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Prisons are Not the Solution for Mental Illness: Looking at Juvenile Mental Health and Recidivism

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Introduction

Around sixty-six percent of incarcerated juveniles have at least one diagnosable mental health problem, compared with an estimated nine to twenty-two percent of the general youth population, according to research done by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. The goal of incarceration is to punish those who have committed crimes in hopes of reducing the number of crimes committed. However, claiming that incarceration is the only way to reduce crime fails to acknowledge the role that mental health has on behavior. Data shows that juveniles who exhibit “some externalizing disorders (e.g., conduct disorders, oppositional defiant disorder, and antisocial behaviors) and substance use disorders” have an increased chance of “delinquency, violence, and contact with the justice system” (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2017). Only focusing on punishment does not allow the underlying issues that lead to the possibility of repeat offending to be addressed.

As of right now, there is little development when it comes to policies that address this issue which is why I hope to gain more information about the public’s opinion on providing mental health services to incarcerated juveniles and the effect on recidivism rates. The question I pose is, do people in California think providing mental health services to incarcerated juveniles is an effective way to reduce recidivism? I want to investigate what factors influence someone’s thoughts on effectiveness.

Context & Significance to California

Mental health and its relationship to incarceration is complicated and not is not clearly understood. In the U.S., 1 in 6 juveniles experience mental health problems annually (NAMI), compared to 4 in 6 incarcerated juveniles that experience mental health problems (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2017). Even though a significant number of incarcerated juveniles experience mental health problems, only 0.4% of juveniles in the system reported that they received mental health care in 2017-18 (Mojtabai). The disparity between incarcerated juveniles with mental health problems and those reportedly receiving care shows a lack of accessibility to appropriate levels of treatment within the system. Failing to address mental health problems among incarcerated juveniles lowers the chances of reducing recidivism. According to a report from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, the recidivism rate among the “release cohort” from 2014-15 was higher than that of the previous year (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation). Providing mental health services has, to some extent, been shown to be an effective method of reducing recidivism.

The introduction of more services like juvenile mental health courts for the population with mental health problems would also align with the public’s opinion on the matter. The public has shifted its opinion about the juvenile justice system nationwide, wanting a more “rehabilitative model of care” (Underwood). Public opinion is the basis of public policy in representative democracies. Policymakers need to know and understand the public’s stances on issues, as being aware of what the public wants is critical to making effective policies. According to research in 2015, the “current policies and practices in the juvenile justice system are not well suited to meet the multiple needs of these youth and, at times, can exacerbate existing problems” (Zajac). By gathering Californians' public opinion on mental health services in the juvenile

justice system, policies that effectively address the issue while reflecting the public's wants can be crafted.

Background

My research focuses on gaining more information on the three issues of juvenile mental health, incarceration, and recidivism and the connection between them. While no causal link can be established between mental health problems and incarceration among juveniles, there is a connection. Although limited, previous research shows a complex connection between mental health and juvenile incarceration and how they impact each other. The number of youth that are in the justice system is over 2 million, and out of those, 65 to 70% have at least one mental health issue, with 20 to 25% exhibiting serious emotional problems (Zajac). Furthermore, it is not uncommon for a juvenile in the system to have more than one mental health problem. A 2015 study found that “an estimated 79% of youth [in the justice system] with one mental health disorder also meet criteria for at least one other disorder, and more than 60% meet criteria for a substance use disorder” (Zajac). Having multiple mental health problems while in the system is more disadvantageous as “youth with co-occurring behavioral problems and emotional problems are at elevated risk for recidivism” (Zajac).

