


2017

## SUPeR Feature Article: Juvenile Injustice in the Justice System

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### Recommended Citation

Faris, Fatima (2017) "SUPeR Feature Article: Juvenile Injustice in the Justice System," *Susquehanna University Political Review*: Vol. 8 , Article 5.

Available at: <http://scholarlycommons.susqu.edu/supr/vol8/iss1/5>

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## **SUPeR Feature Article**

# **Juvenile Injustice in the Justice System**

By Fatima Faris, Class of 2017

### **Abstract**

It is no secret that there are problems in the juvenile justice system of the United States. As a citizen of the largest incarcerator in the world, including of children, I was inclined to find out why it is so many children are being jailed year after year. While I first aimed to gauge public knowledge on the juvenile justice system as a whole, I then decided to see whether the public would be less punitive with more knowledge of the young offender. Additionally, I aimed to gather information on racial disparities within the system and, therefore, within the public. Through three surveys sent to over 2,000 Susquehanna students, I found there was evidence to suggest that there is support for my first hypothesis, but not enough evidence to support my second. A majority of responders in all three surveys think that there should be reform in the juvenile justice system.

## **Introduction**

The United States is the world leader in imprisonment of both children and adults (World Prison Brief). While many understand and acknowledge that flaws exist within our justice system, the juvenile justice system specifically in the United States is one that has often been overlooked and neglected for a myriad reasons, not excluding the fact that a lot of attention is usually directed at the overarching criminal justice system, which is centered around adults. Many fail to see that there is a problem with mass incarceration of children, especially children of color, because the problem is oversimplified to “crime is bad and people who commit said crimes should be imprisoned and punished for their bad deeds.”

But what if the public began to understand that everyone is different and judging crime is a lot more complicated than that? If people were actually informed of the accused child’s background, home life, and history, would that change the way we treat/punish these defendants? Would we be more inclined to send them through programs to help them rehabilitate rather than send them to facilities, often inhabited by violent offenders, with inadequate educational and mental support? What if they understood that in many instances with children that have underdeveloped brains, imprisonment can do more harm than good?

These are very important questions to consider seeing as there is a high inclination with lawmakers and voters to be tough on crime, especially because of the increase in crime in recent decades, there are rarely

considerations for backgrounds, possibly because they humanize offenders. While some may see this as being soft on crime, it is important to understand that minor offenses, especially ones for missing school or getting into a fight with someone, should not take years of a child's life away from them on the basis that it will "teach them a lesson." The effect of humanizing these children can change the system and laws regarding minimum sentencing entirely.

### **History**

Kalief Browder was 16 years old when he was arrested for a crime he did not commit—stealing a book bag. As a minor, he was sent to the adult penitentiary, Rikers Island, in New York. Since he could not make bail, the broken system kept him in prison for three years. Although he was offered a plea deal, which would allow for his release, he did not take it and insisted on his innocence. So the state kept him three years behind bars for allegedly taking a book bag. For most of his time there, he was in solitary confinement, which many psychologists claim has a detrimental effect on a person's mental wellbeing and psyche. A few years after his release and after struggling with mental illness, he took his own life.

Kalief's story is tragic, but unfortunately is not uncommon. In Luzerne County, Pennsylvania, Edward Kenzacoski was a 17 year old with his future ahead of him. When arrested for a minor drug charge—a nonviolent offense, he was sent away for over a year, though he had no prior offenses. Upon returning home, he, too, battled with depression and ultimately took his own life at the age of 23

(Children for Cash). Kenzakoski's mother attested to the fact that her son was a normal happy teenager before being taken away from his home. To make matters worse, had he been in front of a judge not embroiled in a scandal regarding kickbacks, he probably would have had much lighter repercussions regarding his offense.

There is no national consensus on who is considered an adult and who is considered a child. While this creates a whole separate issue in which research can be done on this disparity, it also highlights the fact that children are not being treated equally across the country for committing similar offenses. In 2007, the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) released a report in which they documented 73 cases around the country of twelve and thirteen year old children being sentenced to life imprisonment without proper counsel, more than likely for the rest of their lives. From 1955 to 1975, just a course of twenty years, crime rose by 1600% (Warre-Leubecker et al 1989, 158). Are people really committing more crimes, or are penalties and law enforcement just coming down harder on non-violent offenses? As of 2014, there were about 1.2 million violent crimes committed, compared to 8.3 million minor offenses in the United States (fbi.gov).

