

THE LOUISIANA SURVEY 2017

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Mass Communication
Reilly Center For
Media & Public Affairs



Large Majority Favors Criminal Justice Reform

Belief that crime is increasing grows by ten percentage points since 2015

The third in a series of six reports from the 2017 Louisiana Survey



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**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION
ON THIS REPORT:**

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Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs

The Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs, an integral part of Louisiana State University's Manship School of Mass Communication, uses the intellectual muscle of the school's faculty to help solve practical problems and advance good government initiatives. The Reilly Center's mission is to generate thoughtful programs, dialogue, and research about social, economic, and political affairs, as well as the developing role of the media in American society. The Center is committed to advancing the Manship School's national leadership in media and politics.

The Center's agenda is diverse and fluid – from the annual John Breaux Symposium, which brings in national experts to discuss a topic that has received little or no attention, to conducting the annual *Louisiana Survey*, a vital resource for policymakers, which tracks advancements and regressions of citizen attitudes about state services. The Center's role, within the state's flagship university, is to respond quickly to the needs of state governance in addressing challenges facing Louisiana, particularly in times of crisis such as during Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill. Its action-oriented and partnership-driven philosophy underscores the Reilly Center's dedication to tackling ideas and issues that explore the relationship of media and the public in democratic society.

About the Louisiana Survey

The *2017 Louisiana Survey* is the sixteenth in an annual series sponsored by the Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs at Louisiana State University's Manship School of Mass Communication.

The mission of the *Louisiana Survey* is to establish benchmarks as well as to capture change in residents' assessments of state government services. The survey is further dedicated to tracking public opinion on the contemporary policy issues that face the state. Each iteration of the *Louisiana Survey* contains core items designed to serve as barometers of public sentiment, including assessments of whether the state is heading in the right direction or wrong direction, perceptions about the most important problems facing the state, as well as evaluations of public revenue sources and spending priorities.

In the *2017 Louisiana Survey*, this core is supplemented by measures of support for current fiscal reform proposals as well as potential changes to the state's gasoline tax; support for changing the Taylor Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS); public opinion on criminal justice reform proposals; beliefs about gender discrimination and attitudes toward equal pay; attitudes toward Medicaid expansion and the federal Affordable Care Act; and opinions on a variety of social issues such as religious freedom laws and rights of transgender individuals.

As part of an effort to ensure that the *Louisiana Survey* fulfills its public service mission, the research team drew upon expertise in public policy and polling from Louisiana State University faculty in the Public Administration Institute, the Department of Political Science, and the Manship School of Mass Communication. These faculty members provided invaluable insight into the design of the questionnaire and in identifying the contemporary policy questions that could most benefit from an understanding of the public's views. While we are indebted to them for their time and contributions, they bear no responsibility for any mistakes in the questionnaire, analysis, or interpretation presented in this report.

We especially thank the Reilly Family Foundation for their generous support and vision in helping to create the Louisiana Survey.

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Overview

There is strong, broad support for criminal justice reform in Louisiana. The *2017 Louisiana Survey*, a project of the Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs at LSU's Manship School of Mass Communication, shows that:

- Sixty-five percent of Louisiana residents believe that the amount of crime in the state has increased over the past five years. Perceptions that crime is on the rise have grown by ten percentage points since 2015, the last time this question was included in the *Louisiana Survey*.
- About half (51 percent) of Louisiana residents agree with the statement, "Louisiana's current criminal justice system is fair," and 34 percent disagree. There is a substantial difference between the responses of black and white residents of the state on the fairness of the criminal justice system.
- Large majorities favor three criminal justice reform proposals included in the *2017 Louisiana Survey*: Shorter sentences for people convicted of non-violent crimes (75 percent); more alternatives to prison – such as drug treatment or rehabilitation programs – for people convicted of non-violent offenses (86 percent); and abandoning mandatory minimum sentences in favor of more flexibility for judges to determine sentences (72 percent).
- Support for shorter sentences for people convicted of non-violent offenses varies by the specific type of crime. Whereas 75 percent support shorter sentences for people convicted of non-violent crimes when no specific crime is named, support drops to 69 percent when asked about "non-violent crimes such as fraud or using illegal drugs" and 54 percent when asked about "non-violent crimes such as burglary or selling illegal drugs."

The *2017 Louisiana Survey* was administered over the telephone from February 23 to March 23, 2017, to both landline and cell phone respondents. The project includes a representative sample of 1,012 adult Louisiana residents. The total sample has a margin of error of +/- 3.1 percentage points.

