

Voters Embrace Change to Make Massachusetts a Leader in Common Sense Criminal Justice Reform

Massachusetts voters want a different criminal justice system than the one we have today. They support changes to the state's criminal justice system encompassing everything from sentencing, to prison, to post-release policies. Voters would prioritize prevention (41 percent) and rehabilitation (25 percent) to reduce crime; far fewer think that enforcement (22 percent) or punishment (8 percent) should be the focus.

Voters in Massachusetts are ready to end mandatory minimum sentences. Very few Massachusetts voters say mandatory minimum sentencing is preferable to more discretion for judges in sentencing. Just 8 percent of voters prefer mandatory minimums, including 6 percent of Democrats and 8 percent of Republicans. This mirrors national polling, where large majorities have favored ending mandatory minimums.

Voters see the current prison system as contributing to crime. By a nearly two-to-one margin (53 percent to 27 percent), voters think Massachusetts prisons make offenders more likely to commit new crimes rather than reducing repeat offending and preventing future crime. Voters rate connecting inmates with community groups as their release date approaches as the most effective way to reduce crime, followed by job training and education. A plurality (42 percent) say there are too many people in prison in Massachusetts, versus 10 percent who say not enough, and 23 percent who say about the right amount.

Voters see addiction as a public health issue. Even as the opioid epidemic rages in Massachusetts, voters want more focus on treatment (62 percent) than on arresting dealers (28 percent). By a better than two-to-one margin, voters think addiction should be managed more as a health problem (66 percent) than a criminal issue (24 percent). When a person addicted to drugs commits a crime, many voters think they should serve time in prison, but voters also think our prisons should be more focused on rehabilitation and preparing inmates for reentry, rather than only punishment.

Voters want a system that gives the formerly incarcerated a second chance. After release, voters support a variety of changes that would allow former prisoners to move on with their lives:

62% support sealing misdemeanor records after 3 years instead of 5-year wait.

65% support sealing a felony record after 7 years, instead of the current 10-year wait.

60% support raising the felony theft threshold from \$250 to \$1,500 so that petty theft does not result in a long-lasting criminal record.

50% think people should not be responsible for supervision and court fees if they do not earn enough money to afford the payments.

53% think that prisoners are more likely to reoffend after prison because they've been hardened by their time behind bars, 27% say less likely.

2/3 of voters think drugs should be treated as a health issue instead of as a crime.

Only 8% of voters support mandatory minimum sentences. 87% want judges to have some discretion when sentencing criminals.

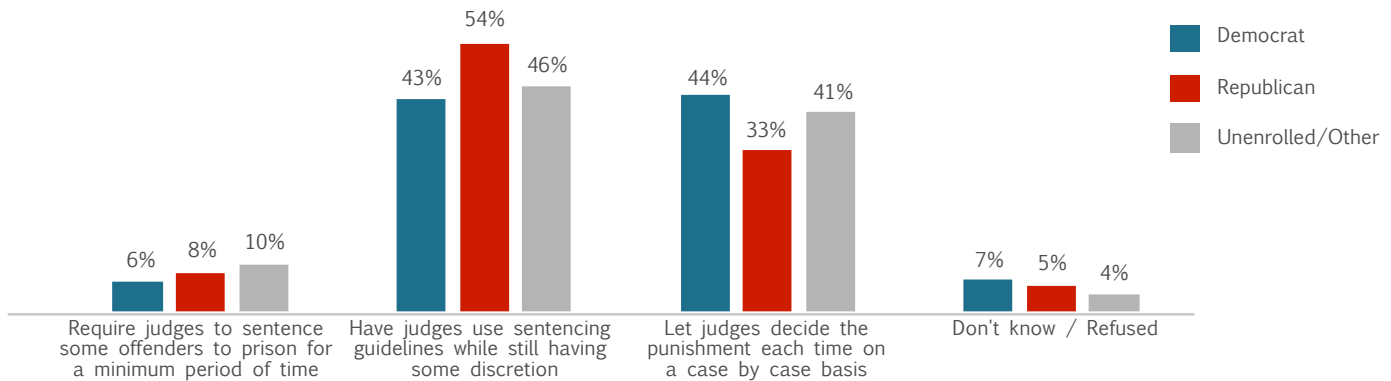
Majorities think connecting inmates with community groups (93%) and providing job training (91%) and education (89%), would reduce crime

60% support raising the threshold for felony theft

from \$250, where it's been since 1987, to \$1,500.

Sentencing reform is not a partisan issue.

Q: Here are three options. Which is the best way for judges to sentence convicted offenders?



Broad, bipartisan support for comprehensive reform remains strong.

A 1997 MassINC poll found that two-thirds of Massachusetts voters supported building a new 1,000 bed prison and a variety of other tough-on-crime positions. But public opinion has swung in the opposite direction. Today, a plurality of Massachusetts voters think there are too many inmates in the state's prisons, and 62 percent favor focusing on treatment programs and facilities over locking up drug offenders. MassINC demonstrated this profound shift in a 2014 poll. Although the issue of public safety played prominently in the 2016 presidential election, views on criminal justice in Massachusetts are little changed since the 2014 poll. There are subtle differences based on political affiliation, but criminal justice reform is not nearly as divided along party lines as other policy matters. Many reform proposals enjoy majority support on the political left, right, and center.

Support for reform is equally strong among crime victims and residents of high crime areas

The survey included a subsample of people who said they or their immediate family had been victims of a crime. These respondents expressed remarkably similar opinions to other Massachusetts voters. This finding is in line with results from the 2014 MassINC poll, which included an oversample of voters living in high-incarceration-rate neighborhoods. Opinion on reform among residents of these communities was on par with residents from other parts of the state.

	Prefer mandatory minimums	Prison leaves inmates more/less likely to commit more crimes	There are too many people in prison / not enough people in prison
All registered voters	8%	53% / 27%	42% / 10%
Self or family have been victims of a crime	9%	53% / 22%	46% / 10%
Residents of high crime areas (2014 poll)	9%	56% / 32%	45% / 16%

About the poll: To assess public support for reform, MassINC commissioned a statewide survey of 754 Massachusetts registered voters. The poll was overseen by The MassINC Polling Group and conducted April 27-May 1, 2017 using live telephone interviewers. For the full topline results and comparisons to past polls, visit massinc.org.