

# FOCUS

Views from the National Council on Crime and Delinquency

## Attitudes of US Voters toward Prisoner Rehabilitation and Reentry Policies

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### *Findings in Brief*

- Of those polled, 74% are somewhat or very concerned about the problem of crime in their communities, and 79% are concerned or fearful about the annual release of 700,000 prisoners.
- By almost an 8 to 1 margin (87% to 11%), the US voting public is in favor of rehabilitative services for prisoners as opposed to a punishment-only system. Of those polled, 70% favored services both during incarceration and after release from prison.
- Only 14% of those polled thought that people coming out of prison were less likely to commit new crimes than they were before imprisonment. Over 50% thought the likelihood was at least the same, while 31% thought that the likelihood of new crime was greater after prison than before.
- By strong majorities, US voters feel that a lack of life skills, the experience of being in prison, and obstacles to reentry are major factors in the rearrest of prisoners after release. Few thought that criminality is inherent.
- By an overwhelming majority (82%), likely voters felt that a lack of job training was a very significant barrier to released prisoners avoiding subsequent crime. They also thought that medical care, the availability of public housing, and student loans are important (86%, 84%, and 83% respectively).
- By huge margins, those polled felt that job training, drug treatment, mental health services, family support, mentoring, and housing were all very important services that should be offered to prisoners. Less than 10% of those polled (only 2% in the case of job training) thought that these services were unimportant.
- Of those polled, 44% felt that planning for reentry should begin at sentencing, another 27% thought it should begin 12 months prior to release. Only 7% were not in favor of planning for reentry.
- When asked about pending legislation that would allocate federal dollars to prisoner reentry (The Second Chance Act), 78% were in support. Of those, almost half expressed *strong* support.

## Introduction

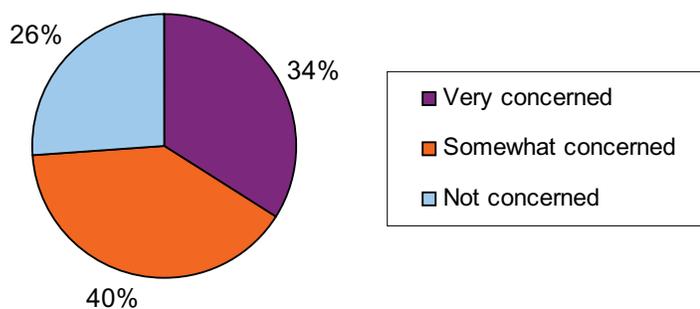
In February, 2006, NCCD commissioned Zogby International to conduct a national public opinion poll about American attitudes toward rehabilitation and reentry of prisoners into their home communities. Except where noted, the questions pertained to prisoners convicted of nonviolent crimes, such as drug or property offenses. The results of the poll showed that striking majorities favor rehabilitation as a major goal of incarceration. The public appears to recognize that our current correctional systems do not help the problem of crime, that prisoners face enormous barriers to successful reintegration to the community, and that rehabilitative services should be provided as a means of reducing crime.

## Method

This survey of likely voters was conducted by telephone according to a methodology approved by the American Association for Public Opinion Research. Zogby uses validated weighting and sampling procedures. The sample size was 1,039 interviews drawn at random. As many as six calls were made to reach a sampled number. The margin of error is +/- 3.1 percentage points.

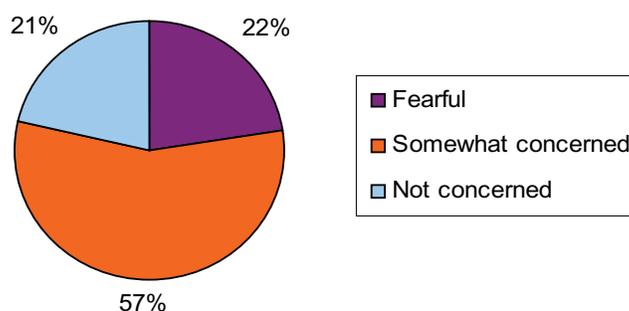
## Survey Questions

1: How concerned are you about crime in your community?



