

A Survey of Christian Perceptions on Incarceration & Justice Reform

Fielded by Barna Group for Prison Fellowship® in October 2019

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BACKGROUND & METHODOLOGY

As the nation's largest Christian nonprofit serving prisoners and a leading voice on criminal justice reform, Prison Fellowship® has a vested interest in tracking key attitudes regarding incarceration and justice among Christians and Christian subgroups, relative to the general American public. Prison Fellowship first commissioned Barna Group to field these questions in 2017, and in September of 2019 repeated the survey, along with a few new questions. As this data informs our internal strategy, we hope it will also influence the public to promote a more restorative approach to justice. While the results from 2019 do not show a significant difference compared with 2017, Prison Fellowship plans to repeat the survey periodically to track cultural shifts among American Christians over time.

This survey was conducted online in September 2019 among 1,093 U.S. adults (age 18+), with a nationally representative sample. An additional 300 interviews were conducted with U.S. adults who qualified as “practicing Christian,” which when combined with those naturally occurring in the general population survey, totals 572 practicing Christians. The maximum margin of sampling error associated with the general population sample (n=1,093) is plus or minus 2.8 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. The margin of sampling error associated with the practicing Christian sample (n=572) is 4 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

RESEARCH DEFINITIONS

Generations:

- Gen Z: Born between 1999 and 2019 (currently age 20 and below).
- Millennials: Born between 1984 and 1998 (currently ages 21–35).
- Gen-Xers: Born between 1965 and 1983 (ages 36–54).
- Boomers: Born between 1946 and 1964 (ages 55–73).
- Elders: Born between 1945 or earlier (ages 74+).

Practicing Christians: Respondents who identify as Christian, say their faith is very important in their lives, and who attended a religious service or gathering in the past month.

Among practicing Christians, three-quarters (78%) have been to church in the past week; the balance (22%) in the past month. They are regular Bible readers (60% read it on their own in the past week) and pray regularly (nearly all, 93%, prayed in the past week).

Denominational Segments: Below are three main denominational segments of Christians analyzed in this survey:

- **Practicing Catholic:** Includes those who attended a religious service or gathering in the past month and self-identify as Catholic.
- **Practicing Mainline Protestant:** Includes those who attended a religious service or gathering in the past month at American Baptist, Episcopal, Evangelical Lutheran, United Church of Christ, United Methodist, or Presbyterian (USA) churches. Among practicing mainline respondents, Methodist (38%) were the largest subgroup represented, followed by American Baptist (24%), Evangelical Lutheran (18%), Presbyterian (USA) (7%), Episcopal (7%), and United Church of Christ (6%).
- **Practicing Non-Mainline:** Includes those who attended a religious service or gathering in the past month at all other Protestant denomination churches. Southern Baptist (25%) was the most commonly identified faith group identified by practicing non-mainline Christian respondents, followed by nondenominational/independent (19%), Baptist (12%), Pentecostal (8%), Church of Christ (6%), Church of God (6%), Evangelical (Free, Covenant) (6%), and others.

Among all the denominational segments of practicing Christians above (Catholics, mainline, and non-mainline) who participated in this survey, a little more than half consider themselves mostly conservative, less than 20% consider themselves mostly liberal, and about one-third consider themselves somewhere in between. Fifty-three percent identified as Republican or leaning Republican compared to 35% Democrat or leaning Democrat. Ten percent of practicing Christians surveyed identified as Independent voters.

More than half of all practicing Christians surveyed live in the suburbs or a small town, with 38% being from the South and 26% being from the Midwest, compared to 18% in the Northeast and 18% from the West. Over two-thirds have completed some college or are college graduates.

About 60% of practicing Christian adults are married (highest among practicing mainline Christians at 70%). Only about one-third of all practicing Christians who participated in the survey has children under 18 currently living in their households.

In terms of age, the respondents who identified as practicing Christians are mostly from the Boomer generation (55–73 years old). Millennials and Gen Z combined (those under 35 years old) make up 29% of the practicing Christian respondents, with a higher proportion of this age group attending non-mainline churches (33% compared to 26% mainline and 25% Catholic).

Regarding ethnicity, practicing Christian respondents are 63% white, 17% black, 14% Hispanic, and 5% other or multiple races. Black practicing Christians are more prominently represented at non-mainline churches (making up 23% of non-mainline respondents), whereas Hispanics are more likely to be represented at Catholic churches (22%).

