



CHRISTIAN PERCEPTIONS ON

Policing, Sentencing, and Other Criminal Justice Issues

Fielded by Barna Group for Prison Fellowship® in April–May 2021



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Background and 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 commissioned Barna Group to field these questions in 2017 and 2019, and in 2021 we 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 most of the results from 2021 do not show a significant difference compared with 2019, Prison Fellowship plans to repeat the survey periodically to track cultural shifts among American Christians over time.

This survey was conducted online from April 15 to May 19, 2021, among 1,519 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,” 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. When this group is combined with those naturally occurring in the general population survey, we get a total of 668 practicing Christians. The minimum margin of sampling error for the main sample (n=1,519) is +/- 2.3%. The margin of error for the sample of practicing Christians is +/- 3.7%. The primary statistical analysis conducted was two-way z-tests for statistical difference. All differences reported on here are statistically different on a 95% confidence interval.

Executive Summary

Since 2017, Prison Fellowship has commissioned the Barna Group to conduct biannual surveys focused on perceptions of crime, incarceration, and other criminal justice issues among Americans. The survey specifically highlights opinions among practicing Christians.

The 2021 results incorporated several new topics. Highlights include:

- For both Americans generally and practicing Christians specifically, the 2021 top criminal justice reform priorities were in-prison job or educational training programs, followed by a removal of barriers to job training and employment for those with a criminal record.
- When asked about police reforms, only 10% of Americans expressed they did not support any reforms in this area. Training officers in tactics to de-escalate or defuse a potentially dangerous situation was the highest scoring option among both Americans and practicing Christians.
- 77% of adults also believe that having additional policing in high crime areas makes communities a lot or somewhat safer; support rises to 86% among practicing Christians.
- Motivated by public safety outcomes, Americans and practicing Christians overwhelmingly support (88% and 90% respectively) offering parole and other flexible release opportunities as an incentive for prisoners to demonstrate good behavior and complete rehabilitation programs. Further, the majority of Americans and Christians believe such release decisions should be based on rehabilitative efforts during prison, rather than the type of crime committed.
- The majority of Americans and practicing Christians oppose restrictions to public and private housing for people with a criminal record (73% and 72% respectively). However, only 54% of Americans and practicing Christians expressed willingness to live in the same neighborhood as someone with a criminal record.
- When asked about using more positive language for those with a criminal record (e.g. “returning citizen” in lieu of “ex-felon”), practicing Christians’ support rose 13% (from 69% to 82%) when the intention behind the change in labels was framed in the larger context of how God offers a second chance to all who sin.

Key trends and distinctions between 2017, 2019, and 2021 results:

- There was a modest decrease in American and practicing Christians’ support for making an example out of people convicted of certain crimes, even at the expense of giving such defendants a harsher penalty than was warranted. In 2017, 49% of Americans and 53% of practicing Christians agreed with using excessive sentences to send a message about certain crimes, whereas 46% of Americans and 50% of practicing Christians expressed agreement in 2021.
- Support for prisoners being able to earn time off their sentence for completion of programs proven to reduce the likelihood of reoffending has continued to rise. American support increased from 76% (2017), to 77% (2019), to 79% (2021). Likewise, practicing Christians’ support for earned time credits increased from 79% (2017), to 81% (2019), to 83% (2021). Further, the margin of those expressing “strong agreement” increased for both Americans and practicing Christians. The media coverage and passage of the bipartisan FIRST STEP Act of 2018, which increased programming and earned time credits for federal prisoners, may have played a role in building this momentum.
- Consistent with the message of Second Chance Month, an April campaign led by Prison Fellowship since 2017 which has grown exponentially in coalition support and media coverage, opposition to restrictions placed on people who have paid their debt for their crime continues to rise among both Americans and practicing Christians.
 - 69% of Americans opposed placing further restrictions on people with a criminal record in 2017, compared to 75% by 2021.
 - Similarly, practicing Christians’ opposition went from 73% in 2017 to 78% in 2021.
- Likely influenced by the highly publicized deaths of Black Americans by police, 2021 showed an increase in the percentage of practicing Christians reporting that their church was engaged in raising awareness

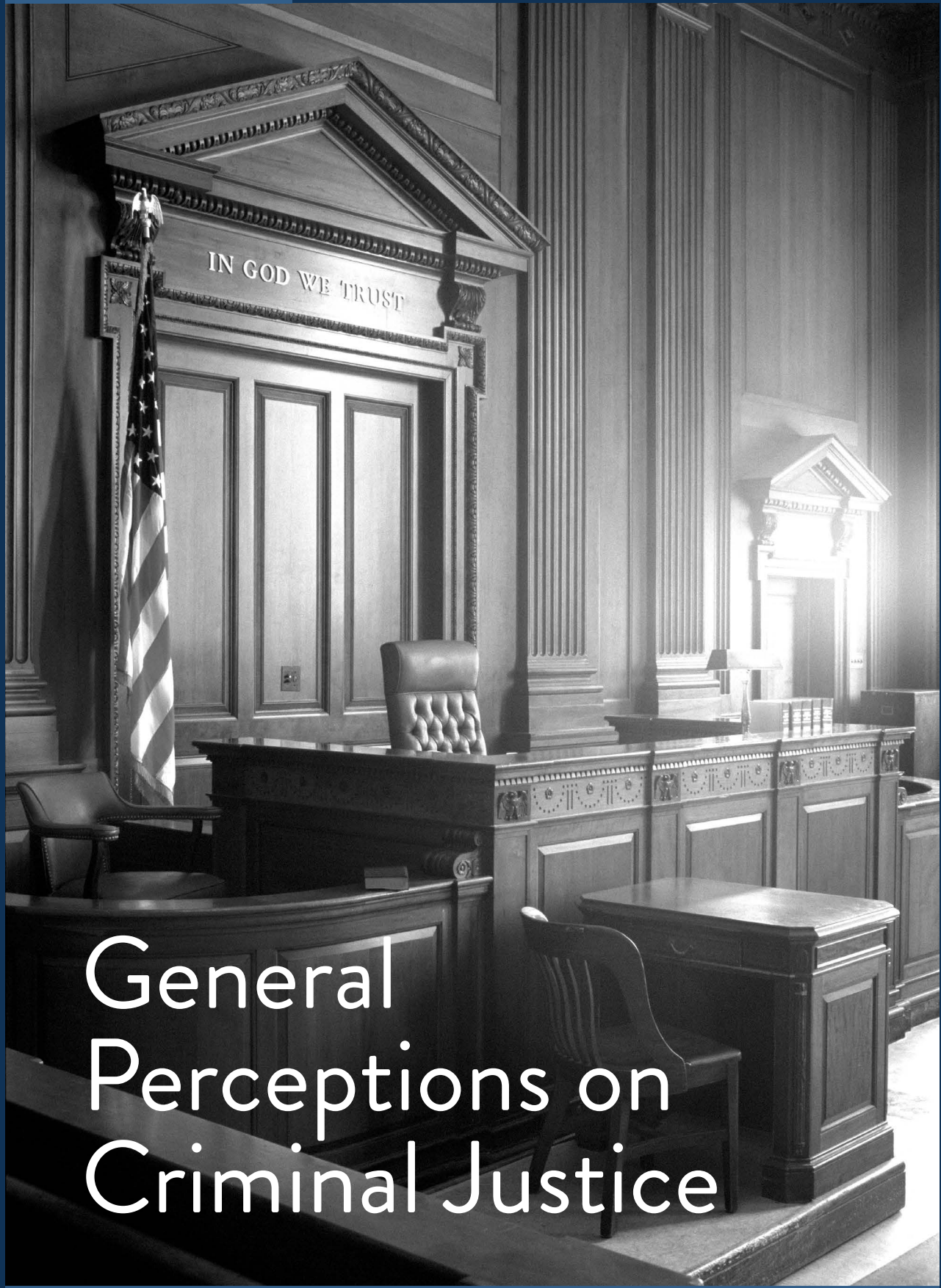
about race issues (29% in 2019 compared to 35% in 2021). There was only a 1% uptick in churches raising awareness of criminal justice issues; among those discussing justice issues from the pulpit, the Bible's mandate to care for others, including incarcerated people, was the top motivation, followed by criminal justice being an issue that impacted the church's community.

