

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

JUSTICE REFORM SURVEY

Fielded by Barna for Prison Fellowship

On June 14, 2017

BACKGROUND & METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to capture key attitudes regarding justice reform, particularly among Prison Fellowship's grassroots base of Christians and specifically Evangelicals. A survey was conducted among 1,015 U.S. adults, with a nationally representative sample, conducted online June 5-9, 2017. 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 607 practicing Christians.

The maximum margin of sampling error associated with the general population sample (n=1,015) is plus or minus 3 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. The margin of sampling error associated with the Practicing Christian sample (n=607) is 3.9 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

RESEARCH DEFINITIONS

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

Evangelical Christians: Those who believe that, when they die, they will go to heaven because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus as their savior, plus seven other conditions related to one's understanding of God, faith, scripture, and other theological teachings. These conditions include:

1. 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.

Being classified as an evangelical is not dependent on church attendance or the denominational affiliation.

Among practicing Christians, three-quarters (78%) have been to church in the past week; the balance in the past month. They are heavy Bible readers (58% read on their own in the past week; 83% of evangelicals read the Bible in the past week) and pray regularly (nearly all, 91%, prayed in the past week).

Mainline Protestant: Attend American Baptist, Episcopal, Evangelical Lutheran, United Church of Christ, United Methodist, or Presbyterian, USA churches.

Non-mainline: includes those who attend all other Protestant denomination churches.

Catholic: self-identify as Catholic (regardless of church attended)

Generations:

- Millennials: born between 1984 and 2002 (currently ages 18-33)
- Gen-Xers: born between 1965 and 1983 (ages 34-52)
- Boomers: born between 1946 and 1964 (ages 53-71)
- Elders: born between 1945 or earlier (ages 72+)

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Overall, practicing Christians, compared to the general American public, show strong concern for the care and conditions of prisoners, are more likely to be involved in advocating for justice reform, and are more likely to say criminal justice factors into their who they consider voting for in an election. However, they indicate more of a preference for stronger punishment, even where it is not warranted. Evangelical Christians in particular are more inclined towards grace, or the idea of a second chance, and reform of the individual, compared to Christians who are less theologically conservative. Evangelicals are more likely than other Christians to disagree with disproportional punishment, but less likely to factor 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 work to be done in challenging perceptions and increasing engagement in advocacy.

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 prison culture, and true second chances.

DETAILED FINDINGS

Criminal Justice Reform

The vast majority of Americans agree the goal of the justice system should be restoration for all involved in a crime, with one-third strongly agreeing. More practicing Christians strongly agree with this perspective on the goal of the justice system.

“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
Agree strongly	37	44
Agree somewhat	50	45
Disagree somewhat	9	9
Disagree strongly	4	3

People are split, however, on whether it is appropriate to punish certain crimes more harshly to set an example. Younger adults (Millennials and Gen X) are more likely to agree that harsher punishment might be needed; older adults (Boomers and Elders) are more likely to disagree. Women, as well as those with a more liberal political perspective, are also more likely to disagree, indicating a concern for individual justice over making an example.

Evangelicals are substantially more likely to disagree with this premise of setting an example, again indicating their priority for individual justice as well as mercy.

“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
Agree strongly	18	21
Agree somewhat	31	32
Disagree somewhat	34	32
Disagree strongly	17	14

The majority of U.S. adults, slightly more among practicing Christians, say that elected officials’ positions on criminal justice reform is a factor that influences how they vote. Gen Xers feel most strongly about this (25% strongly agree) as well as men (23% vs. 15% of women). Political ideology also drives agreement with this factor (29% of liberals agree strongly).

Evangelicals are less likely to consider an official’s position on criminal justice reform in their voting, while Mainline Protestants are more likely to weigh this factor. Among practicing Christians, affiliation with the Democratic party, more than Independent or Republican, indicates consideration of elected officials’ positions on criminal justice reform.

About one quarter of Americans strongly agree that 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. Millennials and Gen Xers are significantly more likely to agree, and those with liberal political leanings are nearly twice as likely to affirm this approach to justice. There are no faith segment differences, indicating this is a political, rather than faith-based, concept.

“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
Agree strongly	24	30
Agree somewhat	52	49
Disagree somewhat	17	16
Disagree strongly	6	5

AMONG THOSE REGISTERED TO VOTE...

“Elected officials’ positions on criminal justice reform is a factor that influences how I vote.”	% U.S. Adults	% practicing Christians
Agree strongly	19	26
Agree somewhat	49	48
Disagree somewhat	26	21
Disagree strongly	6	4

Practicing Christians express higher concern for prison conditions, tied to personal values; yet within Christians there are no significant differences by subgroups. Gen Xers and men are more likely to strongly agree with this statement.

“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
Agree strongly	32	43
Agree somewhat	49	46
Disagree somewhat	14	9
Disagree strongly	4	2

Christians tie their values more directly to prison care, with significantly more than the national average indicating they feel it is important to care for prisoners. Evangelicals are most convinced (44% strongly agree). Gen Xers, then Millennials (especially within practicing Christians) are most likely to value caring for prisoners, and more men also strongly agree with this statement.

“Because of my values, I believe caring for prisoners is important.”	% U.S. Adults	% practicing Christians
Agree strongly	23	35
Agree somewhat	53	52
Disagree somewhat	19	11
Disagree strongly	5	2

When asked if they are willing to take a stand and advocate for criminal justice reform, about three quarters of Americans say they are motivated. Men and adults with higher education levels are more likely to agree strongly with this statement. Practicing Christians are also more likely to be motivated towards advocacy because of their values.

“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
Agree strongly	24	29
Agree somewhat	47	48
Disagree somewhat	24	19
Disagree strongly	6	4

In order to assess whether people think certain crimes, or “sins” are worse than others, a question about different types of drug users was asked. About one-third of adults disagree strongly that illegal is worse than legal drug addiction, with the greatest difference by age (Millennials, then Gen Xers, are somewhat more likely to agree that those who use illegal drugs are worse than those addicted to legal drug).

Practicing Christians are somewhat more likely to pass judgement on someone’s character based on using illegal drugs, with the age differences even more stark (Millennials and Gen Xers more strongly agree that addiction to illegal drugs is worse). However, evangelicals are almost twice as likely as other Christians to disagree that illegal drug use is worse than prescription drug addiction, revealing their perspective that the addiction, not the person’s character, is the primary concern.

“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
Agree strongly	12	18
Agree somewhat	21	22
Disagree somewhat	32	32
Disagree strongly	35	28