This is the third in a series of six releases on results from the *2017 Louisiana Survey*.

More Believe Crime on the Rise

Approximately two-thirds (65 percent) of Louisiana residents believe that the amount of crime in the state has increased over the past five years. This is nearly 11 times as many as those who say crime has decreased (six percent). Another 13 percent say crime has stayed about the same. Perceptions that crime is on the rise have grown by ten percentage points since 2015, the last time this question was included in the *Louisiana Survey* (figure 1).

There are noticeable demographic and political differences in how people perceive the trend in crime. For example, the belief that crime has increased is significantly more common among blacks (75 percent) than whites (61 percent). Louisiana residents without a four-year college degree are also more likely to believe crime has increased (69 percent) than those with a college degree (56 percent), although this pattern holds more strongly among whites than among blacks. There is no significant difference between Democrats (69 percent) and Republicans (65 percent) on this question. However, there is a strong difference between *white* Democrats (48 percent) and *white* Republicans (66 percent) in their perceptions that crime has increased.

More Blacks than Whites Question Fairness of Criminal Justice System

About half (51 percent) of Louisiana residents agree with the statement, “Louisiana’s current criminal justice system is fair,” while 34 percent disagree (figure 2). There is a substantial difference between black and white residents of the state. Whereas a large majority of blacks (71 percent) disagree with this statement, whites are split almost evenly – 41 percent disagree and 44 percent agree.

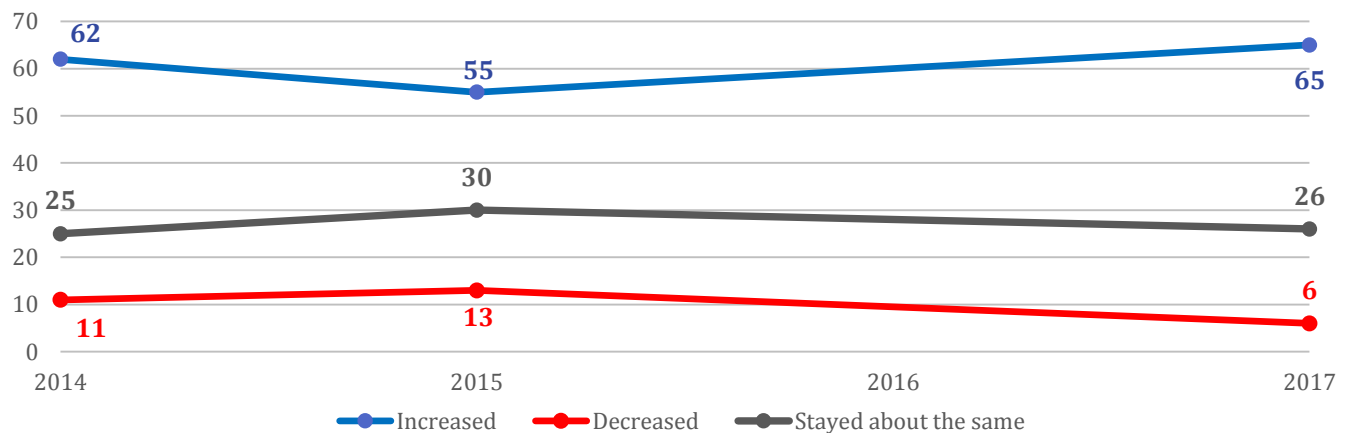
Large, Broad Majorities Support Criminal Justice Reforms

Large majorities favor three criminal justice reform proposals included in the *2017 Louisiana Survey*. Three in four Louisiana residents support shorter sentences for people convicted of non-violent crimes; just 18 percent oppose this proposal (figure 3). An even larger share (86 percent) supports having more alternatives to prison – such as drug treatment or rehabilitation programs – for people convicted of non-violent offenses. Finally, 72 percent support abandoning mandatory minimum sentences in favor of more flexibility for judges to determine sentences.