Practicing Evangelical Christians: Being classified as an evangelical is not dependent on denomination. The term includes those Christians who attended a religious service or gathering in the past month and believe that, when they die, they will go to heaven because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus as their Savior, plus these seven conditions:

1. Maintaining their faith is very important in their life today;
2. Believing they have a personal responsibility to share their religious beliefs about Christ with non-Christians;
3. Believing Satan exists;
4. Believing that eternal salvation is possible only through grace, not works;
5. Believing that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth;
6. Asserting that the Bible is accurate in all that it teaches;
7. And describing God as the all-knowing, all-powerful, perfect deity who created the universe and still rules it today.

Most evangelicals are non-mainline Christians, though not all. Among respondents to this survey categorized as practicing evangelical Christians, church denominational attendance includes 24% Southern Baptist, 18% non-denominational/independent, 10% Baptist (other than American or Southern Baptist), 8% Pentecostal, 6% Evangelical (Free, Covenant), 5% Church of Christ, 4% Baptist American, 4% Church of God, 4% Reformed, 3% Missouri Synod Lutheran, 2% Catholic, 2% Methodist, 2% Protestant (other), 2% Reformed, and 1% of each of the following: Assembly of God, Disciples of Christ, other Lutheran, Greek Orthodox, Nazarene, Presbyterian (other), and Presbyterian (USA). And 4% of practicing evangelical Christians categorized the denomination of their church as “other.”

Practicing evangelicals are particularly focused on reading the Bible on their own (83% of those surveyed had read their Bible outside of a church service in the last week compared to 60% of practicing Christians generally). Roughly three-fourths of evangelical respondents are married, but only 22% have children under 18 living in their household. Roughly three-fourths completed some college or have a college degree. Of those practicing evangelicals completing the survey, 76% consider themselves mostly conservative. Just 5% consider themselves mostly liberal, and 18% identified as somewhere in between. Seventy-eight percent identified as Republican or leaning Republican compared to 17% Democrat or leaning Democrat. Only 6% of evangelicals surveyed identified as Independent voters. Most evangelicals surveyed fell in the Boomer generation (57%), followed by Gen X (28%), millennials (10%), and elders (5%). A high percentage (71%) of evangelicals surveyed are white, followed by black (12%), Hispanic (10%), and then other or multi-race (8%).

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Overall, practicing Christians, compared to the general American public, are more likely to believe the purpose of the justice system should be restoration for all those involved. They show strong concern for the care of incarcerated people and prison conditions. Compared to the general American public, practicing Christians are also more likely to be open to alternatives to incarceration, are more likely to be involved in advocating for justice reform, and are more likely to say positions on criminal justice factor into which candidate they vote for in an election. However, they indicate more of a preference for stronger punishment than the general American public, even where it is not warranted.

Evangelical Christians are far more likely than the general American public to incorrectly assume that crime is on the rise. Nonetheless, they are more concerned than Americans generally and any other Christian subgroup that prison should be safe and humane. Further, they are more inclined toward the idea of a second chance and the possibility for individual transformation. This may be linked to their core belief in redemption through the grace made available through Christ’s atoning sacrifice. Evangelicals are also more likely than other Christian subgroup to disagree with disproportional punishment. However, they are less likely to factor their elected officials’ criminal justice positions into consideration when they vote.

While these numbers indicate that the foundation has been laid for the Church to use its unparalleled capacity to continue playing a role in creating a more restorative justice system, there is still significant work to be done in challenging perceptions and increasing Christian engagement in advocating for a restorative approach to justice.

Prison Fellowship is well positioned to advance this goal. Our mission includes educating the Church on the importance of advocating for a criminal justice system that is fair and redemptive for all, while emphasizing the need for proportional sentencing, constructive corrections culture, and meaningful second chances.

DETAILED FINDINGS

Criminal Justice Generally

Crime Rate

The national crime rate has been steadily declining over the past 25 years (in fact, the crime-rate decline started in 1960).¹ Yet, most U.S. adults and practicing Christians incorrectly assume crime has been increasing during this period. Evangelicals are much more likely to believe crime has been on the rise (60% of Americans generally, compared to 81% of evangelicals), demonstrating the need for education on this issue through tools like Prison Fellowship’s *Outrageous Justice* small-group curriculum and the [Justice Declaration](#).

Other factors besides faith groups surface as significant among responses. For example, 3 out of 4 elders feel that crime is rising, compared to only 45% of Gen Z respondents. Slightly more women than men feel crime is increasing. More conservatives than liberals incorrectly think the national crime rate is rising.

“Generally speaking, over the past 25 years do you think the crime rate in the United States in total is:”	% U.S. Adults	% Practicing Christians	% Practicing Catholics	% Practicing Mainline	% Practicing Non-Mainline	% Practicing Evangelicals
Increasing	60	69	62	66	75	81
Remaining steady	22	19	21	25	16	9
Decreasing	9	7	13	6	5	7
Don’t know	9	4	9	3	4	3

This question was not included in the 2017 Barna survey.

