

To: Parole Review For All

August 23, 2021

From: President, MassINC Polling Group

Re: Parole Review for All Statewide Voter Poll

The MassINC Polling Group (MPG) recently conducted a poll of 990 Massachusetts registered voters for Parole Review for All, a task force of the Criminal Justice Policy Coalition. Topline results and a detailed methodology of the poll are included as an Appendix to this memo. Below is a summary of key findings from our analysis.

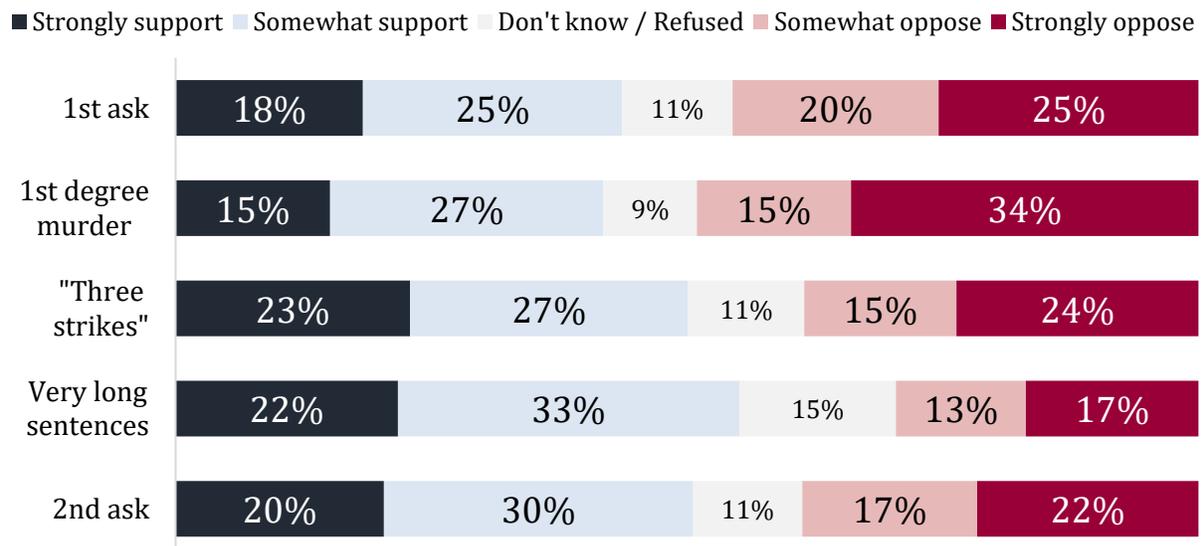
Voters start out divided on the issue. Support grows with specifics and positive messaging.

On our initial question asking about parole review, voters were nearly evenly split on the idea of granting parole hearings to all people in Massachusetts prisons, with 44% in favor and 46% opposed (Figure 1). More (25%) are strongly opposed than are strongly supportive (18%) of the idea.

When doing policy polling, this initial question is especially important. It is presented without additional information or complicating factors and before any messaging questions. For example, this question did not specify a minimum amount of time served before someone would be eligible for parole review.

Figure 1: Voter are split on parole hearings for all initially. Support is higher for parole review for specific groups and after messages in favor.

% who support / oppose each parole review question



A separate question asked voters what they thought would be an appropriate minimum time served before someone would be eligible for parole. We received a wide range of answers including nearly half (48%) who said less than 25 years. Only 17% said more than 25 years, although another 22% said prisoners serving life sentences should never have a chance for parole. Subsequent questions did use 25 years as the minimum since that is the actual proposal on the table at this point.

The next series of questions examined parole review for certain subgroups of prisoners. Voters were least supportive (42% support) of parole hearings for those convicted of first-degree murder. Nearly half (49%) were opposed to granting this group parole hearings after 25 years, including 34% who were strongly opposed. Voters were more inclined to support parole hearings after 25 years for prisoners serving life in prison for so-called “three strikes” offenses (50%), and those serving very long terms that functioned, effectively, as virtual life sentences (55%).

