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The Evolving Landscape of Crime and Incarceration

To: Interested Parties

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Serious doubts about our system of mass incarceration emerge in a nationally representative survey, even in more politically conservative, rural parts of the country. Indeed, in an era of broad speculation about a growing urban-rural divide, there is general consensus between rural America, small cities and major metropolitan areas that our system of criminal justice is not working and communities should focus on priorities other than spending millions on prisons and jails.

A 40 percent plurality believe incarceration rates in their communities are too high, and a 66 percent majority would describe themselves as “concerned” if they learned incarceration rates in their community were higher than in similar communities. In rural communities, a 60 percent majority would be concerned.

Part of this movement against mass incarceration reflects competing priorities for public investment. Building prisons and jails ranks as the lowest priority when compared to investments in schools, infrastructure and health care. And a 62 percent majority agrees that building more prisons and jails is not an effective means to improve the quality of life in their community. This consensus emerges amid doubts about the equity of local criminal justice systems and their ability to fairly mete out justice—particularly to people of color or low income people. But more broadly, Americans fundamentally believe our current criminal justice system is not living up to its promise of producing safer communities. A 67 percent majority agree, “building more jails and prisons to keep more people in jail does not reduce crime,” including 61 percent of rural Americans.

This memorandum summarizes the results of a national survey of 2,000 American adults taken from February 27-March 5, 2018. This survey focused heavily on rural areas, where incarceration rates tend to be much higher than in the nation’s major urban areas. In order to build a robust sample of rural residents, this survey included 1,000 interviews in counties designated as rural. Sample for this survey came from three separate files from TargetSmart corresponding to three lists of counties classified as “Rural”, “Small and Mid-sized Metros”, and “Large Metro” with 50 percent coming from the rural list and 25 percent each from the latter two. This sample was of the general population over 18 years of age with 50% of the records being for cell phones and 50% for landline phones. During processing, the sample was clustered according to race, age, gender, and region.

These results have been weighted back to reflect their proper proportions and weighted demographically as well, based on current census findings. The overall margin of error for this survey is +/- 2.19 percentage points and the margin of error in rural America is +/- 3.10 percentage points.

Key Findings

Building more prisons is a low priority compared to other needs.

All public spending choices are political choices. A dollar spent on one thing cannot be spent on something else. In that context, the public identifies jails and prisons as the lowest priority investment for their tax dollars. Only 37 percent of rural residents consider investments in jails and prisons a major construction priority.

Figure 1: Priorities for construction or repair

	Total Major priority	Rural Major priority
Schools and educational facilities	78	69
Roads and transportation	71	66
Hospitals and other health care facilities	61	60
Water treatment facilities and irrigation	55	47
Jails and prisons	30	37

Similarly, the public rated a range of investments to improve the quality of life in their communities as either very effective, somewhat effective, not very effective or not at all effective. Building more prisons and jails ranked a distant last on this list.

Figure 2: Quality of life priorities

	Total Effective	Rural
Providing more jobs and job training	92	91
Investing more in schools and youth programs	91	88
Building and improving roads and infrastructure	88	87
(SPLIT) Strengthening community-based mental health treatment	87	86
(SPLIT) Strengthening community-based drug and alcohol treatment	85	83
Creating and maintaining parks and green space	83	74
Investing in community-based programs for violence reduction	81	78
Reducing racism and bias	77	72
Investing in arts and culture	76	63
Building more prisons and jails	35	46

