

454 Las Gallinas Avenue, Suite 178  
San Rafael, California 94903-3618  
T: 415 331-5991  
F: 415 331-2969

## Preventing Youth Violence: A Survey of Public Attitudes in California

### Background and Overview

In a 1996 statewide survey, California voters were asked about their views on youth violence. The survey was conducted on behalf of the public education campaign of the Violence Prevention Initiative, a multi-year project of The California Wellness Foundation. Survey questions covered all aspects of youth violence in California, including the extent of violence, the effectiveness of the juvenile justice system and the best ways to prevent youth violence in the future.

The survey comes at a time of intense public debate about youth crime and the future of the juvenile justice system. In 1996, California lawmakers generated the largest volume of juvenile justice crackdown legislation ever seen in the State Capitol. Among their proposals were laws that would make it easier to try children as adults and send more teenagers to state prisons. These lawmakers have acted on what they assume to be a strong public demand for extended incarceration of juvenile offenders and a widespread disenchantment with the juvenile justice system's

emphasis on treatment and rehabilitation.

Based on this new survey, it appears that most California voters do not believe that more juvenile incarceration will lead to reductions in violent juvenile crime. Moreover, the survey reveals strong voter support for public investment in violence prevention and youth treatment programs. In brief highlight form, the survey demonstrates:

- Very strong voter support (more than 75%) for investment in prevention strategies and mild voter support (less than 20%) for more prisons to reduce youth violence.
- Strong voter belief that the primary factors contributing to youth violence are family breakdown and lack of parental discipline.
- Strong voter support for public investment in six specific types of violence prevention programs identified in the survey and discussed below.

This memo offers a detailed description of the survey and of voter responses in the context of current policy and budget trends.

## Survey Method

A statewide telephone survey was conducted May 5-12, 1996 of 1,000 registered California voters. Only voters who stated they were likely to vote in the November, 1996 general election were included in the full survey. These voters represent a balanced cross-section of the California electorate on basic demographic factors such as gender, ethnicity, income level, geography, and political party. The survey included 25 questions about youth violence. A follow-up survey on June 5, 1996 posed two supplemental questions to voters about the funding of a state office of violence prevention. By accepted polling standards, the survey responses are considered to be accurate reflections of statewide voter opinion within a statistical tolerance of plus or minus 3.1 percentage points.

The survey and the follow-up were conducted by the firm of Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin & Associates in consultation with Ed Goetas of The Tarrance Group, and were commissioned by Martin & Glantz on behalf of the Violence Prevention Initiative of The California Wellness Foundation. Because Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin & Associates frequently polls for Democratic candidates, the survey was prepared in consultation with Republican polling expert Ed Goetas of The Tarrance Group to preserve the neutrality of the questions and survey results.

## Survey Results

### A. Perceptions of youth violence: how pervasive is the problem?

Several survey questions explored public perceptions about youth violence. For example, when asked whether youth violence has increased in their community in the last few years, 66 percent of respondents believe that it has increased either a little or a lot (Figure 1). A majority of respondents (60 percent) also believes that young people commit more violent crimes than adults (Figure 2).

In the past few years do you think the incidence of youth violence has increased, stayed about the same or decreased?

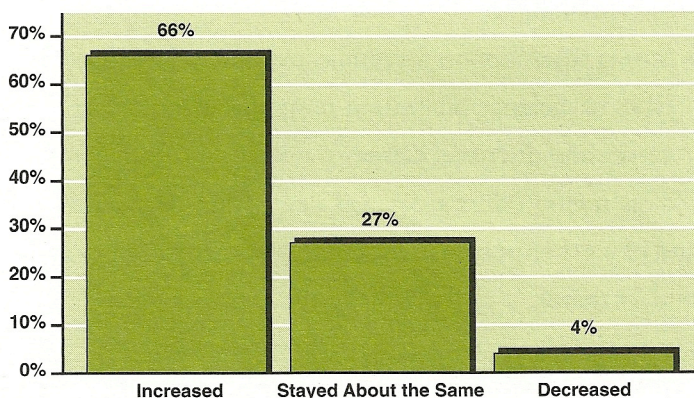


Figure 1

In fact, according to California Attorney General Dan Lungren, arrest rates for violent youth crime actually declined in California between 1990 and 1995. California's Bureau of Criminal Statistics (BCS) also reports that in 1995, adult arrests for crimes of violence outnumbered juvenile arrests for these crimes by a factor of six to one. Thus, the perceptions of a majority of survey participants are at odds with official data on recent crime trends. Nevertheless, these voter perceptions are powerful factors influencing the development of public policy.

