

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

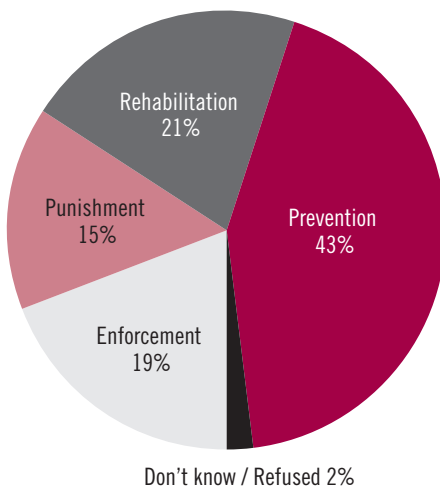
Massachusetts residents are ready to reform the state's criminal justice system with an eye towards reducing crime through prevention and rehabilitation. The public has shifted from a harder line adopted during the tough-on-crime era of the 1990s and is now open to a different approach. The bottom line for residents is creating a system that is effective at reducing crime.

These are the major findings of our new research project looking at public opinion on criminal justice in the Commonwealth. The project was commissioned by MassINC and the Massachusetts Criminal Justice Reform Coalition as a follow-up to MassINC's 2013 report *Crime, Cost, and Consequences: Is It Time to Get Smart on Crime?* It comprised four focus groups and a statewide poll of 1,207 residents. Here are some of the key findings:

Figure ES1:

Residents want to prioritize prevention, rehabilitation

Q: Which do you think should be a top priority for dealing with crime?



Massachusetts residents want the criminal justice system to focus on prevention and rehabilitation—two areas where the current system is not seen as effective.

- Nearly two-thirds (64 percent) think the criminal justice system should prioritize crime prevention or rehabilitation (Figure ES1). This and other findings are largely consistent with national and state polls by the Pew Center for the States, in which majorities favored shifting resources from incarceration towards alternatives.¹
- Majorities of Massachusetts residents think the current system is effective at punishing the guilty (64 percent) and ensuring fair trials (73 percent). On other priorities like rehabilitation and prevention of future crime, effectiveness ratings were considerably lower. The lowest effectiveness ratings went to rehabilitating prisoners addicted to drugs or alcohol (37 percent) and addressing the needs of mentally ill prisoners (37 percent).
- Some parts of the system are seen as counterproductive. Most (59 percent) think released inmates are *more likely* to reoffend due to being hardened in prison, and 57 percent think inmates reoffend because they lack opportunities and resources upon release.

Two-thirds want reforms that result in fewer people sent to prison, reversing previous high levels of support for new prisons.

- In a 1997 MassINC poll, two-thirds supported building a new, 1,000-bed prison. Now, two-thirds (67 percent) would prefer to reform the system so that fewer people are sent to prison.
- Proposals focused on reducing the number of people sent to prison and improving post-release prospects among current inmates receive widespread support (Figure ES2).
- Overall, 85 percent support (52 percent strongly) a reform agenda that includes a focus on reha-

Figure ES2:

Reentry help, supervision, treatment all seen as effective at reducing crime

Q: For each of the following, please tell me how effective, if at all, you think that it is or would be in substantially reducing crime?

	% VERY EFFECTIVE	% TOTAL EFFECTIVE
Send non-violent, mentally ill people to treatment rather than to prison to keep them separated from hardened criminals	61%	90%
Provide prisoners with job training so they can find work after they are released	59%	88%
Require prisoners who are about to be released to connect with community groups that can help them after their release	53%	89%
Require a period of supervision for all prisoners following their release	52%	86%
Send drug users to treatment rather than prison to keep them separated from hardened criminals	47%	83%
Doing more to prepare inmates for release from prison by gradually moving them to a lower security level in prison, to work-release programs, to halfway houses and the like	47%	87%
Sending only those convicted of violent crimes and dealers of hard drugs to prison, and sentencing those convicted of lesser crimes to probation under close monitoring and control	35%	77%
Getting rid of things like television sets and gyms for prisoners, and concentrating on punishing them for their crimes	23%	42%
Require all prisoners to serve out their entire sentence with no chance of early release	21%	45%

bilitation, increased use of probation, reduced sentences for non-violent criminals and drug users, and judicial discretion instead of mandatory minimum sentencing. Support for these reforms rises to 91 percent (65 percent strongly) when residents learn that other states have lowered crime with similar reforms.

