

Oklahoma poll shows support of programs for female inmates

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Many Oklahomans believe the state locks up too many women and think it is because of a lack of adequate alternative programs, a recent Oklahoma Poll found.

With Oklahoma No. 1 in the female incarceration rate, most residents say the state's current stance on crime and punishment is not making them safer.

Tulsa County District Judge Rebecca Nightingale said the results are encouraging because residents are seeing how tougher sentences aren't reducing crime.

"The hope for me as a judge and former prosecutor is that there is some public recognition about changing the high crime statistics through programs rather than tougher sentences," Nightingale said. "Tougher sentences have not led to a reduction in crime. Tougher sentences have led to more warehousing of prisoners. When the public recognizes the need for change, the legislators are hopefully soon to follow."

Different pathways

Historically, public policy and research focused only on the experience of incarcerated men, said Juanita Ortiz, assistant professor of criminal justice at the University of Illinois-Springfield, who also completed her doctorate degree at the University of Oklahoma studying female recidivism rates.

"With this newly arising examination of women as offenders, there has also been an increase in understanding their different pathways to crime and the greater effect that their incarceration tends to have on children left behind," Ortiz said.

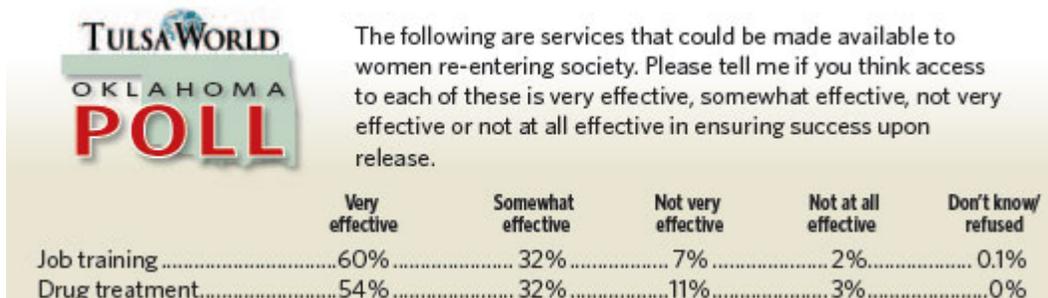
Oklahomans - with slight to no differences among gender, age, political affiliation, education and income - back alternative programs as a way to reduce the incarceration rate, bolstered by 66 percent supporting a reduction in sentences for nonviolent offenders.

"This indicates increasing awareness among the public about the expense and ineffectiveness of incarcerating women, versus sending them through programs that have a better potential of rehabilitating them," Ortiz said.

Incarcerated women are more likely to have experienced trauma such as abuse and poverty, said Laura Pitman, director of female offender operations for the state Department of Corrections.

"Most people have the opinion that these are individuals who have had average advantages, whatever those may be, and they've decided to be bad," Pitman said. "The poll is good news because it shows there are a lot of Oklahomans interested in alternative programs. ... The same strategies presented as re-entry are the same strategies for diversion."

Prison



treatment programs are difficult for most incarcerated women to enter because 40 percent have sentences of less than a year and treatment slots are limited.

Last year, 890 women entered Oklahoma's prisons with a moderate to high need of substance abuse treatment. But the state has 188 beds in the substance-abuse treatment program, which are all paid through grants, Pitman said.

"Only 28 percent got into treatment and received treatment prior to release," Pitman said. "We are only able to treat a fraction, and this is just in one area. People think you can send people to prison and they get all the services they need while they are in. That would be a misconception."

Nearly half of the women in prison have minor children, who usually end up with a family member, Pitman said. The long-term impact on these children has become a growing national issue.

"A lot of the problems you see in children of incarcerated parents, such as poor school performance or aggression, are those same problems their moms experienced when they were children," Pitman said. "That speaks to the intergeneration of incarcerated parents."

Mental health facility

Of the alternative programs supported by Oklahomans, most believe job training is the key. But drug treatment and mental health services are not far behind.

In Oklahoma, 68 percent of incarcerated women were abused as children, 71 percent have experienced domestic violence, 63 percent have substance abuse problems, 57 percent have a history of mental illness and 36 percent were raped after age 18, according to statistics gathered by the George Kaiser Family Foundation.

Yet, about 40 percent report receiving abuse counseling, according to the Kaiser foundation.

"I believe our department of corrections system has become our public mental health facility," said Elana Newman, a practicing clinical psychologist and director of clinical training programs at the University of Tulsa.

Newman said the poll did not give the options of poverty or a trauma as possible factors leading to incarceration.

"We know a traumatic past has an impact on this," Newman said. "The poll speaks to what can we do to educate the public on what needs to be done and need in re-entry programs."

About 86 percent of Oklahomans said they support a program similar to Tulsa's Women in Recovery, which is for nonviolent female offenders. The women must undergo drug counseling, find a job and secure housing.