The support for these reforms cuts across a number of demographic and attitudinal lines. For

Figure 1: More Say Crime on the Rise Today Than in 2015

Percent who say that the amount of crime in Louisiana has _____ in the past five years

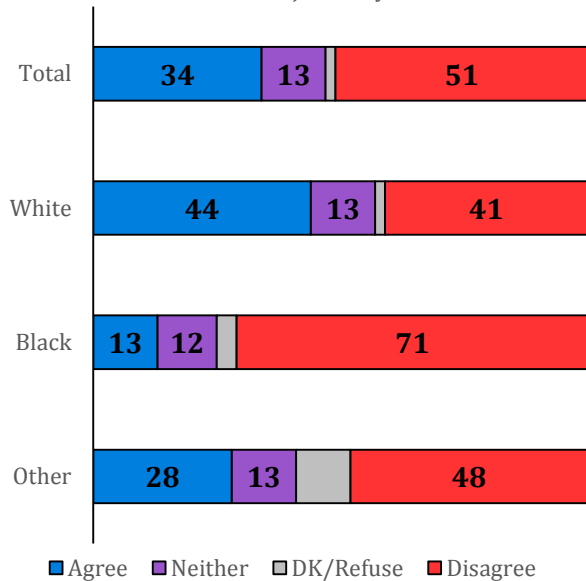


NOTE: Question not asked in 2016.

SOURCE: 2014, 2015 and 2017 Louisiana Survey

Figure 2: Perceptions of Fairness in Criminal Justice System Vary by Race

Percent who agree or disagree with the statement "Louisiana's current criminal justice system is fair."



SOURCE: 2017 Louisiana Survey

example, on the question about shorter sentences for people convicted of non-violent crimes, support among blacks is nine percentage points higher than among whites, but both groups overwhelmingly favor the proposal – 81 percent and 72 percent, respectively (figure 4). There are no differences between blacks and whites on the other two proposals. Likewise, Democrats

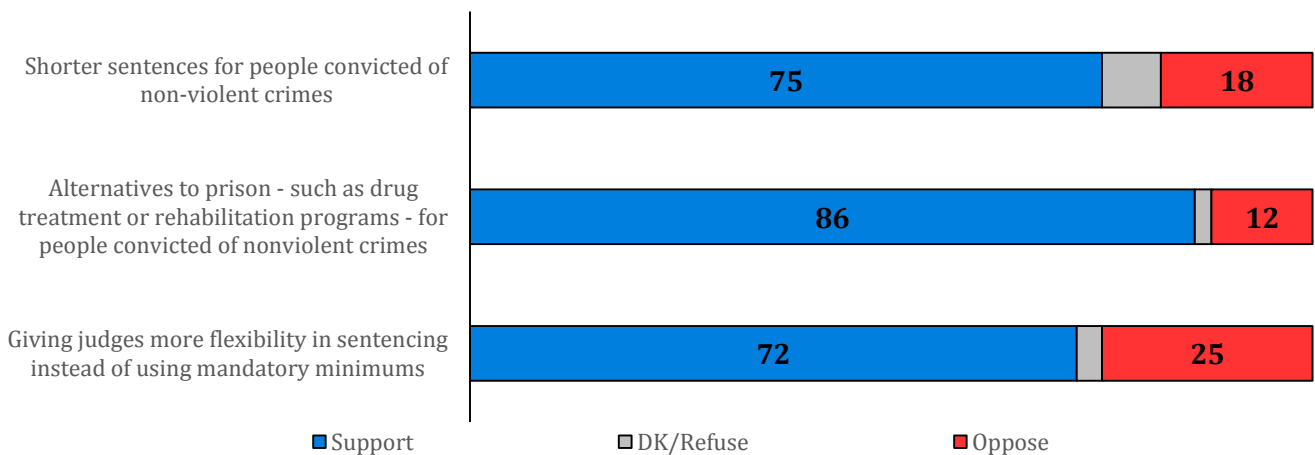
express more support for offering alternatives to prison than Republicans by ten percentage points, but both parties strongly favor the idea – 89 percent and 79 percent, respectively. There are no differences between the parties on the remaining two proposals.

Support of Reforms Drops for Certain Types of Crimes

Two of the three criminal justice reform proposals included in the 2017 Louisiana Survey are aimed specifically at non-violent crimes. Responses, therefore, depend on what exactly people think are non-violent crimes. To explore how conceptions of non-violent crime might shape support for criminal justice reform – particularly by severity of the offense – respondents were randomly assigned to one of three versions of the question about shorter sentences. The first version, analyzed above, makes no reference to a specific crime: “Do you support or oppose shorter sentences for people convicted of non-violent crimes?” The second version differs only by including two specific examples of non-violent crimes: “Do you support or oppose shorter sentences for people convicted of non-violent crimes, such as fraud or using illegal drugs?” A third version cites a different pair of examples of non-violent crime: “Do you support or oppose shorter sentences for people