This suggests strongly that the specifics of a campaign on this issue could make a great difference in terms of public support. The story of a prisoner serving life in prison for a third offense short of murder, or someone serving a very long sentence short of life without the possibility of parole, would be received more sympathetically than someone convicted of first-degree murder.

After taking voters through various messages in favor of the policy, support for the general proposition of “making all people sentenced to life in prison eligible for parole hearings” rose to about half (51%), with 39% opposed. Most voters (54%) held their initial position of either strongly or somewhat supporting or opposing the policy, or being uncommitted, while 30% moved towards support. “Swing towards support” includes supporters becoming more supportive; opponents or uncommitted voters switching to support; and opponents softening from strongly to somewhat opposed. Only 16% moved in the opposite direction towards stronger opposition.

This movement is all in the right direction, but it should be expected because the poll tested only arguments in favor of the policy. In the course of a public debate on this issue, voters would likely hear arguments both for and against the policy. It is therefore most appropriate to analyze the first question asking about parole review as an indication of where the public stands on this policy at this moment.

Democrats (59%) and non-white voters (55%) are among those most supportive of the policy (Figure 2), as are voters under 30 (62%). Support declines steadily with voter age, dropping to a low of 31% support among voters 60 or older. Voters in Boston and its inner suburbs (defined as communities within Route 128) are more supportive (50%) than those elsewhere in the state. Voters living in urban communities, as defined by population density, were more supportive (52%) than those living in suburban (40%) or rural communities (42%). This is notable since experience with crime and incarceration tends to be concentrated in the state’s urban areas. That said, being or knowing the victim of a crime made little difference in support. But those who were themselves or knew someone

arrested and tried for a crime were more supportive (50%) than those without that experience with the criminal justice system (41%).

Voters need basic information. Explaining parole basics is the top positive message.

The results of the messaging section show this to be an uphill battle. None of the arguments in favor of parole review for all was rated “very convincing” by a majority of voters. This is a mark often used in campaigns to identify a broadly successful message (Figure 3). The two most successful messages were considered very convincing by only a third or more of voters. Total support only grew by a few points, to 50%, after the positive messaging section, while opposition dropped to 39%. An 11-point gap after messaging is not large and is another sign of a challenging environment.

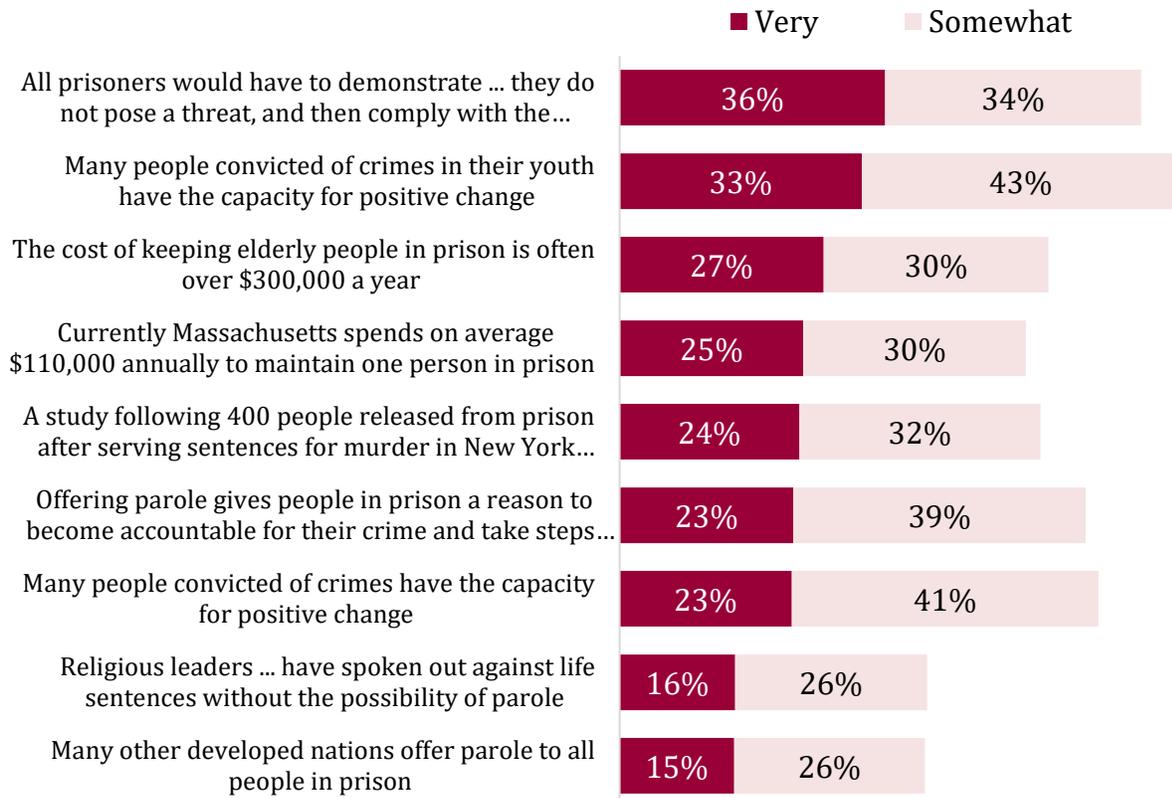
The top message was simply reminding voters of the limits of a parole hearing itself. An inmate would have to convince a board, including mental health professionals, of their fitness for release, and then comply with certain conditions afterward. Parole is an unfamiliar issue to many people, and this information appears helpful. That message was considered very convincing by 36% of voters.