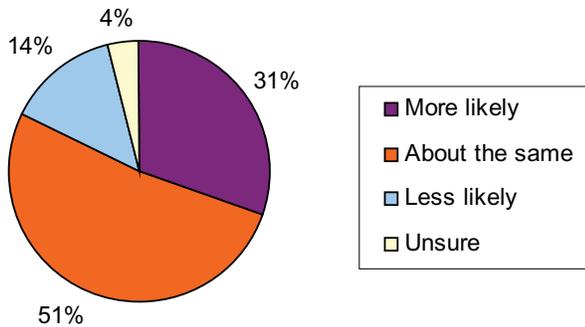
One-third of likely voters (34%) are very concerned about crime in their communities, and another two in five (40%) are somewhat concerned. In comparison, one fourth (26%) are not concerned about crime in their communities.

2: In 2006, 700,000 prisoners in all categories will be released from prison to their home communities. How do you feel about this situation?



More than one in five respondents (22%) are fearful about this situation. More than half (55%) are somewhat concerned, while one in five (21%) are not concerned.

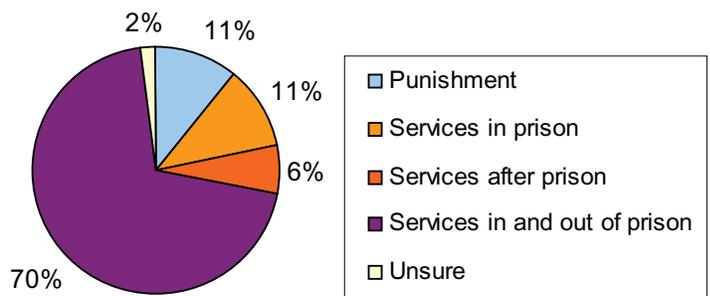
3: Generally speaking, do you think that people who have served their time in prison for nonviolent offenses and are released back into society today are more likely, less likely, or about the same than they were before their imprisonment to commit future crimes?



Nearly one-third of likely voters (31%) think released prisoners are more likely than they were before their imprisonment to commit future crimes. One in seven (14%) feel they are less likely to commit future crimes. A majority (52%), however, think they generally have the same likelihood after release to commit future crimes.

4: State prison systems could offer the following four alternative prison policies for people who have committed nonviolent crime. What would you prefer the state implement?

- **Policy 1:** Treat prison as punishment and do not offer rehabilitation services to people either during their time in prison or after their release.
- **Policy 2:** Make state-funded rehabilitation services available to incarcerated people while they are serving time in prison.
- **Policy 3:** Make state-funded rehabilitation services available to incarcerated people only after they have been released from prison.
- **Policy 4:** Make state-funded rehabilitation services available to incarcerated people both while they are in prison and after they have been released from prison.



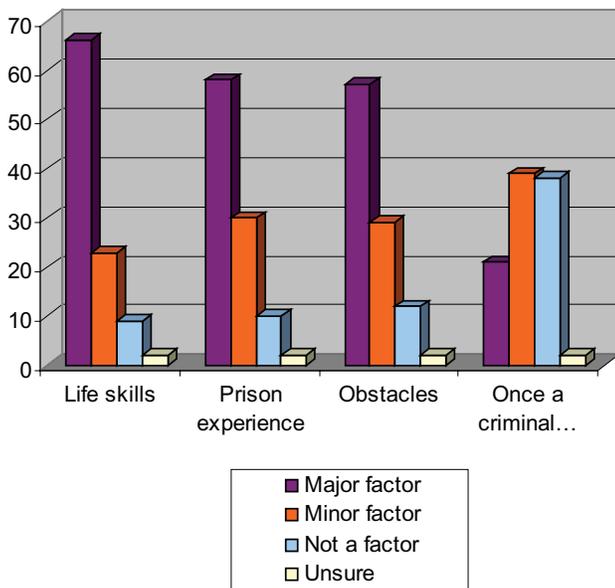
A large majority (70%) prefer Policy 4, making state-funded rehabilitation services available to incarcerated people both while they are in prison and after they have been released from prison. Much fewer respondents prefer Policy 1 (11%), Policy 2 (11%), or Policy 3 (6%).

