

EVIDENCE-BASED DECISION MAKING IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM: KEY FINDINGS FROM A NATIONAL PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY

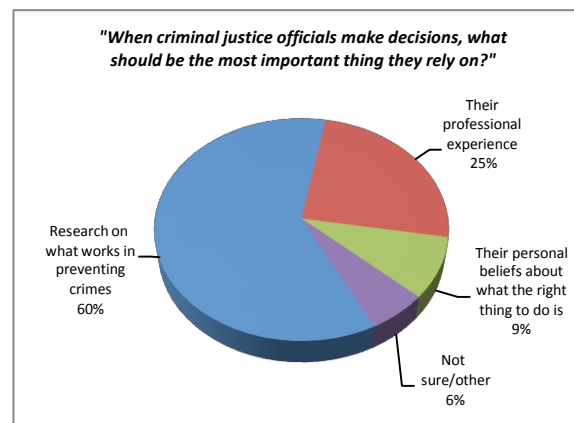
Criminal justice professionals have increasingly demonstrated an appreciation for and commitment to using research to guide policy and practice decisions. As part of an initiative designed to facilitate evidence-based decision making in local criminal justice systems, a national telephone survey was conducted¹ to explore community members' attitudes and expectations about the criminal justice system and, more specifically, the use of research to inform policy and practice decisions. Key findings are highlighted below.

The public expects the criminal justice system to hold individuals accountable for their crimes, increase community safety, instill public confidence in the system's efforts, and report on the effectiveness of their efforts.

- Nearly all (93%) survey respondents believe that the criminal justice system bears responsibility for making neighborhoods safer; 63% strongly agreed that making neighborhoods safer should be a primary goal of system professionals.
- Citizens expect that the criminal justice system will address not only retribution/punishment goals, but also achieve risk-reduction goals.
 - 54% of respondents indicate that punishment should be the primary purpose of the criminal justice system.
 - 31% indicated that the primary purpose of the system should be to reduce the likelihood of recidivism.
 - Nearly half (48%) of those surveyed indicated that the criminal justice system should strengthen the well-being of offenders' families.
- The overwhelming majority (90%) of respondents indicated that a key responsibility of criminal justice professionals should be to increase public confidence in the system.
- Most respondents (89%) believed that criminal justice officials have an obligation to provide the public with information about the effectiveness of their efforts.

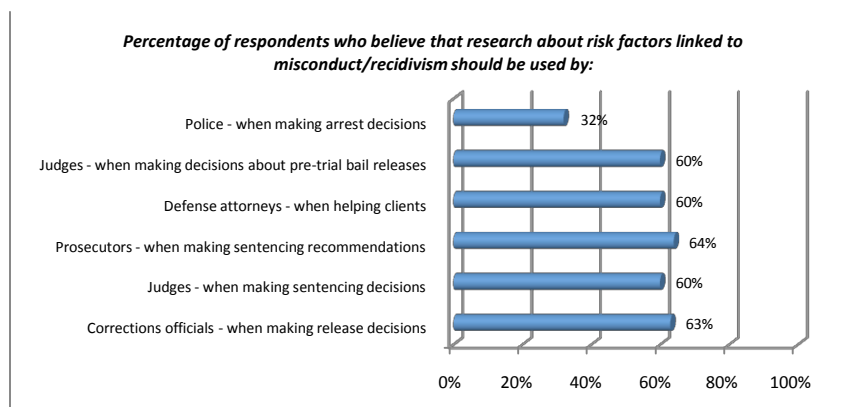
Community members believe that criminal justice officials should rely on research about "what works" when making decisions.

- More than half (60%) of respondents indicated that research should be the most important consideration for decision makers; this was deemed to be much more important than relying on professional experience (25%) or individual beliefs (9%).



¹ The National Institute of Corrections commissioned this public opinion poll, which was conducted by Zogby International and in accordance with recognized polling standards. It was administered via telephone from 7/31 - 8/4/2009 and resulted in a total sample of 1,005 respondents which, based on key demographics and other characteristics, is presumed to be largely representative of U.S. citizens.

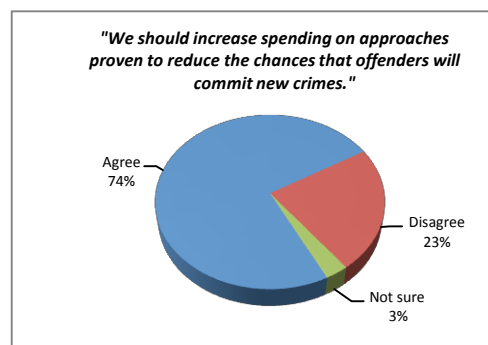
- More specifically, a large proportion of respondents (60-64%) believe that system professionals such as judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, and releasing authorities should use research to inform their decision making in individual cases; only 32% held the opinion that research about recidivism risk should be used to guide arrest decisions.



- For cases involving non-violent crimes, 87% indicated that they would be more likely to support alternatives to incarceration if such strategies were demonstrated to be more effective in reducing recidivism than incarceration.
- A noteworthy exception regarding citizens' support of evidence-based decision making involved their lack of support for alternatives to incarceration in cases involving violent crimes even if research showed that such alternatives reduced recidivism. Forty percent of respondents indicated that such research would increase their likelihood of supporting alternatives in cases involving violent crimes.

Citizens are dissatisfied with current recidivism rates and would support increased investment in evidence-based strategies that improve outcomes.

- When presented with statistics reflecting current recidivism rates for parolees and probationers, most respondents (80%) expressed the opinion that these outcomes are unacceptable.
- The majority (74%) agreed that more funding should be invested in evidence-based crime reducing strategies.



Taken together, the findings from this national poll indicate that the public – while expecting individuals to be held accountable and punished for their crimes – largely supports evidence-based decision-making as a means of reducing recidivism and promoting public safety. This is particularly important given the significant role the public plays in shaping public policy and in light of current research indicating that improved offender outcomes and cost savings are possible when evidence-based principles and practices are implemented effectively.