Incarceration’s Role in Crime Rate Decline

Of the contributing factors that could have reduced crime in recent decades, research suggests that only 25% of the decrease in violent crime and an even smaller percentage of the decrease in property crime can be attributed to increased incarceration.² Other factors, such as a growing economy, changes in the drug market, the aging population, strategic policing, and community responses to crime have been found to be significant contributing factors to the decline in crime.³

1 John Gramlich, 5 Facts About Crime in the U.S., Pew Research Center (October 2019), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/10/17/facts-about-crime-in-the-u-s/>.

2 William Spelman, *The Limited Importance of Prison Expansion*, in THE CRIME DROP IN AMERICA 97-128 (Alfred Blumstein & Joel Wallman 2006); See also National Research Council, *The Growth of Incarceration in the United States: Exploring Causes and Consequences*, National Academies Press (2014).

3 Steven D. Levitt, *Understanding Why Crime Fell in the 1990s: Four Factors that Explain the Decline and Six that Do Not*, 18 J. Econ. Persp. 163 (2004); Steven D. Levitt, *The Limited Role of Changing Age Structure in Explaining Aggregate Crime Rates*, 37 Criminology 581 (1999); Richard Curtis, *The Improbable Transformation of Inner-City Neighborhoods: Crime, Violence, Drugs, and Youth in the 1990s*, 88 J. Crim. L. Criminology 1233

When told the crime rate had generally declined over the past 25 years and asked what role incarceration played in the decline, only 12% of U.S. adults felt it was mostly due to putting people into prison. Practicing Christians felt similarly. More members of Gen Z (21%) feel it is due to incarceration than elders (4%), indicating that younger Americans are much less informed on this issue.

“The national crime rate has actually declined over the past 25 years. How much of the total decline do you think is due to incarceration (putting people into prison)?”	% U.S. Adults	% Practicing Christians	% Practicing Catholics	% Practicing Mainline	% Practicing Non-Mainline	% Practicing Evangelicals
Not much, it’s probably mostly due to other factors	21	24	26	25	23	21
Somewhat, but it’s probably equally due to other factors	45	44	45	46	44	37
Most of it is probably due to incarceration	12	14	17	11	12	12
I really don’t know	22	18	12	18	20	29

This question was not included in the 2017 Barna survey.

Incarceration Rate

For the first time in decades, there has been a small but steady decline in incarceration. This prison and jail population decline can be attributed in part to the successful bipartisan justice reforms that have passed in states and at the federal level in the last decade.⁴ Nonetheless, with nearly 2.2 million people behind bars, the decline should not be a signal to ease up on passing further justice reforms needed to simultaneously reduce the incarceration and crime rates.

The results below indicate that most Americans are not informed about the recent decline in incarceration. Forty-one percent of Americans believe the incarceration rate is increasing, while only 11% believe it to be decreasing. Results are similar among practicing Christians in general, although evangelicals are more likely to incorrectly assume the incarceration rate is increasing (52%). More than 1 in 4 elders think it is decreasing, compared to only 6% of Gen Zs.

(1998); John E. Eck & Edward R. Maguire, *Have Changes in Policing Reduced Violent Crime? An Assessment of the Evidence*, in THE CRIME DROP IN AMERICA 207-256 (Alfred Blumstein & Joel Wallman 2nd eds. December 2009); Spelman, *supra* note 9; Oliver Roeder, et al., *What Caused the Crime Decline?*, Brennan Center for Justice (2015), https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/analysis/What_Caused_The_Crime_Decline.pdf; Richard B. Freeman & William M. Rogers III, *Area Economic Conditions and the Labor Market Outcomes of Young Men in the 1990s Expansion*, Working Paper No. 7073, National Bureau of Economic Research (1999), <http://www.nber.org/papers/w7073.pdf>.

4 Pew, *State Reforms Reverse Decades of Incarceration Growth*, The Pew Charitable Trusts (March 2017), <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/issue-briefs/2017/03/state-reforms-reverse-decades-of-incarceration-growth>.

“Over the past 10 years, do you think the incarceration rate (the rate at which people are put into prison) in the United States has been generally:”	% U.S. Adults	% Practicing Christians	% Practicing Catholics	% Practicing Mainline	% Practicing Non-Mainline	% Practicing Evangelicals
Increasing	41	46	43	45	49	52
Remaining steady	33	35	39	35	33	30
Decreasing	11	10	12	11	9	10
Don't know	14	8	6	8	9	7

This question was not included in the 2017 Barna survey.

