation strategies.
 - ✓ When asked about the impact that reducing the prison population would have:
 - 58% said that it would "Help communities by saving taxpayer dollars that can be reinvested into preventing crime and rehabilitating prisoners"
 - 29% said it would "Harm communities because criminals who belong behind bars will be let out."
 - ✓ In a telling sign of the shift in public mood, voters who report having been a victim of crime who were threatened with physical harm (who represent 17% of voters) were just as likely to support reductions in the prison population as voters overall, with 58% saying that reducing the prison population would help communities and 31% saying it would hurt.
- While this shift in mood is occurring during a time when the country's crime rate is at or approaching 50-year lows, it's noteworthy that whether or not a voter is fearful of crime does not seem to have an impact on their support for reforms.
 - ✓ Overall, 15% of voters say they worry about crime "a great deal."
 - ✓ These voters, though, are about as likely to say that it's important to reduce the prison population (67%) as voters overall (69%).



- What seems to be driving the shift is the sense that prison is not efficiently spending taxpayer dollars, effectively addressing the root causes of crime or preparing offenders to re-enter the community.
 - ✓ 87% agree that drug addicts and those with mental illness should not be in prison, they belong in treatment facilities.
 - ✓ 77% agree that non-violent criminals who go to prison are likely to re-offend because prison doesn't do a good job of rehabilitating addiction and mental illness.

- Among those who said that reducing the prison population was important,
 - ✓ 39% say because sentences are disproportionately severe
 - ✓ 29% say because the cost of prison is too high
 - ✓ 12% say because prison doesn't rehabilitate.

- While there is little question that voters still believe in the importance of punishment, strong majorities also believe that offenders can become productive members of the community, with the right help.
 - ✓ When asked which they believe more
 - 59% said that "people who have committed serious crimes can turn their lives around and move away from a life of crime with the right kind of help."
 - 31% said that "some people say people who have committed serious crimes are unlikely to change and will almost always be a danger to society."

- With voters believing there are commonsense improvements that would make a real difference to the safety of their communities and leaders from both parties advocating for change, the environment appears to be very favorable to reform proposals, even in traditionally conservative areas of the country.