

# NCCD FOCUS

Views from the National Council on Crime and Delinquency

## Attitudes of Californians toward Effective Correctional Policies

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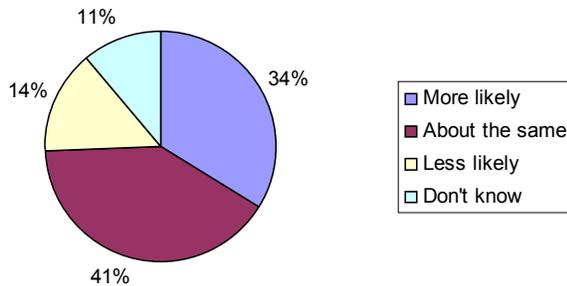
### Findings in Brief

- By almost an 8 to 1 margin (63% to 8%), Californians favor using state funds to rehabilitate prisoners *both* during incarceration *and* after their release from prison as opposed to punishment only. Current California law mandates that the primary purpose of incarceration is punishment. Small margins favor services in prison only (13%) or post-release only (11%).
- Of the 63% mentioned above, there are some ideological differences. However, even 47% of political conservatives support the rehabilitation model. In geographic regions that are typically conservative, Orange County and the Central Valley, there is major support for rehabilitation services to inmates (60% and 64%, respectively).
- By almost 2 to 1 (45% vs. 24%), Californians believe that providing rehabilitation services to inmates *both* while they are serving time *and* after they have been released would be the least costly to the state in the long run. Small margins favor services in prison only (16%) or post-release only (8%).
- By more than a 2 to 1 margin (34% to 14%), Californians think that inmates that have served their sentences return to society *more* likely versus *less* likely to commit future crimes. Respondents answered similarly despite differences of economic status, gender, ethnicity, and political persuasion.
- Almost 59% of Californians polled believe that the experience of incarceration is a major factor in recidivism. Only 29% believe that “once a criminal, always a criminal” is a major factor in recidivism.
- Of those polled, 67% believe that a lack of life skills is a major factor in recidivism; another 19% believe it to be a minor factor. Only 11% believe that a lack of life skills is not a factor in recidivism.
- Of likely voters, 73% would vote for Proposition 36 today. Prop 36 changed state law to require probation and drug treatment, instead of prison time, for the possession and use (not manufacture or sale) of illegal drugs. Prop 36 was passed by 61% of California voters in November of 2000.
- Well over half of Californians surveyed (56%) think that rehabilitating and educating offenders outside of prison would reduce the state’s crime problem. When a similar question was asked in 1982, only 35% of Californians agreed [Field Research Corporation (1982). *A Digest on How the California Public Views a Variety of Matters Relating to Crime*. Author].

**The poll questions all related to inmates that committed property crimes or drug-related offenses.**

## Questions

**Q:** Generally speaking, do you think that the inmates who have served their time and are released back into society today are more likely, about the same, or less likely than they were before their imprisonment to commit future crimes?

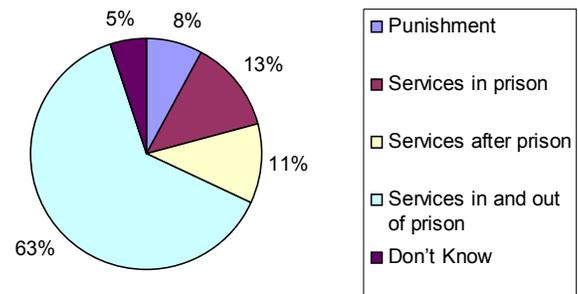


Only 14% of the total respondents thought that prisoners are less likely (vs. more likely or the same) to commit future crimes after serving their time and being released from prison. Over 40% of those polled thought that inmates returning to society were just as likely to commit more crime as they were when they entered prison, and 34% thought that after prison, inmates are more likely to commit future crime. Respondents answered similarly despite differences of economic status, gender, ethnicity, and political persuasion.