Figure 3: Majority Support for Proposals to Reduce Prison Time

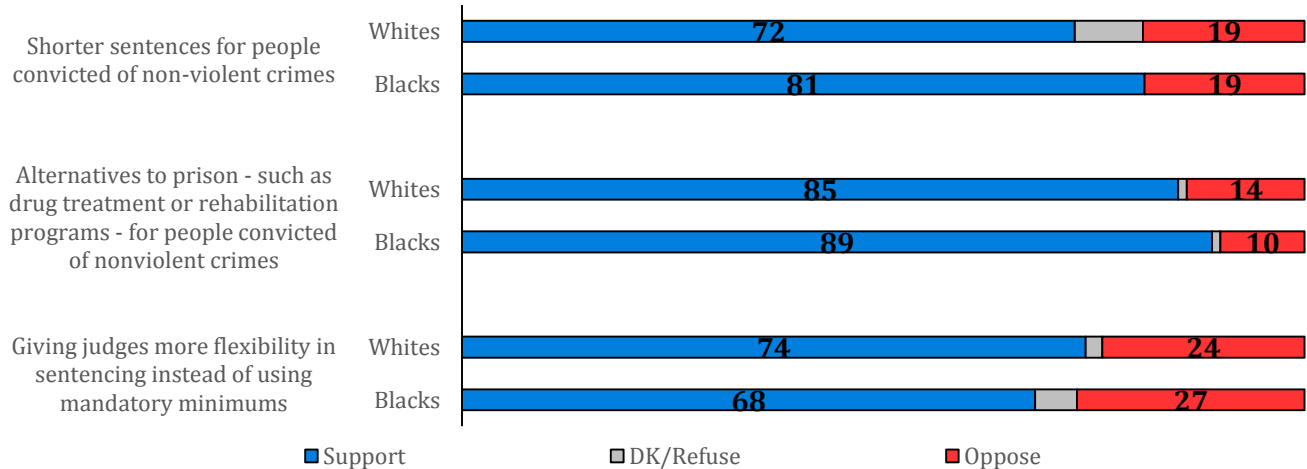
Percent who support/oppose criminal justice reform proposals



SOURCE: 2017 Louisiana Survey

Figure 4: Few Differences by Race on Proposals for Reform

Percent who support/oppose criminal justice reform proposals



SOURCE: 2017 Louisiana Survey

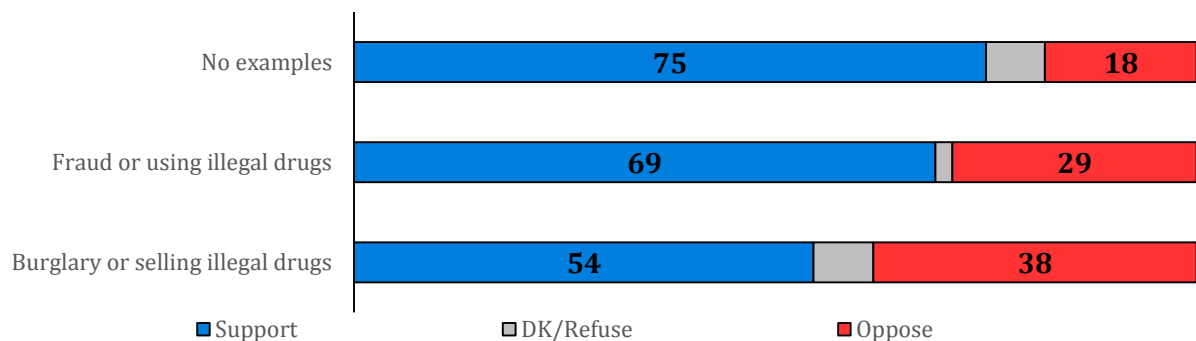
convicted of non-violent crimes, such as burglary or selling illegal drugs?”¹

Support for reform declines for non-violent crimes that may be thought of as more serious (figure 5). Whereas 75 percent support shorter sentences for people convicted of non-violent

crimes without reference to a specific crime, 69 percent do so when asked about “non-violent crimes such as fraud or using illegal drugs.” Support slips further to 54 percent when asking respondents about “non-violent crimes such as burglary or selling illegal drugs.”

Figure 5: Support for Shorter Sentences for Non-violent Crimes Depends on Type of Crime

Percent who support/oppose shorter sentences for people convicted of non-violent crimes



NOTE: Respondents randomly assigned to one of three versions of the question with different examples of crimes classified as non-violent offenses. One version did not provide any specific examples of non-violent crimes. The second version included “fraud or using illegal drugs” as examples of non-violent crime. The third version included “burglary or selling illegal drugs” as examples of non-violent crimes.

