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Poll sees hope for young offenders

Respondents would rather counsel than lock up juveniles

By Ofelia Casillas, Tribune staff reporter

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Illinois residents would rather pay to counsel young offenders than incarcerate them, and keep them close to home instead of in large, distant prisons, according to a new poll.

The poll commissioned by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, set for publication Tuesday, focused on four states, including Illinois.

More than nine out of every 10 respondents in Illinois said they believe young offenders have the potential to change. More than eight out of 10 favored putting more money into counseling and education and less into youth prisons.

More than six in 10 said they believe providing help after young offenders get out of prison is an effective strategy.

Many polled also believe that the juvenile justice system unfairly treats youths who are low-income and African-American or Hispanic, according to an advance summary.

The poll was conducted in September. It included surveys of 500 adults nationwide, plus separate samplings of 300 adults each in Illinois, Washington, Pennsylvania and Louisiana.

The margin of error for Illinois responses was plus or minus 5.7 percent.

Illinois juvenile justice experts said the poll shows the public's feelings are in line with recent research on the most effective approach to juvenile offenders.

Diane Geraghty, director of the Civitas ChildLaw Center at Loyola University Chicago School of Law, said the responses show the public understands that youths should be held accountable, while understanding they are different from adults and require different treatment.

"These are not incompatible ideas. It's not an either-or proposition that you are tough on juvenile crime or you're soft on juvenile crime," Geraghty said.

Paul Wolff, senior executive at Chicago Metropolis 2020, said the poll suggests Illinois residents are in tune with public officials who recently created a new state department for juvenile corrections.

"It's an incremental recognition that these are kids that can be saved and made productive citizens. It's a lot less expensive in terms of the human toll, as well as the taxpayer toll, to get these kids back into society," Wolff said. "We're on a trajectory here where the more that people hear about this and learn about it and think about it, the more the policies are going to change for the better."

A separate survey commissioned by the MacArthur Foundation, also set for release Tuesday, found that national respondents, given the choice between paying for rehabilitation or paying for incarceration, would rather spend for rehabilitation.

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