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California Opinion Poll: Public Attitudes on Youth Crime

BY DAVID STEINHART

HIGHLIGHTS

California has some of the toughest youth sentencing policies and some of the most overcrowded youth institutions in the nation. These sentencing policies have been fashioned by legislators and policy makers who believe that the public is no longer interested in rehabilitation of juvenile offenders, and who think that citizens want a more punitive approach, modeled on sentencing laws for adults.

To gain insight into the public attitudes that are thought to reinforce California's youth sentencing policies, the National Council on Crime and Delinquency commissioned a public opinion survey. The survey was conducted for NCCD by the Mervin Field organization, the Field Institute, in a telephone poll of 1,109 adults in the week of October 10 through 16, 1988.

The survey results show:

- Overwhelming public support for a juvenile justice system, separate from the adult system, with rehabilitation as its primary goal. This support remains firm throughout all demographic subgroups.
- Strong support for the proposition that juvenile offenders should be separated from adults in confinement, and for a juvenile sentencing

scheme different from that for adults.

- A strong preference for sentencing juveniles to specialized treatment and counseling programs in lieu of incarceration in state correctional facilities, even for repeat serious offenders.
- Strong support (better than two thirds of respondents) for educational, vocational and drug treatment programs for youthful offenders, and for more police and parole officers to cope with youthful offenders.
- Moderate support (56 percent of respondents) for expenditures for construction of new youth facilities to relieve overcrowding.
- Significant gaps in the public's comprehension of fundamental facts relating to youth crime and the juvenile justice system in California.

These survey results appear to undermine the presumption, shared by many of the state's policy makers, that the public has lost confidence in the rehabilitative goals of juvenile court law. The results also demonstrate a broad preference for public spending on programs designed to educate and train youthful offenders to become law abiding citizens, which outscored respondents' desire to spend more tax dollars on the construction of new youth incarceration facilities. The poll also

suggests a need for additional public education on the subjects of youth crime and the juvenile justice system.

WHY THE SURVEY WAS DONE

A growing number of states have adopted juvenile justice reforms designed to reduce population size in youth institutions, to lower the cost of juvenile corrections, and improve the performance of youth released from correctional programs.

Reforms have been slow to emerge in California, where juvenile justice problems are severe. California's youth incarceration rate is one of the highest in the nation—more than double the rate of other large states such as Florida, Illinois or Texas. The institutions of the California Youth Authority are severely overcrowded, with about 9,000 youth incarcerated in facilities designed to hold 5,800. Many local detention centers are bulging with children and youth because alternative facilities are not available. In Los Angeles County, for example, hundreds of minors must sleep on floor mats in detention centers that are filled well beyond capacity. Some counties, lacking resources to maintain local programs for youthful offenders, have closed juvenile camps and ranches, increasing pressures on state institutions.

Table 1: Rehabilitation and Punishment

	% Agree	% Disagree	No Opinion
It is more important to emphasize rehabilitation for juveniles than it is for adult criminals.	71.0	23.1	5.9
Youth who commit serious crimes cannot be rehabilitated and should be locked up without any attempt at rehabilitation for as long as the law allows.*	22.3	69.9	7.9
The main purpose of the juvenile court system should be to treat and rehabilitate, rather than to punish.*	68.4	21.4	10.0

Note: Questions marked with an asterisk, in this and in subsequent tables, were posed to a subgroup representing one-half of the total sample of 1,109 adults and have a maximum sampling error that is slightly greater than the sampling error for questions answered by the full group.

To address the problem of overcrowding in the Youth Authority, state administrators have adopted a plan which would add 2,400 institutional beds at a cost in excess of \$300 million. Even if built as proposed, these new institutions would leave the CYA well short of the capacity needed to accommodate the youthful offender population projected for 1992. Administrators at the county level are desperately seeking funds to modernize juvenile detention centers, keep local juvenile camps and ranches open and add new secure beds.

Critics of the California system say that the focus on expansion of state institutional capacity is misguided. These critics say that California incarcerates too many lower-risk youth, for too long, at too high a cost to the taxpayers. They point to the examples of other states, such as Massachusetts, Utah and Maryland, where large institutions have been closed or scaled down, to be replaced by networks of small treatment programs for even the most serious juvenile offenders.

