

February 13, 2018

To: Interested Parties
From: RTI International and Zogby Analytics
Re: Public Opinion Poll Findings on Jails and Local Justice Systems

At a time of national discussion about incarceration and criminal justice reform, a new nationwide poll on perceptions of jails reveals that the vast majority of Americans believe the role of jails should not be to punish, and shows broad support for treatment and rehabilitation—particularly for people committing non-violent offenses and for those with serious mental illness. Nearly 60% of respondents indicated that rehabilitation or treatment is the most important factor when sentencing a convicted criminal for a non-violent crime.

Conducted by RTI International and Zogby Analytics and supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the poll also underscored great disparities in how Americans believe their local justice systems should operate versus how those systems function in reality.

Today, there are nearly 12 million local jail admissions every year—almost 20 times the number of prison admissions—mainly for people awaiting trial or serving short sentences following conviction.

Key findings:

- More than 1 in 3 Americans feel “rehabilitation or treatment” is the purpose of jail, as opposed to “punishing people for committing crime,” “showing the consequences,” or “removing them from the community.”
- 60% of Americans believe that “rehabilitating or treating the person” is the most appropriate response to non-violent offenses as opposed to “punishing the person for committing the crime” or “keeping the person off the street so they can’t commit more crimes.” Support for rehabilitation rises to 71% for non-violent offenses by those who suffer from mental illness.
- Except for the most serious crimes, 75% of Americans believe the most appropriate sentence for an offense by a person with a mental disorder should not involve jail time. People see alternatives to incarceration—such as treatment or rehabilitative services, probation, or community service—as the best option in these cases.
- 28% of Americans believe their local criminal justice systems are “somewhat unfair” or “very unfair.”
- 73% of Americans who are familiar with pretrial services support their use. Pretrial services are procedures that determine the immediate risk a defendant poses to the community, make recommendations concerning the conditions under which that person could be released from

jail while awaiting trial, and supervise defendants who are released from custody while awaiting trial.

- 84% agreed that local governments should devote more resources to substance abuse treatment, which is substantially more than support for prosecution (52%) and harm reduction (69%).

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