

To: Interested Parties

From: GBA Strategies

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Poll Results on Youth Justice Reform in Virginia

At a time when partisan polarization dominates the political landscape, a new poll shows that Virginians of all political stripes support shifting the youth justice system from a focus on incarceration and punishment to prevention and rehabilitation. A strong 78% majority favors this shift, with broad support across partisan affiliations in the state (83% of Democrats, 80% of Independents, and 77% of Republicans).

The following are key findings from the survey of 500 adults in the state of Virginia age 18+:

INCREASE IN SUPPORT FOR PROPOSALS TO REFORM YOUTH JUSTICE SYSTEM IN THE U.S.

Over the last year, Virginians have increased their already high support for several specific policy proposals aimed at addressing problems with the youth justice system, including a misguided focus on incarceration, racial and ethnic disparities in the system, and the shortage of public defenders. Support grew the most for increasing funding for public defenders and reducing racial and ethnic disparities in the youth criminal justice system.

	2016 Total Favor (%)	2017 Total Favor (%)
Design treatment and rehabilitation plans that include a youth's family in planning and services.	92	91
Provide financial incentives for states and municipalities to invest in alternatives to youth incarceration, such as intensive rehabilitation, education, job training, community services, and programs that provide youth the opportunity to repair harm to victims and communities.	87	89
Increase funding to provide more public defenders who represent children in court.	72	77
Require states to reduce racial and ethnic disparities in the youth justice system.	73	78

All four of these proposals garner strong support across partisan lines, with the majority of Democrats, Independents, and Republicans supporting the initiatives. Support is very similar and strong for both people who say that they or their immediate families have been victims of crime and for those who haven't been crime victims. These proposals also enjoy a broad range of support regionally across Virginia with at least 7-in-10 supporters around the populous DC inner suburbs, Richmond area, and the more rural Western part of the state backing these initiatives.

Support is particularly high among the demographic groups most likely to have an interaction with the youth justice system – African Americans and younger adults. At the same time, white non-college educated support is also above 70 percent for each of the proposals above, proving their popularity even among the demographic that most heavily supported Donald Trump for President.

STRONG BELIEF IN REHABILITATION AND COUNSELING FOR YOUTH

Virginians' support for youth criminal justice reform is based on the beliefs that rehabilitation works and saves taxpayer dollars, and that youth who have committed delinquent acts are capable of positive change. These sentiments are shared broadly across racial lines with at least 7-in-10 white and African American adults expressing support for each of these statements.

Which statement comes closer to your view?	
When it comes to youth who have committed delinquent acts, the best thing for society is to rehabilitate them so they can become productive members of society.	When it comes to youth who commit delinquent acts, the best thing for society is to incarcerate them so that our streets are safer.
78	22
The youth justice system should provide youth with more opportunity to better themselves.	The youth justice system should focus on punishing youth who have committed delinquent acts.
78	22
Most youth who commit delinquent acts are capable of positive growth, and they have the potential to change for the better.	Most youth who commit delinquent acts are unlikely to change for the better, and they will likely continue a life of illegal behavior.
77	23
Rehabilitation programs like counseling and education for youth who have committed delinquent acts will SAVE tax dollars in the long run.	Rehabilitation programs like counseling and education for youth who have committed delinquent acts will COST tax dollars in the long run.
74	26
Rehabilitation programs like counseling and education for youth who have committed delinquent acts helps prevent future delinquent acts.	Rehabilitation programs like counseling and education do little to prevent youth who have committed delinquent acts from committing future delinquent acts.
74	26

Virginians believe that the youth justice system should provide youth with more opportunities to better themselves. Virginians also express concern that we spend too much taxpayer money building prisons for youth.

	Total Agree (%)
When it comes to youth in the justice system, what is most important is that the system does a better job of making sure that he or she gets back on track and is less likely to commit another offense	94
Teaching youth who commit an offense to take responsibility for his or her actions does not require incarceration	71
We spend too much taxpayer money on prisons for youth in the justice system	63

STRONG SUPPORT FOR REHABILITATION, INCREASED OPPORTUNITY AND IMPROVING FACILITIES FOR YOUTH

Strong support for a range of policies aimed at reforming the institutions responsible for youth who pose a risk to society remains stable or slightly decreased from a year ago. These include proposals to increase family contact and protect youth in the justice system.

	2016 Total Favor (%)	2017 Total Favor (%)
Create an independent commission of community leaders tasked with ensuring that youth are protected from abuse while in state or local custody	90	89
Require facilities that incarcerate youth to let youth see their families at least once a week	87	86
Require that incarcerated youth are placed in facilities within 60 miles of their families	85	83
Require that youth are placed in facilities with no more than 30 other youth	78	80

In sum, this poll shows that public support in the Commonwealth of Virginia, is strong and growing for the initiatives to reform the youth justice system placing a greater focus on rehabilitation than incarceration and addressing fundamental problems created by the current system. This is a broad sentiment shared by Virginians across racial and partisan lines.

Methodology

The survey of 500 adults age 18+ in the state of Virginia was conducted January 9-18, 2017 on behalf of Youth First Initiative. The sample is subject to a margin of error of +/- 4.4 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. The survey was conducted online using a web-based panel. Care was taken to ensure that the sample is representative of the 18+ adult population in Virginia. The previous survey was conducted January 19-24, 2016 among 500 adults age 18+ in the state of Virginia.