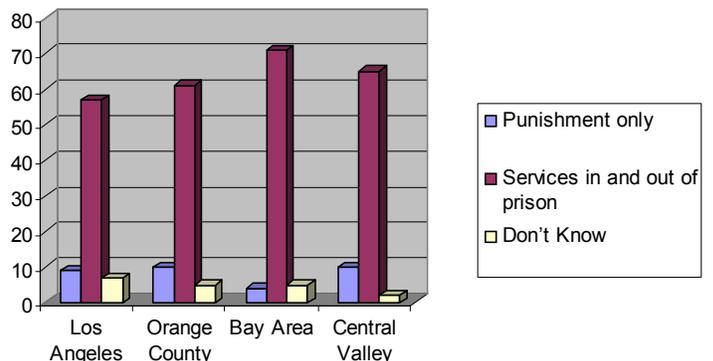
**Q:** Following are four alternative prison policies that California's prison system could follow for people who have committed property crimes or drug-related offenses. Which would you prefer the state implement?

- Treat prison as punishment, and do not offer rehabilitation services to inmates either during their time in prison or after their release.
- Make state-funded rehabilitation services available to inmates only while they are serving time in prison.

- Make state-funded rehabilitation services available to inmates only after they have been released from prison.
- Make state-funded rehabilitation services available to inmates both while they are serving time and after they have been released from prison.

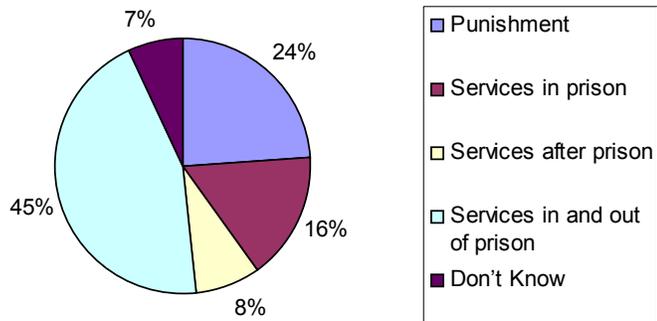


Californians clearly (almost 8 to 1) favor using state funds for rehabilitation over a system that only punishes inmates for drug and property offenses. Merely 8% favor punishment only, while 63% favor rehabilitation both during prison time and after release. Some prefer education and rehabilitation only during detention (13%) and some only post-release (11%). A small number (5%) are uncertain.



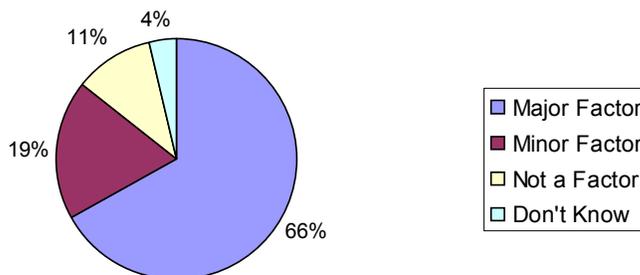
Even areas that are typically conservative, whose residents have in the past opposed such measures, now are largely in support of a rehabilitation model.

**Q:** Which of these four alternative policies do you think would cost the state of California the least in the long run?



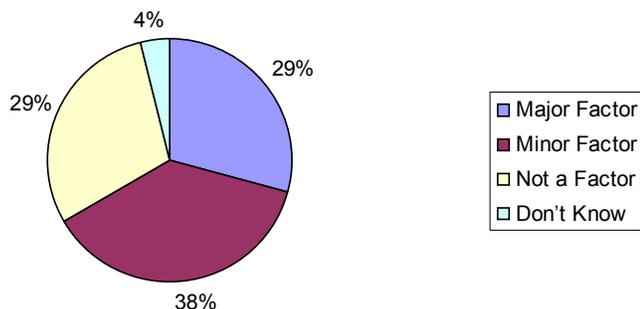
By a margin of almost 2 to 1 (45% to 24%), Californians believe that rehabilitating and educating offenders *both* during their incarceration *and* after their release from prison would be least costly to the state in the long run. Others favored a smaller scope—services in prison only (16%) and post-release only (8%).

**Q:** “When they leave prison, inmates have no more life skills than they had before they entered prison.” In your opinion, is this a major factor, a minor factor, or not at all a factor in the high rate of inmates who return to prison today?



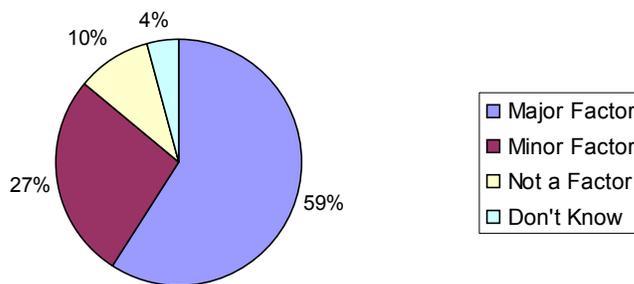
Of those polled, 66% believe that a lack of life skills is a major factor in recidivism; another 19% believe it to be a minor factor. Only 11% believe that a lack of life skills is not a factor in recidivism.

