

Rehabilitation Versus Incarceration of Juvenile Offenders: Public Preferences in Four Models for Change States

Executive Summary

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Over the past few decades, American juvenile justice policy has become progressively more punitive. During the 1990s, in particular, legislatures across the country enacted statutes under which growing numbers of youths can be prosecuted in criminal courts and sentenced to prison. Indeed, today, in almost every state, youths who are 13 or 14 years of age (or less) can be tried and punished as adults for a broad range of offenses, including nonviolent crimes. Even within the juvenile system, punishments have grown increasingly severe.

It is generally accepted that intense public concern about the threat of youth crime has driven this trend, and that the public supports this legislative inclination toward increased punitiveness. But it is not clear whether this view of the public's attitude about the appropriate response to juvenile crime is accurate. On the one hand, various opinion surveys have found public support generally for getting tougher on juvenile crime and punishing youths as harshly as their adult counterparts. At the same time, however, scrutiny of the sources of information about public opinion reveals that the view that the public supports adult punishment of juveniles is based largely on either responses to highly publicized crimes such as school shootings or on mass opinion polls that typically ask a few simplistic questions. It is quite plausible that assessments of public sentiment about juvenile crime, and the appropriate response to it, vary greatly as a function of when and how public opinion is gauged. In our own work, we have found that very slight variations in the wording of survey questions generate vastly different pictures of public attitudes about juvenile justice policy.

An assessment of the public's support for various responses to juvenile offending is important because policy makers often justify expenditures for punitive juvenile justice reforms on the basis of popular demand. Punitive responses to juvenile crime (e.g., the incarceration of juvenile offenders in correctional facilities) are far more expensive and often less effective than less harsh alternatives (e.g., providing juvenile offenders rehabilitative services in community settings). If politicians' misreading of public sentiment has led to the adoption of more expensive policy alternatives than the public actually wants, tax dollars are likely being wasted on policies that are costly and possibly ineffective, and that also may be less popular than is widely assumed.

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In a previous study conducted in Pennsylvania in 2005, we and our colleagues Daniel Nagin and Elizabeth Scott assessed public opinion toward juvenile justice policy using an approach that differs from conventional polling, by measuring respondents' willingness to pay for alternative policy proposals. More specifically, we compared respondents' willingness to pay for incarceration versus rehabilitation of juvenile offenders who had committed serious violent crimes. In the current report we present the results of a replication of this study conducted in each of the Models for Change sites during 2007.

Our approach has several advantages over conventional public opinion polling. First, asking how much respondents as individual taxpayers are willing to pay for a specific policy yields a more accurate estimate of their attitude toward that policy than merely asking whether they approve or disapprove of it, because the question requires the respondent to consider the cost of the policy as well as its benefits. It is far easier to endorse a particular policy when it is proposed in the abstract (e.g., "Do you favor expanding the city's sanitation services in order to clean the streets more frequently?") than when one is told the actual cost of that policy (e.g., "Do you favor expanding the city's sanitation services in order to clean the streets more frequently, at an annual cost to the city of \$1 million per year?") or what the impact of that policy would be on the respondent's personal tax burden ("Would you be willing to pay an additional \$100 in property taxes annually in order to expand the city's sanitation services and clean the streets more frequently?"). As a consequence, conventional polls may indicate more enthusiastic public support for a potentially expensive policy than would likely be the case if the actual cost burden of the policy were revealed.

Second, our approach permits a more direct comparison of public attitudes toward different policies designed to address the same fundamental problem. In conventional opinion polling, respondents' preference for one versus another policy is often ascertained (e.g., "Do you favor Policy A or would you prefer Policy B?"), but the phrasing of such comparative questions seldom provides respondents with information on the relative effectiveness or cost of the proposed options. Without knowing what the respondent believes to be the effectiveness or cost of each alternative, one is unable to know what the respondent's answer genuinely reflects.

In the present study, we use an experimental methodology that permits us to compare respondents' opinions about two juvenile justice policy alternatives that are presented as equally effective. Any observed differences in respondents' willingness to pay for two policies of equal effectiveness must necessarily indicate a true preference for one over the other.

DATA & METHODS

Telephone interviews were conducted with a random sample of approximately 500 households from each of the four Model for Change sites (Illinois, Louisiana, Pennsylvania, and Washington) during 2007. Respondents were presented with several hypothetical scenarios and numerous questions about their background and attitudes. The basic survey was the same for all individuals, with one important exception. One item, which asked respondents if they would be willing to vote for a crime policy proposal requiring each household to pay an additional amount of money in taxes, was systematically varied. Half of the sample, randomly selected, responded to a proposal to increase the amount of rehabilitative services provided to serious juvenile offenders, without any increase in their time incarcerated, whereas the other half of the sample responded to a proposal to increase the amount of time serious juvenile offenders were incarcerated for their crime, without the addition of any services. Otherwise, the wording of the two proposals was nearly identical, in order to compare responses to each of them.

