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Detention no solution for youths: poll

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Believing that juvenile offenders have the potential to change their behavior, Illinoisans would rather spend tax dollars on rehabilitation programs instead of incarceration, according to a survey released Tuesday.

The poll, conducted by the Center for Children's Law and Policy, shows that more than 80 percent of those surveyed in Illinois agree that incarcerating youths without offering them rehabilitation programs is the same as giving up on them.

In addition, the responses raise questions about the apparent effectiveness of juvenile detention.

Less than 15 percent of those surveyed in Illinois believe that incarceration is a "very effective" way to rehabilitate youth.

Among Illinoisans, the poll found that the majority of respondents want state government to reallocate funds spent on juvenile incarceration to counseling, education and job training.

The suggested shift was favored by more than eight out of 10 of those surveyed, with 58 percent "strongly" favoring it and 27 percent "somewhat" supporting it.

"What's important about the survey is that the legislators, prosecutors and other members of government can make good decisions about kids now, and how they're treated in court, without worrying that the public may think that they're soft on crime," said George W. Timberlake, a retired chief judge in the 2d Judicial Circuit and member of the Illinois Models for Change Coordinating Council.

Nearly 80 percent of Illinoisans surveyed believe that the state should house nonviolent juvenile offenders in small facilities in their own communities.

Concerning the effect that a youth's race and economic status have on his case, most Illinois respondents said the justice system unfairly treats poor or black juveniles.

A little more than two-thirds of respondents believe that poor youths are treated "worse" than middle-income ones arrested for the same offense. For black juveniles, the survey shows that 61 percent of

respondents believe that blacks are treated "worse" than white juveniles.

The survey reached 1,700 adults, including 300 each in Illinois, Louisiana, Pennsylvania and Washington, plus 500 more nationwide. The four states are the original participants in the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's Models for Change initiative.

Another survey was done by the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Adolescent Development and Juvenile Justice, which polled 500 residents from the four Models for Change states. It revealed that residents would be willing to pay more in taxes to rehabilitate juveniles instead of locking them up.

On average, the respondents said they are willing to pay 20 percent more in taxes for alternatives to incarceration.

"That is so important in terms of changing public policy because it says to elected officials that the public understands that is an excellent investment," said Paula Wolff, senior executive at Chicago Metropolitan 2020 and a member of the Illinois Models for Change Coordinating Council.

The average cost to detain a juvenile offender in a state facility is about \$90,000, Wolff said, adding that she believes that state officials have been actively seeking new ways to deal with offenders.

About two years ago, Illinois lawmakers established the Department of Juvenile Justice to manage young offenders, removing them from the jurisdiction of the Department of Corrections. Juvenile justice advocates lauded the move as a way to reduce recidivism by shifting the focus from punishment to educational treatment programs.

Even so, Gov. Rod R. Blagojevich has yet to appoint a permanent director, prompting critics to question whether many of the intended changes have actually happened.

The surveys released on Tuesday were paid for by the MacArthur Foundation, which is adding states to its Models for Change effort.

Representatives from Colorado, Connecticut, Ohio and Texas will join the original four states in the program to suggest ways to identify and treat the 25 percent of juvenile offenders who have mental health problems.

The four original states also will be joined by Kansas, Maryland, North Carolina and Wisconsin to address the issue of systemic unfairness based on ethnicity. The foundation plans to establish another network next year to focus on matters related to indigent juvenile defense.

More information on the studies is available on the foundation's Web site.