

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: A Survey Highlighting Christian Perceptions on Criminal Justice

Fielded by Barna for Prison Fellowship in June 2017

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 who they consider voting 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 in particular are more inclined towards the idea of a second chance and the possibility for individual transformation, compared to Christians who are less theologically conservative. 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 sub-groups to disagree with disproportional punishment. However, they are 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 Christian 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 meaningful second chances.

BACKGROUND & METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to capture key attitudes regarding justice reform among Christians and Christian sub-groups as compared to the general American public. 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 categorized 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

Generations:

- Millennials: born between 1984 and 2002
- Gen-Xers: born between 1965 and 1983
- Boomers: born between 1946 and 1964
- Elders: born between 1945 or earlier

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. Practicing Christians make up 29% of American adults (by comparison, 78% of survey respondents self-identified as Christian).

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) and pray regularly (nearly all, 91%, prayed in the past week).

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

- **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, American Baptist (32%) was the largest sub-group represented, followed by Methodists (23%), United Church of Christ (20%), Evangelical Lutheran (13%), Presbyterian, USA (7%) and Episcopal (5%).
- **Practicing Non-Mainline:** includes those who attended a religious service or gathering in the past month at all other Protestant denomination churches. Non-Denominational/Independent (22%) was the most commonly attended among practicing Non-Mainline Christian respondents, followed by Southern Baptist (17%), Baptist (9%), Pentecostal (7%), Church of God (5%), Adventist (5%), and others.
- **Practicing Catholic:** includes those who attended a religious service or gathering in the past month and self-identify as Catholic, even if they do not attend a Catholic church most often (85% of practicing Catholics attend a Roman Catholic or Catholic church most often).

Practicing evangelical Christians: 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 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 and;
7. 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 the above denominational segments. Most evangelicals are non-Mainline Christians, though not all. Among respondents categorized as practicing evangelical Christians, church denominational attendance includes 23% Non-denominational/Independent, 14% Southern Baptist, 14% Baptist (other than American or Southern Baptist), 6% Missouri Synod Lutheran, 6% Pentecostal, 6% Evangelical (Free, Covenant), 6% Assembly of God, 4% Reformed, 2% Church of God, 2% Disciples of Christ, and 1% of each of the following: Adventist, Baptist American, Catholic, Church of Christ, Evangelical Lutheran, and Methodist. 7% of evangelical Christians categorized the denomination of their church as “Other.”

DETAILED FINDINGS

CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM AND ADVOCACY GENERALLY

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 (44% of practicing Christians and 49% of evangelicals).

“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	37	44	46	43	42	49
Agree somewhat	50	45	46	41	45	42
Disagree somewhat	9	9	6	13	9	8
Disagree strongly	4	3	1	3	4	1

Regarding opportunities for restoration – or making amends for one’s crimes – most Americans believe that this should be a part of the justice system. Practicing Christians feel somewhat more strongly about this idea of making amends, and evangelicals and Catholics are most likely to strongly agree (51% and 48% respectively).

Men are also slightly more supportive of this concept, as well as those in Northeastern and Western states.

“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	38	45	48	41	44	51
Agree somewhat	51	48	46	47	49	44
Disagree somewhat	9	6	5	9	5	5
Disagree strongly	2	2	1	3	2	0

When asked if their values compel them to take a stand and advocate for criminal justice reform, 71% of Americans and 77% of practicing Christians agree or strongly agree. Across denominational segments, Catholics are the most likely to advocate for justice reform (85% agree or strongly agree). Among the general American public, men and adults with higher education levels are more likely to agree strongly with this statement.

“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	29	35	35	27	26
Agree somewhat	47	48	50	40	46	48
Disagree somewhat	24	19	13	24	21	24
Disagree strongly	6	4	2	1	6	2

Some 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 X’ers feel most strongly about this (25% strongly agree). Strong agreement increases to 30% among Gen-X practicing Christians and up to 32% among practicing Christian Millennials. American men are more likely to strongly agree (23% vs. 15% of women), and the gender contrast is even more stark between practicing Christians (31% of men v. 21% of women). Political ideology also drives agreement with this factor (29% of liberals agree strongly compared to 18% of conservatives). However, the gap closes when comparing political party (21% of Democrats agree strongly compared to 19% of Republicans).

Catholics and Mainline Protestants are more likely to agree that an official’s position on criminal justice reform factors into their voting, while evangelical Christians are less likely to strongly weigh this factor.

“Elected officials’ positions on criminal justice reform is a factor that influences how I vote.”	% U.S. Adults	% practicing Christians	% practicing Catholics	% practicing Mainline	% practicing Non-Mainline	% practicing evangelicals
Agree strongly	19	26	30	36	25	18
Agree somewhat	49	48	52	41	46	53
Disagree somewhat	26	21	15	21	24	23
Disagree strongly	6	4	3	2	6	5

ADDICTION

About one-third of adults disagree strongly that illegal drug use is worse than legal drug addiction. Millennials are most likely among the generations to agree or strongly agree that those who use illegal drugs are worse than those addicted to legal drugs.

Practicing Christians are somewhat more likely to pass judgement on someone’s character based on using illegal drugs, with practicing Christian Millennials and Gen X’ers more likely to strongly agree that addiction to illegal drugs is worse. Catholics also feel strongly that illegal drug use is worse than addiction to legal substances. However, evangelicals are almost twice as likely as other Christians to disagree that illegal drug use is worse than addiction to legal drugs.

“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	18	28	17	15	5
Agree somewhat	21	22	28	24	18	18
Disagree somewhat	32	32	25	34	33	32
Disagree strongly	35	28	20	25	34	45

SENTENCING

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

Across Christian denominational segments, Catholics followed by Mainline Christians are most likely to agree that severe punishment is needed to make an example for certain crimes. Evangelicals are substantially more likely to disagree with this premise of setting an example, indicating their priority for proportional justice based on the individual.