The program has 55 women participating, and a first class of eight recently graduated.

"This is a small percent of the nonviolent female offenders who we could be helping through alternative programs," said Mimi Tarrasch, director of Women in Recovery. "We certainly think the program is offering a cost-effective and holistic approach to diverting female offenders from incarceration in Tulsa County.

"It is a program that promotes recovery from their addiction and provides the necessary treatment and recovery-oriented supports to make a successful integration into the community and reunite with their children and families."

'Not to be thrown away'

The poll found a correlation between support for alternative programs and people of religious faith.

For people attending several faith services a week, 88 percent favor more alternative programs and 85 percent of Oklahomans attending services weekly stated support for the programs.

The connection between faith and prison outreach isn't a surprise, said Brantley Tillery, associate director of criminal justice and mercy ministries of the Oklahoma Conference of the United Methodist Church.

"People from all faith traditions tend to believe people are not to be thrown away by our society," Tillery said. "There is something valuable about each person. All faith traditions want to be helpful for those incarcerated."

Faith groups have programs in prisons, re-entry programs and mentoring for children of incarcerated parents, including a summer camp hosted by the United Methodist Church.

"Kids are the real victims of it all," Tillery said. "It's not their fault. And they are several times more likely to go to prison, so we are trying to address those needs and address that generational cycle."

An overwhelming majority (83 percent) of Oklahomans say they support programs aimed at children of incarcerated parents.

Children of a parent in prison are five to seven times more likely to wind up behind bars themselves, according to studies from the U.S. Justice Department and Urban Institute. Children with an imprisoned parent are at a higher risk of poor academic performance, substance abuse, depression and suicide, according to these studies.

Democrats favor child-targeted programs (91 percent) more than Republicans (76 percent), and more women (70 percent) than men (54 percent) support these types of programs.

Also, support rises among Oklahomans attending regular religious services, with 85 percent support among people attending several services a week and 84 percent among weekly worshippers.

The Amachi mentoring program in Big Brothers Big Sisters of Oklahoma targets children of incarcerated parents and has received about \$2 million in public and private grants to expand the program.

"We are so encouraged by the response of Oklahomans in this poll," said Sharla Owens, chief executive officer of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Oklahoma. "By providing a positive influence for children of incarcerated parents, we can truly change their lives, our schools and the state."

Oklahoma female incarceration

- 132 women per 100,000 are behind bars in the state, compared to national rate (68), Texas (92), Kansas (41), Arkansas (73) and Missouri (81)
- 37 percent are serving time for drug-related offenses
- 38 percent spend less than one year in prison
- 4,624 children in Oklahoma have a mother in prison
- 46 percent were living with a child under 18 when arrested
- 86 percent say they were unemployed at the time of arrest
- 63 percent had difficulty managing financial resources when arrested
- 46 percent were receiving some type of social assistance at the time of arrest
- Average age is 36 years old
- 58 percent are white, 24 percent are black, 13 percent are American Indian, 4 percent Hispanic and 1 percent other

Source: Oklahoma Department of Corrections, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Do you think Oklahoma locks up too many women in prison, about the right number or too few women?

Locks up too many.....42%

About the right number.....35%
 Locks up too few women23%
 Don't know/refused0.3%

(Numbers have been rounded)

What do you think is the main reason Oklahoma incarcerates such a large number of these women?

Oklahoma women are more prone to crime8%
 Oklahomans generally take a harder line on criminal behavior..26%
 Oklahoma lacks alternative programs.....60%
 Because of divorce/single parenting0.4%
 Because of economy/job opportunities1%
 Because of drug use.....1%
 Because Oklahoma hates/biased toward women 0.5%
 Lack of education0.4%
 Other2.7%

Do you believe the state's current stance on crime and punishment is making you safer?

Yes.....41%
 No.....48%
 Don't know/refused.....11%

Would you support reducing the amount of time offenders spend in prison for some non-violent offenses if it meant the state spent less money on the prison system?

Yes.....66%
 No..... 24%
 Don't know/refused.....11%

Children whose parents are in prison are at a much greater risk of performing poorly in school, substance abuse, depression and suicide. Do you support a proposal that would identify and coordinate services for children whose parents are incarcerated?

Strongly support.....63%
 Somewhat support 20%
 Neutral/No opinion8%
 Somewhat oppose5%
 Strongly oppose.....4%

(Numbers have been rounded)

About the poll

SoonerPoll.com conducted the scientific telephone survey of 753 likely Oklahoma voters Oct. 18-23. The poll includes 384 Democrats, 345 Republicans and 24 independents selected randomly from those who have established a frequent voting pattern.

The margin of error is plus or minus 3.57 percentage points.

The poll is sponsored by the Tulsa World.

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