There have been few initiatives to fix some problems within the system, but there is a lot of work left to do. For example, in 2005, the Supreme Court ruled it unconstitutional to impose capital punishment for offenders under the age of eighteen in *Roper v Simmons*, as it violated the eighth amendment of cruel and unusual punishment. Although *Miller v Alabama* and *Jackson v Hobbs*

respectively ruled it unconstitutional in 2012 and 2010 for juveniles to be given life without the possibility of parole, there are only nineteen states that have it written in the books, leaving the decisions in the other 31 up to judicial discretion. Currently, 26 states have laws on the books that, instead of having life without parole, have mandatory minimums for crimes with parole following the service of the minimum sentence (The Sentencing Project). The majority of children in prison without parole are in California, Florida, Louisiana, Michigan, and Pennsylvania (The Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth).

Additionally, President Obama ruled in 2016 that federal prisons are no longer allowed to use solitary confinement on juveniles because of its ruinous effects on their minds. Even for adults, with fully developed brains and personalities, solitary confinement can be dangerous, with detainees being alone for 23 hours and only having contact with guards for about one hour a day. Peter Smith notes that there is a higher level of psychological distress amongst inmates that have been in solitary confinement (Smith 2006, 455).

Children ranging from twelve to twenty-one years old—given the title of juveniles when they enter the system—are more likely to be incarcerated for nonviolent crimes than their adult counterparts. Additionally, they are more likely to be penalized for minor offenses where adults would just be fined or let go with a warning. Because being in the system is not inexpensive, and the criminal justice system as a whole disproportionately affects African Americans and Hispanics, and other people of color over

white Americans, this can create a never-ending loop of life in the system for children starting before their teen years (Juvenile Justice Information Exchange). Unfortunately, there is not a universal agreement for what age is considered the cutoff and when one is considered an adult. While science is in a basic agreement that the adult brain is not fully developed until age 25, some states charge juveniles as young as 15 and put them in adult facilities.

Currently, there is a push to “raise the age” of what is considered adulthood in states across the country. This push is to help those working in the juvenile justice system—especially judges and prosecutors—realize that children's’ brains are incredibly malleable and putting them in the same facility as violent adult offenders can affect them for the worse in many cases. Instead, by “raising the age,” there is more room for rehabilitation and counseling for minors who are arrested. This not only will create a national consensus, but it will also affect the way children are sentenced by recognizing there is a developmental difference between children and adults.

### **Literature Review**

Many scholars have inquired as to why certain people get longer sentences than others, citing racial disparities within the system, and its effect on the community at large. Their reasoning ranges from ethnicity (like my thought) to socioeconomic status, and prior records to public opinion on crime.

Alex Piquero hits the nail on the head in *Disproportionate Minority Contact*, where he states that the

problem in the juvenile justice system lies in the fact that people of color are more frequently stopped and approached by police officers than white citizens (Piquero 2008, 62). This may account for why people of color are represented in greater numbers in the system than white youth before they even come across a judge. Unfortunately, and Piquero points this out in his article as well, there is not a universal way across the country of processing data of who gets arrested when, when in the process are they adjudicated, and what the ethnicities are of those who are adjudicated. Each state records this data differently, while some do not record it at all, and some departments are more forthcoming with the data than others.

While there are differences on how people get charged from state to state and judge to judge, it would be irresponsible to leave out racial implications in American society. In a very popular study that has influenced my own research, Marianne Bertrand and Sendhil Mullainathan explored whether employers discriminated against more ethnic sounding names. This survey supported their hypothesis that having “very African-American” sounding names or “very white” sounding names would show a difference in callbacks for jobs. According to their research, white sounding names received 50 percent more calls for interviews (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2003). Still focused on the job market, apparently the social construct of race negatively affects those who those suspect to be part of a certain ethnic group (Onwuachi-Willig and Barnes 2005). With the way certain ethnic groups are perceived in the job market field, one can make the sound conclusion that these



implications spread to far more areas in our society. This is incredibly important information that is not limited to the job market. While this will play a part in my research as well, there is already evidence to suggest that the public is more punitive toward “more black” versus “less black” representatives (Hetey and Eberhardt 2014).