Mental health problems that are linked to disruptive behavior, anxiety, and mood, along with substance use, have been found to “increase the likelihood of delinquency, violence, and contact with the justice system” (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2017). When looking at the mental health problems that incarcerated juveniles face, the association is clear, as the most common problems faced are related to disruptive behavior, anxiety, and mood (Zajac). Youth entering the system undergo a screening and assessment process to determine if they have any mental health problems that need to be attended to and how much care is needed

(Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2017). However, accessibility to the proper care and treatments is a problem for incarcerated juveniles. The lack of research makes it difficult to incorporate mental health care effectively into the juvenile justice system. Research in 2016 mentions the “lack of research, inadequate models of care, insufficient policy development, ineffective experience and training of staff, and inadequate practice” that is currently present in the juvenile justice system and how it hinders the quality of mental health care able to be provided (Underwood).

Fortunately, some progress is being made toward addressing the issue of inadequate mental health services in the juvenile justice system. California and some other states have incorporated procedures in the system that allow juveniles to be assessed for mental health problems, including establishing courts that focus specifically on those with mental health issues (Underwood). The goal of these mental health courts is to help juveniles with mental health problems in a similar model to drug courts (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2010). Juvenile mental health courts have been shown to have an effect in lowering recidivism rates for the participants that committed “violent, aggressive, and property crimes” (Judicial Council of California).

California also has the Mental Health Services Act and Fund and the CARE Act and Court, which each assist those with mental health needs. CARE Court “connects a person struggling with untreated mental illness – and often also substance use challenges – with a court-ordered Care Plan for up to 24 months” (CARE Court). However, CARE is limited to “people with schizophrenia spectrum or other psychotic disorders who meet specific criteria” (Care Act). The Mental Health Services Act, on the other hand, was passed as Prop 63 in 2004 with the intention to help the mental health system in a more general way. The MHSA “provides

funding, personnel, and resources to support county mental health programs” and “addresses a broad continuum of prevention, early intervention, and service needs” (The MHSA).

There is still not a lot of public opinion data on juvenile mental health, incarceration, and recidivism that is readily available and addresses the factors that I am interested in for my research. My hope is that by bringing more awareness to the issue and the important role that public opinion plays, more effort will be put into collecting the data. Currently, there is a group in the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation called the Council on Criminal Justice and Behavioral Health that works towards getting information from those who have gone through the system. There is also staff that focuses on juvenile justice and the care that juveniles in the system receive. Part of their mission is to help spread awareness about mental health problems and develop solutions that prevent adults and juveniles with mental health problems from entering the justice system (CCJBH).

Theory and Argument

Since I am interested in gathering data on public opinion, my research question will be answered through a survey. The three main factors that I want to look at are income level, parental status, and interaction with the justice system, but I will also look at other factors. These include political party, race/ethnicity, knowing someone in the justice system, age, and interest in politics/public policy debates. I want to analyze whether any of these factors significantly affect someone’s thoughts about the effectiveness of providing mental health services to incarcerated juveniles on recidivism. Due to the many factors that I am interested in testing, I have constructed a hypothesis for each one.

My first hypothesis is that income will negatively relate to opinion on the effectiveness of providing mental health services to incarcerated youth in reducing recidivism. I think those who

have a higher income will be less likely to view providing mental health services to incarcerated youth as effective because of funding. With the gaps in information and lack of easily accessible information, it is not a simple task to find out whether providing mental health services to incarcerated juveniles is effective in lowering recidivism rates. Since the funding for these services comes from the government, there might be hesitancy to expand and improve the provided services because it could involve an increased tax on those with more income.

My second hypothesis is that parental status will positively relate to opinion on the effectiveness of providing mental health services to incarcerated youth in reducing recidivism. I think that people who have more children will be more likely to think that providing mental health services to incarcerated juveniles is effective because of greater exposure to children and their behaviors. Being a parent exposes people to the importance of a child's mental well-being and the factors that can impact it. I believe that parents would be more aware of how mental health issues can impact the behaviors of juveniles. Additionally, people with more children have more interactions with other children exposing them to a greater variety of effects of different environments on child behavior. The exposure and knowledge that parents gain because of this is the reason I believe they are more likely to understand the importance of getting the proper care for incarcerated youths with mental health problems.