Distinctions between practicing Christians' perceptions compared to the general American public include:

- Practicing Christians are more likely than the American public at large to feel strongly that the primary purpose of the justice system should be restoration for victims, the responsible party, and the community.
- They strongly support opportunities for people who have committed crimes to make amends to victims and communities and are more open to alternatives to incarceration than the American public at large.
- Their values inspire strong concern for the care of incarcerated people and humane prison conditions.
- Practicing Christians' belief in the power of redemption may motivate their strong support for parole and other release decisions being based upon demonstrated rehabilitation efforts, not the type of crime committed. This value may also motivate their high support for second chances: practicing Christians were 11% more likely than other Americans to express strong agreement that once someone has completed their just punishment, they deserve a second chance to become a productive citizen.
- Compared to the general American public, practicing Christians are 8% more likely to agree strongly that positions on criminal justice like fair sentencing, strong prison programs, and second chances are factors which influence their vote (33% of practicing Christians compared to 25% of Americans).

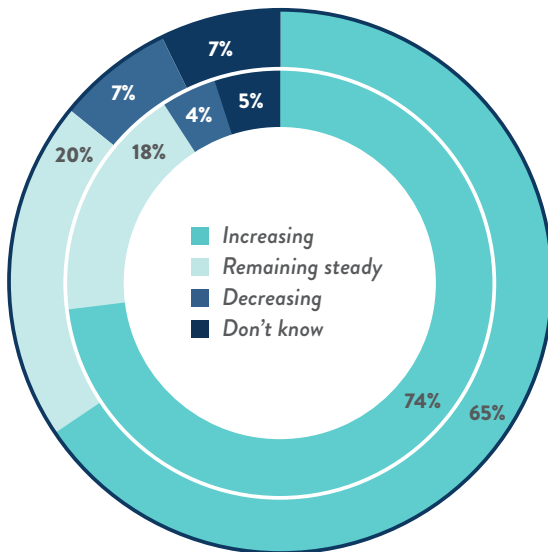
While these numbers indicate that the foundation has been laid for the Church to use its unparalleled capacity to continue playing a role in creating a more restorative justice system, there is still significant work to be done in challenging Christians' perceptions and increasing their advocacy for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



General Perceptions on Criminal Justice

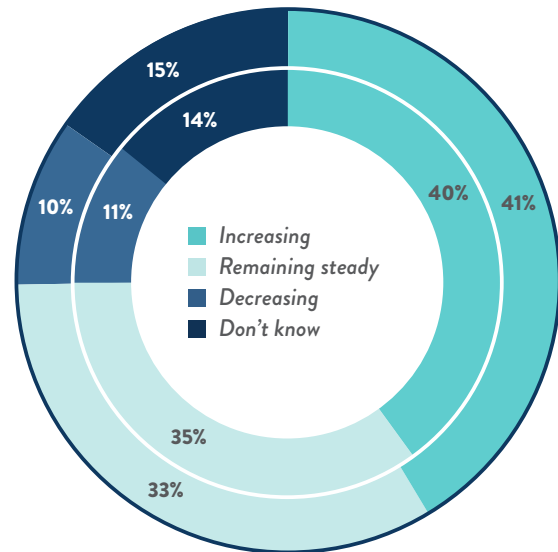
Generally speaking, over the past 25 years do you think the crime rate in the United States in total is ...



○ U.S. Adults ○ Practicing Christians

Despite a small rise in violent crime in 2020, the overall crime rate is declining and has been steadily decreasing since the 1990s.

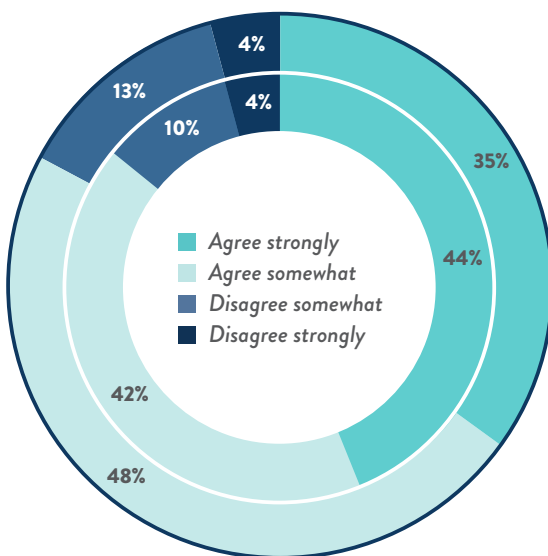
Over the past 10 years, do you think the incarceration rate (the rate at which people are put into prison) in the United States has been generally ...



○ U.S. Adults ○ Practicing Christians

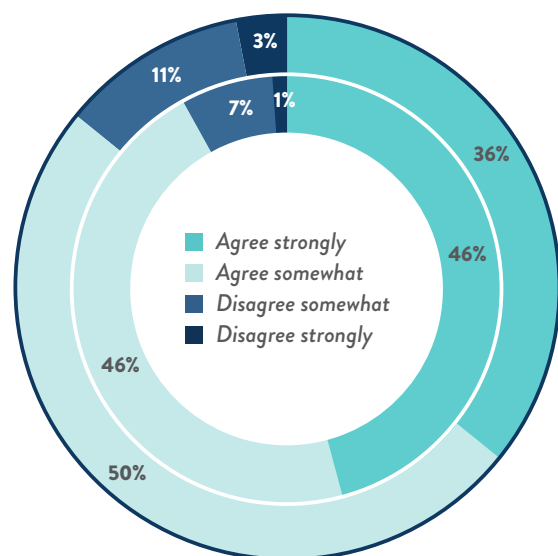
Thanks in part to criminal justice reforms, the incarceration rate has actually had a modest decline in the past 10 years. The country was at an all-time high of 2.3 million people incarcerated in jails and prisons in 2008 and is now at 2.1 million.

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.