Regarding socioeconomic status, Michael Tapia offers another explanation as to why there is an overrepresentation of people of color in the juvenile justice system. He suggests that it has to do with not only race, but also socioeconomic status (SES) of the individual (Tapia 2010, 255). Thornberry agrees in his research. He draws the conclusion that individuals with a lower socioeconomic status will receive harsher punishments than those who fare better in that area (Thornberry 1973, 96). It is important to note socioeconomic status, which is something I did not really consider when theorizing why the system is flawed. However, one must also note that those who are lower on the socioeconomic status spectrum are mostly nonwhites, with African American children up to three times more likely to live in poverty than white children (American Psychological Association). So while SES is definitely important, it more often than not will lead us back to the original question of how race and ethnicity plays a role in judgment. A similar argument was brought up by Kathleen Daly, who says the same is true about women in the justice system (Daly 1989).

Thornberry also brings up a good point on how judges are tougher with delinquents that have prior offenses on their records (98). This is a good explanation for why judges and the community may write off a child since they

seemingly are not learning their lesson the first, second, or even third time around. Similarly, Durham states there is more leniency for first time offenders because judges are willing to give them a second chance since it is much harder to tell how much common sense and control over their own life they have not being fully developed, as opposed to those who have been in front of a judge numerous times (Durham 1987, 637). The general “three strikes and you're out” rule that many judges and prosecutors live by started with more conservative states that have higher levels of African-American citizens (Karch and Cravens 2014).

On the contrary, there is also literature to support that there is a difference in sentencing proportionality between adult offenders and juveniles. According to Andrew von Hirsch, in agreement with my previous statements, adolescents are given harsher punishments for similar crimes compared to their adult counterparts (Hirsch 2001, Abstract). However, there is still a growing number of juveniles being tried in adult prisons, and given harsher sentences in adult courts than adults themselves (Kurlychek, Johnson 2004, Abstract). There is also something called “blended sentencing,” which allows judges to process and sanction juveniles with adult repercussions (Trulson et al). These studies not only demonstrate the disparities between the juvenile and adult justice systems, but they also blur the line even more for those children who are charged as adults and whether they are sentenced to remand and lose years of their lives in an adult facility versus community service. For those adjudicated to adult facilities, studies show there is a

higher recidivism rate than those who are put in other programs (Redding 2003).

Because these conceptions are socially constructed, public opinion plays a crucial role in every facet of American life. While imprisonment is becoming more and more prevalent, media is where the public turns for information regarding crime and punishment. Generally, the public knows very little about the interworking of the justice system (Roberts 1992, 99). Roberts also asserts that the views of the public affect criminal justice policy. This is not news because lawmakers are put into power by the public, and are, therefore, held accountable by them. Does this mean, then, that the general public supports mandatory minimum sentencing and the ages in which certain states consider charging underage children as adults? Ward also did a study regarding public opinion on crime and sentencing. In general, people think that the courts are not as harsh as they could be on crime (Warr 1995, 307). This is very important question to consider because it is not known whether or not these people took in to account the backgrounds of people who commit crimes. This study also did not differentiate child versus adult offenders.

### **Theory and Hypotheses**

Being aware of one's background and history may have an effect on how they are dealt with in the justice system. These background stories will likely appeal to one's empathetic reasoning depending on the severity of the crime and the mental histories and home lives of the offenders. Regarding juveniles who were sentenced to life with our

parole, a study released in 2012 by The Sentencing Project noted that nearly 80% of the responders regularly witnessed violence in their homes, 47% were physically abused, and 77% of the girls experienced sexual abuse growing up (The Sentencing Project). Because information about the child is not always readily available to the public, people's perceptions of their case are one noted, making the fact that they are individuals unrecognizable. Their stories are not heard. However, the presentation of a child's mental state and family history may change all of that.

I have two hypotheses on what effect more information will have on the juveniles charged with breaking the law. My first hypothesis states that knowing more about a child's background will issue a response for more rehabilitative responses rather than public facilities and prisons. I hypothesize this because the public is more likely to sympathize with, and take mercy on, those that they humanize and know more about.

