

# Public Opinion on Sentencing and Corrections Policy in America

2012 polling, consistent with 2010 research, indicates that voters are concerned first and foremost with keeping communities and people safe. Without question, voters want a strong public safety system where criminals are held accountable and there are consequences for illegal activities. They also believe that these goals can be reached while reducing the size and cost of the prison system.

A national public opinion survey conducted in January 2012, along with similar surveys in Georgia, Missouri, and Oregon, found those attitudes persist and revealed opinions on specific policy solutions.

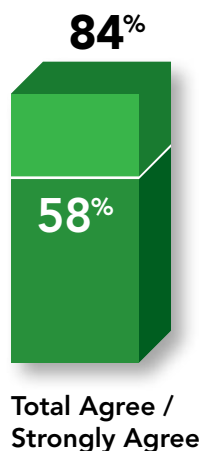
## KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. American voters believe too many people are in prison and the nation spends too much on imprisonment.
2. Voters overwhelmingly support a variety of policy changes that shift non-violent offenders from prison to more effective, less expensive alternatives.
3. Support for sentencing and corrections reforms (including reduced prison terms) is strong across political parties, regions, age, gender, and racial/ethnic groups.

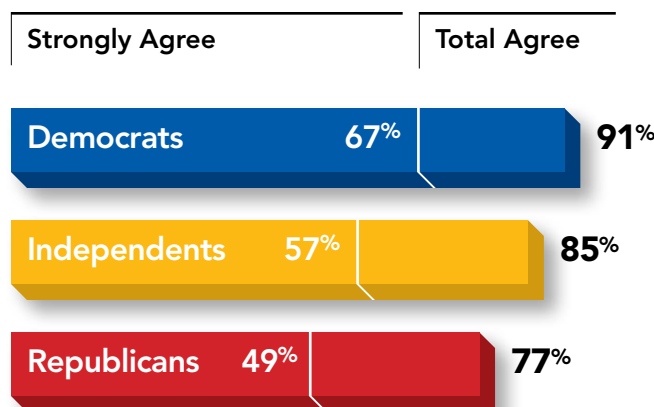
## THE BOTTOM LINE...

“Some of the money that we are spending on locking up low-risk, non-violent inmates should be shifted to strengthening community corrections programs like probation and parole.”

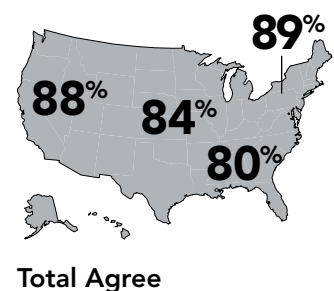
### Overall



### By Party Identification



### By Region

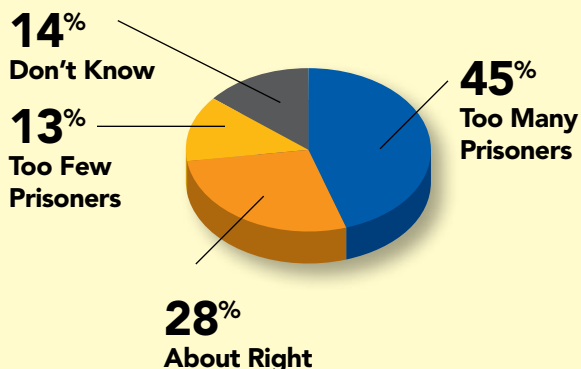


## UNDERLYING ATTITUDES

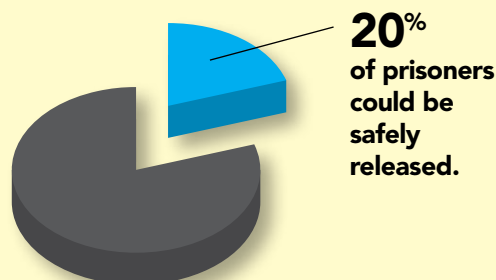
Research from 2010 showed that crime is a low concern among voters. It also showed that voters want offenders held accountable for their actions, and that they make a big distinction between violent and nonviolent offenders. The current survey found that voters also feel safe in their communities, rating their sense of safety at an average of 8 on a 10-point scale.

### A plurality believes there are too many people in prison.

"Do you think there are too many people in prison in the United States, not enough people in prison, or is the number of people in prison about right?"



### On average, voters think about a fifth of prisoners could be released without posing a threat to public safety.



### A strong majority, even among victims, believes prison is not always the best response to non-violent crime.

"Which comes closer to your point of view?"

