

Pennsylvanians Prioritize Criminal Justice Reforms



Criminal Justice

Pennsylvanians agree that reform is needed; differ on biggest concerns

Summary: Types of reform endorsed are linked to race and political leanings.

Criminal justice reform

Hot topic or time for meaningful change?

Many agree, often for different reasons that the criminal justice system is in need of reformation. The varied perspectives range from cost-based judgments related to the budgetary crises in many states to ethical considerations stemming from the prison experiment of the late 20th century that resulted in long prison sentences. This study examined citizen perceptions of criminal justice reform.

The current political climate has reintroduced the need for criminal justice reform. Criminal justice reform refers to ensuring the criminal justice system works fairly and efficiently. Criminal justice reform has recently grown as a more prominent topic of discussion among legislatures at the state and national level.

Citizens elect representatives to govern local jurisdictions, states, and the nation based upon collective desires. Understanding citizen perceptions about criminal justice reform can inform legislative agendas and

guide future research. Elected officials should be informed of the preferences of citizens regarding criminal justice reform to guide their decision-making. It is also important to understand demographic differences across perceptions of criminal justice reform to learn how various groups are being (dis)served by the criminal justice system.

Assessing reform

To determine Pennsylvanians' thoughts on criminal justice reform, study participants were presented two questions. First, respondents were asked to identify the biggest problem with current criminal justice system operations. Second, respondents were asked to identify key areas for reform.

The top operations priority identified was crime control; the deterrent effect of current punishments. Thirty-six percent of respondents believe that current punishments do not keep individuals from committing crimes in the future.

Approximately 22% said that racial/ethnic inequality is a big problem while 19% consider current drug laws to be outdated.

Less pressing criminal justice operations concerns were length of jail and prison sentences (5.9%) and financial costs (10.9%).

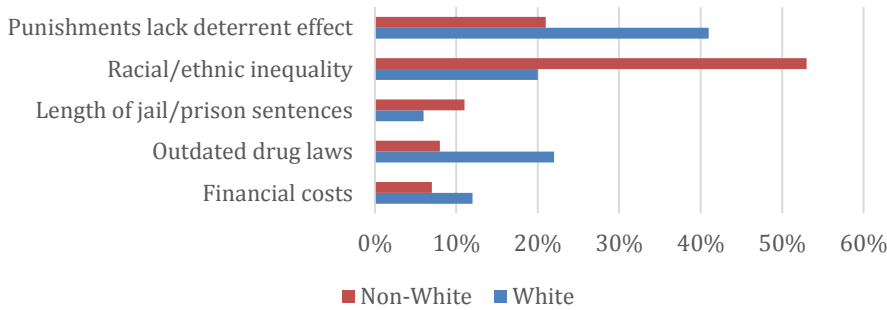
The leading area of reform was police-citizen interactions. About one-third (32.5%) endorsed police-citizen interactions as the most pressing area for reform. Almost a quarter of respondents (23.4%) believe sentencing by the courts is ripe for reform. Fewer Pennsylvanians endorsed post-jail or prison reentry (17.9%), juvenile justice (9.2%), and pre-trial bail (5.5%) as primary areas for reform.

Race

Whites were more likely to express concern over the deterrent effect of punishments (41%) and non-Whites viewed racial/ethnic inequality as a more pressing issue (Table 1).

Police-citizen interactions were a concern for all survey participants, though a greater priority for minority respondents (41%) compared to Whites (36%) (data not shown).

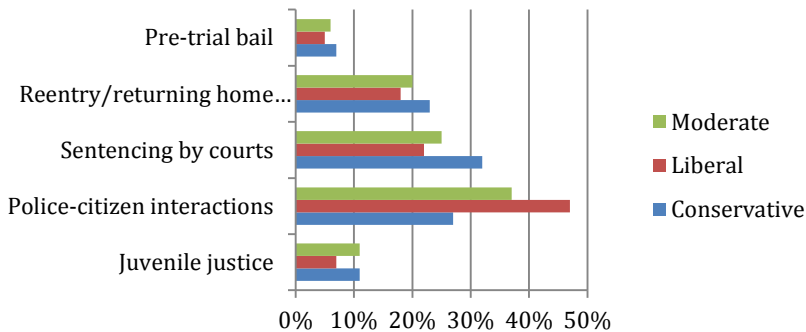
Table 1. Criminal justice operations



Political affiliation

For this study, political leanings were categorized as Conservative, Moderate, and Liberal. Conservatives (32%) were most concerned with current sentencing practices by the courts (Table 2). Moderates (37%) and Liberals (47%) primarily endorsed police-citizen interactions as the most pressing area in need of reform. Few citizens perceived pre-trial bail or juvenile justice as important in stark contrast to contemporary research literature.

Table 2. Key areas for reform



Conclusions and recommendations

Many agree, often for different reasons that the criminal justice system is in need of reformation. The discussions on criminal justice reform routinely include non-incarcerated citizens, representatives from state government entities, and elected officials responsible for the operational aspects of law enforcement, courts, and corrections. Absent are the voices of those most affected by reformations – individuals who become involved with the criminal justice system ranging from arrest through incarceration. The data from the poll suggest there is much variation in public opinion about criminal justice reform; confirming prior research. The results suggest greater efforts to inform the public and legislatures on criminal justice operations are necessary. Additional work is also needed to gather perspectives from those directly affected by the prospects of criminal justice reforms.

Methodology

Data consists of responses from 1,047 randomly selected adult Pennsylvania residents, who participated in the School of Public Affairs’ Pennsylvania Pre-election Poll on Policy and Governance. This was an omnibus self-administered web survey through the Center for Survey Research at Penn State Harrisburg between August 1 and September 2, 2018. The Center employed a quota-based invitation system to produce a final dataset that is representative of Pennsylvania’s population by region and, separately, by age/sex combined categories. The survey response rate was calculated using the American Association of Public Opinion Research’s Response Rate (RR3) formula. The final survey response rate was 1.4 percent. Responses were not weighted. Margin of error is +/- 3.0 percentage points with 95 percent degree of confidence.

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