California shows little sign of moving away from its present juvenile justice policies. The punitive status quo is defended by elected officials who cite constituents' concerns about juvenile crime as justification for long sentences and large institutions.

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However, in recent California history, public opinion on these issues has not been tested in any scientific manner. With this in mind, and given the important policy decisions that lie ahead, NCCD commissioned a public opinion poll on attitudes toward youth crime and juvenile justice. The project was made possible through a grant from the James Irvine Foundation.

NCCD contacted public opinion expert Mervin Field who proposed a survey of 1,000 California adults representing a wide array of demographic characteristics. Survey questions were designed to test fundamental attitudes on rehabilitation and punishment; measure opinions about how tax dollars should be allocated; and explore how respondents would react if their own child were about to be sentenced for a serious crime. The results are discussed below under six topic areas.

Table 2: Youth Sentencing Policy

	% Agree	% Disagree	No Opinion
We should focus less on long terms of confinement for juvenile offenders and more on programs and treatments that will help these youth become law abiding citizens.	82.4	10.0	7.6
Juvenile offenders should be confined in the same institutions as adult prisoners.	12.3	84.0	3.7
Sentences for juveniles should be the same as those for adults for all crimes.	29.3	62.0	8.5

SURVEY RESULTS

Rehabilitation and Punishment

Today in California, there is tension between the themes of rehabilitation and punishment in the juvenile justice system. Rehabilitation is, of course, the founding tenet of the juvenile system, and this tenet is incorporated into the statement of purpose of California's juvenile court law (Welfare and Institutions Code Section 202). However, in response to complaints about the alleged leniency of the juvenile justice system, the California legislature redrafted this code section in 1984 to include punishment as an explicit goal.

Has the public given up on rehabilitation for youth who break the law? The answer according to NCCD's poll is "no." NCCD probed responses on the theme of rehabilitation and punishment with four different questions, displayed in Table 1. In each case, respondents voiced support for a separate system of justice for juveniles, founded on the principle of rehabilitation. In each case,

this support came from more than two-thirds of those responding. Analysis of the demographic data on responses, supplied by the Field Institute, revealed no significant deviations in this support by geography, income level, ethnic group, religion or educational level. There was some decline in enthusiasm for rehabilitation among registered Republicans and self-identified "strong conservatives," but by every other demographic measure, there was consistently strong support for the rehabilitative goals of the juvenile court law.

Youth Sentencing Policy

In the last 10 years, the average sentence served by a ward of the California Youth Authority has been doubled from 11 to 22 months. The longer terms of confinement have been ordered by the state's Youthful Offender Parole Board, a group of seven Governors' appointees who defend this sentencing policy by saying the public wants it that way. This sentencing policy has led to significant overcrowding in state youth

facilities and to demands for the construction of costly, new institutions.

Respondents were asked for their opinions about the length and place of youth confinement, as shown in Table 2. More than 80 percent of respondents said, "We should focus less on long terms of confinement for juvenile offenders and more on programs and treatments that will help these youth become law abiding citizens." Overwhelmingly, respondents rejected the notion that juveniles and adults should be confined in the same institutions.

To personalize the question, respondents were asked to choose a sentence for their son, daughter, nephew or niece found to have committed a serious crime. Half the sample was asked to choose a sentence for their child relative on a serious *first* offense, and the other half was asked to select a sentence for a serious *repeat* offense (Table 3). For a first offense, less than 10 percent of respondents felt that commitment to a state correctional facility was the right sentence, and 72 per-

Table 3: Sentencing a Child Relative

What sentence for your son, daughter, nephew or niece for a serious crime <u>for the first time</u> ?*	% of Respondents:
Sentenced to a term in a state correctional facility	9.9
Placed in a special program to receive counseling and treatment	72.1
Returned home on supervised probation	11.6
No opinion	6.1
What sentence for your son, daughter, nephew or niece for a <u>repeat</u> serious crime?*	
Sentenced to a term in a state correctional facility	31.1
Placed in a special program to receive counseling and treatment	60.3
Returned home on supervised probation	5.3
No opinion	3.3