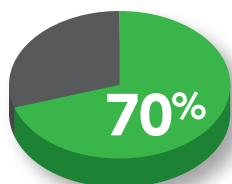
#### Statement A

"One out of every 100 American adults is in prison. That's too many, and it costs too much. There are more effective, less expensive alternatives to prison for non-violent offenders and expanding those alternatives is the best way to reduce the crime rate."

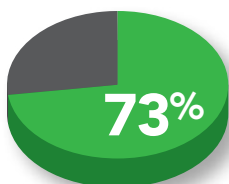


Strongly Support / Total Support

% Total Favor



Violent Crime Victim Households



Non-Violent Crime Victim Households

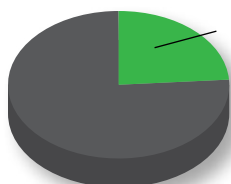
#### Statement B

"People who commit crimes belong behind bars, end of story. It may cost a lot of money to run prisons, but it would cost society more in the long run if more criminals were on the street."

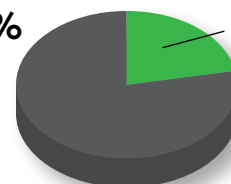


Strongly Support / Total Support

% Total Favor

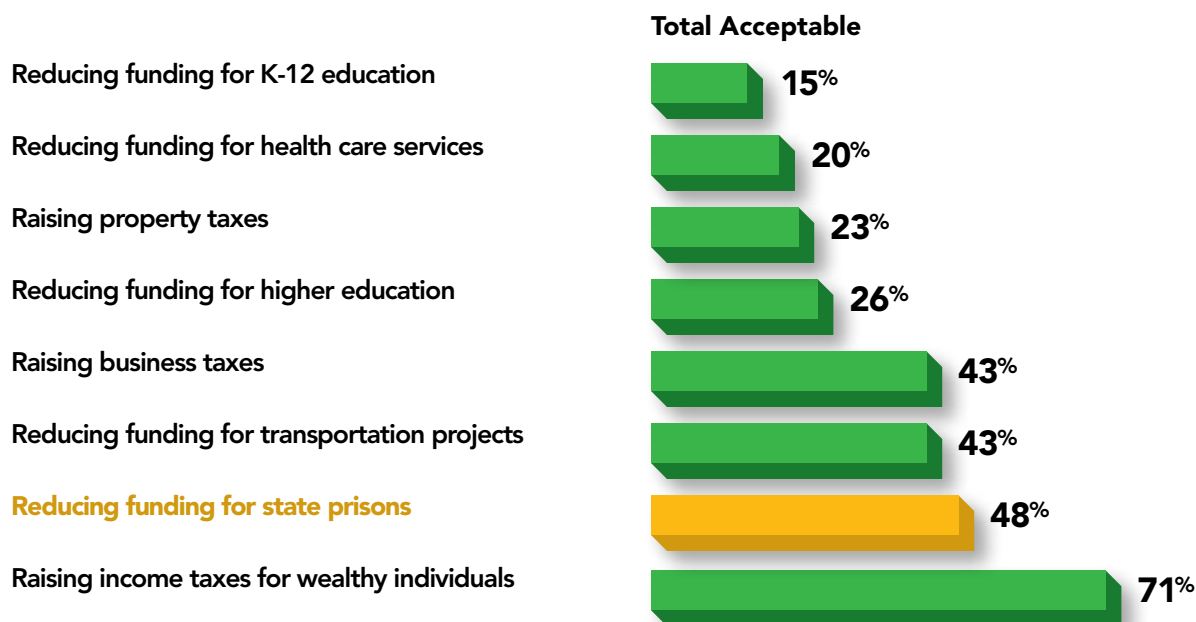


Violent Crime Victim Households



Non-Violent Crime Victim Households

Voters are more willing to raise taxes on the wealthy or reduce funding for state prisons than they are to consider other types of funding reductions.