After that was a message about prisoners who committed their crimes in their youth being capable of change (33%). A version of this message that did not mention the youth of the offender did less well (23%), highlighting again that voters are likely to be more sympathetic to certain prisoners who would benefit from the policy than others.

Figure 2: Democrats, young, and non-white voters are most supportive on first-ask
% who strongly or somewhat support parole review for all on first ask

		Total Support
OVERALL	Overall	44%
PARTY ID	Dem	59%
	GOP	34%
	Ind / Oth	36%
GENDER	Male	45%
	Female	43%
AGE	18-29	62%
	30-44	50%
	45-59	40%
	60+	31%
RACE	White	40%
	Non-white	55%
EDUCATION LEVEL	HS or less	46%
	Some coll	36%
	BA/BS	45%
	Adv deg	50%
REGIONS	West / Central	39%
	Southeast	46%
	Outer Boston Suburbs	40%
	Boston / Inner Suburbs	50%
COMMUNITY TYPE	Rural	42%
	Suburban	40%
	Urban	52%
SELF / FAM VICTIM OF CRIME?	Yes	44%
	No	45%
SELF / FAM ARRESTED FOR CRIME?	Yes	50%
	No	41%

Figure 3: Details of parole, young offenders are top messages, with cost not far behind
% finding each argument in favor of parole review very or somewhat convincing



Following those top two messages were two about the cost of housing inmates generally (25%) and in their old age (27%) and one about a study of inmates convicted of murder that found none re-offended after they were released (24%). These arguments may seem cold or pragmatic, but they did much better than referencing religious leaders' opposition (16%) or the parole practices in other countries (15%). Cost-savings was a popular argument in favor of criminal justice reform several years ago, when many red states moved to reduce their prison populations.

The rank order of these messages is largely the same among voters who swung towards support parole review. Base supporters – those who strongly or somewhat supported the policy both times it was asked – also had the same top-three messages. Half or more of base supporters rated those messages as very convincing. Base supporters were also more moved by arguments about inmates' potential for change and the value of parole in giving inmates a motivation to improve themselves in prison. But the consistency in the top messages suggests that the same messages that will activate supporters of the policy are also most effective at persuading non-supporters.