My second hypothesis, on the other hand, states that when exposed to a defendant of color (or non-white), responders are more likely to vote for punitive measures because of how they perceive their role in the criminal world in our society. In many cases, as stated in the history and literature review, it is a fact that more people of color are represented in the criminal justice system than their white counterparts and for longer times, though there is no evidence to suggest that people of color commit more crimes than white people.

While my two theories seem as if they are in conflict with one another, one should keep in mind that they are not

mutually exclusive. It is entirely possible for one to be more inclined to vote for rehabilitative programs for those they feel have had a rough life and need more help, but also take pause if they see that the person in question is a person of color simply because of how society has portrayed them in media and other places. My independent variables for my hypotheses are knowledge on defendant and ethnicity of defendant, respectively, while my dependent variables for both are imprisonment or rehabilitative services. Thornberry's research supports the claim that nonwhites will receive harsher punishments than whites do in the juvenile system (Thornberry 1073, 95).

### **Methodology**

For my methodology, I created a series of surveys, with a population of over 200 people in each group to make sure that I had a sufficient enough number of responders. My surveys were entered and distributed through the Qualtrics database through Susquehanna University. The aim of the surveys was in part to gauge how much people know about the juvenile justice system and how they viewed it. In the same questionnaire/survey, there was a list of scenarios in which the surveyed person detailed how they would (or how they think the courts should) handle each of these cases.

In each of the three surveys, I controlled for some variables of those who are surveyed, including their age, political affiliation, sex, ethnicity, and whether they were raised in a rural, urban, or suburban neighborhood. By controlling for these variables, the hope was to limit the

possibility of any other outside factors having an effect on my outcomes.

For the first survey, the people taking it were only given basic information on whatever crime had been committed. There was no background information on the delinquent whatsoever (mental health or otherwise). This first survey was to give me a better idea of how the public views how people should be punished for wrongdoings, or whether they should be given help, in a general matter. Additionally, this survey, compared to the other two, was to hopefully give me more insight on my first hypothesis about the power knowledge has on punitive/rehabilitative responses. I expected the responders to this survey to be a lot harsher than those of the other two surveys. The second group surveyed included the same scenarios, but were also given names that are “non-white” sounding to see how those surveyed view people of color in the juvenile justice system, and how they would penalize them. Instead of just leaving it at names, I also decided to include background information to ensure that if there is a difference between the second and third surveys, it is more likely to be due to the ethnic component. Finally, the third group surveyed was also given the same background information on the delinquent, including mental health and home background and “white” sounding names. These last two surveys are important to my first hypothesis that claims more information will lead to more rehabilitative measures taken. The aim was that they would also support my second hypothesis in terms of race and ethnicity playing a role in how punitive the public is.

After collecting all the results from the surveys and questionnaires, I examined all of the responses and information to see if any of the other two surveys have an effect on the possible outcomes.

### **Results**

As stated in my first hypothesis, I expected to see a higher percentage of people to be punitive if they took the control survey than if they took either of the other two surveys. In my control survey, as mentioned in my methodology, the only information included was the actual offense that was committed. One of the questions posed was that of murder: A girl has shot and killed her stepparent. She should go to jail for the crime she has committed; which was followed with various responses ranging from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree.’ Roughly 73% of the responders either agreed or strongly agreed. In the second and third surveys, more information is included, bringing to light abuse by this stepparent as well as an absent mother. With “Stephanie,” (Survey Three) 68% disagreed that she should go to prison for her actions, with 61% of them urging for more rehabilitative outcomes outside of a state penitentiary. For La Shona (Survey Two), there is a nearly similar approach. 67%% disagreed with jail, and almost 60% pushed for a more rehabilitative outcome. As for this particular question, there was no evidence to support my second hypothesis, but there was a lot of support for the first (Figures I-III).