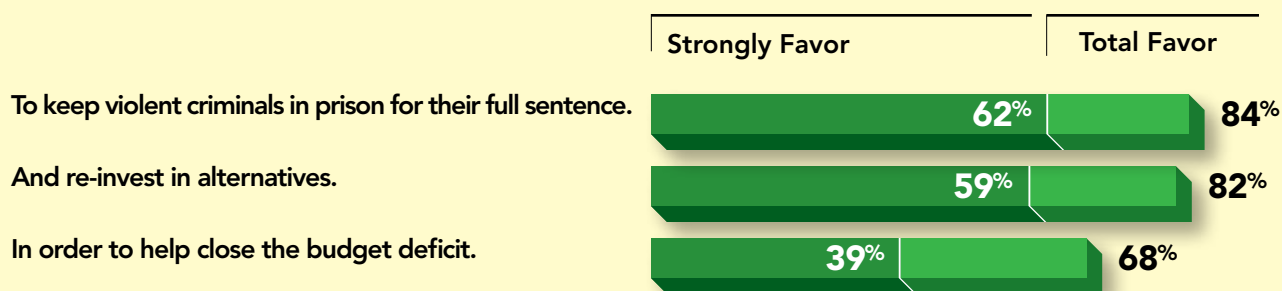


## POLICY SOLUTIONS

State policy makers seeking to reduce prison costs while maintaining public safety often look to reduced sentences for non-violent offenders as a policy remedy. The poll tested public support for a variety of such reforms. In the abstract, a plurality of voters believes that current sentences are "about right." But there is widespread support for shorter sentences and alternatives to incarceration for non-violent crimes, especially when prison savings are reinvested in less costly supervision options.

### 1. DIVERT MORE NON-VIOLENT OFFENDERS FROM PRISON

Send fewer low-risk, non-violent offenders to prison:



### Raise the Felony Theft Threshold

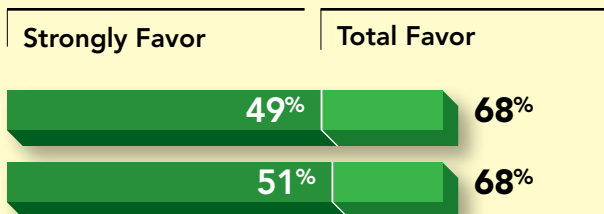
"Many states have a law that stealing property valued over \$500 is a felony crime, and thus the offenders face at least one year in prison. Some states have raised this felony threshold from \$500 to \$1,000 [or] \$1,500. Do you favor or oppose a proposal to raise the threshold to \$1,000 [or] \$1,500 in your state?"



Voters continue to support an increase in the threshold even in the face of a strong argument against it.

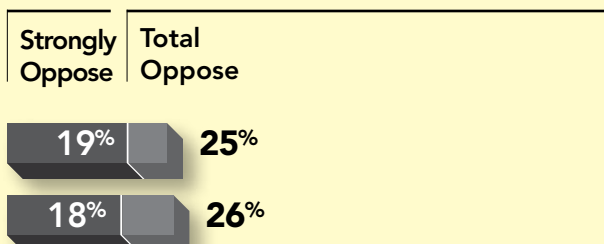
**Supporters...**

...say these laws were passed decades ago. Now electronics cost more than \$500. If someone steals one, they shouldn't be locked up at a cost to taxpayers of thousands per year. The threshold should be raised to at least \$1,000 [or] \$1,500.



**Opponents...**

...say that it is the wrong time to go soft on crime in this bad economy. People who steal make our communities less safe, and they should be locked up.

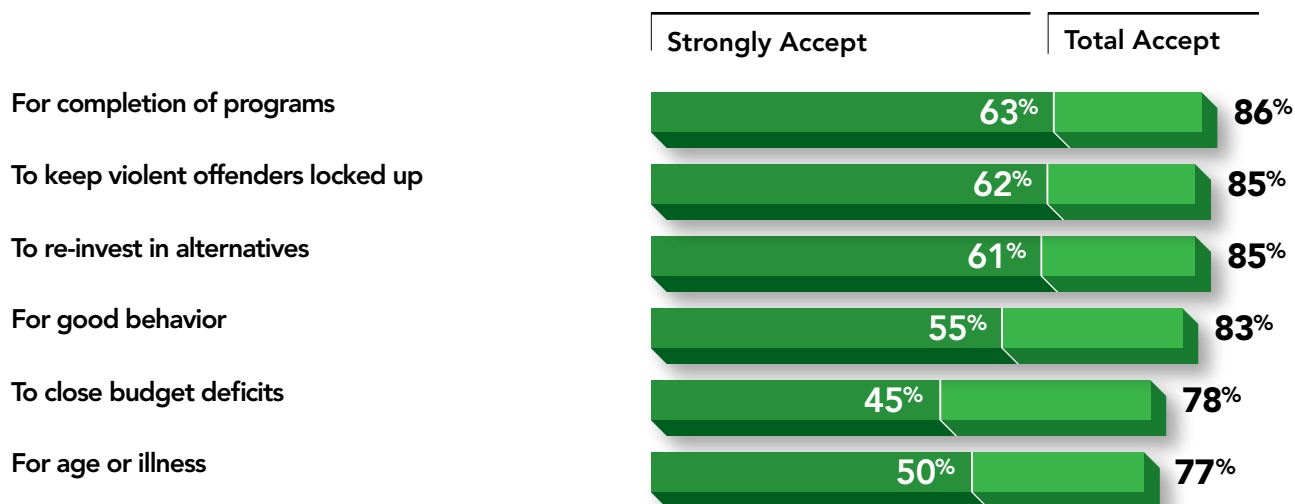


Total Support	PARTY AFFILIATION			GEOGRAPHIC REGION				HOUSEHOLD TYPE		
	Democrats	Independents	Republicans	East	South	Midwest	West	Violent Crime Victim	Non-Violent Crime Victim	Law Enforcement Member
\$1,000	72%	71%	60%	70%	64%	69%	71%	68%	69%	51%
\$1,500	71%	72%	60%	69%	66%	65%	72%	68%	66%	60%