5: More than 60-75% of all prisoners now released from state prisons are rearrested within two years. Following are some reasons that people have given to explain why this is. Tell me whether you think each issue is a major factor, a minor factor, or not a factor in the high rate of returns to prison.

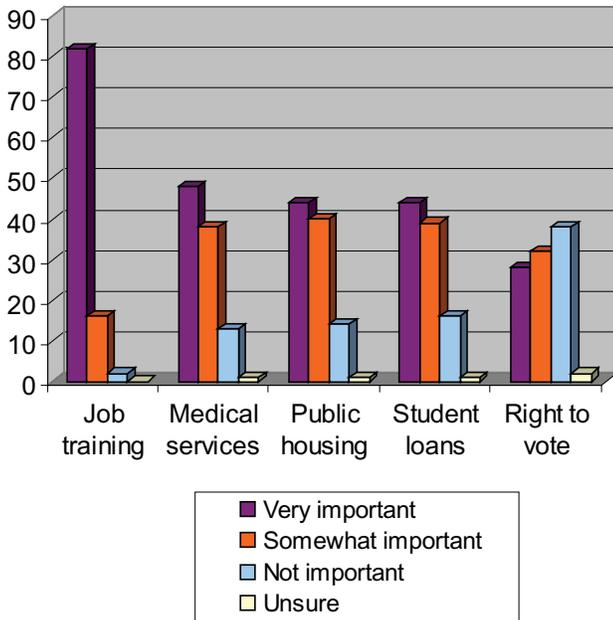
- When people leave prison, they have no more life skills than they had before they entered prison.
- The experience of prison reinforces criminal behavior.
- People returning to society from prison experience too many obstacles to living a crime-free life.
- Once a criminal, always a criminal.

Over half of respondents feel that three of these reasons are major factors in the high rate of people returning to prison after they have been released. This includes nearly two in three who say that when people leave prison, they have no more life skills than they had before they entered prison (66%). Nearly three in five say that the experience of prison reinforces criminal behavior (58%), and people returning to society from prison experience too many obstacles to living a crime-free life (57%). In contrast, one-eighth or fewer (9% to 12%) say each of these reasons is not a factor in the high rate of people returning to prison after they have been released.

Respondents are much less likely to say that “once a criminal, always a criminal” is a major factor (21%) in the high rate of people returning to prison after they have been released. Twice as many (39%) believe this is a minor factor, although approximately the same percentage (38%) say this is not a factor at all.



6: The following have been barriers to reentering prisoners. Tell me if you think it is very important, somewhat important, or not important in a person's successful reintegration to society after incarceration.

