

To: Community Public Safety Investment Convening Attendees  
From: Daniel Gotoff, Celinda Lake, and Corey Teter, *LRP*  
Re: Survey Findings on Community Investment  
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The following memo summarizes the key takeaways from a recent nationwide survey of likely voters on public safety and community investment.<sup>1</sup> This poll found voters have a holistic view of public safety that challenges conventional wisdom about uniform support for “tough on crime” strategies. In fact, results demonstrated there is widespread support for substantial change to criminal justice policy and practice. Respondents consider law enforcement important partners in fighting crime, but are skeptical of the effectiveness of prisons and jails and regard investing in communities as a powerful means of delivering safety. The survey also found overwhelming support for shifting some public funds away from incarceration and into community-based public safety programs. Responses indicate voters see formerly incarcerated people and crime survivors as important messengers of the value of investing in community-designed and community-run public safety strategies.

### **The Context: Perceptions of Public Safety**

- Voters have a clear appetite for change when it comes to criminal justice and eschew overly narrow approaches to public safety. They believe police play an important role in preventing crime (86% effective, including 43% very effective), in concert with other strategies, including employment and vocational training (79% effective, including 40% very effective), as well as drug and mental health treatment and services (71% effective, including 33% very effective). Prisons and jails rank much lower in perceived effectiveness when it comes to preventing crime, both overall and in terms of intensity (63% effective, including just 19% very effective).
  - Among Republicans, just one-quarter view prisons and jails as “very effective” (73% effective, including 25% very effective), only slightly higher than Democrats (56% effective, including 15% very effective) and independents (58% effective, including 17% very effective).

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<sup>1</sup> Lake Research Partners designed and administered this survey that was conducted by telephone using professional interviewers. The survey reached a total of 800 likely 2016 General Election voters nationwide and was conducted October 25<sup>th</sup> - 30<sup>th</sup>, 2017. The margin of error of this poll is +/- 3.5%.

- There is also relative consensus across Party lines on employment and vocational training, which is considered highly effective at preventing crime among independents (86% effective, including 45% very effective), Democrats (78% effective, including 39% very effective), and Republicans (77% effective, including 39% very effective).
- Republicans are slightly less likely to place an emphasis on drug and mental health treatment (65% effective, including 25% very effective) than either Democrats (75% effective, including 39% very effective) or independents (71% effective, including 36% very effective).
- More pronounced partisan divides emerge on the extent to which police prevent crime, with Democrats registering significantly less intensity (81% effective, including 29% very effective) than Republicans (91% effective, including 51% very effective) or independents (92% effective, including 54% very effective).
- Voters consider the lack of “prevention programs to keep young people from turning to crime” (33% 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> response) and “re-entry programs for formerly incarcerated individuals” (24% 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> response) to be major barriers to public safety, as well as “high unemployment” (23% 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> response) and the profusion of “people being incarcerated for minor, non-violent offenses” (20% 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> response). A second tier of perceived barriers includes “too few police officers” (23% 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> response) and “too many criminals out in the streets” (23% 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> response).
  - Voters place “racial inequality” (15% 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> response) and “the excessive use of police force” (4% 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> response) into a lower tier of what they consider to be barriers to public safety. While these numbers are slightly higher among voters of color, they fall into a lower tier among these voters, too.
- Voters overwhelmingly favor a range of community-based reforms and services to improve public safety at the local level. Each of these approaches garners over 80% support, including robust majorities of voters who support them strongly. The most popular of these are treatment for mental health (95% favor, including 75% strongly favor) and job and skills training (95% favor, including 74% strongly favor). Voters also strongly favor treatment for drug addiction (93% favor, including 69% strongly favor), mentoring and counseling programs (92% favor, including 65% strongly favor), increased resources for parents (91% favor, including 65% strongly favor), and violence reduction initiatives (89% favor, including 63% strongly favor).

SUPPORT FOR COMMUNITY BASED REFORMS & SERVICES		
	% Total Favor	% Strongly Favor
Treatment for mental health	95%	75%
Job and skills training	95%	74%
Treatment for drug addiction	93%	69%
Mentoring and counseling programs	92%	65%
Parenting classes for people who are incarcerated and home parenting visits once they are released	91%	65%
Violence reduction initiatives, like gang prevention and intervention programs	89%	63%

### Broad and Intense Support for Community-Based Public Safety Programs

- Over three-quarters of voters' support proposals to move funding from incarceration to community-based public safety programs (78% and 16% oppose), including a solid 57% majority who supports the proposal strongly.
  - Support spans partisan divides, with Republicans (70% support) only slightly less supportive than Democrats (85% support) and independents (81% support).
  - The same is true across demographic lines, with the proposal demonstrating overwhelming support among men (78% support) and women (79% support); younger (85% support) and older voters (72% support); college educated (80% support) and non-college educated (78% support); as well as White (78% support), African American (83% support), and Latino voters (72% support).
  - Despite the commanding support for this community-based approach to public safety, which would be funded by reallocating resources currently used for incarceration, voters are notably far more hesitant to move some funding from *policing* to invest in this approach. In fact, a majority of voters (54%) opposes this variant of the proposal. While Democrats narrowly support the idea (49% support vs. 44% oppose), support starts out under fifty percent; moreover, Republicans and independents oppose it by double-digit margins (-15 points each).

- Support for investing in community-based public safety programs increases slightly in the context of an engaged debate, with voters hearing arguments for, as well as against, the proposal (81% support and 15% oppose, including 59% strong support). Overall, there appears to be little difference in support depending on whether voters hear a thematic framework in favor of the proposal emphasizing a “Smarter Approach” to criminal justice (79% support) versus one emphasizing a “Safer Approach” (82% support), but the latter holds special appeal for some subgroups, including white voters and non-college educated voters.

