

Most Texas voters support criminal justice reform

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AUSTIN—More than three-fourths of Texas voters believe 17-year-old offenders should be treated as juveniles rather than adults, and an even greater number support alternatives to incarceration for some nonviolent low-level drug-related crimes, a newly released survey revealed.

A poll of more than 500 registered Texas voters Dec. 14-19, 2016, showed strong support for criminal justice reform policies reflected in bills now under consideration in the Texas Legislature.

They include initiatives to raise the age of juvenile jurisdiction, reduce penalties for low-level nonviolent drug offences and grant judges latitude to sentence offenders to treatment programs and community service instead of prison.

The Alliance for Safety and Justice commissioned Baselice & Associates to conduct [the research](#) on behalf of the Texas Smart-on-Crime Coalition, which includes the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission.

“The CLC is part of this coalition seeking more effective criminal justice policies, and it is encouraging to see these survey results showing Texans are very much in support of these efforts,” said Kathryn Freeman, CLC director of public policy.

“We want fair and just laws that appropriately punish criminal behavior and also make it possible for people to rebuild their lives. This survey shows that Texans by and large understand the situation and want the system to be reformed, regardless of their political affiliation.”

Raise the age of juvenile jurisdiction

The survey showed 78 percent of all Texas voters—and 86 percent of voters in the Republican primary—support handling 17-year-old offenders in the juvenile justice system, while granting judges discretion to move them to the adult criminal justice system on a case-by-case basis. Texas is one of only six states that routinely charges 17-year-olds as adults.

A separate [study](#) by the Raise the Age Coalition revealed the arrest rate among 17-year-olds and the types of crimes for which they are arrested more closely resembles 16-year-olds than adults.

The [Texas Department of Public Safety](#) reports 95 percent of 17-year-olds arrested in 2015 were accused of nonviolent crimes and misdemeanor offenses.

“We don’t want Texas to be the last state to raise the age,” said Lindsey Linder, policy attorney with the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition. “These survey results present a compelling case to legislators to raise the age of criminal responsibility to 18—a common-sense approach that would make Texas communities safer, protect parental rights and keep youth out of dangerous mental and physical conditions inside adult facilities.”

On April 20, the Texas House voted to approve a bill to raise the age of criminal responsibility from 17 to 18. Now the measure moves to the Senate, where a companion bill is in the Criminal Justice Committee.

Texas voters favor drug treatment programs over incarceration

The December survey also revealed strong support for measures to respond to low-level nonviolent drug offenses with substance-abuse treatment programs.

The survey revealed 87 percent of all voters—and 83 percent of GOP

primary voters—support a policy that places nonviolent low-level drug offenders into community supervision or treatment programs rather than prison.

The poll showed 92 percent of all Texas voters—and 88 percent of Republican primary voters—believe the current system in Texas is not working for people with drug addiction.

“This is a wake-up call for Texas legislators to rethink the way the state addresses addiction and to continue on the pathway of finding solutions that cut costs and increase public safety,” said Marc Levin with the Texas Public Policy Foundation. “Texas voters favor programs where those with drug addiction get opportunities for rehabilitation rather than simply being warehoused.”

In other key findings, the survey revealed:

- 82 percent of all Texas voters—and 75 percent of Republican primary voters—favor reclassifying possession of a small amount of drugs as a misdemeanor rather than a felony.
- 79 percent of all voters—69 percent of Republican primary voters—said they would favor a hypothetical candidate who supports rehabilitation by sending people with low-level drug offenses into community supervision or treatment programs instead of prison.
- 82 percent of voters—and 76 percent of GOP primary voters—support changing the way technical parole violations are handled. They favor accountability measures such as enhanced curfew, electronic monitoring or increased check-ins over incarceration. More than 12,000 people a year are sent back to prison for technical violation such as missing a meeting with a parole officer—not committing a new crime.

Editor's Note: The article was edited April 21 to report on the vote in the Texas House on a bill to raise the age of juvenile jurisdiction.