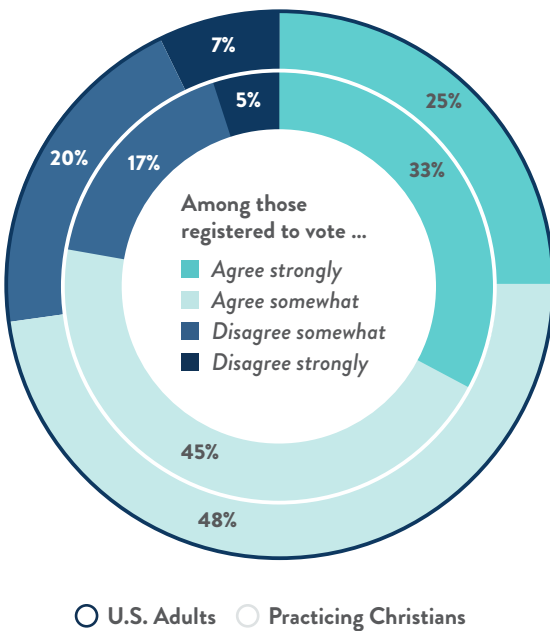
○ U.S. Adults ○ Practicing Christians

The criminal justice system should provide opportunities for people who commit crimes to make amends to their victim(s) and their community.

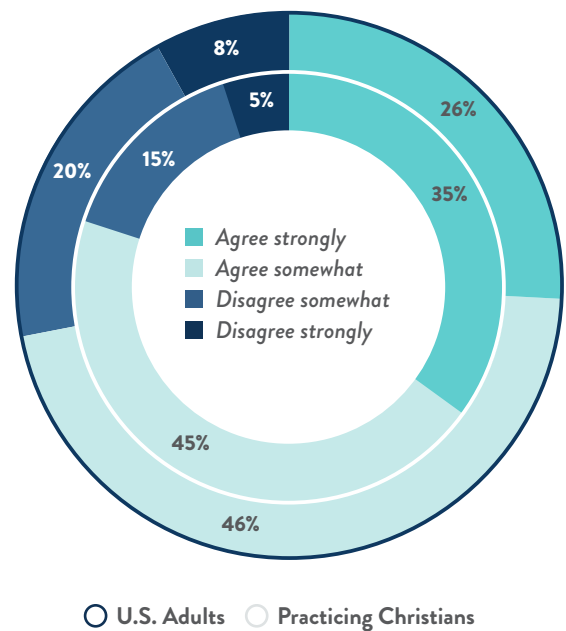


○ U.S. Adults ○ Practicing Christians

Elected officials' positions in favor of criminal justice reforms like fair sentencing, strong prison programs, and second chances, are a factor that influences how I vote.



My values compel me to advocate in support of criminal justice reforms when I perceive there are unjust policies or laws.



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)?

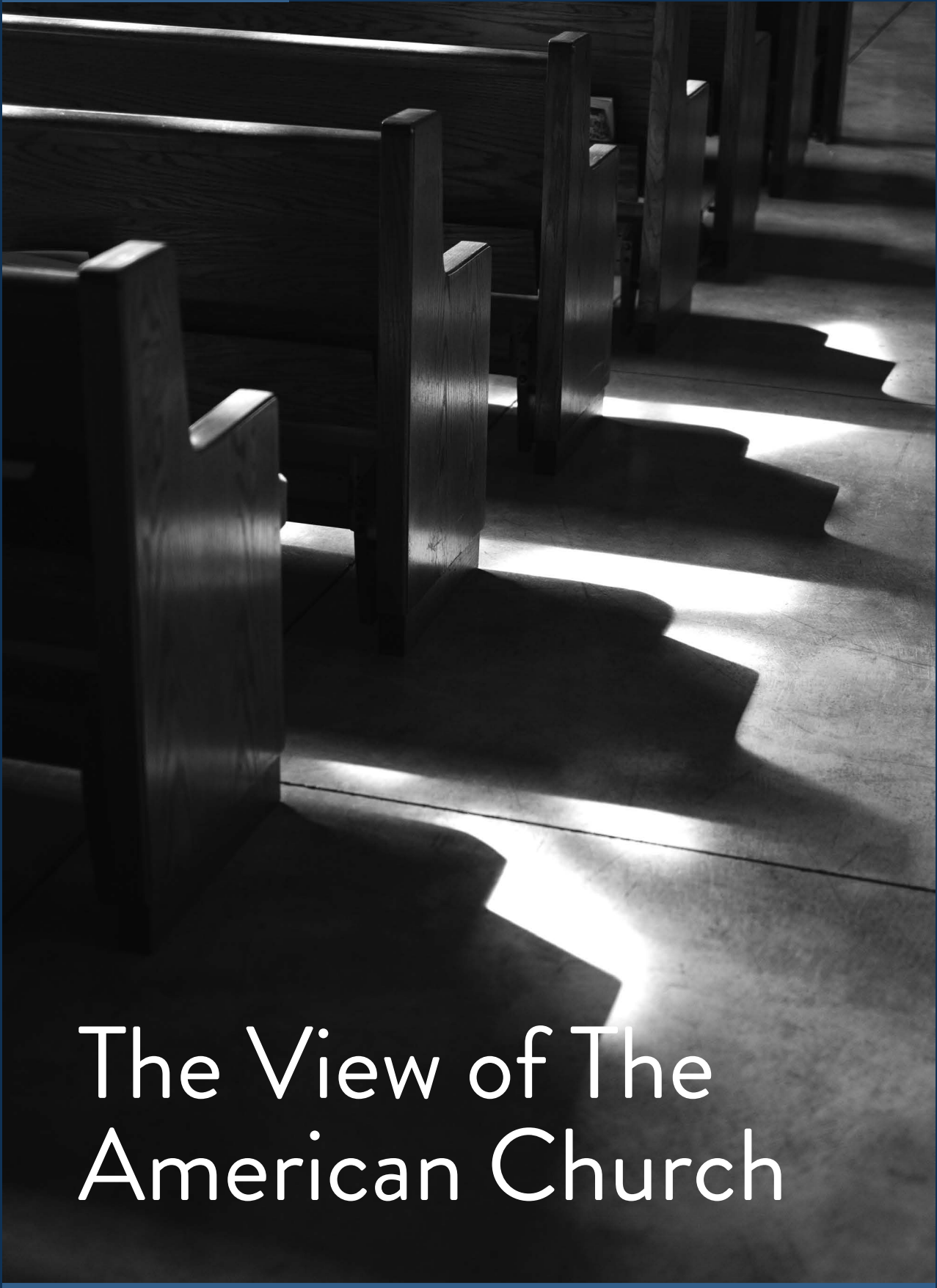
	U.S. Adults	Practicing Christians
<i>Not much—it's probably mostly due to other factors</i>	20%	19%
<i>Somewhat, but it's probably equally due to other factors</i>	37	36
<i>Most of it is probably due to incarceration</i>	16	19
<i>I really don't know</i>	27	26

Research suggests that only 25 percent of the overall decrease in violent crime throughout the past 20 years, and an even smaller percentage of the decrease in property crime, can be attributed to increased incarceration. Other factors besides incarceration, including 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.

All of the following elements have been considered as part of comprehensive criminal justice reform. Please choose up to five that you believe are of greatest importance in reform.