Restoration as a Goal of the Justice System

Consistent with Prison Fellowship’s approach, the vast majority of Americans agree the goal of the justice system should be restoration for all involved in a crime, with more than one-third strongly agreeing. Practicing Christians and evangelicals are significantly more likely to strongly agree with this restorative approach to the justice system (46% of practicing Christians and 52% of evangelicals). Compared to other races, black Americans are more likely to strongly agree (45%) with this idea.

“The primary goal of the criminal justice system should be restoration for all parties, including the victim, the impacted community, as well as the person who committed the crime.”	% U.S. Adults	% Practicing Christians	% Practicing Catholics	% Practicing Mainline	% Practicing Non-Mainline	% Practicing Evangelicals
Agree strongly	35	46	44	41	48	52
Agree somewhat	46	40	42	44	37	35
Disagree somewhat	15	12	12	13	12	9
Disagree strongly	4	2	2	1	3	5

Opportunities to Make Amends to Victims and Community

Regarding opportunities for restoration (making amends for one's crimes), most Americans believe this should be part of the justice system. Practicing Christians feel somewhat more strongly about this idea, and evangelicals are almost twice as likely as the average American to strongly agree (63% compared to 33%).

“The criminal justice system should provide opportunities for people who commit crimes to make amends to their victim(s) and their community.”	% U.S. Adults	% Practicing Christians	% Practicing Catholics	% Practicing Mainline	% Practicing Non-Mainline	% Practicing Evangelicals
Agree strongly	33	44	40	45	48	63
Agree somewhat	53	47	51	46	42	32
Disagree somewhat	12	8	8	67	8	5
Disagree strongly	3	2	1	2	2	0

Church Engagement in the Political Process Generally

About 1 in 5 Americans who have attended church in the past six months strongly agrees that the church should participate in the political process. This viewpoint is significantly more prevalent among practicing Christians (28% strongly agree, compared to 19% of Americans who attended church in the last month) and evangelicals (35% strongly agree). Interestingly, this belief is highest among younger generations and decreases steadily with age. There are also significant differences between Republicans and Democrats (25% versus 14%, respectively, agree strongly).

“The local church should be an active participant in the political process.” (Only asked if attended church in past six months.)	% U.S. Adults	% Practicing Christians	% Practicing Catholics	% Practicing Mainline	% Practicing Non-Mainline	% Practicing Evangelicals
Agree strongly	19	28	26	21	31	35
Agree somewhat	31	28	27	31	29	27
Disagree somewhat	28	24	26	24	24	18
Disagree strongly	23	20	22	24	24	20

This question was not included in the 2017 Barna survey.

The Church's Role in Advocating for Justice

More than 1 in 4 U.S. adults, more than one-third of practicing Christians, and nearly half of evangelicals agree strongly that the church should support justice reforms that would provide second chances for people with a criminal record. Women are more likely than men to want this kind of support from churches. Black Americans and those with children under age 18 are also more likely than average to agree strongly with this stance, as are Democrats and evangelicals.

Notably, dozens of churches have joined Prison Fellowship in celebrating April as [Second Chance® Month](#), with some hosting a [Second Chance Sunday](#) service.

“The Church should support criminal justice reforms that provide prisoners a second chance to become successful, contributing members of society.”	% U.S. Adults	% Practicing Christians	% Practicing Catholics	% Practicing Mainline	% Practicing Non-Mainline	% Practicing Evangelicals
Agree strongly	27	37	24	24	40	48
Agree somewhat	50	49	52	53	46	38
Disagree somewhat	17	10	10	9	11	12
Disagree strongly	6	3	4	4	3	3

This question was not included in the 2017 Barna survey.

Church Engagement in Raising Awareness of Social Issues

Of the choices listed, homelessness and the sanctity of life are the top two social issues churches tend to promote to their congregants, according to churched adults. Compared to the average American who has attended church in the last six months, practicing Christians are more likely to reference sanctity of life, and Catholics and evangelicals even more so. Criminal justice is mentioned least often, indicating that other issues are more publicized in churches today, but the topic is still on the radar. Alarmingly, about a quarter of Americans attending church in the past six months said their congregation was not engaged in raising awareness among its congregants on any of the listed issues.

“Is your church engaged in raising awareness among its congregants on any of the following issues? Check all that apply.” (Only asked if attended church in the last six months.)	% U.S. Adults	% Practicing Christians	% Practicing Catholics	% Practicing Mainline	% Practicing Non-Mainline	% Practicing Evangelicals
Homelessness	51	53	52	61	51	46
Sanctity of human life	42	54	62	45	50	65
Drug and alcohol abuse	36	41	39	42	42	42
Domestic violence	33	36	38	44	34	32
Race relations /issues	29	29	27	31	29	22
Human trafficking	24	30	30	32	28	30
Criminal justice	20	22	21	27	23	22
None of the above	23	17	12	18	21	18

This question was not included in the 2017 Barna survey.