Figure 4: Top message overall are also most effective with base support, swing and undecided voters

% in each group who find each argument very convincing

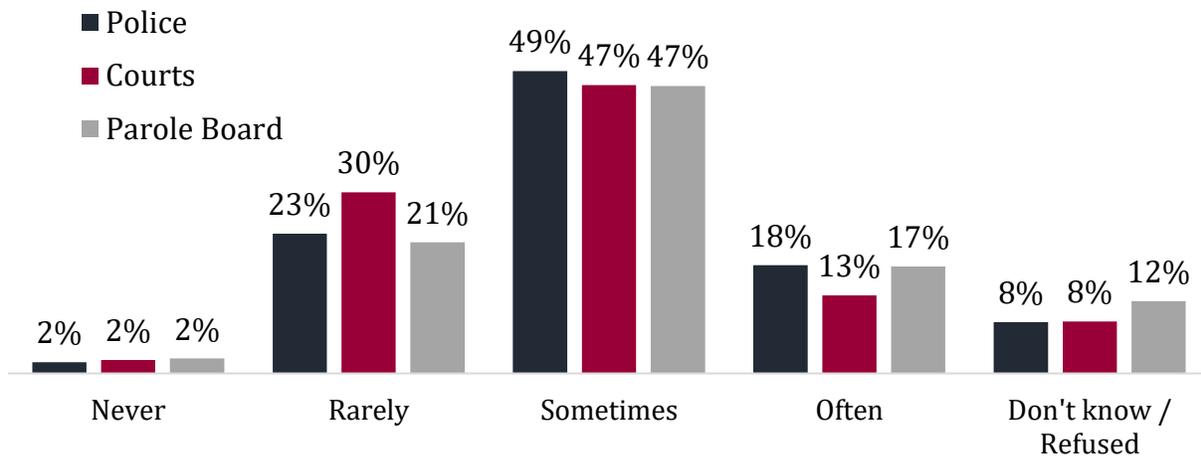
	Overall	Swing towards support	Base support	Swing / unsure
All prisoners would have to demonstrate ... they do not pose a threat, and then comply with the conditions of their parole...	36%	40%	54%	32%
Many people convicted of crimes in their youth have the capacity for positive change	33%	35%	54%	29%
The cost of keeping elderly people in prison is often over \$300,000 a year	27%	29%	50%	23%
Currently Massachusetts spends on average \$110,000 annually to maintain one person in prison	25%	29%	42%	24%
A study following 400 people released from prison after serving sentences for murder in New York State found none of them were sent back to prison for another crime	24%	25%	46%	17%
Offering parole gives people in prison a reason to become accountable for their crime and take steps to change and learn from mistakes	23%	22%	46%	17%
Many people convicted of crimes have the capacity for positive change	23%	19%	46%	16%
Religious leaders ... have spoken out against life sentences without the possibility of parole	16%	14%	29%	12%
Many other developed nations offer parole to all people in prison	15%	11%	32%	10%

Voters are skeptical of criminal justice system consistency.

A majority of voters say that the police (67%), courts (60%) and parole board (64%) make mistakes arresting, convicting and releasing suspects/inmates at least sometimes (Figure 5). Non-white voters were more likely to mistrust the police (77%) and courts (69%) but less likely to mistrust parole boards (59%). But the fact that these three institutions are mistrusted about equally overall presents more of a challenge than an opportunity. There is little advantage in highlighting the police and courts putting innocent people in prison if voters think parole boards are equally likely to err in releasing inmates who should be released. In fact, bringing up the subject may risk voters painting the entire system with a broad brush.

Figure 5: Little difference in views of criminal justice system components

% who think each make mistakes in terms of arresting / convicting / releasing people for crimes