### B. Why do children commit acts of violence?

Participants in the survey were asked to identify factors that contribute to youth violence. Overwhelmingly, they point to the family as the place where the problem begins. Fifty-seven percent of respondents believe that either "lack of parental discipline" or "breakdown of family" is the single most important factor contributing to violence among youth. Factors outside the family draw much lower responses. For example, only 4 percent think gangs are the biggest factor leading to youth violence. Other primary factors selected by respondents include low self-esteem (6 percent of respondents), poverty (4 percent) and school-related problems (5 percent) (Figure 3).

### C. Is the juvenile justice system too lenient in dealing with youth violence?

A strong majority of respondents (62 percent) believe the juvenile justice system in California is too lenient in the administration of punishment to juvenile offenders. Only 5 percent believe the system administers sentences that are too harsh. When the question is focused on violent or repeat juvenile offenders, nearly three fourths (73 percent) of respondents believe the juvenile justice system is too lenient. When the question is focused on first-time and non-violent

Who do you think commits most of the violent crime these days?

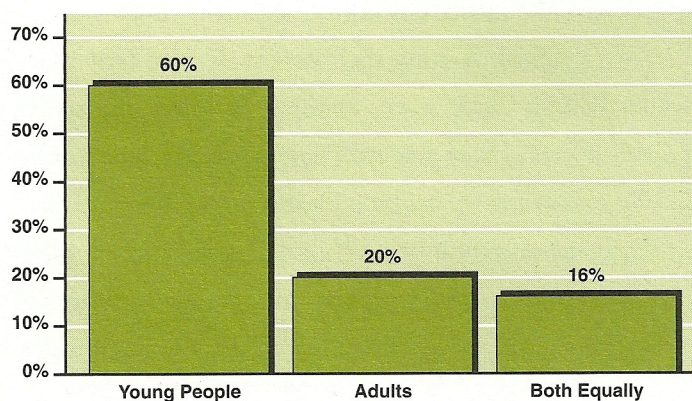


Figure 2

Why do you think kids commit acts of violence?

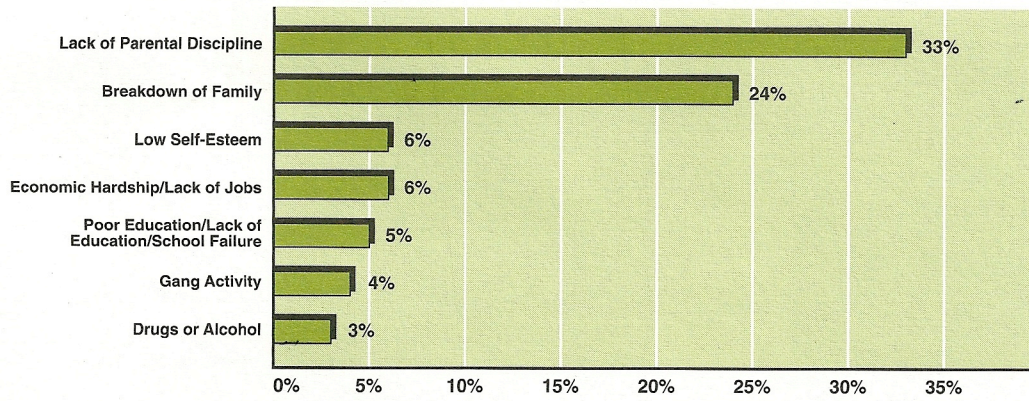


Figure 3

offenders, responses are split evenly between those who believe the punishment given by the juvenile justice system is too lenient (36%) and those who believe it is about right (38%) (Figure 4).