**2. REDUCE PRISON TIME FOR NON-VIOLENT OFFENDERS**

All the approaches examined to reduce prison time served are broadly acceptable to voters.

Voters strongly support reducing prison time for low-risk, non-violent offenders for a variety of reasons:



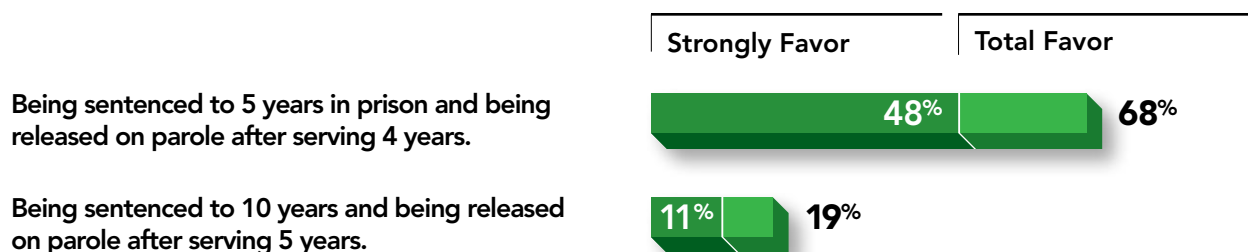
**A large majority of voters favor shortening prison terms for non-violent offenders by a full year.**

“Allow non-violent crime inmates to be released up to 6 [or] 12 months early if they have behaved well and are considered a low risk for committing another crime.”



**The percentage of a sentence served seems more important than its length.**

“Which of the following do you prefer as punishment for someone convicted of a non-violent crime?”



**Nearly all voters prioritize preventing recidivism over time served, even when prison time varies up to a year.**

“It does not matter whether a non-violent offender is in prison for 18 or 24 or 30 months [or] 21 or 24 or 27 months. What really matters is that the system does a better job of making sure that when an offender does get out, he is less likely to commit another crime.”



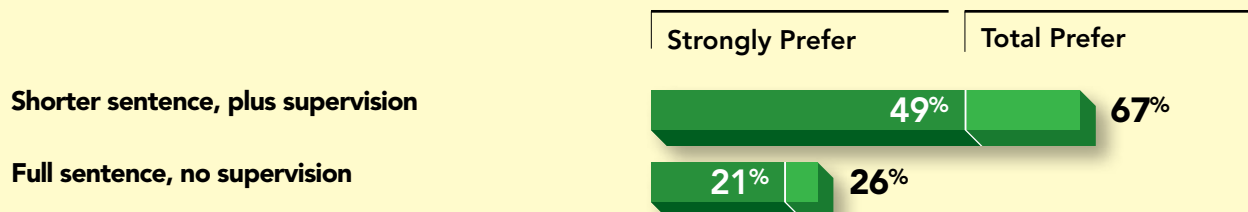
Total Agree	PARTY AFFILIATION			GEOGRAPHIC REGION				HOUSEHOLD TYPE		
	Democrats	Independents	Republicans	East	South	Midwest	West	Violent Crime Victim	Non-Violent Crime Victim	Law Enforcement Member
18/24/30 months	90%	85%	85%	86%	86%	86%	89%	83%	89%	87%
21/24/27 months	94%	93%	84%	91%	89%	94%	88%	86%	91%	91%

### 3. MANDATE SUPERVISION FOR ALL OFFENDERS RELEASED FROM PRISON

Voters strongly prefer that inmates be subject to a period of mandatory supervision, rather than be held until their sentences expire and released without any supervision, regardless of offense type.