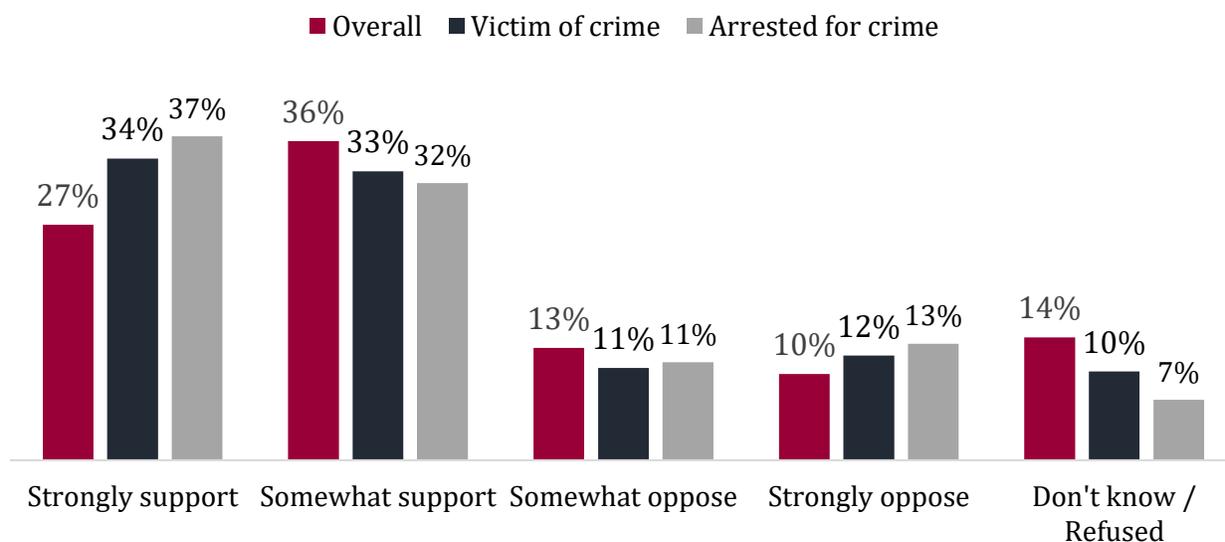
Majority of voters support restorative justice.

A majority of voters (63%) support expanding restorative justice techniques in the state's criminal justice system (Figure 6). Only 23% were opposed. As on the parole review questions, there is a significant partisan split, with Democrats (73%) more in favor. But on this question, even a majority of Republicans (55%) are open to the concept. Younger voters are more supportive than older, as are voters with higher levels of education. So too are voters with direct experience with the criminal justice system, either as victims or perpetrators of crime, or with a friend or family member in that position. These subgroups were more likely to *strongly* support restorative justice (34% and 37% respectively, compared to 27% overall).

Restorative justice is very popular with base supporters of parole review (83%), and a little more popular than average with those who swung towards support between the questions before and after messages (69%). This suggests a possible advantage to pairing some aspects of restorative justice with parole review, perhaps by incorporating some restorative techniques into discussing the details and conditions of parole.

Figure 6: Voters with experience with the criminal justice system more likely to strongly support restorative justice

% of voters overall and in each subgroup who support/oppose restorative justice



Restorative justice is likely a new concept for many, if not most voters, and how the concept is presented can make a big difference in support levels. It also means that another description of the policy could yield different results. Still, the fact that restorative justice was more popular than every version of parole review asked about in the poll suggests that linking the two issues in voters’ minds could help to bolster support for parole review.

Conclusion

Parole review for all starts as an even proposition with voters. It improves slightly with information, given that only supportive information was offered. Based on the message testing of the poll, the most successful way forward is to appeal to voters’ heads as much as their hearts. Explaining the basics of parole – that a hearing is not a guarantee of a release, nor is release unconditional – lowers the stakes of the policy change. Arguments about the cost of keeping inmates in prison did better than several arguments appealing to religious or moral objections to life sentences.

Which types of inmates the campaign chooses to associate with the policy will also be key to driving support. Voters are much less sympathetic towards convicted murderers than they are towards prisoners who find themselves behind bars for life due to “three strikes” laws or excessively long sentences. The success of the argument about youthful offenders’ capacity for change suggests that juvenile LWOPs could play a large part in a communications effort, as well.

If there is an opportunity for future research, it would be worth testing messages against the policy to see how much they depress support. That would help the campaign prepare for the other side of the public debate that will undoubtedly occur if this policy is to move forward. The terrain for that campaign is very even. Gaining ground will require smarts and discipline, sticking to the messages

that motivate supporters, persuade the uncommitted, and soften opponents. Fortunately, the same three messages were well-rated by supporters and swing voters alike, meaning the campaign can focus on broadcasting a few messages rather than tailoring different messages to different purposes and audiences.