In a question regarding stealing from a neighborhood store in order to fit in with a group of friends, “Ross” and “Jose,” 45% and 44% of responders voted for punitive actions, respectively, while, interestingly enough, 37.5% of responders in the control survey voted for rehabilitative outcomes and only 15% of those in the control survey voted for the juvenile to go to jail. As for drug offenses, in response to “Markus” (Survey Two), a little over 28% of responders thought he should go to jail for the crime he has committed. About 33% thought he should be put in a program outside of a state facility, and about 33% voted against rehabilitative programs and also against jail. With “Michael,” (Survey Three) who was also selling drugs, 30% thought jail is the best option, 48% wanted a rehabilitative program, and a little over 16% disagreed with jail and rehabilitative programs (Figures IV-VI). Again, this shows support for my first hypothesis, but not for my second.

Another murder question on the surveys was that of a boy who killed his sibling. Without any background information in the control survey, 83.4% of the responders either agreed or strongly agreed with prison time, while less than one percent disagreed, and 11.5% thought rehabilitation would be helpful. For the second a third surveys, more information is given about the mental history of the boy, who, as it turns out, has undiagnosed mood disorders. With “Darius” (Survey Two), about 35% of responders thought that jail time is still a necessity, with almost 58% of responders saying that rehabilitation was best. As for those who surveyed “Kyle” (Survey Three), 57% voted for



rehabilitation, and about 35% still thought jail time is best (Figures VII-IX).

One thing I noted while gathering up my data is that a supermajority of the respondents in all three surveys came from women. When assessing the public's position on crime, evidence suggested that punitive responses depend, not only on the age of the defender, but on the gender of those being surveyed as well. While there is not a significant difference between the responses of men and women overall, women are more likely to be less so toward younger offenders (Sprott 1999). Because of this study and the population of responders, I decided to control for gender to see if there was a difference in this study. When looking at the punitive responses of the public, there is evidence supporting that whites are partly tougher on crime due to racial prejudice, while blacks are tougher on crime due to fear of crime (Cohn et al 1991). While I had gender as one of my independent variables to begin with, I did not originally hypothesize any differences that might occur with the responses between the genders. Obviously, then, I figured I must account for gender differences in responses.

A difference of means test was performed between surveys one and two, as well as surveys one and three. There was a statistical significance in both tests (6.86% and 6.54%, respectively), which supported my first hypothesis of more information leading to more rehabilitative responses. However, when the difference of means test was performed on surveys two and three, the outcome was not statistically significant (.43%), thus not supporting Hypothesis II.

When controlling for the variables I accounted for in my methodology in a regression analysis, it was found that most of those factors do not affect the outcomes, most notably and surprisingly, ethnicity and neighborhood in which one grew up. I did expect that ethnicity would play a role because people of color would likely be more rehabilitative because of their own experiences, but that was not the case. There was no statistical differences between white responders and responders of color. Additionally, I wanted to control for neighborhood in which one grew up because I expected to find a difference between responders who grew up in a rural neighborhood versus those who grew up in the suburbs or urban areas. That was not the case.

Variables that did make a difference were gender and political affiliation. For gender, the options included female, male, and agender. For political affiliation, I included Democrat, Independent, Libertarian, and Republican. For both of these variables, there was statistical significance to suggest that those who identify as male are more punitive than those who identified as female or agender. Additionally, those who identify as Republican are more punitive than those who identify with the other political parties.

The point of this study, besides finding support for my hypotheses, was to see if there would be any push for the participants to reach out to their respective lawmakers. In my control survey, when asked about whether or not mandatory minimums should exist, a little over 32% either agreed or strongly agreed, while a little over 47% either disagreed or strongly disagreed (the remainder had no opinion). A little over 44% of responders in Survey Three think that there

should not be mandatory minimums, with 37% saying there should. As for Survey Two, 48% say there should not be mandatory minimums, with 34% saying there should. When asked whether juveniles should be treated like adults in the system for committing similar crimes, over 68% of those in the control survey either disagreed to strongly disagreed. 67% in Survey Three had the same response. 63% in Survey Two also disagreed or strongly disagreed. A plurality of the percentages in the all of the surveys (although only very slight (less than one percent) in Survey Two) think that juveniles should begin to be treated as adults in the juvenile justice system between the ages of seventeen and eighteen.

Finally, with the question regarding whether there should be reform in the juvenile justice system, 53% in the control survey agree or strongly agree, while 36% say they do not know enough about the system to make an informed response. 60% in Survey Two say there should be reform, while 30% do not know enough. 59% in Survey Three agree with reform, with 30% saying they do not know enough.