Factoring Justice Reform into Voting

About 1 in 4 registered voters say elected officials' favorable positions on criminal justice reform plays a role in their voting decisions. The Gen Z group stands out with 46% agreeing strongly that this is a factor when they vote, as do black Americans (45%) and liberals (37%). Among practicing Christians, those affiliated with the Democratic Party are more likely to factor in elected officials' positions on this issue when voting. Political ideology also drives agreement with this stance (50% of liberal Christians agree strongly versus only 25% of conservative Christians). Evangelicals are slightly less likely than practicing Christians to say their voting is influenced by criminal justice issues.

“Elected officials’ positions in favor of criminal justice reforms like fair sentencing, strong prison programs, and second chances are factors that influences how I vote.”	% U.S. Adults	% Practicing Christians	% Practicing Catholics	% Practicing Mainline	% Practicing Non-Mainline	% Practicing Evangelicals
Agree strongly	25	30	32	34	28	28
Agree somewhat	46	50	48	47	49	47
Disagree somewhat	23	18	17	15	19	19
Disagree strongly	6	3	3	4	3	6

This question was edited in 2019 for clarity. The 2017 version stated, “Elected officials’ positions on criminal justice reform is a factor that influences how I vote.” Due to this change, results should not be directly compared to 2017.

Advocating for Justice

When asked if their values compel them to take a stand and advocate for criminal justice reform, 74% of Americans and 81% of practicing Christians agree (somewhat or strongly). Across denominational segments, Catholics and mainline Christians are more likely to advocate for justice reform (84% somewhat or strongly agree) than non-mainline Christians. Evangelical Christians are most likely to strongly agree.

When you sign the [Justice Declaration](#), you’ll be joining Prison Fellowship’s Justice Advocate network and will have the opportunity to digitally engage with lawmakers to advance justice reforms. For even deeper engagement, our [Justice Ambassador program](#) equips Christians to influence their church and community and build relationships with lawmakers.

“My values compel me to advocate in support of criminal justice reforms when I perceive there are unjust policies or laws.”	% U.S. Adults	% Practicing Christians	% Practicing Catholics	% Practicing Mainline	% Practicing Non-Mainline	% Practicing Evangelicals
Agree strongly	24	32	31	32	32	38
Agree somewhat	50	49	53	52	45	42
Disagree somewhat	21	17	13	14	21	16
Disagree strongly	5	2	2	2	3	4

Priority of Specific Justice Issues

When asked to choose the criminal justice reforms that are most important, expanding programs, keeping youth out of adult prisons, expanding access to in-prison education and work opportunities, and reducing barriers to opportunities for people with a criminal record are the most commonly selected among U.S. adults (with more than a quarter of Americans selecting each of these four choices from a total list of 20 options). Results among practicing Christians are similar, although they also showed strong concern for collaboration with faith-based programs and programs that strengthen connections between incarcerated people and their families. Practicing Catholics in particular are most likely to express interest in expanding the availability of in-prison programs.

“All of the following elements have been considered as part of comprehensive criminal justice reform. Please choose <u>up to five</u> that you believe are of greatest importance in reform.”	% U.S. Adults	% Practicing Christians	% Practicing Catholics	% Practicing Mainline	% Practicing Non-Mainline	% Practicing Evangelicals
Response #1: Expanding the availability of in - prison programs	36	36	42	38	32	38
Response #2: Keeping youth under 18 out of adult prisons	32	31	30	30	31	23
Response #3: Expanding access to education and work certification programs in prison	31	30	33	26	29	31
Response #4: Reducing the barriers that people with a criminal record face in accessing job training, employment, affordable housing, and social service supports	28	25	23	31	24	29

This question was not included in the 2017 Barna survey.

Addiction

Illegal Versus Legal Drug Use

About 3 in 10 U.S. adults disagree strongly that illegal drug addiction (e.g., heroin and methamphetamines) is worse than legal drug addiction (e.g., prescription pills and alcohol). The greatest difference is seen among different age groups, with more millennials (20%) likely to agree that it is worse to be addicted to illegal drugs. Black Americans are also more likely to feel this way.

Practicing Christians are not significantly different from other Americans in their opinions, however. More evangelicals (40%) strongly disagree that illegal drug addiction is worse than prescription drug addiction.

