

HIGHLIGHTS OF MONTGOMERY COUNTY 2006 JUVENILE JUSTICE COMMUNITY POLL

Even though Americans are less likely to be a victim of crime today than in recent decades, their fear of crime creates a highly pronounced split in attitudes toward juvenile justice. That divergence in Dayton-Montgomery County Ohio is strongly evident in a fresh survey of citizen attitudes conducted on behalf of Juvenile Court and its Reclaiming Futures initiative sponsored by The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The survey shows a definite willingness on the part of local taxpayers to support treatment alternatives for less violent juvenile offenders.

An October 2005 Gallup poll asked adults across the country, "Is there more crime in your area than there was a year ago, or less?" Nearly half (47 percent) said there is more crime, the highest level of agreement in the past ten years. However, according to the FBI Uniform Crime Report, the level of violent crime in the United States actually is lower than at any time since the survey began in 1973. The murder rate in the country, for example, is at its lowest since 1967. Yet, even with the United States leading the world in the rate of incarceration, Americans do not feel safer.

Why are people more afraid? According to the Center for Media and Public Affairs in Washington, "crime news doubled and coverage of murders tripled during the period while real world violent crime did not increase." In an ABC News poll conducted in 2000, 82 percent of the people who feel that crime has increased in their community based that perception on news reports. People are more afraid because the media's adage "if it bleeds it leads" prevails not only in news reporting but also in prime time programming.

In keeping with the national trend, Montgomery County enjoyed a ten percent drop in the crime rate between 2000 and 2003 but local voters do not feel any safer.

- A majority (77 percent) of the county's voters believe the crime rate has increased over the past five years. In the same way, although the juvenile crime rate has decreased, the great majority (84 percent) of the residents polled believe they are less safe from juvenile criminals than they were five years ago.
- On a 2003 Montgomery County Human Services Levy poll, 47 percent of the county's residents considered "youth violence" a serious problem in their community.
- Are girls engaging in criminal behavior in greater numbers? A majority (73 percent) of the people polled agreed that there is an increase.

Logically, people who think the crime rate is rising are worried about their safety and that of their family. Mandatory incarceration has been touted as the way to protect the public from violent adult criminals. By punishing children as adults, some voters think they would feel safer. That incarceration route has significant support among Dayton-Montgomery County respondents to the survey, but other alternatives also enjoyed strong levels of support.

- Forty-three percent of the people polled agree, "*Juvenile offenders know right from wrong and choose to commit crimes. They don't deserve different treatment than adult offenders.*" Men are more likely to agree with that statement (51 percent) than are women (36 percent).

Thinking that incarcerated youth cannot commit further crimes, there is support for harsher punishment and longer sentences. About half (48 percent) of Montgomery County voters feel that the sentences young people receive are too lenient.

- Two in five of the voters polled (39 percent) would be willing to incarcerate juveniles convicted of serious crimes for *life*.
- Support for harsher sentences is a reflection of the public's frustration with recidivism. Most voters (65 percent) believe, "*Juveniles who commit serious crimes will commit another violent crime if released.*"

Despite that tough line stance, Dayton-Montgomery County citizens also showed great compassion for young offenders and believe that most children can be reclaimed. There is a definite split and seeming contradictions in public attitudes, and the survey shows that many of the respondents who advocate incarceration-based courses also feel strongly about treatment programs.

- Most (63 percent) Montgomery County voters feel, "*Society is too quick to give up on young people who commit crimes.*" Two-thirds (65 percent) of the white voters agree with the statement while only fifty-six percent of the African-American voters agree.
- Seventy-two percent of Montgomery County's voters agree, "*Even young people who commit serious crimes or are repeat offenders have the capacity to change for the better.*"
- To offer young offenders the opportunity to change, a majority (79 percent) of the people polled agree, "*We should focus less on locking up juvenile offenders and more on programs and treatments that will help them become law-abiding citizens.*"

So, how do taxpayers want to address juvenile crime? The ideal solution would be to prevent those crimes from occurring. Toward that end, a large share (44 percent) of the county's voters support spending tax dollars to address what they see as root cause social problems like the prevalence of single parent families, domestic violence, child abuse, substance abuse and addiction and lack of employment opportunities.

- Two-thirds (67 percent) of the voters polled agree, "*It is more important to spend tax dollars on programs to prevent juvenile crime than on programs to treat offenders.*"

Montgomery County voters have long supported programs to prevent crime. In a 2003 Human Services Levy poll, when asked if they agree or disagree with the statement, "Crime and violence would be much worse if we didn't fund human services programs like mentoring, drug treatment and after school care" more than three-fourths (78 percent) agreed.

Addressing problems within families could prevent juvenile crime before it occurs. Most voters (60 percent) blame poor parenting for much of the juvenile crime.

- According to the US Advisory Board on Child Abuse, "Child abuse increases the likelihood of arrest as a juvenile by 53 percent." This fact is not lost on Montgomery County residents. An even larger share (84 percent) believes that most teenagers who commit crimes were abused and neglected in childhood and, for that reason alone deserves a second chance.