### **Conclusions**

Based on the three surveys I sent to students on campus, I planned to see a higher level of students in the control group wanting to send delinquents to prison for their crimes, since they were given little to no information on why the child did the crime or any information about the child's home life or mental stability. I also assumed I would have this outcome no matter the political affiliation of the surveyed people because, especially in today's time with the rising crime rates, there is a push on both sides of the aisle

to tackle crime and no one wants to be seen as if they are “soft” on crime. I found that there was significant evidence to support my first hypothesis. In general, the responses of the first survey were far more punitive than that of surveys two and three.

As for the survey that includes the non-white sounding names of the delinquents (Survey Two), I expected to find that a higher percentage would vote for punitive rather than rehabilitative outcomes for those children compared to those in Survey Three. This assumption was based off of the studies done shown that more African Americans are put in prison than their white counterparts for similar crimes. Moreover, Hispanics are put in jail at an alarming rate from state to state. Because of the attitudes toward people of color and their suspected crime rate in the public, I was sure that I was to find that the surveyed people would be more inclined to let their opinions on how the public sees people of color and crime influence their decision, whether that decision be a conscious one or not. Unfortunately for me, and fortunately for our society, at a glance, there is no statistical significance to the slightly different responses between the latter two surveys. Therefore, I did not have enough evidence to support my second hypothesis of a racial component playing a role in public response to crime.

If I were to do this study again, I would absolutely broaden the population to beyond Susquehanna walls. While I did not find support for my second hypothesis, I am unconvinced that ethnicity plays no role in the juvenile justice system, for the simple fact that studies all around say

differently. I am content, however, that Susquehanna students, generally speaking, are not as systematically racist as I predicted. Another flaw of this study is that regarding to the way the second and third surveys were conducted. I think that there is a slight chance those taking the second survey may have caught on to the point of it since the names were somewhat extreme. If I were to do this again, I am not quite sure how to fix this problem, as having a mixture of white sounding and non-white sounding names in one survey would create another problem entirely.

The conclusions I had hoped to find would have demonstrated the major impact that public perception has on the juvenile justice system, let alone the criminal justice system as a whole. These perceptions do not allow for people to make judgements based on individual circumstances because of rules like minimum sentencing for certain offenses. I found through my studies that while many do not know much about the juvenile justice system, if their voices were taken into account in their home states, a real change could be made, although an overwhelming majority is not inclined to reach out to their lawmakers. The hope is that this study will, at least in part, change the culture of how those in the juvenile justice system are dealt with in the coming future by opening the eyes of those who took these surveys.