“A person who is addicted to illegal drugs is much worse than a person who is addicted to legal drugs.”	% U.S. Adults	% Practicing Christians	% Practicing Catholics	% Practicing Mainline	% Practicing Non-Mainline	% Practicing Evangelicals
Agree strongly	12	15	19	15	13	12
Agree somewhat	22	21	27	22	17	15
Disagree somewhat	37	32	29	37	32	34
Disagree strongly	29	32	25	27	37	40

Sentencing

Disproportional Punishment

Americans are split concerning whether it is appropriate to punish certain crimes more harshly in order to set an example. The question specifically used the term “more severe punishment than their crime deserves” to indicate a disproportional sentence by anyone’s standard.

As was the case in 2017, respondents are evenly divided, with about 1 in 6 agreeing strongly and the same proportion disagreeing strongly. Practicing Christians’ opinions are not significantly different from the general population on this topic.

Interestingly, younger adults (Gen Z and millennials, 23%) are more likely than their elders to agree strongly that severe punishment may be needed to make an example (Boomers 13%, Gen X, and elders 15% each). This indicates that concern for individual justice may increase with age. Those with a more liberal political perspective (27%) are more likely than are conservatives (11%) to disagree strongly with the idea of making an example out of someone, as are evangelicals (27%), indicating their prioritization for proportional justice based on the individual case.

“It’s important to make an example out of someone for certain crimes, even if it means giving them a more severe punishment than their crime deserves.”	% U.S. Adults	% Practicing Christians	% Practicing Catholics	% Practicing Mainline	% Practicing Non-Mainline	% Practicing Evangelicals
Agree strongly	17	21	23	23	19	13
Agree somewhat	31	30	31	25	31	27
Disagree somewhat	34	32	33	34	31	32
Disagree strongly	18	17	13	18	19	27

Alternatives to Incarceration

Almost 1 in 3 Americans and practicing Christians agree strongly that judges should have the latitude to assign alternative forms of punishment when sentencing. Black Americans (44%) and those who are more liberal (41%) are also more likely to agree strongly with this viewpoint.

“In choosing sentencing, judges should have more freedom to use forms of punishment other than prison, if these other forms are proven to protect public safety and address victims’ needs better than prison.”	% U.S. Adults	% Practicing Christians	% Practicing Catholics	% Practicing Mainline	% Practicing Non-Mainline	% Practicing Evangelicals
Agree strongly	29	31	31	31	30	34
Agree somewhat	55	53	50	55	54	45
Disagree somewhat	13	13	15	8	12	16
Disagree strongly	4	4	3	7	3	5

Prison Reform and Caring for Prisoners

Youth Incarceration

Practicing Christians and Americans generally show similar levels of agreement that sending youth to prison will make them more likely to live a life of crime (29% agree strongly). Mainline Christians express the greatest concern that sending youth to prison will make them more likely to live a life of crime (40% agree strongly), and women are more likely than men to feel this way (32% vs 26%).

“I believe that sending youth to prison will make them more likely to live a life of crime than to reform them.”	% U.S. Adults	% Practicing Christians	% Practicing Catholics	% Practicing Mainline	% Practicing Non-Mainline	% Practicing Evangelicals
Agree strongly	29	29	25	40	27	24
Agree somewhat	41	41	47	26	41	36
Disagree somewhat	24	24	24	27	24	26
Disagree strongly	6	6	3	7	8	14

Prison Conditions

Based on their beliefs about the intrinsic value of each person, the vast majority (82%) of Americans agree that prison conditions should be safe and humane (33% strongly agree). As in 2017, this number is higher among practicing Christians (43% strongly agree) and even higher among evangelicals (52% strongly agree) .

“It’s important that prison conditions are safe and humane, specifically because I believe every person has intrinsic value and worth.”	% U.S. Adults	% Practicing Christians	% Practicing Catholics	% Practicing Mainline	% Practicing Non-Mainline	% Practicing Evangelicals
Agree strongly	33	43	40	42	44	52
Agree somewhat	49	48	48	46	48	43
Disagree somewhat	14	8	8	9	8	5
Disagree strongly	4	2	3	2	0	0

Restoring Pell Grant Access for Incarcerated Students

The Pell Grant Program is a federal financial aid program for low-income students pursuing postsecondary education. From 1965 to 1994, Pell Grant access for incarcerated students made postsecondary education a consistent feature of American prisons. However, a 1994 amendment to the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act denied all prisoners access to Pell funding. As a result, the number of higher education programs in prisons drastically declined. In 2016, the Department of Education, using the flexibility authorized under the Experimental Sites Initiative, provided

Pell Grant funding of postsecondary education at 67 colleges and universities working in 100 correctional facilities. In May 2019, the Trump Administration expanded funding for these sites, and Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos offered strong praise for the initiative. While the Administration’s Pell sites are yielding promising initial results, Pell Grant restoration for incarcerated students would significantly increase the scope and impact of these benefits in a more permanent manner.