My third hypothesis is that interaction with the justice system through a job will positively relate to opinions on the effectiveness of providing mental health services to incarcerated youth in reducing recidivism. I think that the more someone interacts with the system, the more likely they are to see mental health services for incarcerated juveniles as an effective way to reduce recidivism. Interacting with the justice system means there is a possibility that more is known about what goes on in the system and what programs are

effective. There is also the chance that people who interact with the justice system are exposed to people with mental health problems, whether juveniles or adults.

My fourth hypothesis is that people who identify as Democrats will be more likely to believe that providing mental health services to incarcerated youth effectively reduces recidivism. Democrats tend to support policies that promote government social welfare programs more. Making mental health services available to incarcerated juveniles is part of social welfare and helps a group of people who have been marginalized. Additionally, Democrats support those who are underprivileged and are at higher risk of having undiagnosed and untreated mental issues.

My fifth hypothesis is that racial and ethnic minorities will be more likely to believe that providing mental health services to incarcerated youth effectively reduces recidivism. Areas that have majority-minority populations also have a history of being neglected. Many of these communities do not have proper access to essential services such as nutritious food. This also applies to the healthcare sector, including mental health care access. Furthermore, racial and ethnic minorities disproportionately make up the incarcerated population. It is because of this disparity that I think they will be more likely to support a system that focuses more on rehabilitation and treatment rather than just imprisonment.

My sixth hypothesis is that knowing someone who is or was incarcerated or knowing someone who works in the justice system will positively relate to opinions on the effectiveness of providing mental health services to incarcerated youth in reducing recidivism. Similar to interactions with the justice system, I think that those who know someone who is associated with the system, whether it be through work or incarceration, will be more supportive of mental health

services. Specifically for knowing someone who is or was incarcerated, the respondent may have more knowledge about what helps inmates recover while incarcerated.

My seventh hypothesis is that people under thirty-five years of age will have the opinion that providing mental health services to incarcerated youth is effective in reducing recidivism. People in the younger age bracket are more aware and educated about mental health problems and the importance of proper care. Additionally, there are fewer social stigmas around mental health among the younger age bracket, which means a higher likelihood that they will see giving incarcerated juveniles access to mental health services as effective in reducing recidivism.

My eighth hypothesis is that those who are more invested in politics/public policy debates will view providing mental health services to incarcerated youth as effective in reducing recidivism. If someone is more informed about the current issues, they will be more likely to take a stance on a topic such as mental health and juvenile incarceration. I think that people who are more interested and invested in politics and public policy will be more likely to support providing mental health services to incarcerated juveniles. Those who know the true effects of mental health services on recidivism rates will be more inclined to take a solid stance on the topic rather than give a neutral answer.

Research Design and Data

My research design used a self-created Qualtrics survey that was distributed through Amazon MTurk to gather data on California adults. A total of thirty-three questions were asked to gather data on all independent variables and the dependent variable for my topic. For the independent variables, questions about age, political alignment, parental status, race/ethnicity, involvement in politics/public policy, interaction with the justice system, knowing someone in the system, and income level were asked.

The questions asked to collect data on the independent variables are listed below. “What is your current age?”, “Are you Hispanic, Latino, or Chicano--or none of these?”, “Choose one or more races that you consider yourself to be: Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or some other race,” “Please give your best guess--indicate the answer that includes your entire household income for last year (2022).”, “Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or something else?”, “How interested are you in politics or public policy debates?”, “Do you have any children?”, “How many children do you have?”, “To what extent do you interact with the criminal justice system at your current job? (i.e., work in a prison, as a social worker, lawyer, police officer, etc.)”, “Do you know anyone, other than yourself, who works in the justice system?”, “Do you know anyone, other than yourself, who is/was incarcerated?”, and “What is your current age?”.