## Appendix

Figure I- Q8 Control Survey

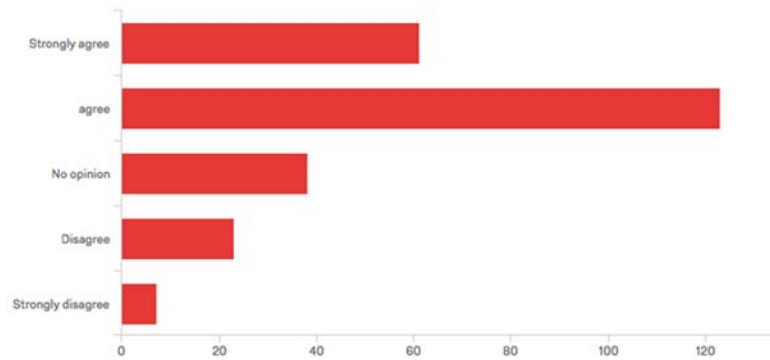


Figure II- Q8 Survey Two

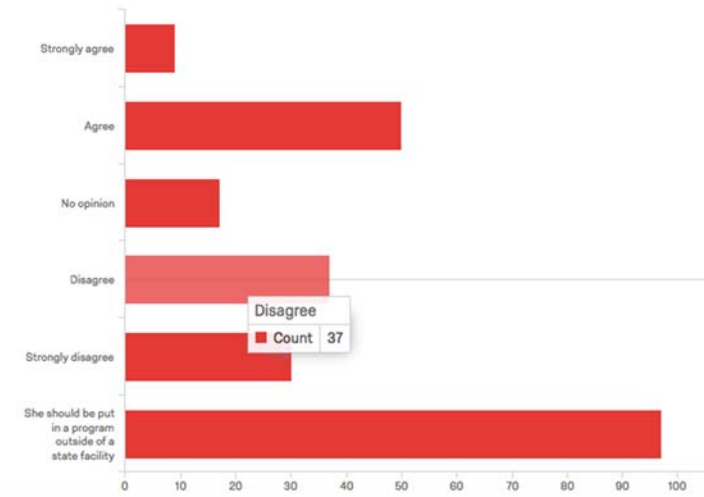


Figure III- Q8 Survey Three

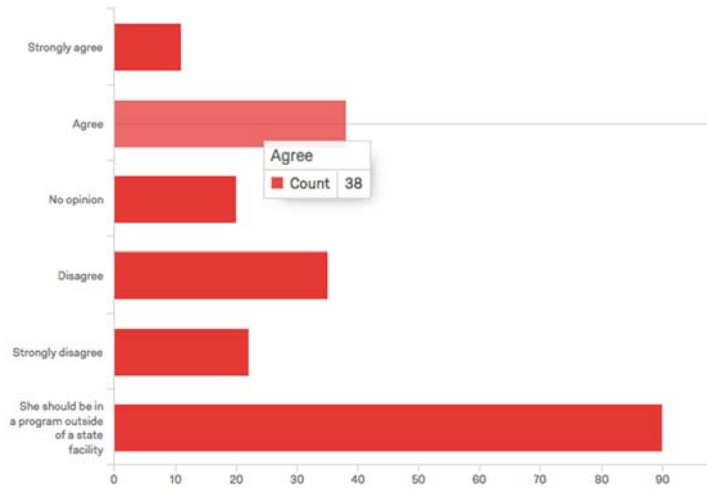


Figure IV- Q9 Control Survey

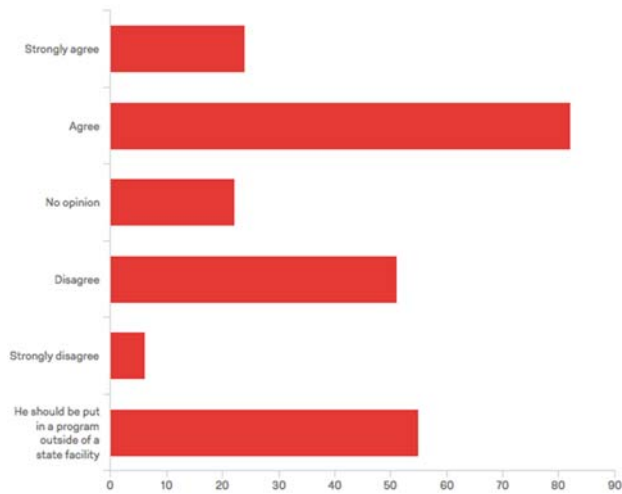


Figure V- Q9 Survey Two

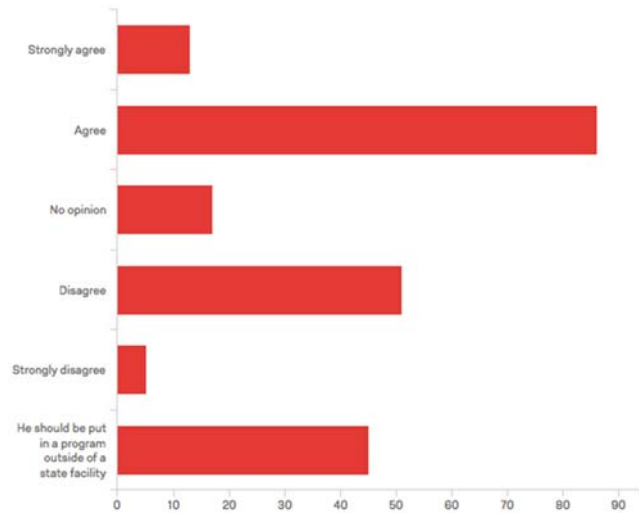