While open to intensified counseling and drug treatment programs, the population takes a far tougher stand toward parents of juvenile offenders. Because parents must share the blame for juvenile criminal behavior, survey respondents believe parents of youthful offenders should be required to pay restitution

or a fine when their children commit crimes. Two thirds (65 percent) of the people polled believe parents should be required to pay restitution to the offended party while fifty-eight percent believe parents should pay a fine. A much smaller share (34 percent) would require incarceration of the parents

In addition to situations within the family, Montgomery County voters know that substance abuse and juvenile crime are undeniably linked.

A majority (69 percent) of the county's voters believe that access to drug treatment for all juveniles, regardless of their ability to pay, would lower the juvenile crime rate.

- Most (57 percent) voters polled assume that more than half of the young have a problem with drugs and/or alcohol when they enter the Montgomery County juvenile justice program (a figure that is actually lower than the estimate of judges and treatment experts).
- Support for the use of tax dollars to fund substance abuse treatment programs increases to eighty-one percent when voters learn that it costs three times more to keep a young person in jail than in drug treatment.
- Three women in five (62 percent) believe more than half of the children arrested in Montgomery County have a substance problem, while only half (50 percent) of the men share that view.

Few voters see a link between youth employment options and criminal behavior. Only one survey respondent in three (34 percent) believes *"the main reason for the drug problem among youth is that there are too few jobs or economic opportunities for them."*

- There is a significant difference in the perspectives of the county's two major races. Nearly half (48 percent) of the African-American voters polled agree that poor economic opportunities contribute to young people becoming involved in the drug trade. Only thirty percent of the white respondents share that view.

When asked for the best way to allocate tax dollars to address juvenile crime, more than twice as many (45 percent) survey respondents would allocate tax dollars to *"Treatment facilities for juveniles who abuse drugs and alcohol"* as would give those funds to the *local police departments* (22 percent).

Voters see a comprehensive approach to juvenile crime as most effective. While the public must be assured that young offenders will not be returned to the public without supervision, residents want their tax dollars invested in programs that will prevent juvenile crime as well as offering juvenile offenders the services necessary to take advantage of a second opportunity at a law-abiding life.

- That attitude is especially important now as The Montgomery County Juvenile Justice Center (JJC) under construction in downtown Dayton and projected to be on line by the end of 2006, will supply the comprehensive approach to juvenile treatment the public is seeking. The JJC will house all of the Juvenile Court's functions except Probation Services. Based on the survey, JJC will likely model an approach that will garner public support - a comprehensive approach that brings treatment providers and justice personnel into a coordinated setting.

The Reclaiming Futures Project also fits public attitudes by promoting hands-on, one-on-one justice and treatment outcomes for substance-abusing youth. Key to the success of the Reclaiming Futures program are the "natural helpers," trained community volunteers who provide support and encouragement and advocate for young people by linking them with opportunities and services to bring about positive life changes.

The survey revealed significant support for the Reclaiming Futures concept. Even after discussing juvenile crime and its impact on the community, more than two people in five (44 percent) who were interviewed said they would consider becoming a “natural helper.”

- Over half (55 percent) of the people who initially said they would not be interested in becoming a natural helper reported they would be more likely join to assist the child of a neighbor. The increased willingness of volunteers to help children in their own community is key to the success of this program.

Volunteering with children is very familiar to Montgomery County residents in that most (78 percent) voters have been involved with a program for young people at some time in their lives.

- People who have engaged in such volunteer efforts are those who share their homes with children (83 percent), people between the ages of forty-six and sixty-five (85 percent) and the more highly educated segments of the community.
- The survey showed that Involvement with a volunteer program is often the result of a request from a family member, church leader, neighbor or friend.

There is a clear demographic profile of people who are willing to become mentors.

- African-American voters are more likely (67 percent) than white voters (40 percent) to indicate a willingness to mentor.
- Parents and guardians of children under the age of eighteen are more likely to volunteer (59 percent) than are non-parents (38 percent).
- Marital status also indicates an inclination to volunteer. People who are divorced (55 percent) or never married (55 percent) are more likely to express an interest in mentoring than are those who are married (42 percent) or widowed (30 percent).

Overall, the random telephone survey of 400 citizens conducted between February 6 and March 13, 2006 reflected a greater degree of support for treatment alternatives than had been seen in prior surveys. While frustrated and scared by crime, citizens have moved toward a multi-faceted response that, when combined with the soon-to-open Juvenile Justice Center’s menu of coordinated service options, presents opportunities that county voters believe can result in progress. Rather than a universal “throw ‘em in jail and toss away the key”, the prevailing attitude in Dayton-Montgomery County today is “be firm, be fair, be aggressive in treating the sources of juvenile crime.” Given Montgomery County’s historic role as a bellwether test market of American public opinion, there is strong reason to believe that Reclaiming Futures’ approach matches the national mood.