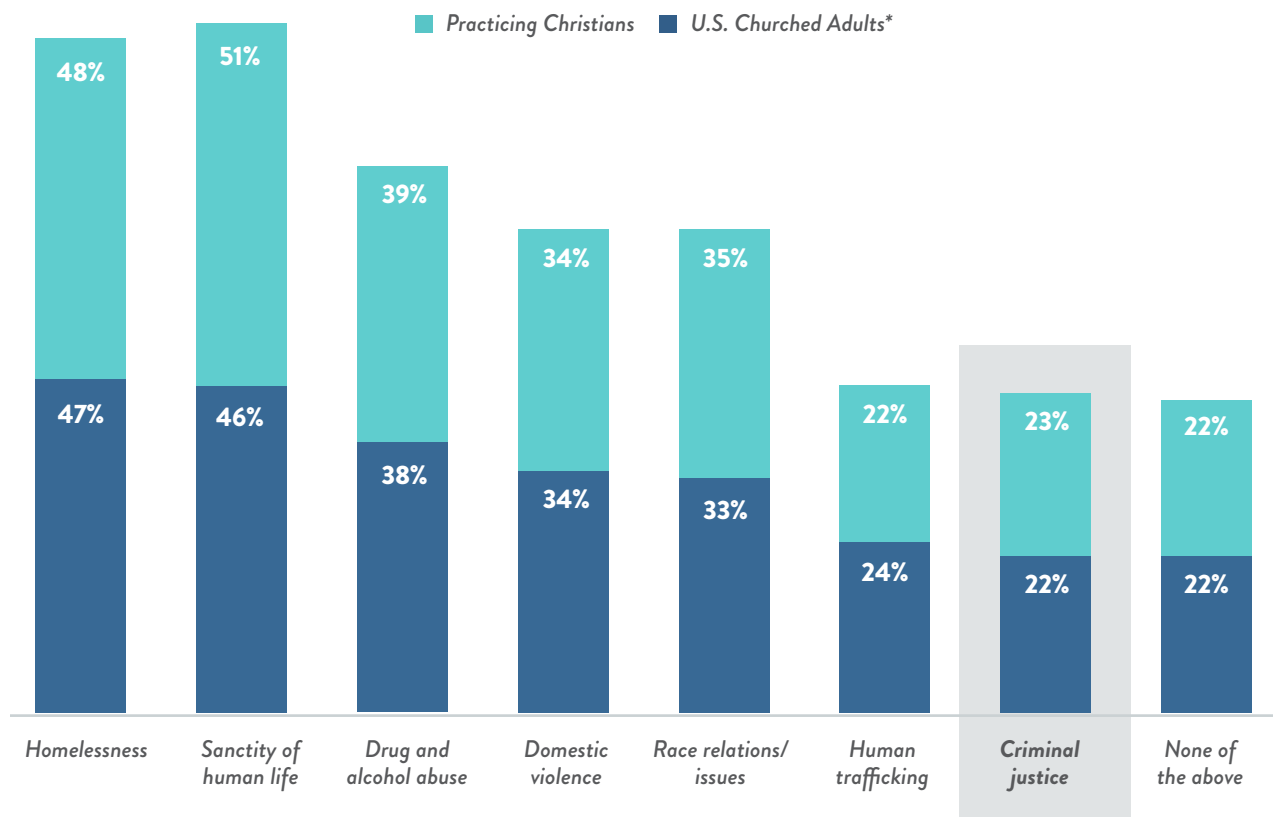
	U.S. Adults	Practicing Christians
<i>Expanding the availability of in-prison programs (including education, substance abuse, mental health, job training, etc.)</i>	30%	29%
<i>Reducing the barriers that people with a criminal record face in accessing job training, employment, affordable housing, and social service supports</i>	30	29
<i>Keeping youth under 18 out of adult prisons</i>	26	27
<i>Expanding access to diversion programs (i.e., drug courts, mental health courts, veterans' courts, etc.)</i>	24	23
<i>Expanding access to education and work certification programs in prison</i>	24	30
<i>Training to reduce racial biases and, thus, disproportionate impact on people of color</i>	21	19
<i>Increasing resources for public defenders so people who are poor have better quality representation</i>	20	20
<i>Reducing disproportional sentencing</i>	20	15
<i>Reforming pretrial process so that people who can't afford bail and are not a threat to the community are not incarcerated unnecessarily</i>	20	18
<i>Expanding use of early release for terminally ill people who are incarcerated</i>	15	16

*The above chart is based on the top 10 most popular reform responses for U.S. adults. Practicing Christians' top 10 responses not featured in the above chart include "Expanding collaboration with faith-based groups for in-prison programming and reentry services"; 25% of practicing Christians selected this option.



The View of The American Church

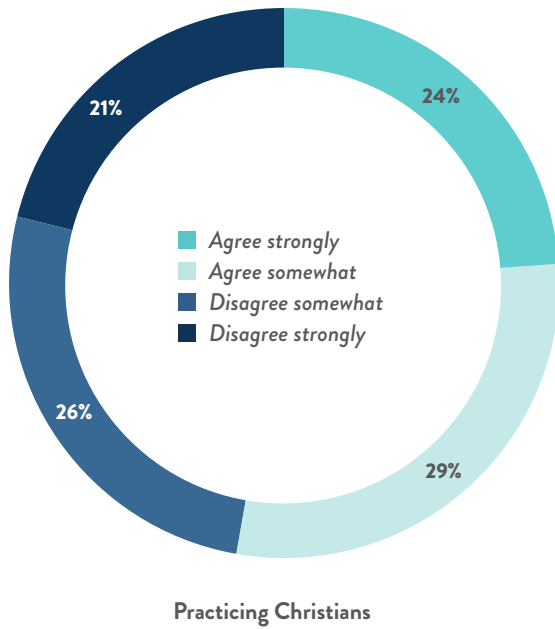
Is your church engaged in raising awareness among its congregants on any of the following issues? Check all that apply.
 (*only asked if church Christian)



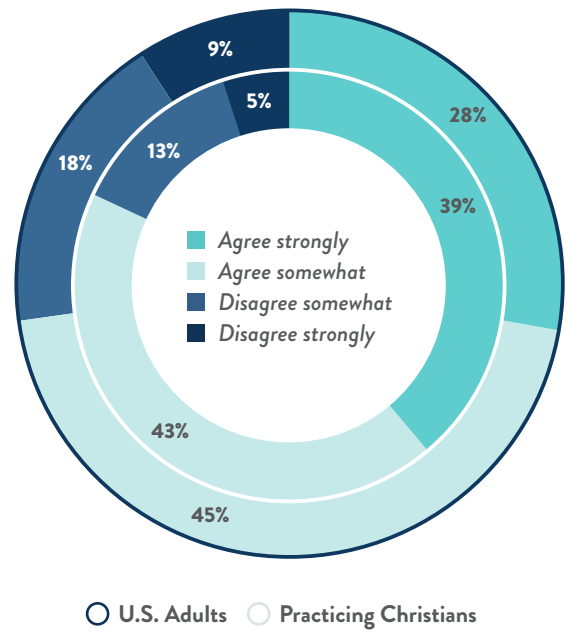
What do you think is the main reason why your church became engaged in raising awareness on the issue of criminal justice and incarceration? Select up to two. *Asked of those attending a church that raises awareness for criminal justice

