

New Poll Shows Strong, Bipartisan Support for Ambitious Criminal Justice Reforms in Mississippi

Mississippi voters across the political spectrum and demographic groups support bold criminal justice reforms. In fact, four out of five registered voters (79 percent) believe it is important to reduce the number of people who are incarcerated and only 3 percent want to spend additional tax dollars on jails and prisons.

The results could not come at a more critical time for policymakers. Mississippi has the third highest incarceration rate in the country, and taxpayers spend more than \$360 million on the prison system every year. Mississippi stands out for continuing to grow its jail and prison populations while other states are safely reducing incarceration. This poll demonstrates that voters in Mississippi overwhelmingly want lawmakers to take bold action and reduce the state’s jail and prison populations.

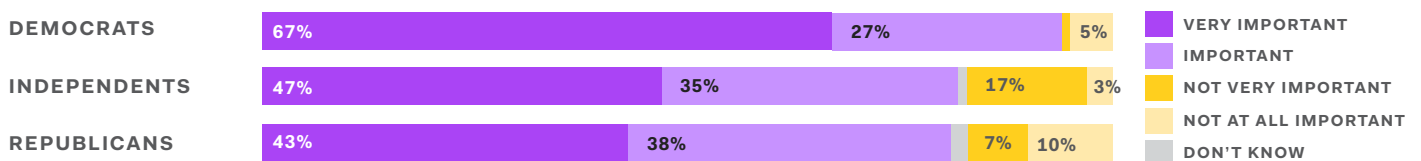
These are just some of the findings from a statewide survey of 800 registered voters in Mississippi conducted by Public Opinion Strategies on behalf of FWD.us. The poll has a margin of error of + 3.4 percent and was fielded August 15-19, 2018.

Key Survey Findings:

MISSISSIPPI VOTERS BELIEVE THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM IS NOT WORKING AND ARE OVERWHELMINGLY IN FAVOR OF REDUCING THE STATE’S JAIL AND PRISON POPULATIONS.

- More than two-thirds of Mississippi voters (68 percent) believe the state’s criminal justice system needs “significant improvements.”
- By a margin of 15 to 1, voters prefer that “additional funding available to help reduce crime” be spent on “schools and K-12 education” (45 percent) rather than “jails and prisons” (3 percent).
- Nearly 8 out of 10 voters (79 percent) believe it is important to “reduce the number of people who are in jail or prison.”
- By a 2 to 1 margin, voters believe being incarcerated makes people “more likely to commit crimes in the future” (41 percent believe “more likely” and 21 percent believe “less likely”).
- Contrary to popular belief, crime victims are just as likely as other voters to support criminal justice reform – including 74 percent who believe it is important to reduce the number of people who are in jail or prison.
- After hearing more about the issue, the share of voters who believe it is important to reduce the jail and prison population increases to 85 percent – including 81 percent of Republicans, 82 percent of Independents, and 94 percent of Democrats (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: “HOW IMPORTANT IS IT TO REDUCE THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE WHO ARE IN JAIL OR PRISON IN MISSISSIPPI?”



BY WIDE MARGINS, MISSISSIPPI VOTERS SUPPORT COMMON-SENSE POLICY REFORMS AIMED AT SAFELY REDUCING INCARCERATION.

- 77 percent support “increasing funding for public defenders and ensuring that people who have been accused of crimes have proper legal representation.”
- 69 percent support “removing convictions from an eligible person’s record after they have completed the terms of their sentence, including probation and parole, and remained crime-free for a period of time.”

- 67 percent support “eliminating jail sentences for certain misdemeanor crimes such as driving with a suspended license or trespassing.”
- 67 percent support “ending the practice of keeping people in jail before trial if they have been charged with a misdemeanor or non-violent felony crime.”
- 61 percent support “punishing people convicted of drug possession with a misdemeanor rather than a felony sentence, punishable by up to one year in jail.”
- Support for criminal justice policy reforms cuts across political party affiliations, with six out of 10 Republicans, Independents, and Democrats supporting these proposals (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2: VOTER SUPPORT FOR CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORMS BY POLITICAL PARTY AFFILIATION

PROPOSAL	REPUBLICANS	INDEPENDENTS	DEMOCRATS
Increasing funding for public defenders and ensuring that people who have been accused of crimes have proper legal representation.	71%	79%	83%
Eliminating jail sentences for certain misdemeanor crimes such as driving with a suspended license or trespassing.	62%	72%	70%
Ending the practice of keeping people in jail before trial if they have been charged with a misdemeanor or non-violent felony crime.	66%	68%	65%
Punishing people convicted of drug possession with a misdemeanor rather than a felony sentence, punishable by up to one year in jail.	63%	61%	56%
Removing convictions from an eligible person's record after they have completed the terms of their sentence, including probation and parole, and remained crime-free for a period of time.	64%	69%	76%

REVISITING MISSISSIPPI'S HABITUAL ENHANCEMENT LAWS AND ENSURING PEOPLE ARE ALLOWED TO EARN TIME OFF THEIR PRISON SENTENCE FOR PARTICIPATING IN REHABILITATION PROGRAMS IS A PRIORITY FOR MISSISSIPPI VOTERS

- By a margin of 2 to 1, voters believe habitual enhancements should only be used when the current offense is violent (65 percent) rather than allowing prosecutors and judges to add years to prison sentences “whether the current offense is violent or not” (31 percent) (Figure 3).
- More than half of voters (52 percent) believe convictions older than 10 years shouldn’t count towards habitual enhancements rather than the current law that allows old convictions to “always count” (27 percent).
- The vast majority of voters believe people convicted of nonviolent offenses should be eligible for opportunities not currently available with the habitual enhancement such as “time off their prison sentence for maintaining good behavior and participating in rehabilitation programs” (92 percent), “probation supervision” (89 percent), “parole and post-release supervision” (89 percent), and “prison terms less than the maximum sentence” (77 percent).

FIGURE 3: HABITUAL ENHANCEMENTS SHOULD...