The text of the added question about willingness to pay for rehabilitation was as follows:

Currently in _____ juvenile offenders who commit serious crimes such as robbery are put in jail for about one year. Suppose _____ citizens were asked to approve the addition of a rehabilitation program to the sentence for these sorts of crimes. Similar programs have reduced youth crime by 30%. Youths in these programs are also more likely to graduate from high school and get jobs. If the change is approved, this new law would cost your household an additional \$100 per year in taxes.

After reading this question, respondents were asked: "Would you be willing to pay the additional \$100 in taxes for this change in the law?" Respondents who indicated 'yes' were asked an additional follow-up question: "Would you be willing to pay \$200 for the same change?" Respondents who indicated 'no' to the original question also were asked an additional follow-up question: "Would you be willing to pay an additional \$50 for this change?" Response options to all questions were 'Yes' and 'No'.

The text of the added incarceration question was nearly identical:

Currently, in _____ juvenile offenders who commit serious crimes such as robbery are put in jail for about one year. Suppose _____ citizens were asked to vote on a change in the law that would increase the sentence for these sorts of crimes by one additional year, making the average length of jail time two years. The additional year will not only impose more punishment but also reduce youth crime by about 30% by keeping juvenile offenders off the street for another year. If the change is approved, this new law would cost your household an additional \$100 per year in taxes."

The same follow-up questions were asked of respondents who received the incarceration scenario as were asked of respondents who were presented with the rehabilitation scenario.

RESULTS

As Figures 1 and 2 indicate, across the sample as a whole (that is, with data from all four states combined), the public clearly favors rehabilitation over punishment as a response to serious juvenile offending. More respondents are willing to pay for additional rehabilitation than for additional punishment, and the average amount in additional annual taxes that respondents are willing to pay for rehabilitation is almost 20% greater than it is for incarceration (\$98.49 versus \$84.52). Conversely, significantly more respondents are unwilling to pay for additional incarceration (39 percent) than are unwilling to pay for added rehabilitation (29 percent). It is quite clear that the public supports rehabilitation and is willing to pay for it.

Figure 1

Average Amount Public is Willing to Pay Annually in Additional Taxes for Rehabilitation or Incarceration

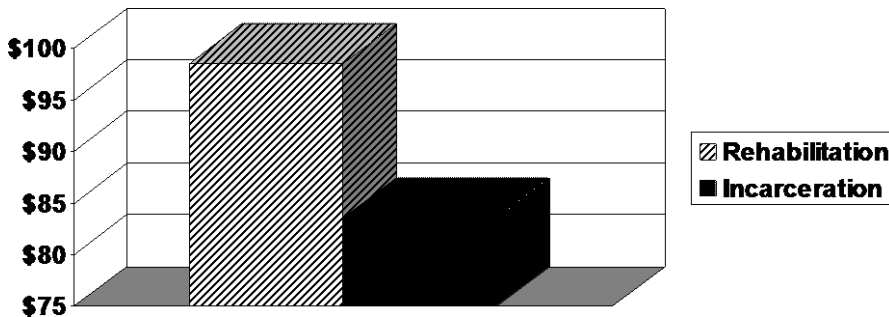
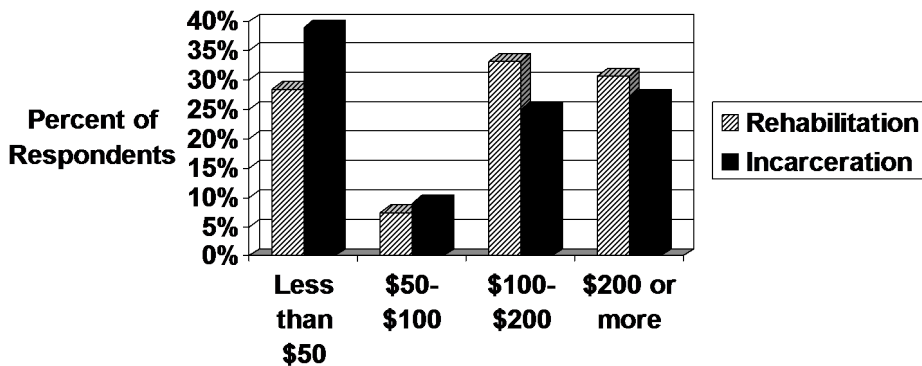