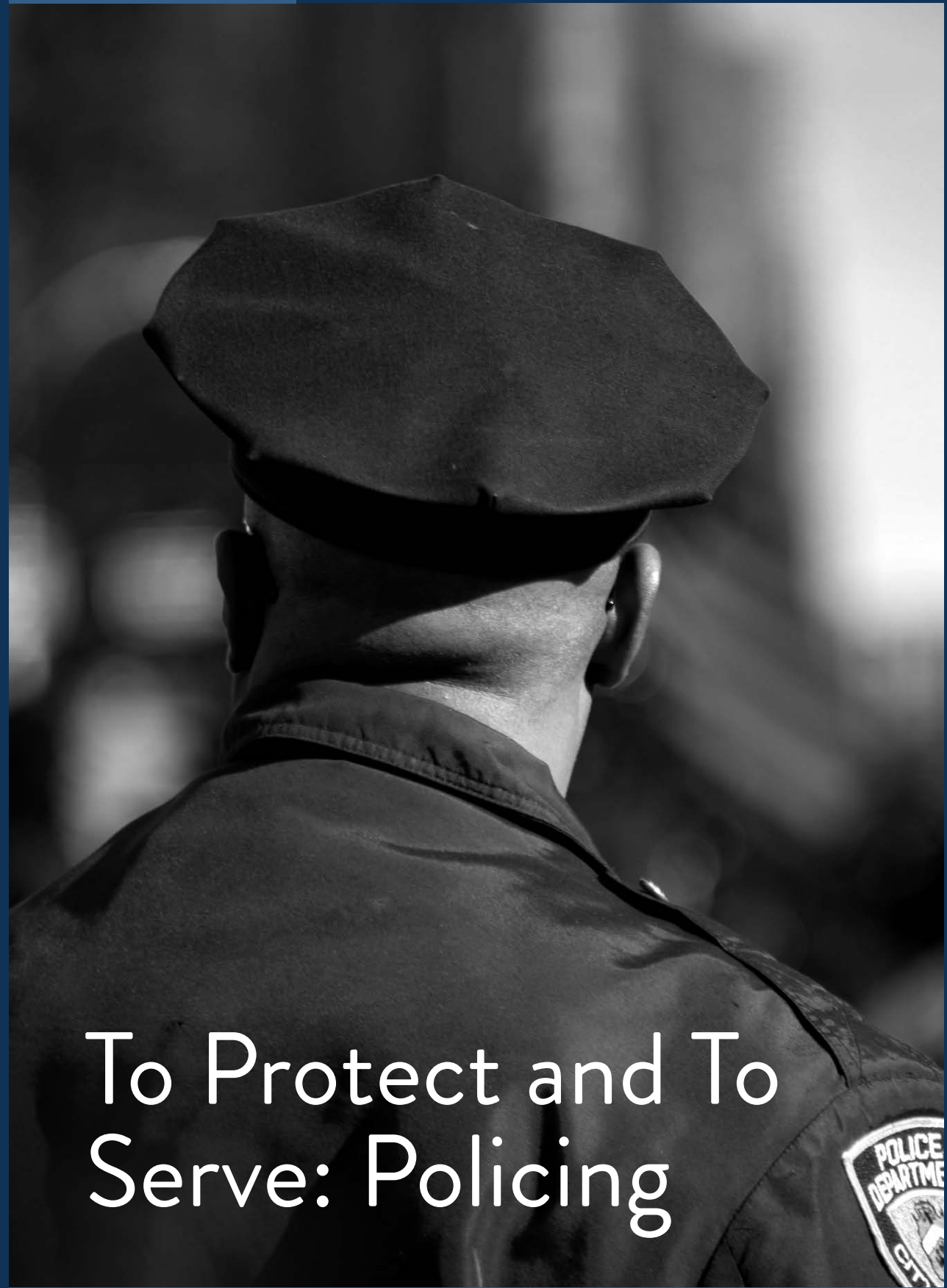
	U.S. Church Adults*	Practicing Christians
<i>The Bible instructs us to care for others, even those behind bars</i>	59%	64%
<i>Criminal justice and incarceration are a problem affecting our community</i>	42	41
<i>Members of our congregation have friends or loved ones behind bars</i>	35	29
<i>Recent media coverage on the issue</i>	25	20
<i>Not sure</i>	7	4
<i>Other</i>	1	2

The local church should be an active participant in the political process.
 (*only asked if attended church in past six months)

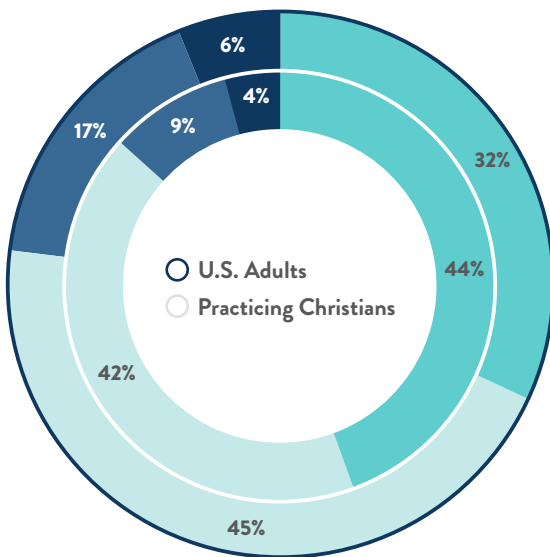


The Church should support criminal justice reforms that provide inmates a second chance to become successful, contributing members of society.