**D. Is incarceration an effective response to juvenile crime and violence?**

From a policy perspective, some of the most surprising survey results are voter responses comparing the value of juvenile incarceration to prevention programs as strategies for the reduction of youth violence. One question asked respondents to identify the biggest crime fighting priority, taking into account the projected growth of the state youth population over the next ten years. Of two choices offered, only 17 percent agree with the first choice, "Our biggest priority is to build more prisons and youth facilities and enforce strict sentences to guarantee that the most violent juvenile offenders are kept off the streets." By contrast, more than three-fourths (77 percent) of

respondents choose the second option, "Our biggest priority is to invest in ways to prevent kids from taking wrong turns and ending up in gangs, violence or prison." Even self-identified political conservatives responding to this question strongly support investment in prevention (70 percent of conservatives) as an alternative to building more prisons (22 percent of conservatives) (Figure 5).

When asked to agree or disagree with a particular youth sentencing policy, 79 percent of respondents agree with the following statement: "For nonviolent youth offenders we need to implement restitution and accountability to the community through work or repayment to the victims, instead of putting them in prison at taxpayers' expense." Only 17 percent agree with the alternative policy statement that was part of this question: "Restitution is not going to discourage juvenile crime. We need tougher sentencing and more prisons for non-violent youth offenders to make sure they don't commit more crimes and violence." There was almost no change in this response

Do you think the punishment for young people who have committed crimes is too lenient, about right or too harsh?

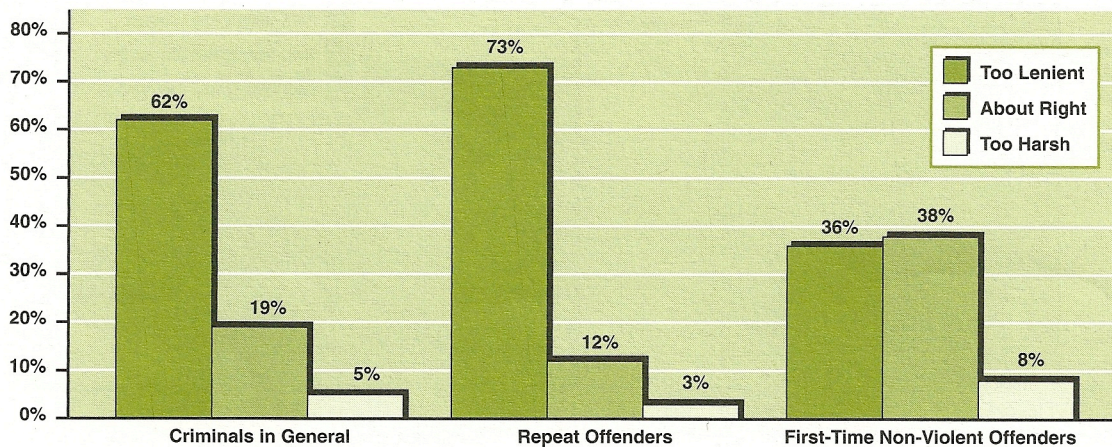


Figure 4

Which comes closer to your opinion? Our biggest priority is...