Figure VI- Q9 Survey Three

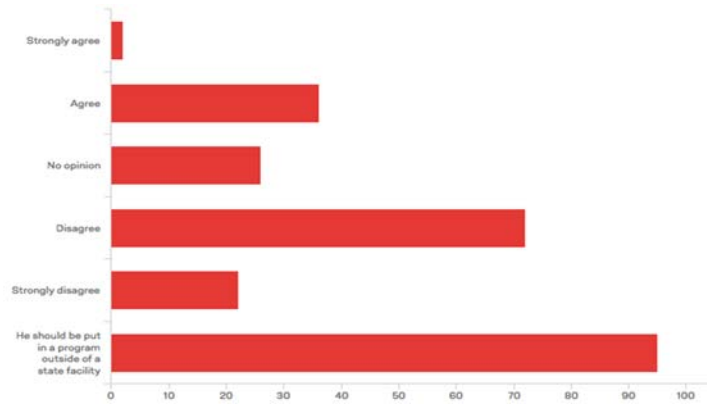




Figure VII-Q10 Control Survey

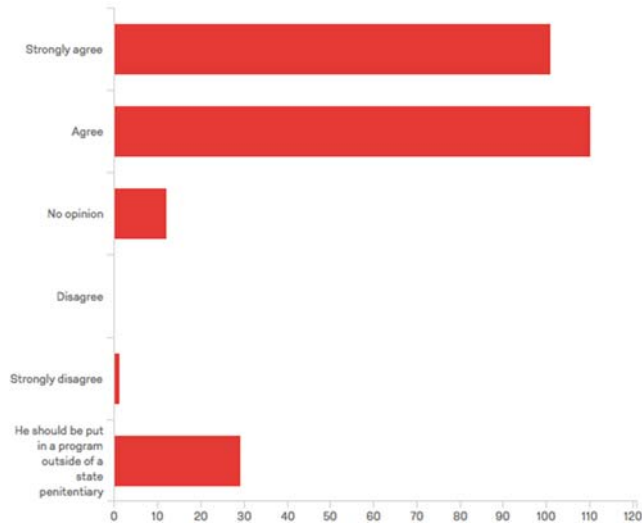


Figure VIII- Q10 Survey Two

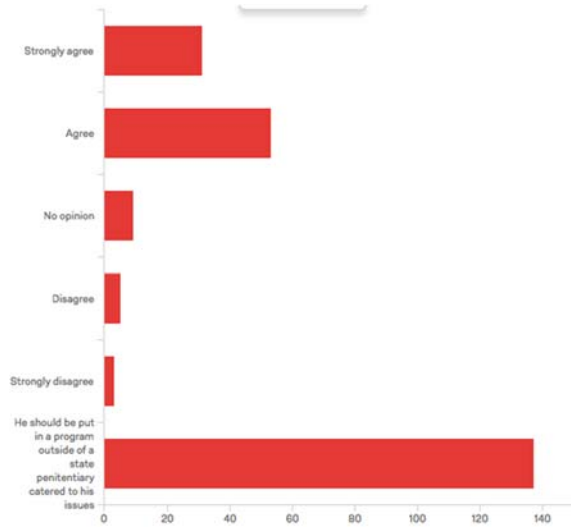
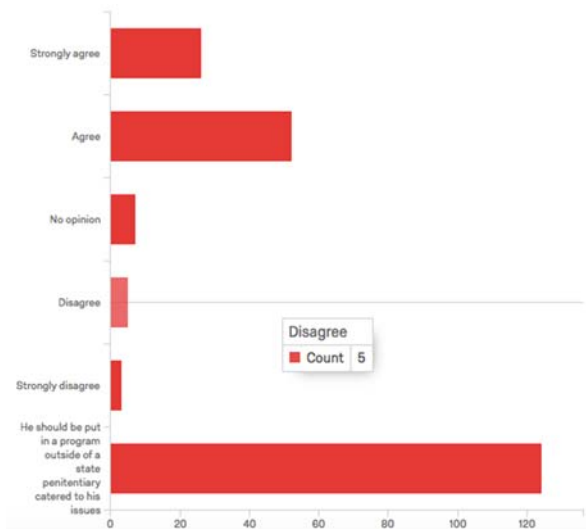


Figure IV- Q10 Survey Three



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