To Protect and To Serve: Policing

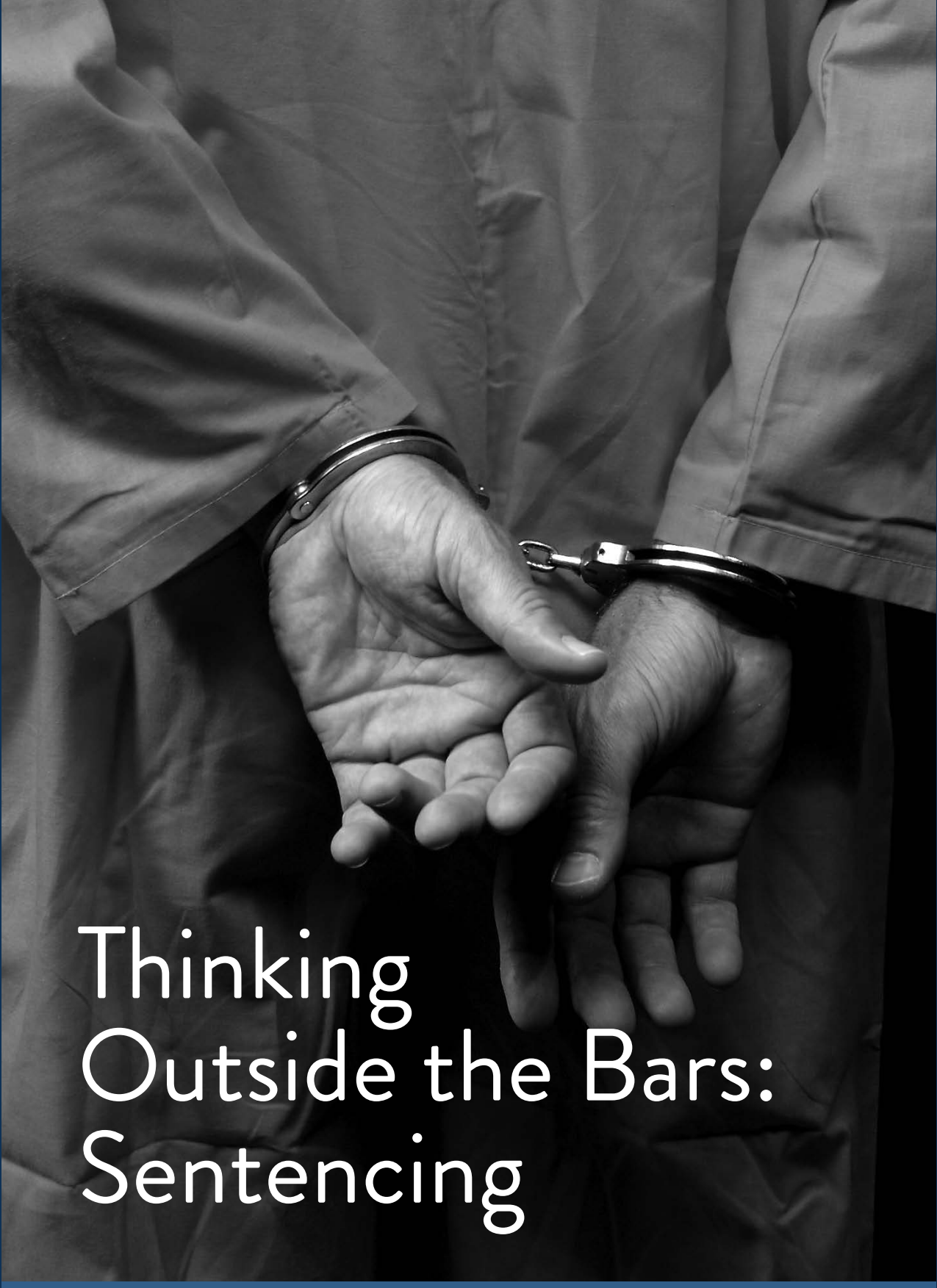


Do you think the presence of additional police in high crime areas makes a community safer?

- Yes, a lot safer
- Yes, somewhat safer
- Police do not change the safety of the community
- No, it makes communities less safe

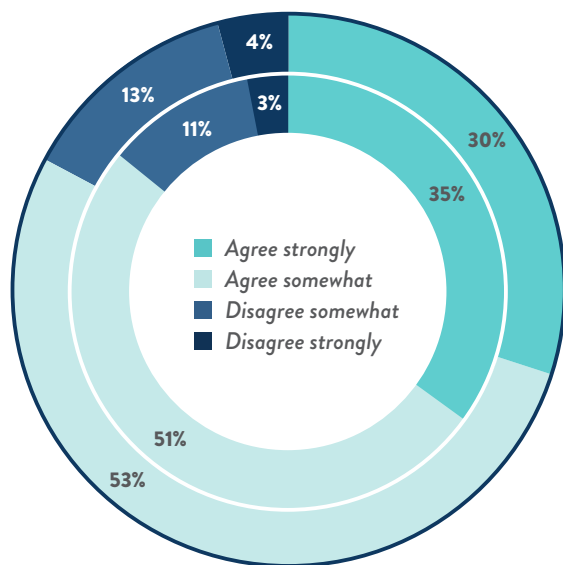
Lately, there has been a lot of talk about police reform. Which of the following do you think is the most important to address? Select up to two.

	U.S. Adults	Practicing Christians
Training officers in tactics to de-escalate or defuse a potentially dangerous situation	35%	35%
Ending qualified immunity that shields law enforcement from being held personally responsible from constitutional violations (e.g., excessive use of force)	24	20
Guidelines on the use of force should be re-examined	22	21
Additional funding for law enforcement to keep the community safe	17	22
Reforming police unions that shield law enforcement from being held personally responsible for misconduct	17	16
Increasing community-based policing that focuses on building trust between community members and the police	16	19
Creating a national registry of police misconduct	15	11
Limit the use of no-knock warrants that allow an officer to forcefully enter property without knocking or ringing the doorbell	15	15
Redistribution of funding for police to other public services	7	6
Other	1	1
I do not favor police reform	10	10



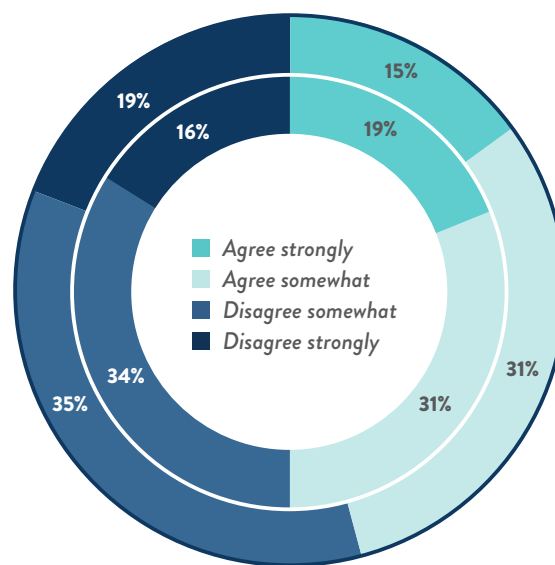
Thinking Outside the Bars: Sentencing

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

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.

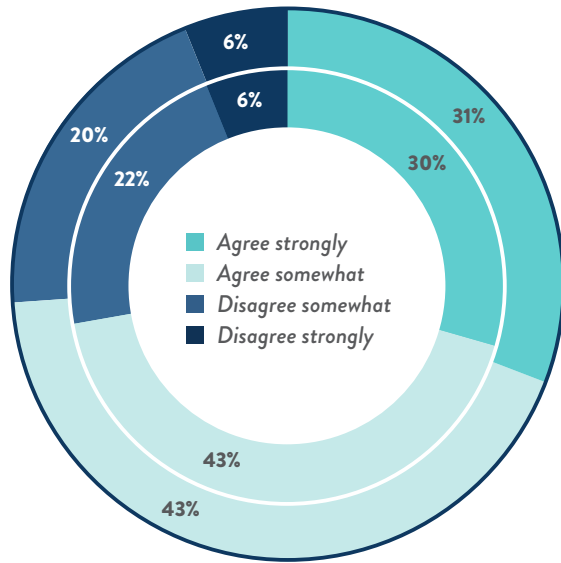


○ U.S. Adults ○ Practicing Christians



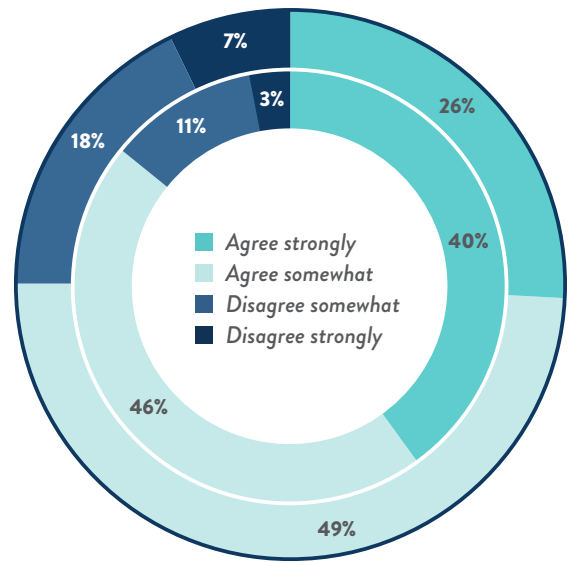
A Culture That Restores: Prison Reform

I believe that sending youth (those under 18) to prison will make them more likely to live a life of crime than to reform them.