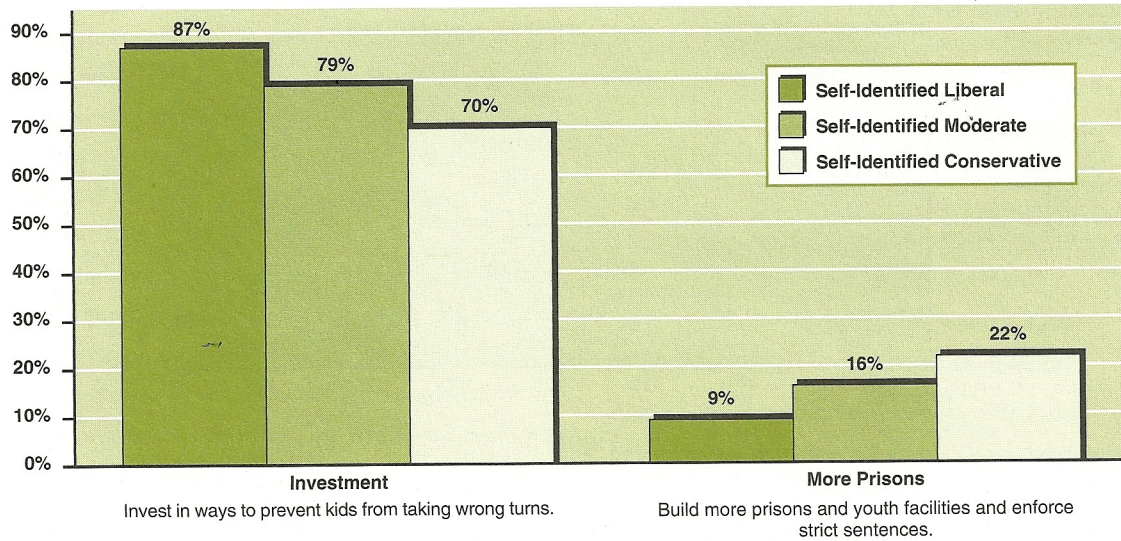


Figure 5

among self-identified political conservatives; 76 percent of self-identified conservatives support the statement favoring restitution and accountability as alternatives to placing nonviolent youth in prisons (Figure 6).

In another part of the survey dealing with the cost of youth incarceration, 87 percent of respondents felt that the following statement was either somewhat or extremely convincing: "The most expensive way to deal with the problem of kids and violence is to wait for kids to become criminals and build prisons to house them. Instead of spending \$32,000 to put them in a youth prison, we need to spend whatever is necessary to keep kids from becoming criminals in the first place. It just makes economic sense" (Figure 7).

These opinions about juvenile incarceration cannot be interpreted as a wholesale rejection by voters of incarceration as a response to crime and violence. In responses to other questions, respondents reinforce their support for prisons and tough sentences. For example, 72 percent of respondents find the following survey statement to be either somewhat or extremely convincing: "Prisons are removing violent offenders from our streets. Stricter enforcement of laws and tougher sentences will reduce crime." Nevertheless, on balance the voters responding to this survey express serious reservations about relying *exclusively* on a policy of incarceration without sufficient attention to prevention. Voter preference for prevention strategies and diminished confidence in incarceration strategies, emerge

Which of the following comes closer to your opinion for juvenile offenders?

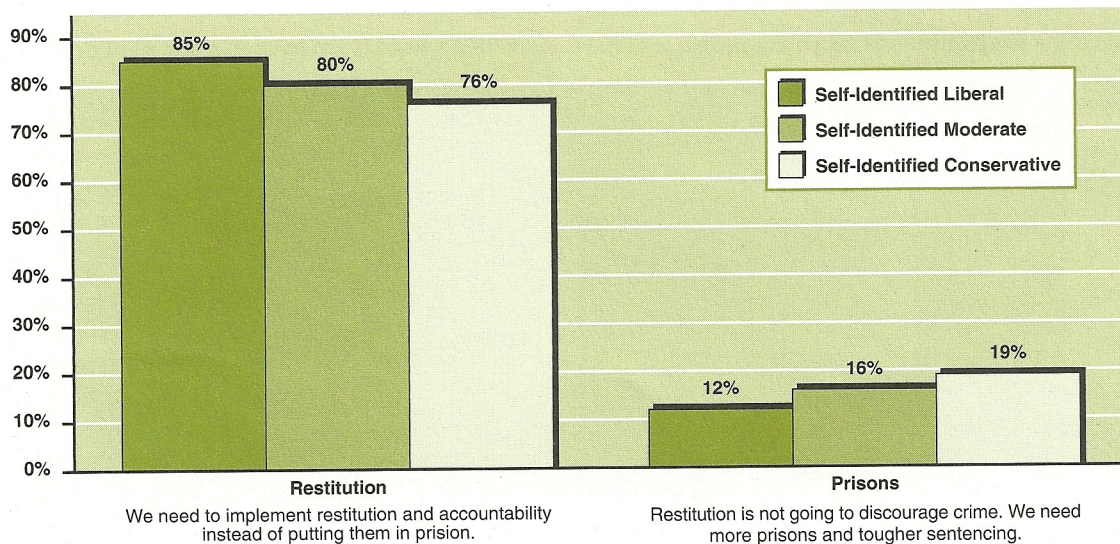


Figure 6

The most expensive way to deal with kids and violence is to wait for kids to become criminals. Instead of spending \$32,000 to put them in a youth prison, we need to spend whatever is necessary to keep kids from becoming criminals in the first place.