Residents show little support for mandatory minimum sentencing.

- Only 11 percent favor mandatory minimum sentences when presented with three options (Figure ES2). Far more prefer judges either use sentencing guidelines (44 percent) or determine sentences on a case-by-case basis (41 percent).
- This marks a clear departure from MassINC’s 1997 poll, when large majorities viewed a

variety of mandatory sentences as effective in reducing crime.³

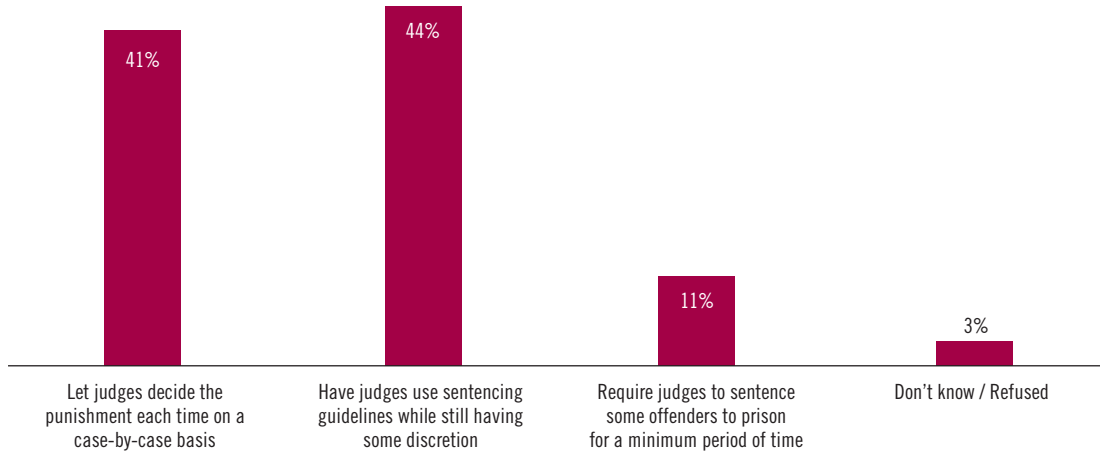
The public views drug use as a health problem rather than a crime, and favors rehabilitation over incarceration.

- More than twice as many (64 percent) perceive drug use as a health problem than a crime (24 percent).
- More than four in five (83 percent) think sending drug users to treatment instead of prison would be effective in reducing crime. Drug trafficking is still viewed as a more serious offense, and far fewer would support leniency for those involved.

Figure ES3:

Preferred sentencing practice?

Q: Which is the best way for judges to sentence convicted offenders?



Concerns about supervision cloud picture of public support.

- The focus groups conducted in preparation for the poll found residents do not believe the supervision system is effective right now. Participants were sensitive to overworked supervision staff, and questioned whether they could keep up with higher demands stemming from reforms that sent more inmates into supervised release situations.
- Just 41 percent are aware that many inmates are released without any supervision at all. In fact, nearly half (48 percent) of inmates released from Department of Correction (DOC) facilities in 2011 received no post-release supervision.

In communities that receive a very large share of released inmates, residents agree with the broad, pro-reform sentiment of the rest of the state.

- Because reform will disproportionately impact the ten communities where 49 percent of DOC releases take place, these areas were oversampled to examine residents' opinions on these issues closely.
- While some responses varied by a few percentage points, there were no sharp departures or reversals of opinion between these ten communities and the rest of the state. Generally speaking, residents from high-release areas support the overall reform agenda and see the potential benefit of the specific reforms included in the poll.