For the income question, respondents were given nine answer options, with the lowest being “Less than \$10,000” and “\$150,000+” being the highest. The question about the respondents' interest in politics and public policy had responses from “Very interested” to “Not interested at all,” with no option to select a neutral option. If respondents answered that they had children, they were asked how many, with “6 or more” being the greatest option. Interaction with the justice system was measured on a scale that included the following options: Never, Rarely, Occasionally, A moderate amount, and A great deal. The answer options for age started at “18-24” and went to “55+” as the highest option. For political affiliation, people had the option to pick “independent” but were then asked if they leaned more Democrat or Republican or if they were truly Independent. If a respondent answered that they leaned more Democrat or Republican, they were grouped with that party during analysis.

While some of the questions I used to measure my independent variables were direct in terms of what they were measuring, the reliability of others may not have been as high. The questions about income, number of children, age, political affiliation, race/ethnicity, knowing anyone who is/was incarcerated, and knowing anyone who works in the justice system all have answers that are reliable as there is no interpretation of the choices available. Having an income in the range of “\$45,000 - \$59,000” means the same thing to each person who took the survey and cannot be interpreted differently.

On the other hand, the questions about interest in politics/public policy debates and interaction with the justice system have answers that can be interpreted differently from person to person. The answer “somewhat interested” to the question “How interested are you in politics or public policy debates?” might mean something different from one respondent to the next. The same goes for the answer choices for the question about interacting with the justice system. What qualifies as “occasionally” interacting with the justice system varies from person to person. It is because of this reason that the answers to these questions may not be as reliable as the answers where there is no possibility for different interpretations.

For the dependent variable, survey takers were asked about their opinion on the effectiveness of providing mental health services to incarcerated youth in reducing recidivism on a Likert scale. The question was, “Recidivism is the tendency for convicted criminals to re-offend. How effective or ineffective do you think providing mental health services to incarcerated juveniles is in lowering recidivism?” and the Likert scale answers ranged from “very ineffective” to “very effective” with an option to answer “neither effective nor ineffective” if the respondent did not want to take a stance.

After 169 survey responses were collected, the results from each question that addresses an independent variable were taken with the answers from the dependent variable question and put into a pivot table so the data could be better organized and read. Most of the independent variables I tested were categorical, so a chi-square test was used to determine whether there was a significant relationship with the dependent variable. The relationship with the dependent variable was tested using an ANOVA test for the ordinal variables, like the number of children someone has.

Due to the nature of how the survey was conducted, the California adults who responded to the survey were not a random sample and were not representative of the true California adult population. This means that the external validity of the findings is low as they cannot be reasonably applied to the California adult population. However, because I wrote the survey questions, the construct validity of the survey is high as I was able to word the questions so that I would get data on the three factors that I was interested in whilst controlling five other ones.

Findings

In testing the relationship between the different factors outlined in my hypotheses and opinion on the effectiveness of providing mental health services to incarcerated juveniles in reducing recidivism, only two of my hypotheses were supported. A positive correlation was found between parental status and opinion on the effectiveness of providing mental health services to incarcerated youth in reducing recidivism. The relationship was analyzed using an ANOVA test, and a p-value of 0.0076 was found. This indicates that more children tend to lead to a more positive opinion about the effectiveness of mental health services. **Figure 1** breaks down the answers of respondents by a percentage based on how many children they responded

having. The different colors represent how people responded to the effectiveness of mental health services in reducing juvenile recidivism.