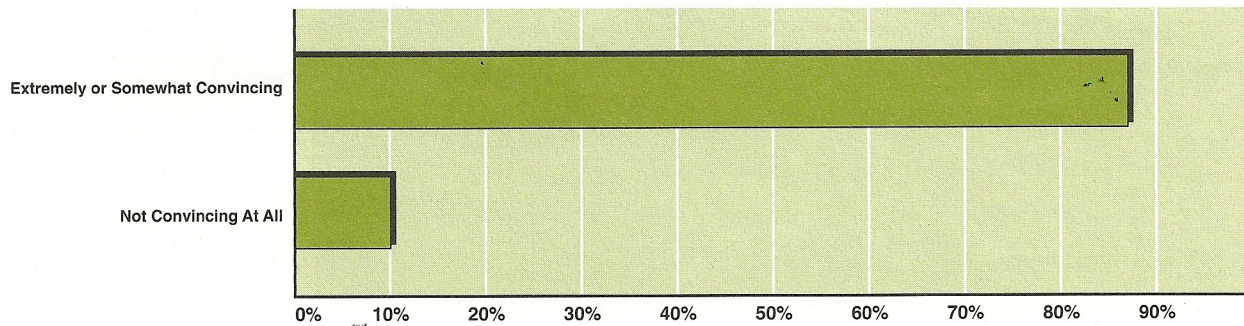


Figure 7

most convincingly when the questions are framed in terms of how the system should respond to children and youth, particularly non-violent youth.

**E. Is there public support for community violence prevention programs?**

The survey elicits strong voter support for several specific types of violence prevention programs. Strong majorities of respondents believe that the following types of programs would be moderately to highly effective in dealing with youth crime and violence in California:

- *Conflict resolution programs*, using student mediators in the classroom to teach children how to resolve conflicts without violence.
- *Mentoring programs*, in which youths are paired with adults to provide them with positive role models.
- *Bootcamps*, where nonviolent juvenile offenders are put through a three to four month program combining physical training by drill instructors with education and substance abuse counseling.
- *Beacon/Second shift schools*, where multiple services for youth and families are provided on school campuses that stay open after

hours to give kids access to services and a safe place for recreation and other activities.

- *Teen courts*, where juveniles charged with minor offenses like truancy and petty theft are tried by a jury consisting of other teenagers and may be sentenced to community service.
- *Community youth violence prevention plans*, which bring community leaders, youth service providers, and public agency personnel together to produce and implement a community wide violence prevention strategy.

Respondents were asked to rate these programs on a scale from 1 (ineffective) to 7 (highly effective). **Figure 8** demonstrates that most of those surveyed rated all these programs a 4 (effective) or above. It is notable that respondents show consistent support for multiple programs and approaches to youth violence.

**F. Who is responsible for solving the problem of youth violence?**

The survey asked participants to identify who should bear the primary responsibility for solving the problems of juvenile crime and violence. By a wide margin, 59 percent of respondents identify the family as having primary responsibility. By contrast, only 9 per-

Percentage of voters who on a scale of 1-7 rated these programs with 4 or above for effectiveness in preventing juvenile crime.