### TEXT OF ENGAGED DEBATE

#### **SMARTER APPROACH**

*[SOME/OTHER] people say that we are bankrupting ourselves without making our communities any safer by incarcerating millions of Americans every year. Over 60% of those incarcerated are in for nonviolent, low-level offenses. We need a smarter approach to public safety: reinvesting those resources at the local level into prevention, treatment, and re-entry programs, so that communities can reduce crime and recidivism and re-integrate those who have served their time into productive, taxpaying citizens. This is the smarter, safer, more efficient approach.*

#### **SAFER APPROACH**

*[SOME/OTHER] people say that overreliance on incarceration is making our communities less safe. We waste billions locking people up for low-level, nonviolent offenses, when studies show that people who are sent to prison, even for a short time and minor offenses, are more likely to go back to prison and commit more serious offenses. Investing in community-based prevention, treatment, and re-entry programs is proven to help former prisoners and young offenders get their lives back on track, lowering the crime rate and making communities safer.*

*[SOME/OTHER] people say that today’s world is less safe than at other points in our past. We can’t ignore the reality of rising crime rates, especially when statistics show that too many people released from prison will return to a life of crime. The best path to true public safety is being tough on crime. That’s why we need to invest in more prisons and jails that will keep dangerous criminals off our streets and protect our communities.*

- Respondents are split on what term best describes the proposal. Although a plurality (21%) prefers “public safety investments”, “community investment” (17%) and “community safety investments” (16%) are close behind. While settling on a common terminology is highly important from a communications perspective, advocates have the opportunity to define this approach to community public safety in their own terms.

#### **Message and Positioning**

- Beyond the efficacy of positioning this proposal first within the framework of increasing public safety, the most persuasive arguments in

favor of the proposal focus on setting young people on a path towards success; the proven success of this approach in dramatically lowering recidivism and creating safer communities (using the Colorado example as a case study); and how investing in community-based public safety programs help to break systemic causes of crime. The last of these messages also includes a disproportionate focus on young people, and specifically the plight of children whose parents are incarcerated.

### TEXT OF POSITIVE MESSAGES

**[YOUTH]** *“Incarcerating young people is often counterproductive and expensive. Taxpayers pay an average of \$407 per person per day and as much as \$148,000 per person per year. Locking up young people increases their chances of going to jail again by 22 percent. We need to set our children on a path toward being successful, responsible adults. States that have worked to decrease their youth incarceration rates by reinvesting in community programs have seen their youth crime rates drop while saving millions of dollars.” (82% convincing, incl. 50% very convincing)*

**[COMMUNITY FOCUS]** *“Investing in community-based prevention, treatment, and re-entry programs is making a proven difference. In one state, the Department of Corrections established a program to help community reentry organizations that focus on education, job training, and counseling services, and only two and a half percent of participants have returned to prison while in the program. More than half of participants have been successful finding jobs and remaining employed. Re-entry programs are an investment in stronger, safer communities.” (87% convincing, incl. 49% very convincing)*

**[SYSTEMIC CHANGE/BREAK CYCLE]** *“Today, more than half of all adults in prison have children. Incarcerated adults are often central to their children’s lives, but there are almost no services for these 2.7 million children, who are at increased risk of becoming incarcerated at some point themselves. In order to break this cycle, we need to start investing in what works—community-based prevention, intervention, and treatment programs that ensure children have the skills they need to become contributing members of their communities and our society.” (82% convincing, incl. 48% very convincing)*

- A message detailing the role of systemic racism in perpetuating over-incarceration tests 10-15 points *less* convincing than the top tier of arguments across demographic subgroups, including among voters of color. However, this message does emerge in regression analysis as predictive of a shift in support for the central proposal, suggesting a key role for this line of discourse in select settings<sup>2</sup>. The regression models underscores the utility of messaging that highlights the Colorado Work and Gain Education & Employment Skills (WAGEES) program as a case study, as well.
  - **[SYSTEMIC RACISM]** *“Over 60% of people in prison are Black or Latino. Black people are incarcerated at nearly 6 times the rate of whites, and Latinos at nearly double the white rate. The majority incarcerated for drug offenses are*

<sup>2</sup> Multivariate regression analysis is a statistical technique used for determining the relationship between a set of independent variables (in this case, the message statements) and a single dependent variable (in this case, the *shift* in support over the course of the survey for investing in community-based public safety programs).

*minorities, despite not using drugs at higher rates than whites. At no other point in U.S. history have so many been deprived of their liberty. Investing in community-based prevention, treatment, and re-entry programs can make our streets safer and help reverse these trends.” (72% convincing, incl. 36% very convincing)*

- In terms of messengers, voters want to hear from a diverse coalition of stakeholders to deliver this message, including police, formerly incarcerated individuals who have completed community programs, and people who have been victimized. The support of local churches and judges could also have a powerful impact on voters, as could endorsements from governors and members of Congress.
- Arguments against the proposal hold significantly less resonance with voters, both in terms of intensity and overall reach. However, a general attack arguing that this proposal would result in communities becoming less safe does resonate somewhat with voters (64% doubts, including 32% serious doubts), including persuadable voters (61% doubts, including 40% serious doubts).
  - *[ATTACK: UNSAFE] “Advocates for re-entry programs show a lot of compassion for criminals, but what about for their victims? Those who have been in prison for armed robbery, rape, or murder have already proven that they’re a threat to everyone in our communities. Investing in re-entry programs brings dangerous people back in to our neighborhoods, and makes all of us less safe.” (64% convincing, incl. 32% very convincing)*

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