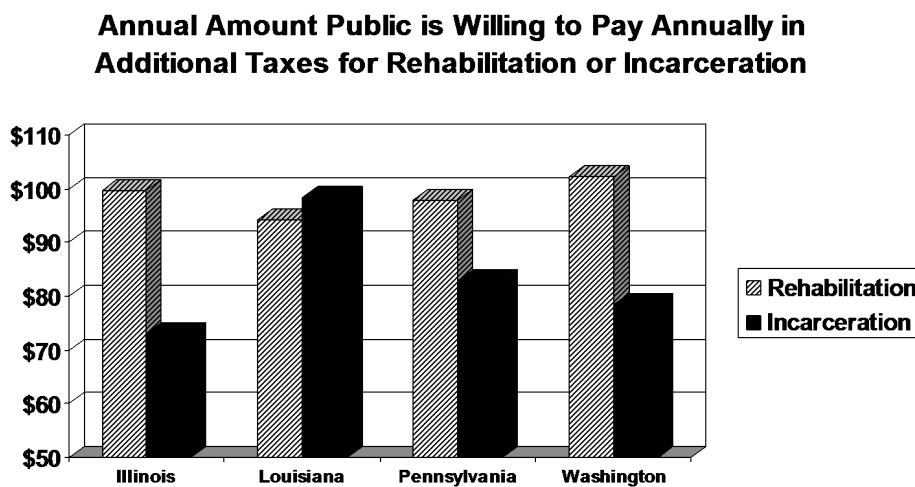
Figure 2

Amount Willing to Pay in Additional Taxes Annually for Rehabilitation or Incarceration



This general pattern holds in three of the four Models for Change sites: Pennsylvania, Washington and Illinois. In Pennsylvania, the public is willing to pay 18% more for rehabilitation than punishment (\$98 versus \$83). In Washington, the public is willing to pay 29% more (\$102 versus \$79). And in Illinois, the public is willing to pay 36% more for rehabilitation than punishment (\$100 versus \$73 annually). In Louisiana, the amounts for rehabilitation and punishment are statistically equivalent (\$94 versus \$98). (See Figure 3)

Figure 3



DISCUSSION

When informed that rehabilitation is as effective as incarceration (in fact, the former is more effective), the public is willing to pay nearly 20 percent more in additional taxes annually for programs that offer rehabilitative services to serious juvenile offenders than for longer periods of incarceration. We find this for the sample as a whole, and in three out of four of the Models for Change sites (the sole exception is Louisiana).

These results are consistent with public opinion surveys in general, which usually find more public support for rehabilitation than politicians may believe is the case. The added value of the present survey is that this general trend is found using a methodology that is thought to more accurately gauge public support for various policy alternatives than conventional polling.

One criticism of this approach to assessing public opinion is that the actual dollar amounts generated through the method may not be accurate, because respondents are forced to pick among predetermined responses. Some individuals who indicate a willingness to pay \$200 in additional taxes may in fact be willing to pay even more, but because we did not press beyond this amount, we do not know how large this group is, nor do we know how responses would have differed had we used different dollar amounts to anchor the response categories. Moreover, because the respondents know they are answering a hypothetical question, their responses may differ from what they would say if a genuine referendum were held.

The absolute dollar amounts are less important than the relative amounts, however. Although the true dollar amount that taxpayers are willing to pay for either policy may be uncertain, what is certainly clear is that participants are willing to pay more for rehabilitation than for incarceration if each delivers the same result. This finding, together with evidence that incarceration is substantially more costly than rehabilitation (at least five times more costly, according to some estimates), supports the conclusion that the returns per dollar spent on rehabilitation are a better value than the returns on incarceration. Support for rehabilitation would likely be even stronger if respondents were told that at least five offenders can be provided with services for the same price as incarcerating just one of them.

Our survey challenges the view held by many politicians and the media that the public opposes rehabilitation and favors incarceration of young offenders. According to conventional wisdom, the driving force behind the punitive reforms in recent years has been the public demand for tough juvenile justice policies, and politicians frequently point to public outrage at serious juvenile crime as justification for sweeping legislative reforms.

We believe, instead, that members of the public are concerned about youth crime and want to reduce its incidence, and are ready to support effective rehabilitative programs as a means of accomplishing that end — indeed favoring rehabilitation to imposing more punishment through longer sentences. Our findings offer encouragement to lawmakers who are uncomfortable with the recent trend toward punitive juvenile justice policies and would like to initiate more moderate reforms.

The high cost of punitive sentencing has become a consideration in the public debate — long sentences translate into more prison space, more staff and generally higher operating costs. Cost-conscious legislatures may become disenchanted with punitive juvenile justice policies on economic grounds and pursue policies that place greater emphasis on rehabilitation and early childhood prevention. If so, they may be reassured, on the basis of our findings, that the public will support this move.

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Models for Change is an effort to create successful and replicable models of juvenile justice system reform through targeted investments in key states. With long-term funding and support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Models for Change seeks to accelerate progress toward a more rational, fair, effective, and developmentally appropriate juvenile justice system. Four states - Illinois, Louisiana, Pennsylvania and Washington - have been selected as core Models for Change sites. Other states participate, along with a National Resource Bank, in action networks targeting mental health and disproportionate minority contact in juvenile justice systems.

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