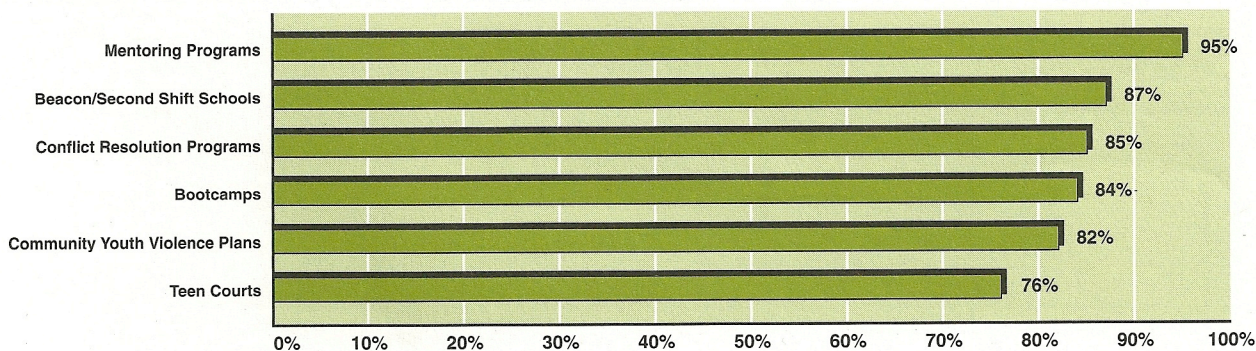
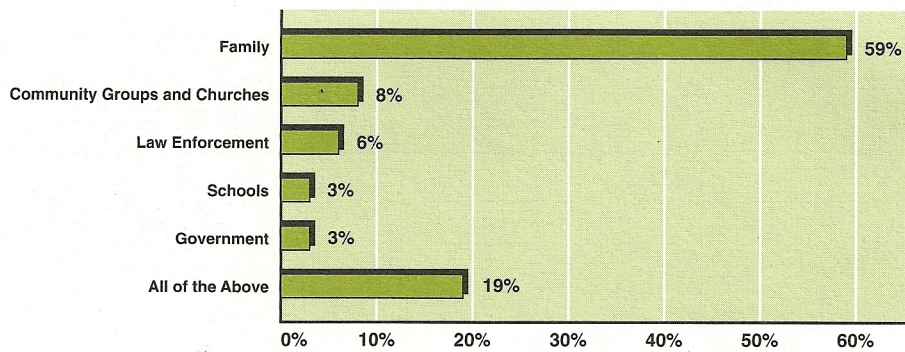


Figure 8

**Who is most responsible for solving the problems of juvenile crime and violence?**



**Figure 9**

cent of respondents to this question identify government and law enforcement agencies as having the greatest share of responsibility (Figure 9).

Voters are divided in their opinion of whether government can offer solutions to the problem of youth violence; 46 percent of respondents agree that government offers solutions, while 44 percent believe government is “more of a problem.” Yet when asked in a follow-up survey whether they would support the creation of an independent state-level “violence prevention authority,” 69 percent of voters say they believe such an authority would be effective as a way to help local communities develop resources and programs to reduce violence (Figure 10).

**G. Who should pay for programs and strategies to reduce youth violence?**

When asked whether they support the investment of tax dollars in six types of violence prevention programs, voters respond with strong majorities favoring public investment (Figure 11).

Voters responding to this survey also strongly support a tax check-off as a means of directing taxpayer funds to violence prevention

strategies. A tax check-off for more police officers is supported by 72 percent of respondents, and a tax check-off for community-based violence prevention programs (including after school programs) is favored by 79 percent of respondents.

By more narrow majorities, voters also favor the dedication of tax dollars to a California state violence prevention authority, using either a tax check-off, a portion of prison construction funds or a share of state property taxes (Figure 12).

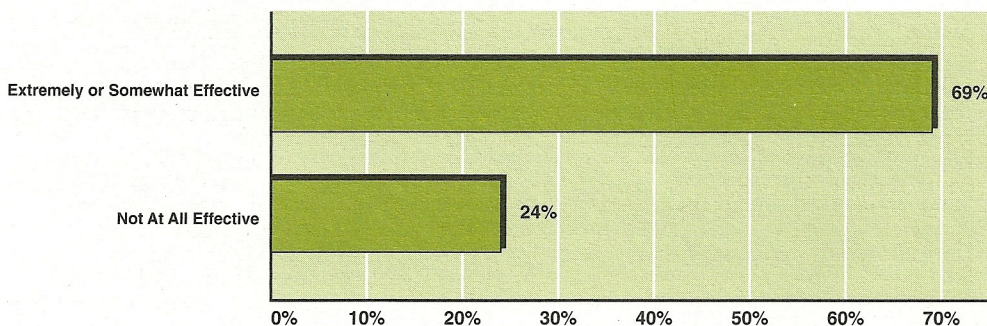
**Survey Implications**

**A. The evidence points toward strong voter support for investment in prevention solutions.**

This survey of voter attitudes on youth violence may well suggest a need to correct some of the assumptions that are currently driving youth crime policy and violence prevention spending in California.