Most Americans with an opinion on the issue of Pell Grant restoration would definitely or probably support making Pell Grants available to those in prison, regardless of whether they will be released. Support is slightly higher among younger generations, black Americans, and practicing Christians.

“How do you feel about making Pell Grants available again to anyone in prison, regardless of whether or not they will eventually be released?”	% U.S. Adults	% Practicing Christians	% Practicing Catholics	% Practicing Mainline	% Practicing Non-Mainline	% Practicing Evangelicals
Definitely support	31	36	31	40	37	30
Probably support	32	34	36	24	35	34
Probably not support	17	15	15	17	15	20
Definitely not support	20	15	18	18	12	17

This question was not included in the 2017 Barna survey. The above percentage breakdown excludes respondents who answered undecided.

Earning Time Off

Over three quarters of Americans (77%) agree, at least somewhat, that prisoners should be allowed to earn time off their sentences if they complete programs to reduce recidivism. Among Christian subgroups, Catholics are the most likely to agree (87%). Millennials and elders are significantly more likely to agree strongly with this position compared to Boomers. For a comparison of state policies on this topic, see Prison Fellowship’s resource [here](#).

“Prisoners should be allowed to earn time off their sentences if they complete programs that are proven to develop positive life skills and reduce the likelihood of reoffending.”	% U.S. Adults	% Practicing Christians	% Practicing Catholics	% Practicing Mainline	% Practicing Non-Mainline	% Practicing Evangelicals
Agree strongly	26	29	31	26	30	32
Agree somewhat	51	52	56	51	49	50
Disagree somewhat	16	14	10	19	16	12
Disagree strongly	6	4	4	5	5	6

Caring for Prisoners

A majority (75%) of people agree, at least somewhat, that caring for prisoners is important, with black Americans and younger adults having stronger opinions about this matter. Practicing Christians are more likely than the general population to strongly agree about this and evangelicals (50%) even more so. This may speak to the influence of prominent evangelical leaders who prioritized the Christian duty to “remember those in prison,” like the late Charles “Chuck” Colson, founder of Prison Fellowship, and the late Billy Graham who founded The Institute for Prison Ministries.

“Because of my values, I believe caring for prisoners is important.”	% U.S. Adults	% Practicing Christians	% Practicing Catholics	% Practicing Mainline	% Practicing Non-Mainline	% Practicing Evangelicals
Agree strongly	26	37	33	35	39	50
Agree somewhat	49	50	53	51	49	43
Disagree somewhat	18	11	11	10	12	7
Disagree strongly	7	2	3	4	1	0

Second Chances

Benefiting Others

Almost all Americans agree that people with criminal records have the potential to be contributing members of society. Most practicing Christians (52%) strongly agree, and evangelical Christians are most convinced of this (61% strongly agree), which may be an indication of their strong belief in grace and redemption.

“People who have turned their life around after a criminal conviction can benefit a community by using their experience as a lesson for others to transform their life.”	% U.S. Adults	% Practicing Christians	% Practicing Catholics	% Practicing Mainline	% Practicing Non-Mainline	% Practicing Evangelicals
Agree strongly	42	52	46	55	55	61
Agree somewhat	49	43	49	38	42	38
Disagree somewhat	7	4	4	5	3	1
Disagree strongly	2	1	1	2	1	0

Awareness of Barriers to Reentry

Approximately 3 in 4 Americans acknowledge that barriers prevent people returning from prison from succeeding. Awareness is similar among practicing Christians. Indeed, there are over 44,000 legal “collateral consequences” linked to a criminal conviction.⁵ This “second prison” led Prison Fellowship to launch **Second Chance Month** in 2017, a nationwide effort to raise awareness about these barriers and unlock brighter futures for people with a criminal record.

“Because of barriers, prisoners do not have a fair chance to succeed in reentering society.”	% U.S. Adults	% Practicing Christians	% Practicing Catholics	% Practicing Mainline	% Practicing Non-Mainline	% Practicing Evangelicals
Agree strongly	25	27	28	32	26	25
Agree somewhat	44	42	41	30	44	42
Disagree somewhat	25	26	29	26	24	26
Disagree strongly	6	6	2	12	6	7

This question was not included in the 2017 Barna survey.

Deserving Second Chances

The general idea of a getting a second chance resonates with most Americans’ thinking, with about 2 in 5 (42%) agreeing strongly that former prisoners should have the opportunity to be productive members of the community. A higher percentage of black Americans, liberals, and evangelicals feel strongly about the topic.

