

March 16, 2017

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 debate about incarceration and law enforcement, a new nationwide pollⁱ on perceptions of jails and local criminal justice systems 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.

Conducted by RTI International and Zogby Analytics and released by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the poll also underscores great disparities in how Americans believe their local justice systems should operate versus how those systems function in reality. For example, only 13% of Americans are aware that three out of four people in jail are there for non-violent offenses such as traffic, property and drug offenses.

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:

- 62% 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.” Support for rehabilitation rises to 74% for non-violent offenses by those who suffer from mental illness.
- Except for the most seriousⁱⁱ crimes, over three-quarters 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.
- Only 18% of Americans believe the role of jails for people who receive convictions should be to punish. Nearly twice that number (33%) say the role of jails should be to prevent people from committing future crimes through treatment or rehabilitation.
- Only 14% of Americans believe that individuals arrested for non-violent offenses, whose alleged crimes do not involve significant property loss, should be held in jail while awaiting trial.

- 28% of Americans believe their local criminal justice systems are “somewhat unfair” or “very unfair.”
- More than two-thirds of Americans believe that risk to public safety should be the main factor in determining release for people awaiting trial, not their ability to pay bail or other fees.
- 74% 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.

ⁱ RTI International developed the survey instrument and conducted independent analyses. [Zogby Analytics](#) administered the online survey completed by 3,007 respondents nationwide December 9-13, 2016. The survey was conducted online, but respondents are not required to own a computer or have private internet access as the survey could be completed outside one’s home or using a mobile smart phone or tablet.

ⁱⁱ Respondents were asked about crimes that did not involve violence, a sexual offense, or significant property loss.

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