“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	18	21	26	30	18	7
Agree somewhat	31	32	43	24	29	23
Disagree somewhat	34	32	26	37	33	45
Disagree strongly	17	14	6	8	20	25

Most U.S. adults agree that methods other than prison should be allowed in sentencing, with men more strongly agreeing (39% vs. 23% of women). Practicing Christians feel somewhat more strongly about alternative punishments than the general American public, with Catholics leading the way in their support for alternative forms of accountability.

“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	31	35	40	34	35	40
Agree somewhat	54	49	49	47	47	45
Disagree somewhat	12	12	7	17	13	12
Disagree strongly	3	4	4	2	4	4

PRISON POLICIES AND CARE FOR INCARCERATED PEOPLE

Most Americans agree that sending youth to prison will make them more likely to live a life of crime. Those with more liberal political beliefs also agree more strongly than those with conservative beliefs (32% v. 22% agree strongly). Evangelical Christians express particular concern that youth prisons are ineffective places for reformation (36% strongly agree compared to 28% of all practicing Christians).

“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	26	28	31	22	29	36
Agree somewhat	41	43	46	49	39	38
Disagree somewhat	26	23	16	22	27	20
Disagree strongly	7	6	6	7	6	5

When it comes to prison conditions, practicing Christians express higher concern than the American public generally because of their belief in every person having intrinsic value and worth. Evangelical Christians are the most likely to be concerned (52% saying they strongly agree). Generationally, Gen X'ers (37%) are most likely to strongly agree with this statement. Men are also more likely to strongly agree than women (35% compared to 28% of women), but 54% of women “agree somewhat” compared to 44% of men.

“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	32	43	46	35	44	52
Agree somewhat	49	46	46	46	47	41
Disagree somewhat	14	9	6	18	7	6
Disagree strongly	4	2	1	1	2	1

About three quarters of Americans agree or 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 X'ers are more likely to agree, and those with liberal political leanings are nearly twice as likely to strongly agree with this approach to justice. Nevertheless, a total of 72% of respondents with conservative ideology said they agreed or agreed strongly with the below statement. Across Christian denominational segments, Catholics feel most strongly about this concept (37% of Catholics strongly agree).

“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	24	30	37	30	28	24
Agree somewhat	52	49	48	46	48	49
Disagree somewhat	17	16	11	18	18	19
Disagree strongly	6	5	3	6	6	8

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). Generationally, Gen X'ers, then Millennials (especially within practicing Christians) are most likely to strongly agree with this statement. Men are also more likely to strongly agree with this statement (28% compared to 19% of women).

“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	23	35	36	27	37	44
Agree somewhat	53	52	53	57	50	54
Disagree somewhat	19	11	10	13	10	3
Disagree strongly	5	2	1	4	3	0

SECOND CHANCES

Almost all Americans agree that people with criminal records have the potential to be contributing members of society. Demographically, Gen X'ers and those with incomes under \$50K annually are most in support of this statement. Most practicing Christians strongly agree and evangelical Christians are most convinced of this (69% strongly agree).

“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	47	54	52	56	55	69
Agree somewhat	48	43	45	38	42	30
Disagree somewhat	4	3	2	3	3	2
Disagree strongly	2	1	0	2	1	0

The general idea of a getting a second chance with a clean slate is central to most Americans' thinking, as about half agree strongly that people who have completed their just punishment should have the opportunity to be productive members of the community. Men and democrats are most convinced of this, as are evangelical Christians (61% of evangelicals strongly agree).

“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	43	51	55	49	50	61
Agree somewhat	50	45	42	45	45	38
Disagree somewhat	5	4	4	6	3	1
Disagree strongly	2	1	0	1	1	0

However, applying the general idea of second chances to specific policy implications yielded less support. Respondents were given the following background before answering the below question: “Oftentimes, someone with a criminal record is prohibited from applying for many jobs, obtaining certain housing, or voting, among other restrictions.”

Only about one quarter of Americans strongly agreed that restrictions should not be placed on people with criminal records. Men are more likely to agree with this concept of removing further penalties after one has paid their debt (30% vs. 17% of women strongly agree), as are Democrats and Independents and respondents from the Western region.

Millennials and Gen X’ers are significantly more likely to agree strongly, and this belief is even stronger among young practicing Christians. However, evangelical Christians are significantly less likely to agree, and more likely to “disagree somewhat” compared with other Christians.

“With only a few exceptions related to their specific crime (for example, not allowing someone convicted of embezzling money to work at a bank), 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	24	32	38	41	29	19
Agree somewhat	45	41	42	34	39	40
Disagree somewhat	25	21	14	20	26	34
Disagree strongly	6	6	6	5	6	7

Prison Fellowship founded Second Chance Month in April 2017 to raise awareness about the challenges people with a criminal record face in accessing jobs, education, housing, and other things necessary for a productive life. Among U.S. adults, 9% say they have heard of National Second Chance Month. Awareness is highest among Millennials (18%), next among Gen X’ers (11%), and low among Baby Boomers and Elders. Men were more likely to have heard of Second Chance Month than women (14% compared to 4% women respondents). Practicing Christians expressed higher awareness than most Americans (20% compared to 9%), with 41% of practicing Christian millennials, practicing Catholics (33%), and practicing Christian men (31% compared to 9% of women), being the highest sub-groups.

However, only one-fifth of respondents who said they had heard of Second Chance Month described anything related to prisoners, law, or justice. Therefore, the likely actual awareness is around 2%. This is not surprising given that 2017 was the first year of celebrating April as Second Chance Month.