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STATE of the STATE Survey

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*Attitudes toward
Crime and Criminal
Justice: What You
Find Depends on
What You Ask*

by:

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MICHIGAN STATE
UNIVERSITY

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*Attitudes toward
Crime and Criminal Justice:
What You Find Depends on What You Ask*

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OVERVIEW

Individual perceptions and attitudes toward crime and criminal justice are frequently characterized as punitive, asymmetrical, and imprecise. Not only are American citizens said to possess fixed beliefs about law and order, but when they adjust their attitudes toward crime, it is usually in a more hardened and punitive direction. Making individuals more disillusioned and pessimistic about crime and criminal justice is easier than making them more optimistic.

Our survey results show that this image of individual attitudes toward crime and criminal justice as hardened, punitive, and inflexible may be incorrect. Through the use of survey experiments, we find that attitudes toward crime and criminal justice depend on information and context. Depending on these factors, individual attitudes can be changed in either a more punitive or a less punitive direction.

The lesson to be learned is that traditional survey methods may present a biased image of what individual citizens are willing to support and tolerate when it comes to crime.

THE SURVEY

- **Survey and Sample Design.** A telephone survey of 1,151 adult residents of the state of Michigan was conducted by Michigan State University's Institute for Public Policy & Social Research between September 5 and October 12, 1996. It is the eighth quarterly MSU State of the State Survey (SOSS). It focuses on issues related to perception of crime, victimization, and attitudes toward criminal justice in Michigan. The sampling error is +/- 2.9%. All of the statistical relationships presented in this report fall beyond the range of sampling error.

The sample is designed to provide representative information for respondents from major regions of the state: Detroit, Southeast Michigan (excluding Detroit), Southwest Michigan, Central Michigan (West and East), northern Lower Michigan, and the Upper Peninsula. (See attached information sheet for a list of counties included in each region.) The data reported here are weighted to make the results representative of the adult population of Michigan.

- **Experimental Element.** An interesting and path-breaking feature of this wave of the SOSS survey is that it contains several experiments to determine how responses to survey questions change under different scenarios. Through the Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) techniques, it is possible to control exposure to certain types of information and to randomly assign respondents to different control groups. Such experiments are not apparent to the respondents or interviewers, but allow the researcher to test for the effects of different question orders and wordings.

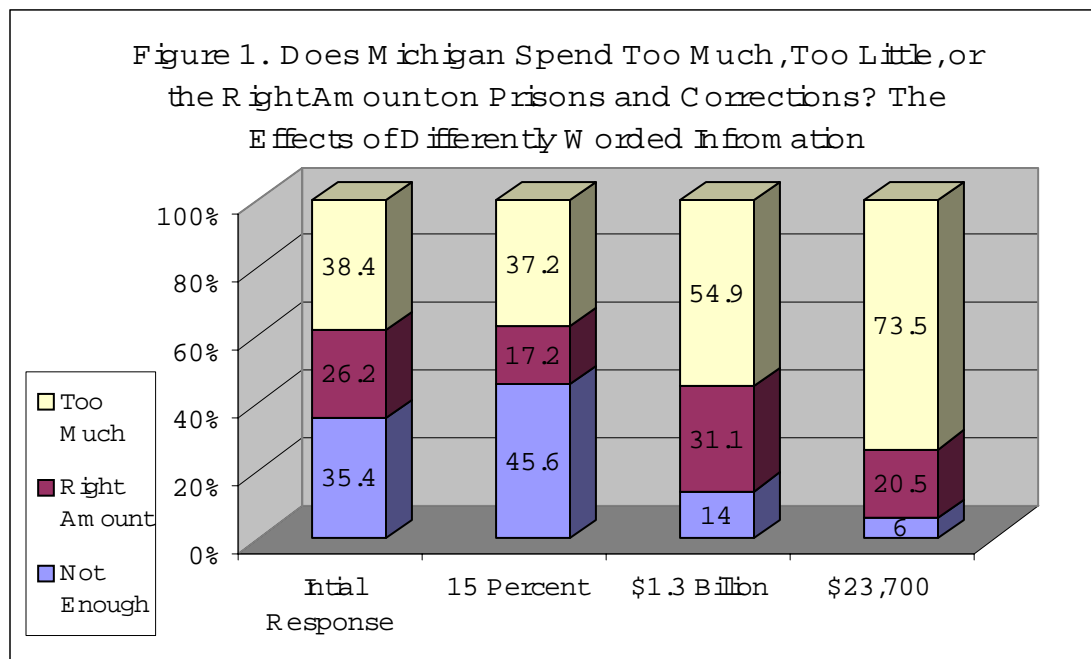
KEY FINDINGS

State Spending on Crime

- **In deciding whether the state of Michigan spends too much on prisons and corrections, individual responses depend on the way in which spending information is expressed.** Certain types of information invoke more negative responses than other types. Consider the first column in Figure 1, in which only 38.4% say that too much is being spent on crime. This is based on a simple and direct question. (Question 1C exact question wording is given below.) However, when individuals are presented with information about the cost of keeping people in prison, they are more likely to say that too much is spent on crime.