**Q:** “Once a criminal, always a criminal” In your opinion, is this a major factor, a minor factor, or not at all a factor in the high rate of inmates who return to prison today?

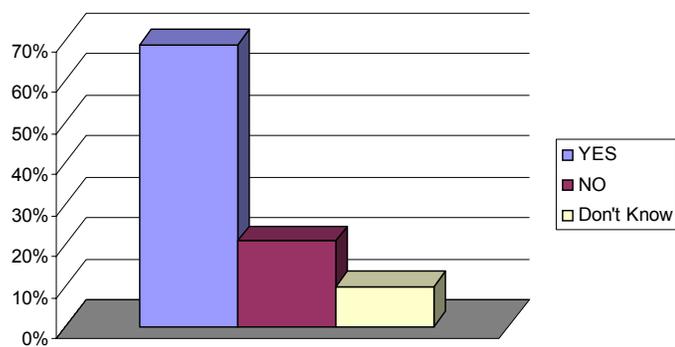


Only 29% of respondents thought that criminality is irreparable and a major factor in recidivism, while another 29% thought it a minor factor, and 38% thought it not at all a factor. In addition, 59% believe that the experience of being in prison is a major factor in subsequent offending and returning to prison, while another 27% consider it a minor factor, and only 10% think that it is not at all a factor.

**Q:** “The experience of prison reinforces criminal behavior.” In your opinion, is this a major factor, a minor factor, or not at all a factor in the high rate of inmates who return to prison today?

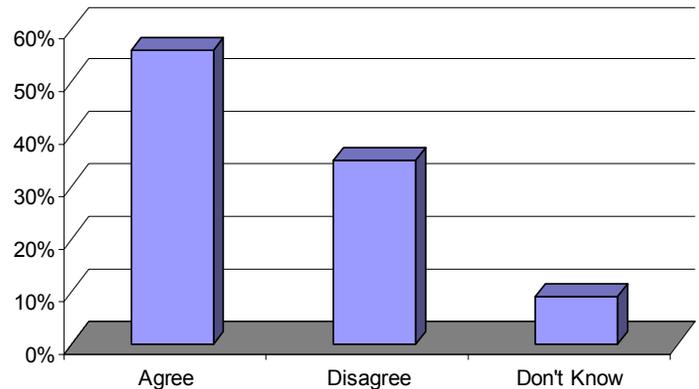


**Q:** In the November 2000 general election, California voters approved Proposition 36, which changed state laws to require probation and drug treatment, rather than prison terms, for persons convicted of possessing or using illegal drugs. The new law does not apply to those convicted of the sale and manufacturing of illegal drugs, who could still be sentenced to prison terms. If Proposition 36 were being voted on again this year, would you be inclined to vote YES or NO?



Of likely voters, 73% would vote for Proposition 36 today. Prop 36 was passed by 61% of California voters in November of 2000.

**Q:** Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: *“The crime problem would be reduced if fewer offenders were sent to prison and instead were re-educated and rehabilitated out of prison.”*



A total of 56% of respondents agree that education and rehabilitation would help reduce California’s crime problem. When a similar question was asked by the Field Research Corporation in 1982, only 35% of Californians agreed.

## Summary

Over the past several decades, California has experimented with a variety of sentencing policies to reduce crime. Most of those reforms have emphasized increasing punishment. These survey data suggest that the state’s public is looking for a reconsideration of these policies. Californians are now saying that punishment alone does not deter crime and that they favor a correctional system that includes rehabilitation as a core operating principle.

The information in this report is a result of a survey conducted by the Field Research Corporation in May of 2004 and sponsored by NCCD, a nearly 100-year old research organization. The questions all related to inmates that committed property crimes or drug-related offenses. Field polled a representative sample of 1003 adults (18 or older) living in California about their attitudes toward criminal punishment and rehabilitation. The poll used a random sampling method with an error range of +/- 3.2 percentage points. All percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number. This project was made possible by a generous grant from the Roney Family Foundation.