



Is the Public Willing to Pay to Rehabilitate Juvenile Offenders?

When making decisions about juvenile corrections, policymakers struggle to strike the right balance between incarcerating and rehabilitating youthful offenders. The public weighed in on this issue in a recent poll. This poll was unusual in that it went beyond asking the public about their support for rehabilitation programs as many polls do. Instead, it asked the public the more difficult and perhaps more policy-relevant question—how much they are willing to pay for rehabilitation programs and for longer periods of incarceration.

Is the Public Willing to Pay for Rehabilitation of Juvenile Offenders?

When asked about serious juvenile offenders, the public was willing to pay as much or more taxes for rehabilitation programs than for longer periods of incarceration. Conservatives, liberals, and moderates all voiced their willingness to pay higher taxes to support effective rehabilitation programs for juvenile offenders.

How Much is the Public Willing to Pay for Rehabilitation and Incarceration?

To answer this question, it is important to know how the study worked. In 2005, researchers at the University of Florida and Temple University randomly selected 1,502 Pennsylvania residents (45% response rate) and presented them with one of two policy proposals.

Half the sample was told that juvenile offenders who commit serious crimes such as robbery are put in jail for about one year. A new bill would add a rehabilitation program that has been shown to reduce crime by 30%, increase high school graduation, and help youth get jobs. If approved, the new law would cost each household an additional \$100 per year in taxes.

The other half of the sample was told that juvenile offenders who commit serious crimes such as robbery are put in jail for about one year. A new bill would add one additional year of jail time, which would impose more punishment and reduce youth crime by 30%. If approved, the new law would cost each household an additional \$100 per year in taxes.

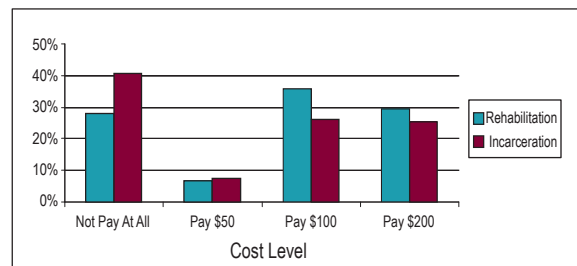
Then respondents were asked,

“Would you be willing to pay an additional \$100 for this change?”

- If YES, “Would you be willing to pay \$200 for the same change?”
- If NO, “Would you be willing to pay an additional \$50 for this change?”

As shown in Figure 1, over 7 in 10 (72%) respondents were willing to pay higher taxes for rehabilitation programs. Specifically, almost two-thirds of respondents (65%) were willing to pay \$100 or more in taxes for rehabilitation programs. Just over one fourth (28%) were unwilling to pay any higher taxes for rehabilitation programs.

Figure 1. Respondents Willing to Pay for Rehabilitation or Incarceration



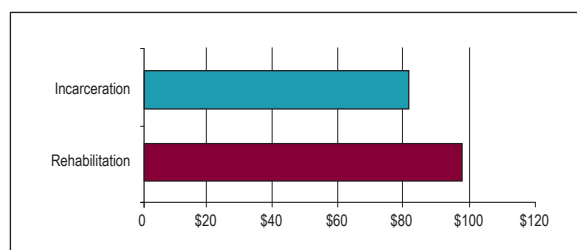
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When asked about additional punishment, almost 6 in 10 (59%) people were willing to pay higher taxes for longer periods of incarceration, with over half (52%) willing to pay \$100 or more. About 4 of 10 respondents (41%) were unwilling to pay any higher taxes to lengthen incarceration of juvenile offenders.

Is the Public More Willing to Pay for Rehabilitation or Incarceration?

The public was willing to pay about \$20 more, on average, for rehabilitation programs than incarceration—a difference that was statistically significant. As shown in Figure 2, the public was willing to pay an extra \$98 per household for programs that rehabilitate juvenile offenders, compared to an extra \$81 for incarcerating juvenile offenders.

Figure 2. Public More Willing to Pay for Rehabilitation than Incarceration

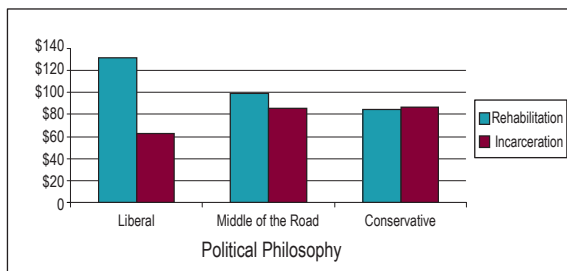


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Do the Findings Depend On Whether Respondents Were Liberal or Conservative?

Those who identified themselves as liberals were more willing to pay for rehabilitation programs than longer periods of incarceration (as shown in Figure 3). Self-identified conservatives were equally willing to pay for rehabilitation and incarceration. Men were equally willing to pay for rehabilitation or incarceration, whereas women were willing to pay more for rehabilitation than incarceration.

Figure 3. Liberals, Conservatives, and Moderates Were Willing to Pay for Rehabilitation and Incarceration



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These results are surprising in a couple ways. First, the public appears to be willing to pay higher taxes on this issue—effective approaches for addressing serious juvenile crime. Second, this study shows more support for rehabilitation than earlier studies. The researchers contend that public attitudes may have changed because juvenile crime rates have declined dramatically in the past 10 years. Studies may also show attitudes less favorable to rehabilitation if they are conducted in the aftermath of a widely-publicized juvenile crime such as a school shooting.

It is possible that the Pennsylvania citizens polled in this study are different from respondents in other states. The sample was randomly selected, however, so it closely mirrored the state’s population: 87% were White, 50% had some college experience, and 50% reported incomes over \$50,000. The sample did include more females (60%) than in the state as a whole (52%). Even though this study was well-designed, states with different demographics might produce different results. Interestingly, Pennsylvania has one of the lowest rates of juvenile property crime in the country, but one of the highest rates of juvenile violent crime. Typically, high crime rates produce attitudes less favorable to rehabilitation.

The figures are reprinted from, “Do People Value Punishment More than Rehabilitation?” with permission from the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Adolescent Development and Juvenile Justice (www.adjj.org). The newsletter is based on an article, “Public Preferences for Rehabilitation Versus Incarceration of Juvenile Offenders” published in *Crime and Public Policy* in 2006 by D. Nagin, A. Piquero, E. Scott, and L. Steinberg. Copies are available from the Family Impact Seminars at 262-5779. ■



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