How the additional information is presented to them makes a dramatic difference, however. (Q.2-Q.4) If told that \$23,700 is spent per year to keep each criminal in prison, respondents are twice as likely to believe that too much is being spent on crime. If told that 15% of the Michigan's state budget is spent on prisons and corrections, or that \$1.3 billion of the state budget is spent on prisons and corrections, people are less likely to say that too much is being spent.

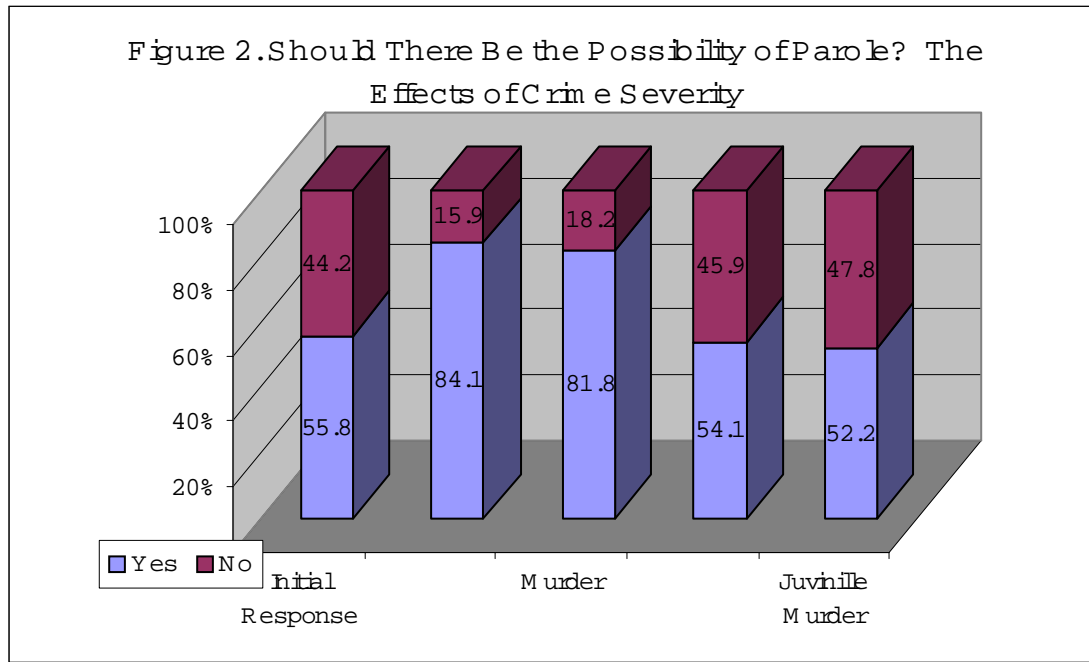
From a financial perspective, the \$23,700 per prison-year, 15% of the state budget, and \$1.3 in billion state expenditures per year are exactly equivalent to one another. However, people can more readily interpret information about spending that is expressed as dollars per prisoner than in the other forms.



Parole

- **Unlike the evidence from national surveys, individual support for parole and rehabilitation depends on the seriousness of the offense.** If given an opportunity in surveys, individuals are likely to consider the seriousness of the offense when deciding whether to support the possibility of parole. (Q.5-Q.9)

In contrast to the “lock them up and throw away the key” stereotype, individual attitudes toward parole are more rational and flexible. The first column of Figure 2 shows that 55.8% of respondents support the possibility of parole in the abstract. However, if the crime is child molestation or murder, the percentage of respondents supporting parole decreases. Murder by a juvenile invites less punitive responses. On less serious crimes such as drunk driving, respondents tend to be much less punitive.