Many doubts about the criminal justice system

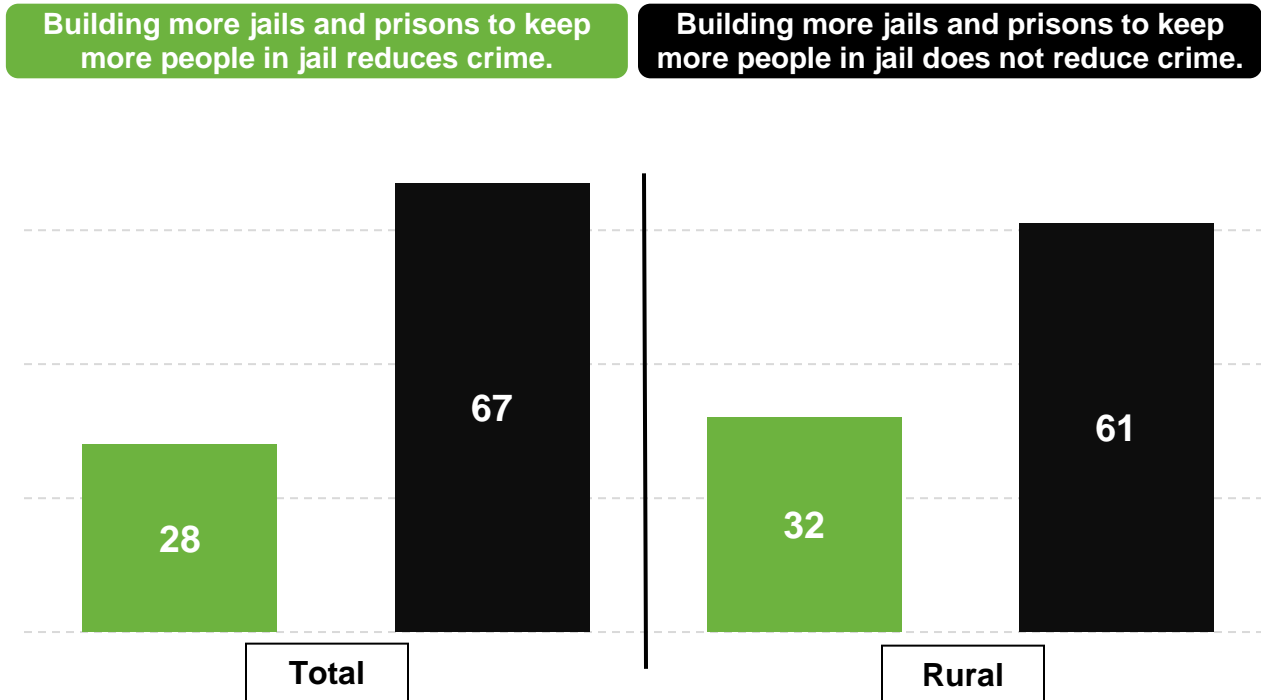
Nearly half (49 percent) believe, “Too many people are in jail for the wrong reasons,” which represents a fairly stunning indictment of our local justice systems. Doubts about the criminal justice system are articulated most vividly in terms of race and class. A 47 percent plurality disagree with the statement, “Local judges are fair to all people, regardless of background,” including 63 percent of African Americans. A 55 percent majority of all respondents agree with the statement, “Our justice system discriminates against poor people.” This rises to 76 percent of (self-ascribed) “lower class” people and 84 percent of African Americans surveyed.

But more fundamentally, the country has concluded that what we are doing, the system of locking a lot of people up in prisons and jails, is not working. The public does not believe that putting more people in jail reduces crime, including people in rural parts of the country.

Figure 3: Building jails and prisons does not reduce crime

Statement 1

Statement 2



Reassessing mass incarceration

As a result of these complementary trends in thinking, the public is beginning to turn on mass incarceration, *particularly in their community*. A 40 percent plurality believe up front that the level of incarceration is too high in their communities, and just 9 percent believe we should be putting more people in jails and prisons. But an impressive 66 percent would be concerned—52 percent very concerned—if they learned that their community has a higher rate of incarceration than similar communities in their state. A 60 percent majority of rural residents concur and 45 percent of rural residents would be very concerned if they learned their communities had higher rates of incarceration than other communities.

Moreover, the public rewards candidates for public office who advocate for their desire for a different path. This survey asked reactions to a hypothetical candidate with the following views:

Brad Johnson says our county has one of the highest incarceration rates in the state, and that our rate is much higher than the national average. Rather than burdening taxpayers with the cost of unnecessary incarceration, Mr. Johnson wants to invest in treatment options for people suffering from addiction, and create educational and economic opportunities.

A 71 percent majority find this candidate appealing, including 68 percent of rural residents.

Conclusion

For decades, this country spent billions on a system that led to one of the highest incarceration rates in the world without seeing the promised result in reduced crime. More and more Americans are waking up to these facts, seeking policy alternatives and better investments of their money than in prisons and jails.