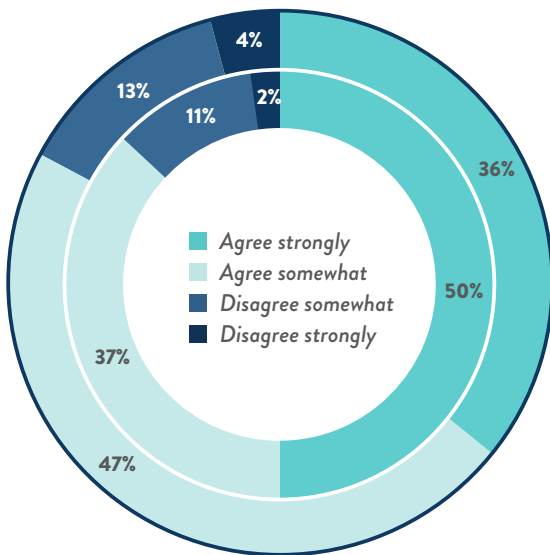
○ U.S. Adults ○ Practicing Christians

Because of my values, I believe caring for prisoners is important.



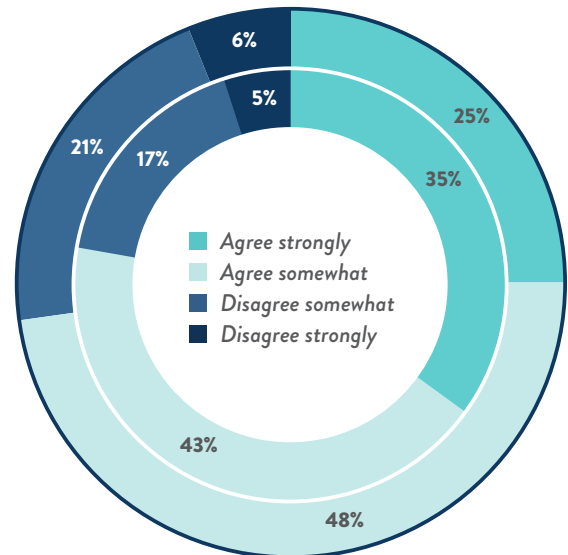
○ U.S. Adults ○ Practicing Christians

It's important that prison conditions are safe and humane, specifically because I believe every person has intrinsic value and worth.



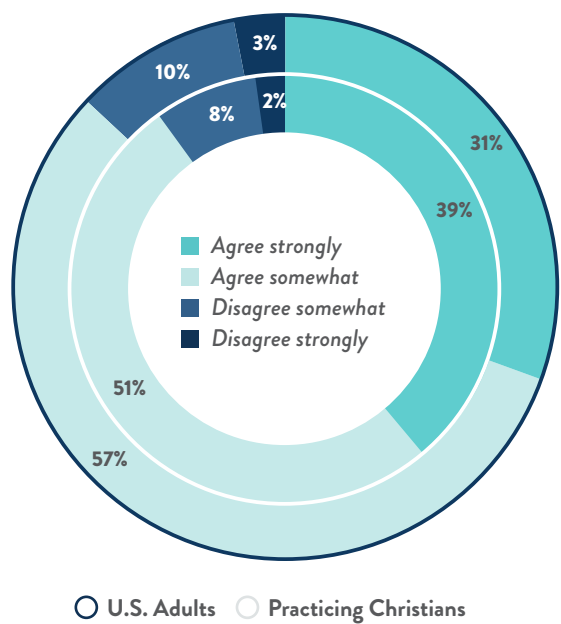
○ U.S. Adults ○ Practicing Christians

The decision to release an incarcerated person to parole or other community supervision should be based on their demonstrated rehabilitation effort rather than the type of crime they commit.

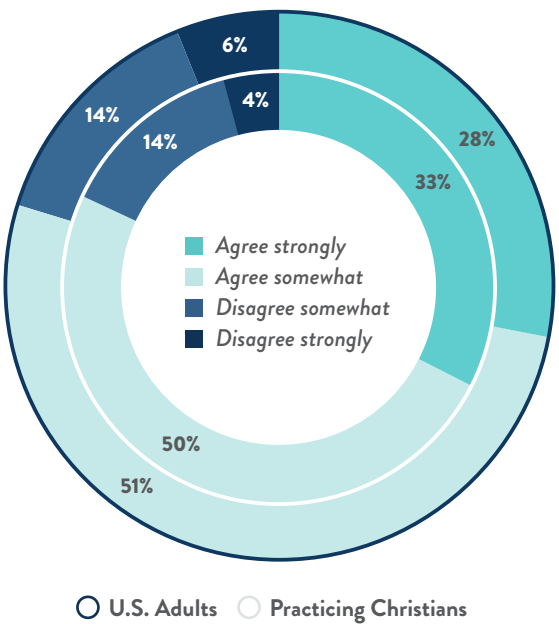


○ U.S. Adults ○ Practicing Christians

Offering parole or flexible release opportunities provides an incentive for prisoners to demonstrate good behavior and complete rehabilitation programs, which are good for public safety.



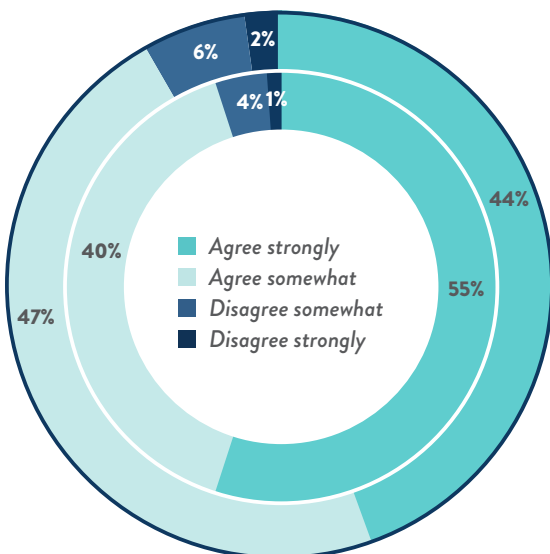
Prisoners should be allowed to earn time off their sentences if they complete programs that are proven to develop positive life skills and reduce the likelihood of reoffending.





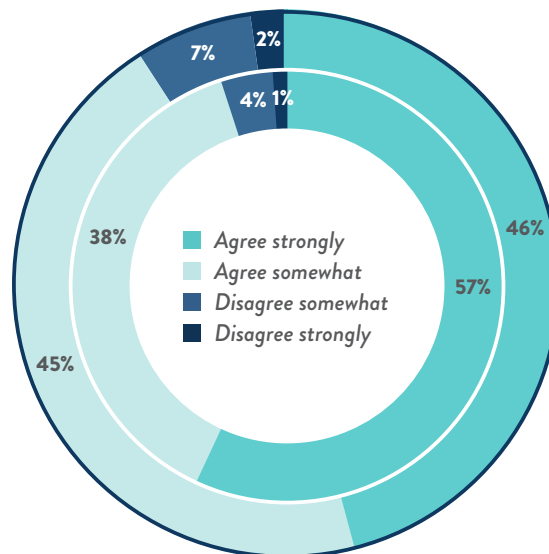
The Hope To Rebuild: Second Chances

Once someone with a criminal history has completed their just punishment, they deserve a second chance to become productive members of the community.