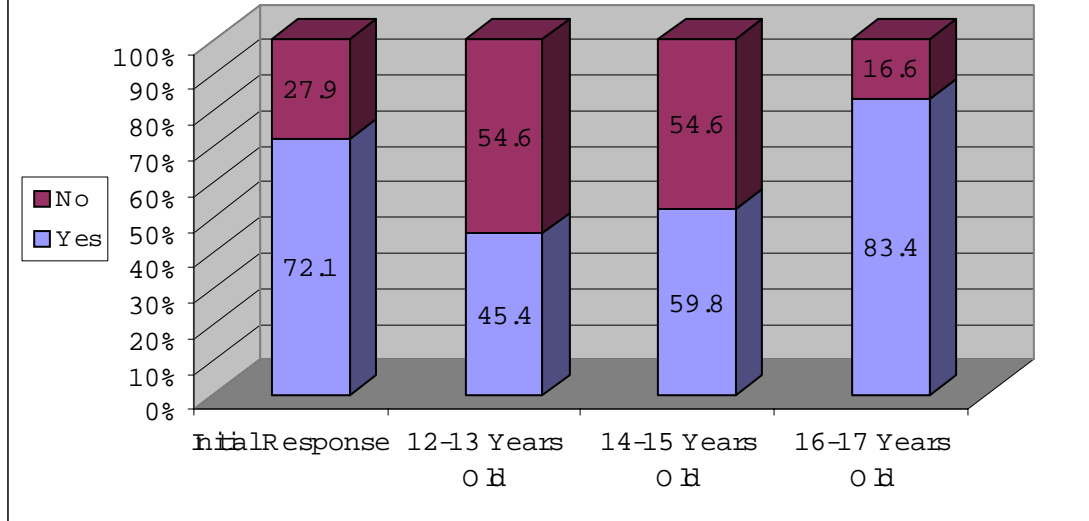


Youthful Offenders

- Individual support for treating youthful offenders as adults is conditioned by the age of the offender.** Recently enacted legislation in Michigan lowering the age at which juveniles can be tried as adults raises interesting questions about how far residents are willing to go to administer juvenile justice. Although previous research shows that most people want juveniles who commit serious violent crimes to be tried in adult courts (partly because of the perceived leniency of the juvenile court system), researchers have not established how tolerant individuals are becoming of punishing youthful offenders. We address one dimension of this question: Who is a “youthful offender” in the public’s mind? At what age of the offender does public punitiveness recede? (Q.10-Q.13)

The first column in Figure 3 (next page) shows that 72.1% of respondents believe that juveniles should receive the same length of sentence as adults who commit the same crimes. This question is asked in the abstract, without identifying the age of the juvenile or the type of crime. (Q.10)

Figure 3. Should Juvenile Offenders Serve Comparable Sentence to Adults? The Effects of Age or Juveniles



DISCUSSION

Several conclusions are warranted. First, on the whole, attitudes toward crime are punitive, especially when it comes to juvenile offenders. This conclusion is consistent with other survey results.

Second, in contrast to other researchers, we find that the variation in attitudes toward crime that exists is predictable and rational, not simply random. We find that people's attitudes toward crime reflect the information that is presented to them. Survey researchers often write questions in broad or abstract terms that do not reflect the context within which issues are perceived. For example, individuals do not perceive juvenile crime in the abstract, as it is often presented to them in surveys. Instead, they usually learn about it from particular news events referring to particular contexts.

Survey researchers should try to provide a context for questions about this type of crime, such as the seriousness of the offense, age of the offender, whether drugs are involved, the race and gender of the offender, parental involvement, psychological problems, reasons for committing the crime, and characteristics of the victim. Although every survey cannot consider every type of context, survey researchers should be alert to the sensitivity of their results to the contextual information that they provide to respondents. They should attempt to introduce more reality into their surveys by offering alternative scenarios and information contexts.

Policy makers also need to evaluate surveys carefully – since the answers you get depend so much on what questions you ask.

SURVEY QUESTIONS

NOTE: The full wording of questions and answers for the items discussed in this briefing paper is given below. The order of questions conforms with the order of the bulleted items above. Some questions were asked of only a part of the sample as part of the experimental element. These questions consumed about two minutes of the 22-minute interview.

Experiment 1

Asked of all respondents

Q. 1. Generally speaking, do you think that Michigan spends too much, too little, or about the right amount on prisons and corrections?

Randomly Assigned Questions (each asked of 1/3 of all respondents to Q. 1)

Q. 2. If you learned that 15% (15 cents out of every dollar) of Michigan's general fund budget goes to prisons and corrections, would you think that Michigan spends too much, too little, or about the right amount on prisons and corrections?

Q. 3. If you learned that 1.3 billion dollars were spent on prisons and corrections in Michigan during fiscal year 1996, would you think that Michigan spends too much, too little, or about the right amount on prisons and corrections?

Q. 4. If you learned that the state of Michigan spends an average of \$23,700 for each inmate housed in a correctional facility for one year, would you think that Michigan spends too much, too little, or about the right amount on prisons and corrections?

Experiment II

Asked of all respondents

Q. 5. Should a person convicted of a crime serve the full prison sentence with no possibility for parole even if there is evidence that he or she has changed or has been rehabilitated?

Randomly Assigned Questions (each asked of 1/4 of all respondents to Q. 5)

Q. 6. Should a person convicted of child molestation serve the full prison sentence without the possibility of parole if there is evidence that he or she has changed or has been rehabilitated?

Q. 7. Should a person convicted of murder serve the full prison sentence without the possibility of parole if there is evidence that he or she has changed or has been rehabilitated?

Q. 8. Should a person convicted of drunk driving serve the full prison sentence without the possibility of parole if there is evidence that he or she has changed or has been rehabilitated?

Q. 9. Should a juvenile convicted of murder serve the full prison sentence without the possibility of parole if there is evidence that he or she has changed or has been rehabilitated?

Experiment III

Asked of all respondents

Q. 10. Do you think juveniles who commit crimes should receive the same length sentences as adults who commit the same crimes?

Randomly Assigned Questions (each asked of 1/3 of all respondents to Q. 10)

Q. 11. Do you think juveniles who are 12 or 13 years-old should receive the same length sentences as adults who commit the same crimes?

Q. 12. Do you think juveniles who are 14 or 15 years-old should receive the same length sentences as adults who commit the same crimes?

Q. 13. Do you think juveniles who are 16 or 17 years-old should receive the same length sentences as adults who commit the same crimes?