Appendix

Topline Results
Statewide Survey of 990 Massachusetts Registered Voters
Field Dates: August 4-13, 2021

Which do you think should be the top priority for dealing with crime? *Order randomized.*

Prevention, such as education and youth programs	26%
Rehabilitation, such as education and job training for prisoners	18%
Punishment, such as longer sentences and more prisons	12%
Enforcement, such as putting more police officers on the streets	26%
Reducing the number of prisoners who re-offend upon release, by helping prisoners transition back to society	10%
Something else	1%
Don't Know / Refused	7%

Do you think there are too many people in prison in Massachusetts, not enough people in prison, or is the number of people in prison about right?

Too many	35%
Not enough	19%
About the right amount	18%
Don't Know / Refused	28%

To the best of your knowledge, are all people convicted of crimes in Massachusetts eventually eligible for parole hearings to determine whether or not they should be released early, or are some never eligible?

They are all eligible for hearings	24%
Some are never eligible	48%
Don't Know / Refused	28%

Currently, there are over 1,000 people serving prison sentences in Massachusetts who are not eligible for parole hearings. We would like to know whether Massachusetts should ensure every person **serving a life sentence** in Massachusetts has access to parole hearings where the parole board would seek to determine whether they pose any further risk to the community. The board generally includes mental health specialists and other experts.

Would you support or oppose making all people sentenced to life in prison eligible for parole hearings eventually?

Strongly support	18%
Somewhat support	25%
Somewhat oppose	20%
Strongly oppose	25%
Don't Know / Refused	11%

How many years do you think someone serving a life sentence should wait before they are eligible for hearings and a chance for parole?

Less than 5	5%
5 to 14	17%
15 to 25	25%
More than 25	17%
They should never have a chance for parole	22%
Don't Know / Refused	13%

In Massachusetts, people convicted of first-degree murder are automatically sentenced to life without parole. Would you support or oppose making all people sentenced to life without parole for murder eligible for parole hearings after serving 25 years?

Strongly support	15%
Somewhat support	27%
Somewhat oppose	15%
Strongly oppose	34%
Don't Know / Refused	9%

Massachusetts has a "three strikes" law, meaning someone who commits certain crimes as their third felony is automatically sentenced to life without parole. Would you support or oppose making all people sentenced to life without parole under this "three strikes" law eligible for parole hearings after serving 25 years? .

Strongly support	23%
Somewhat support	27%
Somewhat oppose	15%
Strongly oppose	24%
Don't Know / Refused	11%

Some people in Massachusetts' prisons are serving sentences of multiple decades, which are long enough to virtually be a life sentence. Would you support or oppose those people being eligible for parole hearings after they have served 25 years of their sentence?

Strongly support	22%
Somewhat support	33%
Somewhat oppose	13%
Strongly oppose	17%
Don't Know / Refused	15%

Here are some statements regarding parole hearings for people after 25 years of incarceration. After I read each one, please tell me if you find it very convincing, somewhat convincing, not too convincing, or not at all convincing when it comes to supporting the idea of parole hearings for everyone. *Order randomized.*

	Very convincing	Somewhat convincing	Not too convincing	Not at all convincing	Don't know / refused
Many people convicted of crimes in their youth have the capacity for positive change.	33%	43%	10%	7%	8%
Many people convicted of crimes have the capacity for positive change.	23%	41%	18%	10%	8%
The cost of keeping elderly people in prison is often over \$300,000 a year.	27%	30%	17%	16%	10%
A study following 400 people released from prison after serving sentences for murder in New York State found none of them were sent back to prison for another crime.	24%	32%	19%	17%	8%
Many other developed nations offer parole to all people in prison.	15%	26%	22%	27%	11%
Religious leaders like Pope Francis and organizations like the Massachusetts United Church of Christ and the Massachusetts Episcopal Dioceses have spoken out against life sentences without the possibility of parole, calling them immoral.	16%	26%	22%	27%	10%
All prisoners would have to demonstrate to the board, including mental health experts, that they do not pose a threat, and then comply with the conditions of their parole; failure to comply would result in going back to prison.	36%	34%	12%	10%	8%
Offering parole gives people in prison a reason to become accountable for their crime and take steps to change and learn from mistakes.	23%	39%	16%	13%	8%
Currently Massachusetts spends on average \$110,000 annually to maintain one person in prison.	25%	30%	20%	15%	11%