SOURCE: 2017 Louisiana Survey

¹ Technically, the latter two versions of the question are “double barreled” in that they each ask about two examples of crimes simultaneously. However, the advantage in this case is that the examples allow a test of differences by seriousness of non-violent crimes in

a general way without the risk of constraining respondents to think solely in terms of a single domain like theft or drug crimes. It should be noted that this test does not reveal how support for criminal justice reforms might differ in reference to violent crimes.

Survey Methodology

The data in this report were collected from a randomly selected sample of adult (18 years or older) residents of Louisiana via telephone interviews conducted from February 23 through March 23, 2017. The project includes live-interviewer surveys of 414 respondents contacted via landline telephone and 598 respondents contacted via cell phone, for a total sample of 1,012 respondents. The design of the landline sample ensures representation of both listed and unlisted numbers by use of random digit dialing. The cell phone sample is randomly drawn from known, available phone number banks dedicated to wireless service.

The response rate is ten percent. This response rate is the percentage of eligible residential households or personal cell phones in the sample for which an interview is completed. The rate is calculated using the American Association for Public Opinion Research's method for Response Rate 3 as published in their Standard Definitions. Response rates for telephone surveys have declined for several decades and frequently fall in the single digits even among the very best survey research organizations. The response rate for this survey is within the typical range for reputable live-interviewer telephone survey firms.

The combined landline and cell phone sample is weighted using an iterative procedure that matches race, education, household income, gender and age to known profiles for the adult population of Louisiana found in the Census Bureau's American Community Survey 2015 one-year estimates. The sample is also weighted for population density by parish. Weighting cannot eliminate every source of nonresponse bias. However, proper administration of random sampling combined with accepted weighting techniques has a strong record of yielding unbiased results.

The sample has an overall margin of error of +/- 3.1 percentage points.

In addition to sampling error, as accounted for through the margin of error, readers should recognize that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

Louisiana State University's Public Policy Research Lab, a division of the Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs, designed the survey questionnaire and sampling strategy, conducted telephone interviews, computed the survey weights, and conducted all statistical analysis.

Question Wording & Toplines

NOTE: Unless otherwise indicated, results are for the total sample. Not all respondents were asked each question, and questions asked to a subset of respondents are labelled accordingly. For these questions, percentages are for only those respondents who were asked the particular question. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Q1.

Would you say that the amount of crime in Louisiana has increased in the past five years, decreased, or stayed about the same?

Increased	65
Decreased	6
Stayed about the same	26
Don't know/Refused [VOLUNTEERED]	3

Q2.

Now we would like to ask you about criminal justice in Louisiana. Please tell me whether you agree, disagree, or neither agree nor disagree with the following statement: "Louisiana's current criminal justice system is fair."

Agree	34
Disagree	51
Neither	13
Don't know/Refused [VOL.]	3

Q3A. [RESPONDENTS RANDOMLY ASSIGNED TO Q3A, Q3B, OR Q3C WITH EQUAL PROBABILITY.]

Do you support or oppose shorter sentences for people convicted of non-violent crimes?

Support	75
Oppose	19
Don't know/Refused [VOL.]	6

Q3B. [RESPONDENTS RANDOMLY ASSIGNED TO Q3A, Q3B, OR Q3C WITH EQUAL PROBABILITY.]

Do you support or oppose shorter sentences for people convicted of non-violent crimes, such as fraud or using illegal drugs?

Support	69
Oppose	29
Don't know/Refused [VOL.]	2

Q3C. [RESPONDENTS RANDOMLY ASSIGNED TO Q3A, Q3B, OR Q3C WITH EQUAL PROBABILITY.]

Do you support or oppose shorter sentences for people convicted of non-violent crimes, such as burglary or selling illegal drugs?

Support	54
Oppose	39
Don't know/Refused [VOL.]	7

Q4.

Do you support or oppose having more alternatives to prison - such as drug treatment or rehabilitation programs - for people convicted of non-violent offenses?

Support	86
Oppose	12
Don't know/Refused [VOL.]	2

Q5.

As you may know, mandatory minimum sentences require those convicted of certain crimes to serve a certain length of time in prison. Some people have proposed that instead of mandatory minimums, judges should have the flexibility to determine sentences based on the facts of each case. Would you support or oppose giving judges more flexibility to set sentences?

Support	72
Oppose	25
Don't know/Refused [VOL.]	3