Table 4: Spending for Juvenile Justice

	% Agree	% Disagree	No Opinion
The state should spend some tax money exploring innovative and cost effective solutions to the problem of juvenile crime, before spending hundreds of millions of dollars to build new youth correctional facilities.*	74.0	15.4	10.5
We need to provide young people, including those in institutions, with educational and job training programs to lend meaning to their lives and to encourage law-abiding behavior.*	91.3	3.9	4.5
Not enough money and resources are being spent on trying to prevent crime by juveniles.*	58.8	24.0	17.0

cent chose "placement in a specialized treatment and counseling program." For a repeat offense, the number preferring commitment to a state institution increased to 31 percent, but a substantial number (60 percent) still believed that the best sentence for a repeat, serious offender was placement in a special-

ized treatment and counseling program.

Spending for Juvenile Justice

Some of the most difficult decisions facing Californians today are choices about how to spend tax dollars. Corrections administrators want to meet incarceration demands by building new institutions at a short-

term projected cost of more than \$300 million. The additional, ongoing cost of operating new institutions would be substantial, with each 100 beds adding \$2 to \$3 million in annual operating costs.

Skeptics of the facility expansion plans point to the fact that California already has more secure containment capacity for youth than any

Table 5: Support for Spending in Five Juvenile Justice Categories

How should we spend taxpayer funds for the following activities?	Percent who think we should spend:			
	More	Same	Less	No Opinion
a. Counseling, job training programs for juveniles in youth correctional facilities.	76.3	14.4	3.3	5.9
b. More drug treatment programs for juveniles who violate drug laws.	75.3	13.8	5.2	5.6
c. Hiring more police and law enforcement people to deal with juveniles who break the law.	67.6	22.5	5.0	4.9
d. Adding more parole officers and services to help juveniles obey the law after they have served their sentences.	67.2	20.4	5.9	6.4
e. Building more youth correctional facilities.	55.1	27.0	6.9	10.9

Table 6: Responses to Overcrowding of California Youth Correctional Facilities

	% Agree	% Disagree	No Opinion
We should not be overly concerned about overcrowding in youth correctional facilities, because juvenile offenders do not deserve any better treatment than adult offenders.	21.5	71.2	7.2
When youth correctional facilities are overcrowded, non-violent juvenile offenders should be placed elsewhere.	81.7	9.8	8.2
When youth correctional facilities are overcrowded, we should build more of them, even if they are costly to the taxpayer.	56.1	33.6	9.9

other state and accounts for nearly 25 percent of all funds spent nationally on youth corrections. A recent report by the Commonwealth Institute, "Reforming the California Youth Authority," suggests that many youth now in state training schools do not belong there, and could be handled cost-effectively in local treatment programs.

NCCD asked survey respondents a number of questions about how money should be spent in the juvenile justice system (Table 4). Strong majorities were in agreement with the proposition that "the state should explore innovative and cost effective solutions to the problem of juvenile crime, before spending hundreds of millions of dollars on new youth cor-

rectional facilities." More than 90 percent endorsed the need to provide young people in institutions with educational and job training programs. A smaller majority of respondents (59 percent) agreed with the statement that not enough money was being spent on trying to prevent juvenile crime.

Table 7: Need for Youth Programs and Services

	% Agree	% Disagree	No Opinion
Young people about to be released from confinement in state institutions should have access to job training and counseling before they re-enter the community.*	92.4	4.0	3.3
We need to provide young people, including those in institutions, with educational and job training programs to lend meaning to their lives and to encourage law-abiding behavior.*	91.3	3.9	4.5
Increasing employment opportunities for youths could prevent a lot of serious crime.*	81.9	13.4	4.5
The justice system should offer more sentencing options, like counseling and vocational programs, to juveniles than to adults.	69.6	23.5	6.8

In another series of questions, respondents were asked whether public expenditures for five related purposes should be increased, held at the same level, or decreased. Interestingly, the public thought expenditures for all five juvenile justice purposes should be increased (Table 5). The strongest spending endorsements were for drug treatment programs for juvenile offenders, and for counseling and job training programs for juveniles in youth correctional facilities. Two thirds of respondents said expenditures should be increased for police and law enforcement personnel and for more parole officers and services. The lowest spending priority among those polled was for "building new youth correctional facilities."