Now that we've talked more about it, I want to ask you again. Would you support or oppose making all people sentenced to life in prison eligible for parole hearings?

Strongly support	20%
Somewhat support	30%
Somewhat oppose	17%
Strongly oppose	22%
Don't Know / Refused	11%

How often do you think police in Massachusetts make mistakes in terms of arresting the wrong person for crimes?

Never	2%
Rarely	23%
Sometimes	49%
Often	18%
Don't Know / Refused	8%

How often do you think courts in Massachusetts make mistakes in terms of convicting the wrong person for crimes?

Never	2%
Rarely	30%
Sometimes	47%
Often	13%
Don't Know / Refused	8%

How often do you think the Massachusetts parole board makes mistakes in terms of granting release to inmates who should not have been released?

Never	2%
Rarely	21%
Sometimes	47%
Often	17%
Don't Know / Refused	12%

Have you or a member of your immediate family or close friends ever been a victim of a crime?

Yes	34%
No	58%
Don't Know / Refused	8%

Asked of those who answer yes to the previous question:

Did you or your family member or friend experience any of the following as a result of this crime? *Order randomized.*

	Yes	No	Don't Know / Refused
ROTATE ORDER			
Physical harm or stress	53%	42%	6%
Emotional harm or stress	75%	23%	1%
Financial harm or stress	62%	34%	4%
Isolation from immediate family and friends	31%	63%	6%
Isolation from the immediate neighborhood	27%	68%	6%

Have you or a member of your immediate family or close friends ever been arrested, charged, or convicted of a crime?

Yes	29%
No	66%
Don't Know / Refused	6%

Asked of those who answer yes to the previous question:

Did you or your family member or friend experience any of the following as a result of this crime? *Order randomized.*

	Yes	No	Don't Know / Refused
ROTATE ORDER			
Physical harm or stress	44%	52%	4%
Emotional harm or stress	58%	37%	5%
Financial harm or stress	49%	48%	3%
Isolation from immediate family and friends	43%	54%	3%
Isolation from the immediate neighborhood	50%	47%	3%

Techniques referred to as “Restorative Justice” are being successfully used in Massachusetts, other states, and other countries. It brings the offender, their family and friends, together with the victim’s family and friends, all voluntarily, to understand the harm the crime inflicted on both the victim’s and offender’s communities. It seeks to identify the crime’s root causes, and repair and empower the individuals and communities. Would you support making this pathway more available to all parties impacted by crime?

Strongly support	27%
Somewhat support	36%
Somewhat oppose	13%
Strongly oppose	10%
Don't Know / Refused	14%

DEMOGRAPHICS

Party Identification

Democrat	34%
Republican	14%
Independent / Other	47%
Refused	5%

Race

White	78%
Black	6%
Latino	7%
Asian	6%
All others	3%
Refused	1%

Age

18-29	18%
30-44	23%
45-59	26%
60+	32%
Refused	1%

Gender

Men	46%
Women	53%
Non-binary	1%
Refused	<1%

Education

High School or less	34%
Some college, no degree	26%
College graduate (BA/BS)	23%
Advanced degree	17%
Refused	1%

About the Poll

These results are based on a survey of 990 Massachusetts registered voters. Responses were collected via online and live telephone interviewers calling both landline and cell phones August 4 - 13, 2021. Final survey data were weighted to known and estimated population parameters for registered voters in Massachusetts by age, gender, race, education, geography, and party identification. This project was sponsored by Parole Review For All, a task force of the Criminal Justice Policy Coalition.