“Once someone with a criminal history has completed their just punishment, they deserve a second chance to become productive members of the community.”	% U.S. Adults	% Practicing Christians	% Practicing Catholics	% Practicing Mainline	% Practicing Non-Mainline	% Practicing Evangelicals
Agree strongly	42	48	45	45	52	63
Agree somewhat	49	46	51	47	41	36
Disagree somewhat	8	5	3	7	6	1
Disagree strongly	1	1	1	1	1	0

Removing Barriers to Reentry

While support for the concept of second chances is strong among Americans, there is a decline in support when asked to apply that concept in practical and policy terms. While 91% of Americans said they agreed strongly or somewhat with giving people a second chance to become a productive member of society after they complete their punishment, only 70% of Americans agree strongly or somewhat that formerly incarcerated people should not face further restrictions after

⁵ Justice Center, *National Inventory of Collateral Consequences of Conviction*, Council of State Government Justice Center (2019), <https://niccc.csgjusticecenter.org/>.

release. As noted above, about the same number of Americans (69%) acknowledge that barriers prevent people returning from prison from succeeding.

Respondents were provided with context that these restrictions applied to formerly incarcerated individuals' ability to obtain housing, vote, and apply for jobs but would exclude restrictions on activity directly related to their past crime (e.g. not allowing someone convicted of embezzling money to work in a bank).

Gen Zs and Millennials are significantly more likely to agree strongly with this opinion, as are black Americans and liberals. Practicing Christians are not significantly different from the national average.

“With only a few exceptions related to their specific crime, once a person has paid their debt for a crime, they should not face further restrictions on their life.”	% U.S. Adults	% Practicing Christians	% Practicing Catholics	% Practicing Mainline	% Practicing Non-Mainline	% Practicing Evangelicals
Agree strongly	25	27	22	35	28	28
Agree somewhat	45	45	47	42	44	41
Disagree somewhat	24	22	23	19	22	22
Disagree strongly	6	6	8	3	5	9

Awareness of the “Returning Citizen” Term

Around 1 in 4 Americans claims to be familiar with the term “returning citizen,” which has become increasingly popular among those in the criminal justice reform community. Awareness is slightly higher among black Americans, those living in urban communities, and Gen Z and millennials compared to their elders.

“Are you familiar with the term ‘returning citizen?’”	% U.S. Adults	% Practicing Christians	% Practicing Catholics	% Practicing Mainline	% Practicing Non-Mainline	% Practicing Evangelicals
No	77	74	72	73	75	83
Yes	23	26	28	27	25	17

More Positive Language

Prison Fellowship, based on the belief in the inherent dignity of every person and the recognition that language influences culture, has moved away from using labels that promote negative stereotypes such as inmate, ex-felon, or ex-offender. Instead, language is chosen that better reflects a person’s identity and potential as set apart from their circumstance or past choices (see [this article](#) for greater explanation of Prison Fellowship’s rationale).

When asked about their preferences for replacing negative labels with more positive terms to refer to those who have a criminal record, almost 1 in 3 Americans prefer “returning citizen.” Unfortunately, an equal percentage prefer the terminology currently in use. The term “restored citizen” comes in third, and the other suggested terms are each selected by only 5% or fewer. Practicing Christians are more open to using something more positive, with only 23% preferring the current terms.

Among practicing Christians, men are significantly more likely than women are to prefer to stay with traditional labels (30% versus 17%), as are evangelicals (33%) and those with higher incomes (36%).

“If we were to use a more positive term to refer to someone who has a criminal record, which one would you choose?”	% U.S. Adults	% Practicing Christians	% Practicing Catholics	% Practicing Mainline	% Practicing Non-Mainline	% Practicing Evangelicals
Returning citizen	30	31	31	34	31	25
Restored citizen	22	24	21	25	26	21
Other positive term	17	22	23	18	20	21
None, I prefer the current terms	30	23	25	24	22	33

CONCLUSION

While the 2019 Barna survey results indicate that the foundation has been laid for the Church to play a role in pursuing a more restorative justice system, many results indicate a need for greater education and mobilization of Christians. Prison Fellowship desires to see a positive trend in each question’s results in the years to come. We need you to partner with us to make this desire a reality. When you sign the Justice Declaration, you’ll be added to our Justice Advocate network. As a Justice Advocate, you’ll receive our Advocacy newsletter and Advocacy Alerts, giving you access to our online platform and opportunities to quickly and easily contact your lawmakers about the need for proportional sentencing, constructive corrections culture, and meaningful second chances. Visit www.justicedeclaration.org to add your name today.