Responses to Overcrowding of California Youth Facilities

Overcrowding is a severe problem in the institutions of the California Youth Authority and in a number of local juvenile detention centers as well. Overcrowding places tremendous strain on inmates and staff,

compromising conditions of confinement and increasing frequencies of institutional violence.

Questions were asked to assess the public's level of concern about this problem, and to get some sense of what respondents thought would be a solution. Overall, just 22 percent of respondents agreed with the assertion that we should not be concerned about overcrowding in youth correctional facilities. When solutions were explored, nearly 82 percent agreed that non-violent juvenile offenders should be removed from overcrowded youth facilities. A smaller majority (56 percent) agreed that a response to overcrowding should be to build more youth correctional facilities, even if they are costly to taxpayers (Table 6).

The Need for Youth Programs and Services

In every instance where they were asked, respondents expressed support for programs and services for juvenile offenders. The most positive responses were linked to vocational and employment programs for youth

about to be released from confinement and for the purpose of preventing juvenile crime (Table 7).

Misconceptions About Youth Crime and the Juvenile Justice System

NCCD included in the poll some questions that would test the public's knowledge of certain juvenile justice facts, especially their perception of the level of juvenile crime activity in recent years.

Juvenile arrests for all crimes in California declined by 11.3 percent from 1981 through 1986, the latest year for which data has been published by the state's Department of Justice, Bureau of Criminal Statistics. In the last two years of this down cycle, total arrests began to rise, moving up 2.1 percent between 1985 and 1986. Juvenile arrests for violent crimes decreased by 25.2 percent between 1981 and 1986, with a 1 percent upturn in the 1985-86 year. When expressed as a rate of arrests per 100,000 juveniles age 12 to 17, the declines are similar to those for total arrests. For the years 1981 through 1986, California's total

Table 8: Misconceptions About Youth Crime

Do you think the rate of juvenile crime in California has been going up in the last five years, going down or staying about the same?

% of Respondents:

Going up	82.2
Staying the same	8.3
Going Down	1.6
No Opinion	7.4

Table 9: Misconceptions About the Juvenile Justice System

	% Agree	% Disagree	No Opinion
State run institutions for delinquent youth operated by the California Youth Authority are severely overcrowded.	53.1	8.4	37.4
Juvenile offenders in state correctional facilities in California serve longer sentences on average than youth in most other states.	16.9	26.0	57.1

juvenile arrest rate declined by 8.1 percent, and the juvenile arrest rate for violent felonies declined by 21.4 percent.

The public's perception of juvenile crime activity bears little relationship to these facts, as shown by Table 8.

When asked about overcrowding in the California Youth Authority, a slim majority of respondents (53.1 percent) believed that overcrowding was severe, but a significant number (37.4 percent) could form no opinion. The gap in knowledge was even greater on the question of whether juvenile offenders in California served longer sentences on average than youth in most other states, with

57.1 percent of respondents unable to form an opinion (Table 9).

The lack of understanding about the basic facts relating to youth crime and juvenile justice suggests a need for additional public education on the subject.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

This survey was conducted in the week of October 10 to 16, 1988, by telephone contacts with 1,109 adults. Responses on questions posed to the total group of 1,109 have a maximum sampling error of plus or minus 3.1 percent. Responses on questions posed to one-half the total sample (marked with an * in the tables) have a maximum error of plus or minus 4.3 percent. Where total percentages shown for any one ques-

tion do not add up to 100 percent, the difference is attributable to rounding error or to one or more non-responses to the question. The data collected by the Field Institute was reported to NCCD by total response and by responses of demographic subgroups, including geographic location, political affiliation, sex, race, age, marital status, income, religion, education, and political ideology. The results presented in this report show responses by all persons to whom each question was posed.

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