#### Violent Offenders

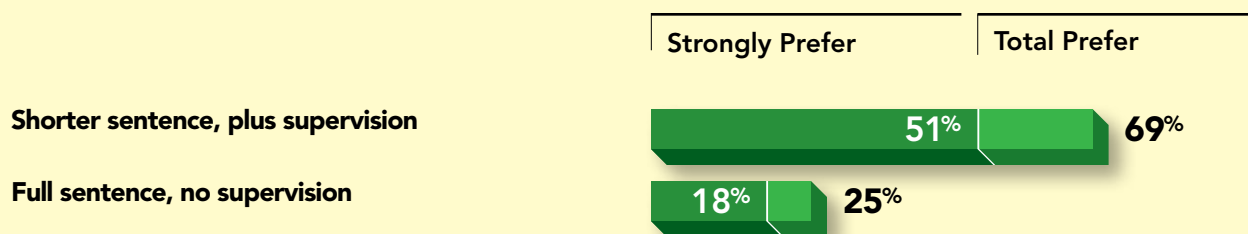
When given a choice between violent offenders serving a full 5-year prison sentence or 4 years of a 5-year sentence plus 1 year of mandatory supervision, voters prefer the mandatory supervision option.



	PARTY AFFILIATION			GEOGRAPHIC REGION				HOUSEHOLD TYPE		
	Democrats	Independents	Republicans	East	South	Midwest	West	Violent Crime Victim	Non-Violent Crime Victim	Law Enforcement Member
Total Prefer										
With Supervision	72%	66%	62%	65%	59%	72%	76%	68%	69%	62%
No Supervision	24%	25%	30%	27%	33%	21%	20%	24%	23%	34%

#### Non-Violent Offenders

When given a choice between non-violent offenders serving a full 3-year prison sentence or 2 years of a 3-year sentence plus 1 year of mandatory supervision, voters prefer the mandatory supervision option.



	PARTY AFFILIATION			GEOGRAPHIC REGION				HOUSEHOLD TYPE		
	Democrats	Independents	Republicans	East	South	Midwest	West	Violent Crime Victim	Non-Violent Crime Victim	Law Enforcement Member
Total Prefer										
With Supervision	72%	67%	67%	70%	65%	70%	73%	74%	74%	67%
No Supervision	23%	25%	26%	23%	27%	24%	23%	21%	21%	28%

#### 4. IMPROVE PROBATION AND PAROLE SUPERVISION

	Strongly Agree	Total Agree	Democrats	Independents	Republicans
“An effective probation and parole system would use new technologies to monitor where offenders are and what they are doing, require them to pass drug tests, and require they either keep a job or perform community service.”	74%	92%	95%	91%	89%
“There are five million offenders who are out of prison and under community supervision. If we are serious about public safety, we need a better system to supervise and track these people.”	70%	89%	90%	88%	88%
“We have too many low-risk, non-violent offenders in prison. We need alternatives to incarceration that cost less and save our expensive prison space for violent and career criminals.”	69%	88%	94%	89%	81%
“Prisons are a government program, and just like any other government program they need to be put to the cost-benefit test to make sure taxpayers are getting the best bang for their buck.”	66%	87%	88%	87%	87%
“Ninety-five percent of people in prison will be released. If we are serious about public safety, we must increase access to treatment and job training programs so they can become productive citizens once they are back in the community.”	66%	87%	90%	89%	82%
“Our spending on corrections has grown from \$10 billion to \$50 billion over the last twenty years but we are not getting a clear and convincing return on that investment in terms of public safety.”	57%	77%	81%	74%	76%
“Parole and probation are just a slap on the wrist and not a substitute for prison.”	29%	50%	43%	49%	59%

## METHODOLOGY

On behalf of the Pew Center on the States, Public Opinion Strategies and the Mellman Group conducted phone interviews with 1,200 likely voters nationwide on January 10-15, 2012. The survey has a margin of error of  $\pm 2.8\%$ . The margin of error is higher for subgroups.

The full survey is available at [www.pewcenteronthestates.org/publicsafety](http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/publicsafety).

### Poll Respondent Demographics

- 39 percent identified as conservative
- 30 percent identified as liberal

---

- 32 percent identified as a Republican or leaning Republican
- 24 percent identified as Independent
- 37 percent identified as Democrat or leaning Democratic

---

- 17 percent identified as a violent crime victim household
- 43 percent identified as a non-violent crime victim household
- 12 percent identified as a law enforcement household



Public Opinion Strategies is a leading national political, public policy, and public affairs research firm. Public Opinion Strategies is widely recognized as the nation's leading Republican polling firm, listing 19 U.S. Senators, 6 Governors, and over 70 Members of Congress as clients. Public Opinion Strategies also works for some of America's largest corporations and associations in the public affairs realm.



The Mellman Group has provided sophisticated opinion research and strategic advice to political leaders, public interest organizations, Fortune 500 companies, and government agencies for over thirty years. Current clients include the majority leader of the U.S. Senate and the Democratic whip in the U.S. House.