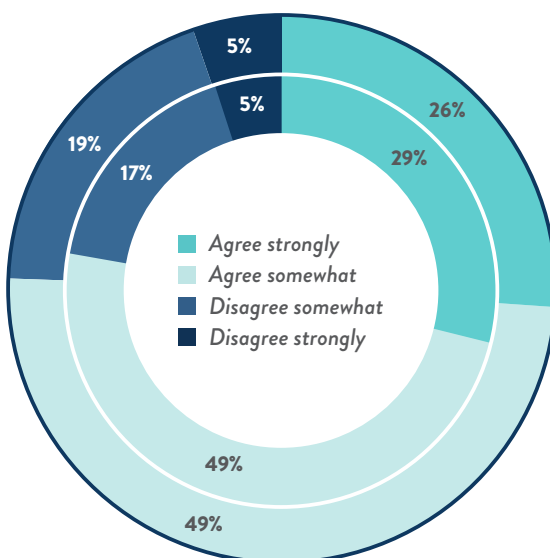
○ U.S. Adults ○ Practicing Christians

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.



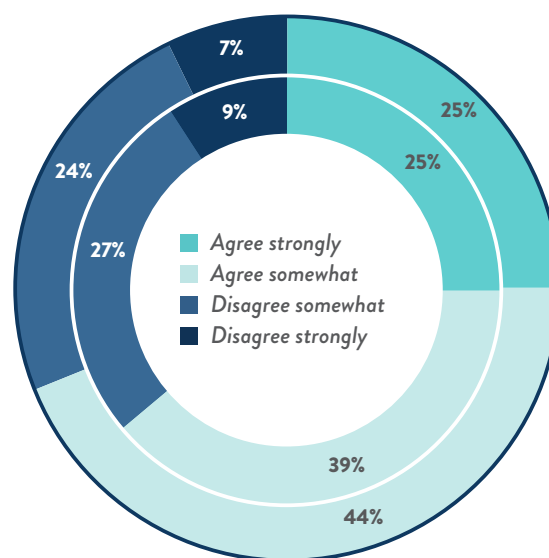
○ U.S. Adults ○ Practicing Christians

With only a few exceptions related to their specific crime (for example, not allowing someone convicted of embezzling money to work in a bank) ... once a person has paid their debt for a crime, they should not face further restrictions on their life.



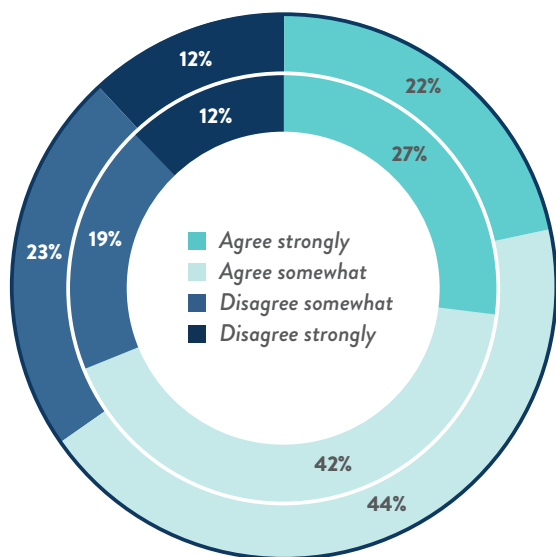
○ U.S. Adults ○ Practicing Christians

Because of barriers, prisoners do not have a fair chance to succeed in re-entering society.



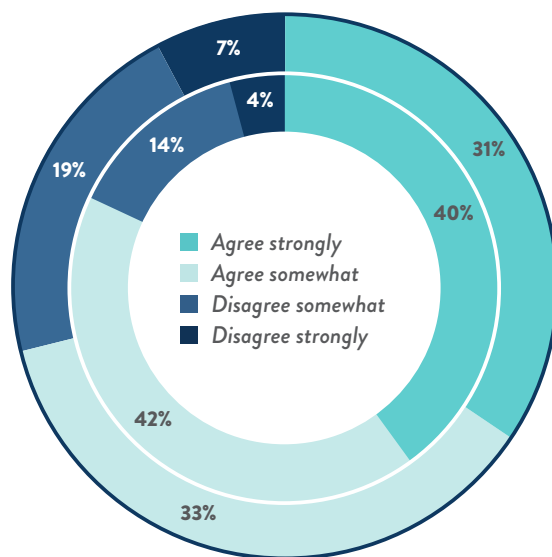
○ U.S. Adults ○ Practicing Christians

I believe that terms such as “ex-offender,” “felon,” and “ex-con” should not be used to describe someone with a criminal record because it applies a permanent identity label on past behavior and carries a negative stigma that can be difficult for that individual to overcome.



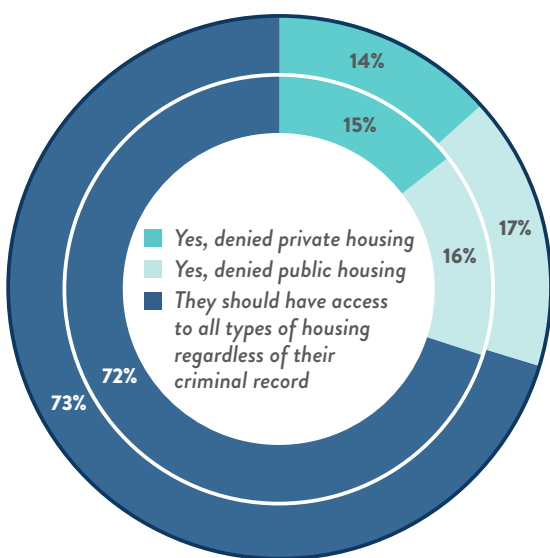
○ U.S. Adults ○ Practicing Christians

Because God has forgiven me of my sins and given me a second chance, I believe those who have been released from prison also deserve a second chance without being assigned a permanent label such as “ex-offender,” “felon,” or “ex-con.”



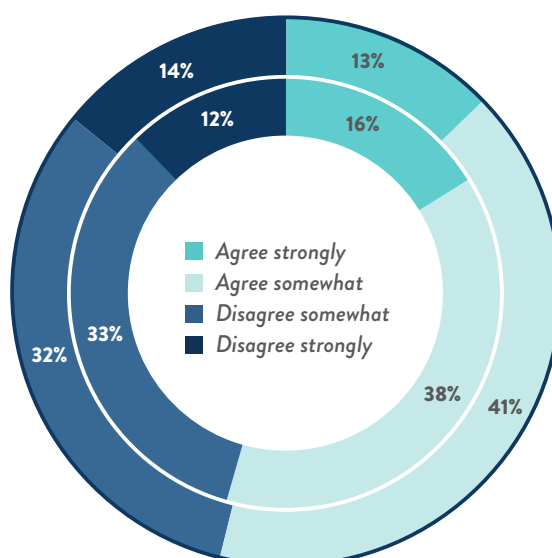
○ U.S. Adults ○ Practicing Christians

Do you think a person who is released from prison should be denied public or private housing based on his or her criminal record?



○ U.S. Adults ○ Practicing Christians

How willing would you be to live in a neighborhood alongside people with a criminal record?



○ U.S. Adults ○ Practicing Christians

