



MEMORANDUM

TO: INTERESTED PARTIES
 FROM: ROBERT BLIZZARD – PUBLIC OPINION STRATEGIES
 DATE: March 21, 2017
 RE: RECENT PA STATEWIDE POLLING RESULTS

On behalf of the U.S. Justice Action Network, Public Opinion Strategies conducted a statewide survey of 500 registered voters (moe ± 4.4%) in Pennsylvania, January 22-24, 2017. Fully 40% of the interviews were conducted via cell phone. The purpose of this memo is to review the key findings from the survey.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Few Pennsylvanians believe the state’s criminal justice system is working well.**
 Just 17% of Pennsylvania voters say the state’s criminal justice system is “working pretty well as it is,” with 15% saying it needs a “complete overhaul” and fully two-thirds (66%) who say it needs “major reform” or “minor reform.”
- **A significant majority believe the state should break down barriers to help ex-offenders.**
 By an overwhelming 92%-7% margin, Pennsylvanians strongly agree that “We should break down barriers for ex-offenders so they can get jobs, support their families, and stop being dependent on government services that cost Pennsylvania taxpayers money.”

	Agree	Disagree
Overall	92%	7%
Republicans	90%	7%
Democrats	93%	6%
City of Philadelphia	95%	5%
Philadelphia Suburbs	87%	11%
Wilkes-Barre Market	94%	6%
Harrisburg Market	91%	5%
Pittsburgh Market	92%	7%

- **More than three-quarters agree that what really matters is that the system does a better job of keeping an offender from committing another crime.**

By a vast 84%-15% margin, Pennsylvanians strongly agree that “It does not matter whether an offender is in prison for months or years. What really matters is that the criminal justice system does a better job of making sure that when an offender does get out, they are less likely to commit another crime.”

	Agree	Disagree
Overall	84%	15%
Republicans	82%	17%
Democrats	88%	11%
City of Philadelphia	82%	18%
Philadelphia Suburbs	85%	13%
Wilkes-Barre Market	76%	18%
Harrisburg Market	89%	11%
Pittsburgh Market	80%	18%

- **There’s very strong support for shifting funds away from locking up nonviolent offenders to more cost-effective programs.**

By an 83-17% margin, Pennsylvanians strongly agree that “Some of the money Pennsylvania is spending on locking up nonviolent offenders should be shifted to strengthening mandatory community supervision programs like probation and parole.”

And, along those lines, there’s strong support (90% support-7% oppose) for a policy to “Reduce costly prison time for low-level, non-violent offenders in Pennsylvania prisons and re-invest some of those savings to create a stronger, more cost-effective probation and parole system that holds offenders accountable for their crimes.”

- **By an overwhelming margin, Pennsylvania voters support replacing mandatory minimum sentences.**

By an 85%-11% margin, voters in Pennsylvania strongly support a proposal to “Replace mandatory minimum sentences with sentencing ranges so that judges can weigh the individual circumstances of each case, such as seriousness of the offense and the offender’s criminal history, when determining the penalty.”

	Support	Oppose
Overall	85%	11%
Republicans	84%	13%
Democrats	87%	8%
City of Philadelphia	80%	12%
Philadelphia Suburbs	83%	14%
Wilkes-Barre Market	89%	6%
Harrisburg Market	84%	14%
Pittsburgh Market	85%	8%

- **Pennsylvania voters are strongly supportive of reducing costly prison release delays, and moving certain offenders onto supervision and treatment programs.**

By an overwhelming 92%-6% margin, Pennsylvanians strongly support the following:

“Now, as you may know, when someone is currently sent to prison here in Pennsylvania, they are given a minimum and a maximum sentence. The law requires that they serve the entire minimum sentence and then they may be released to community supervision.

Due to agency delays, the state spends \$73 million each year holding many people convicted of non-violent offenses after their minimum sentence.

There is a proposal being discussed in Harrisburg that would eliminate these delays and move certain offenders onto effective supervision and treatment programs after serving their required minimum sentence. This approach could reduce the likelihood of people having another offense and saving the state tens of millions of dollars.”

And, by a 93%-6% margin, voters say they’d support this plan if the savings could be reinvested in community supervision and treatment programs.

- **Pennsylvanians Broadly Support a “Clean Slate” proposal to seal minor criminal records after a crime-free period.**

By an 81-17 percent margin, voters support the following:

As you may know, Pennsylvania law allows for the expungement of non-violent low-level crimes from someone’s record, but in order to have the crime expunged, you have to be 70 years of age or older and crime-free for 10 years, or you have to have been dead for 3 years. Now, some people support a proposal that would allow the criminal record of non-violent misdemeanors to be automatically sealed after a few years assuming they haven’t committed another crime. This proposal would eliminate the government bureaucracy and red tape to file for expungement. And, under this proposal, a person’s past record would not show up in a background check for potential employers, but law enforcement could still access the person’s sealed record for safety reasons.

- **Supporting these reform proposals can help Pennsylvania legislators at the ballot box.**

If voters learned that their State Legislator favored these courses of action to reform the state’s criminal justice system, 66% say they’d be “more likely” to vote to re-elect them, with just 6% saying they’d be “less likely.”

Republicans (57%-5%), Independents (65%-9%), and Democrats (74%-6%) would all be “more likely” to re-elect their Legislator if they supported these reform proposals. In addition, voters in both GOP-held State House Seats (65%-6%) and in DEM-held State House Seats (67%-5%) would be “more likely” to support their incumbent in the next Election.

- **Finally, by an overwhelming margin, Pennsylvania voters support increasing the use of evaluations and other tools to help judges consider cases before making decisions.**

By a vast 93%-5% margin, Pennsylvania voters strongly support the following:

“As you may know, when someone is accused of a crime, the judge must set bail, which can mean the person either is held in jail or has to pay money to be released until their case is heard.

Right now, many judges make this decision without complete or reliable information on the people in front of them. As a result, judges may release people who are not likely to return for their hearings and who go on to commit additional crimes or they may hold people in expensive jails when they are very likely to return for their hearings and not dangerous at all.

There is a proposal being discussed in Harrisburg that would increase the use of evaluations and other tools to help judges consider all important information before making decisions.”