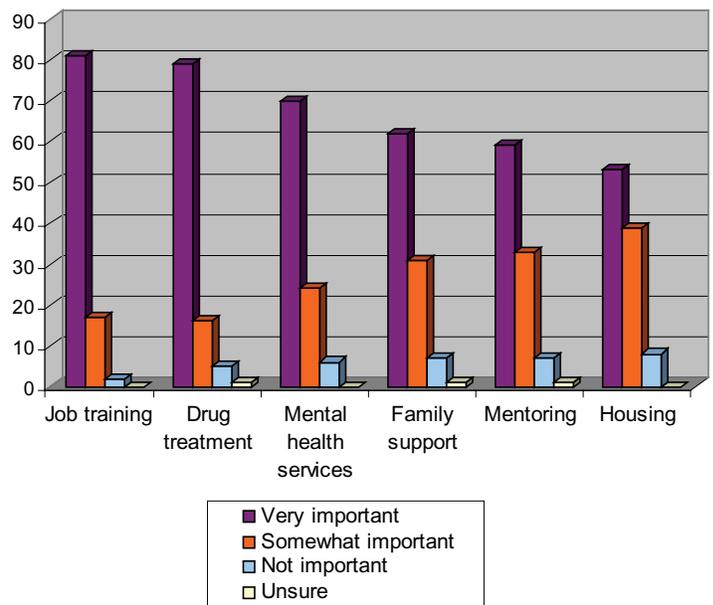


A vast majority (82%) say it is very important to have access to job training for a person to successfully reintegrate into society after incarceration. Pluralities of over two in five also say it is very important to have access to medical services (48%), access to public housing (44%), and access to student loans for education (44%). Approximately two in five (38% to 40%) say each of these items is somewhat important for a person to successfully reintegrate into society after incarceration.

More than one in four (28%) feel it is very important that a person's right to vote is reinstated, and one in three (32%) say this is somewhat important. A plurality (38%), however, feel this is not important for a person to successfully reintegrate into society after incarceration.

7: The following are services that could be made available to people reentering society after being incarcerated. Please tell me if you think access to each is very important, somewhat important, or not important to a person's successful reintegration into society after incarceration.

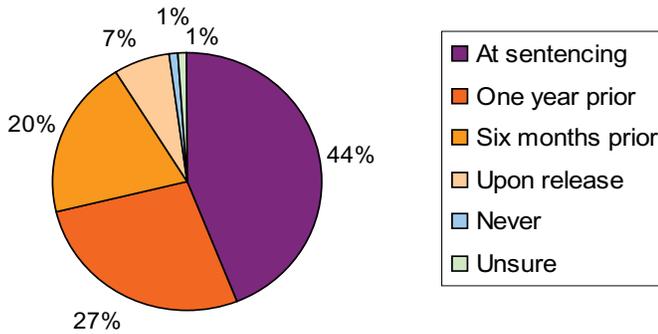
- Job training
- Drug treatment
- Mental health services
- Help for families
- Mentoring
- Housing



Majorities feel each of these is very important for a person to successfully reintegrate into society after incarceration. Access to job training (81%) and access to drug treatment (79%) are more likely than others to be cited as very important, while access to housing (53%) is the least likely of the six to be rated very important.

8: When do you think planning for an incarcerated person’s reentry into society should begin?

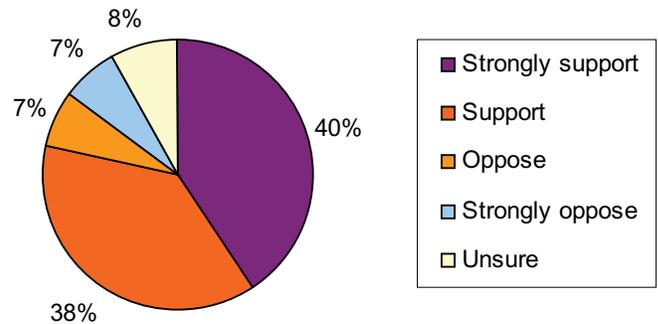
- At sentencing
- One year prior to release
- Six months prior to release
- Upon release
- Never
- Unsure



According to respondents, planning for an incarcerated person’s reentry into society should begin sooner than later. A plurality of over two in five (44%) feel it should begin at sentencing. More than one fourth (27%) say it should begin one year prior to release, and one-fifth (20%) say it should begin six months prior to a person’s release. Only 7% say planning should begin upon release, and just 1% feel this should never occur.

9: There is a bill in the US House of Representatives and Senate called the Second Chance Act, which funds programs and services for prisoners reentering the community. Do you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose this effort on the part of the federal government?

- Strongly support
- Somewhat support
- Somewhat oppose
- Strongly oppose
- Unsure



Approximately four in five (79%) support this effort, with support closely divided between strongly (41%) and somewhat (38%). In comparison, one in seven (14%) oppose the bill, while 8% are not sure.