In recent years, California crime control policy has moved rapidly in the direction of more incarceration for violent offenders in all age groups. In November 1994, California voters overwhelmingly approved Proposition 184, the “Three Strikes” Initiative, rati-

**“We should immediately establish an independent state-level violence prevention authority to identify resources, programs and strategies that can help communities reduce violence now.” How effective would this be as a way to prevent youth violence?**



**Figure 10**

Percentage of voters willing to invest public tax dollars in the following prevention programs.

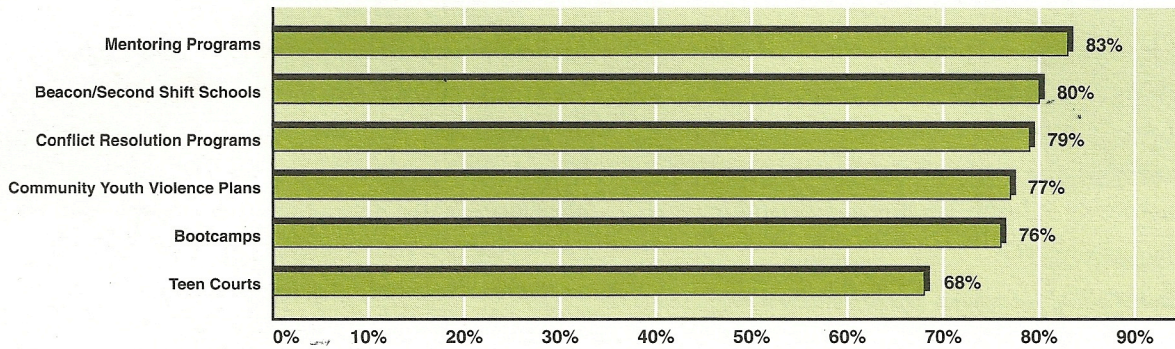


Figure 11

fyng earlier legislative action to impose life terms on repeat violent adult offenders. Also in 1994, California adopted tough new juvenile justice reforms that lowered the age of eligibility for trial as an adult to 14, mandated state prison sentences for some juveniles and reduced juvenile confidentiality rights. By embracing these policies, elected officials have sought to satisfy what they perceive to be a strong public demand for more prisons and a weak public interest in spending for prevention and treatment programs.

In this 1996 statewide poll of voter attitudes on youth violence, voter enthusiasm for extended incarceration for juvenile offenders appears to be tempered by vigorous and widespread support for investment in prevention. This support remains consistent across all demographic groups including survey participants who describe themselves as political conservatives. It is not clear from this survey whether voters are having second thoughts about the cost and efficacy of “Three Strikes” laws and other mandatory incarceration measures. It may simply be that by focusing on deeper issues related specifically to children, the survey elicits a strong and perhaps neglected voter interest in public policies for the prevention of violence and the treatment of juvenile offenders.

**B. Some specific conclusions suggested by this survey.**

This survey offers evidence of voter support for specific programs and approaches that may be effective in the control of youth crime and violence in California. This information may prove valuable to juvenile justice policy-makers and funding decision-makers who are considering commitments to new youth crime and violence prevention projects. Some of the conclusions suggested are:

- *Youth violence prevention efforts must be focused firmly on families.*

Family breakdown and lack of parental discipline are strongly identified by voters as the major causes of youth violence in California. Family support programs drew support from participants in this survey. More than ninety percent of respondents support the statement that “As an alternative to the streets, we need to provide local community programs for youth and families, such as extended daycare, parenting workshops, tutoring and job training.” Mentoring programs, which supplement family guidance with other adults serving as positive role models, also drew strong support from survey respondents.

To fund a state level agency to distribute money to community based youth violence prevention projects, would you be willing to fund the following:

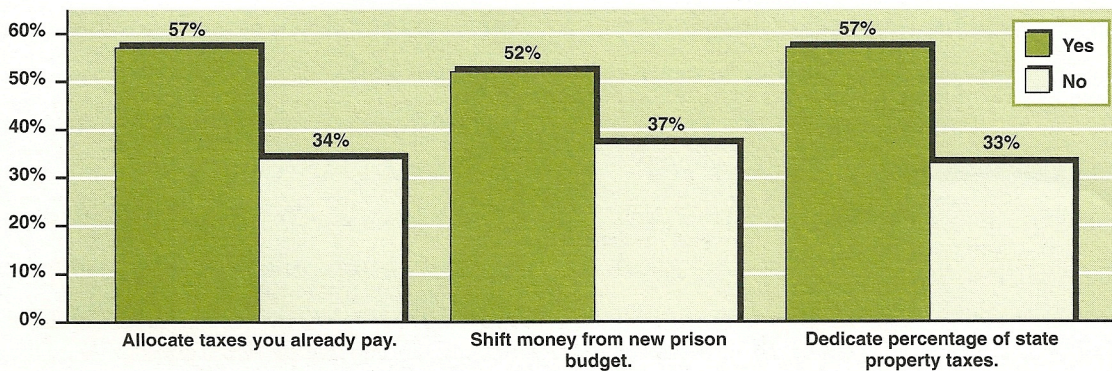


Figure 12

- *There is support for utilization of schools for after-hours activities.* Second shift schools, modeled on the Beacon Schools program in New York, keep school campuses open after hours to provide recreation, public services and additional learning opportunities for school-age children. Eighty-eight percent of the voters responding to this survey express the belief that beacon/second shift schools are moderately to highly effective as programs to prevent youth crime and violence.

- *Children of all ages, including older teens, can benefit from positive intervention.*

When asked whether there is an age at which it is too late to help a young person who has gotten involved with crime and violence, 72 percent of respondents said there was no cut-off age at which a youth is too old to benefit from a helping hand. Another 23 percent believe that children who commit crimes between the ages of 10 and 18 are beyond help. The fact that nearly three-fourths of respondents believe that children of all ages are amenable to intervention is particularly interesting because it raises questions about the breadth of public support for pending legal reforms that would force more teenagers into the adult prison system where they would not receive rehabilitative programming.

- *Accountability and discipline are important components of programs for children who have already been in contact with the justice system.*

For youth who have already become involved in crime, the survey elicits strong voter interest in programs that require personal discipline and accountability to the victim and the community. Restitution – in which juvenile offenders compensate their victims – is favored by eighty percent of respondents as an effective method of preventing further crime and bringing justice to the victim. Ninety-four percent of respondents believe that an appropriate sentence for a petty crime of vandalism or graffiti is an order of cleanup or community service. Taken as a whole, the survey sends a message that treatment modalities for juvenile offenders are most popular when combined with accountability factors like discipline, restitution and community service.

- *Responsibility for solving the problem of youth violence rests largely with the family and the local community. Voters remain ambivalent about government's role in combating youth violence.*

Voters responding to this survey identify the family as having the greatest measure of responsibility for preventing youth violence. At the same time, respondents endorse government-funded programs – in the form of parenting classes, child care, after school programs and mentoring programs – for families that are having trouble providing guidance and discipline to their children.

The survey draws mixed views about the role and effectiveness of government as a problem-solver when it comes to youth violence. Many respondents (44 percent) believe government is part of the problem; this may reflect a generalized distrust of government among members of the public. Despite this view, a majority of respondents also would rely on government to solve the problem of youth violence (56 percent) as opposed to charities and volunteers (31 percent). Two-thirds of voters in the follow-up survey favored the creation of a state violence prevention authority as an effective means of reducing youth violence.

- *Voters are willing to invest tax dollars in effective youth violence prevention programs and strategies.*

Respondents overwhelmingly support the investment of public tax dollars in each of six types of youth violence prevention programs. More than three-fourths of respondents said they would be willing to invest tax funds in conflict resolution curricula, mentoring programs, bootcamps, beacon/second shift schools or community youth violence plans; two-thirds (68 percent) express support for investment in teen courts for juveniles with minor offenses. In the follow-up survey, somewhat smaller majorities are willing to fund a state violence prevention authority using a one percent tax check-off (57 percent), a share of prison construction funds (52 percent) or a portion of state property taxes (57 percent).

*Written by David Steinhart based on polling reports produced by Paul Maslin of Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin & Associates and Ed Goetas of The Tarrance Group. David Steinhart is a California attorney and juvenile justice specialist; he is Director of the Commonwealth Juvenile Justice Program. Resources for Youth: An honest dialogue about strategies to prevent youth violence is funded by a grant to Martin & Glantz from The California Wellness Foundation.*