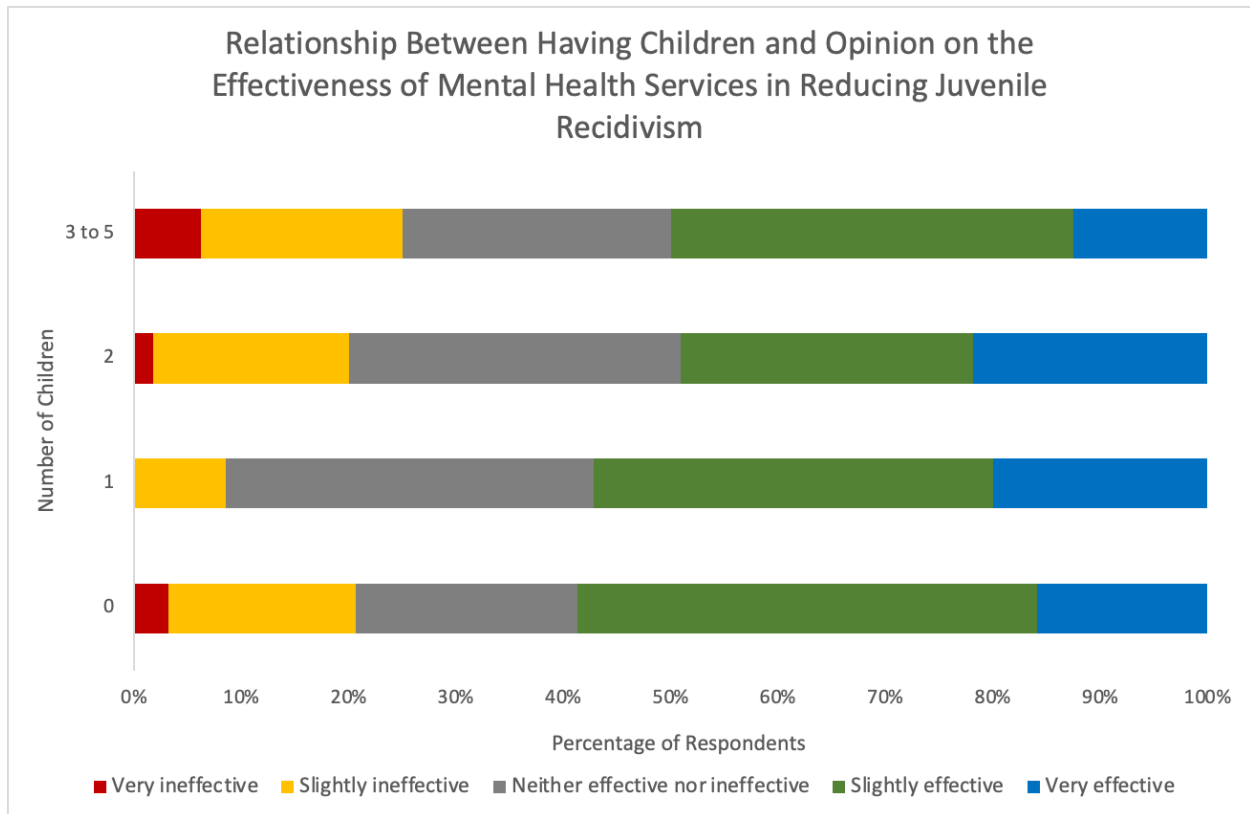


Figure 1: Relationship between Number of Children and Opinion Data Source: MTurk Survey

Table 1 shows that 106 of the 169 respondents had at least one child. Of those who responded to having children, two was the most common answer, with fifty-five responses, the second most common being one child. Even though the answer choice of “6 or more” was given, no one who took the survey responded to having more than five children.

Number of Children	Very ineffective	Slightly ineffective	Neither effective nor ineffective	Slightly effective	Very effective
0	2	11	13	27	10
1	0	3	12	13	7

2	1	10	17	15	12
3 to 5	1	3	4	6	2

Table 1: Number of Children and Opinion Data Source: MTurk Survey

Another positive correlation was also found between interest in politics/public policy debates and opinion on the effectiveness of providing mental health services to incarcerated youth in reducing recidivism. The relationship was analyzed using a chi-square test, and a p-value of 0.013 was found. This indicates that more interest in politics/public policy debates tend to lead to a more positive opinion about the effectiveness of mental health services in reducing juvenile recidivism. **Figure 2** shows that increasing interest in politics/public policy leads to more divergence in opinion about the effectiveness of mental health services in reducing juvenile recidivism.

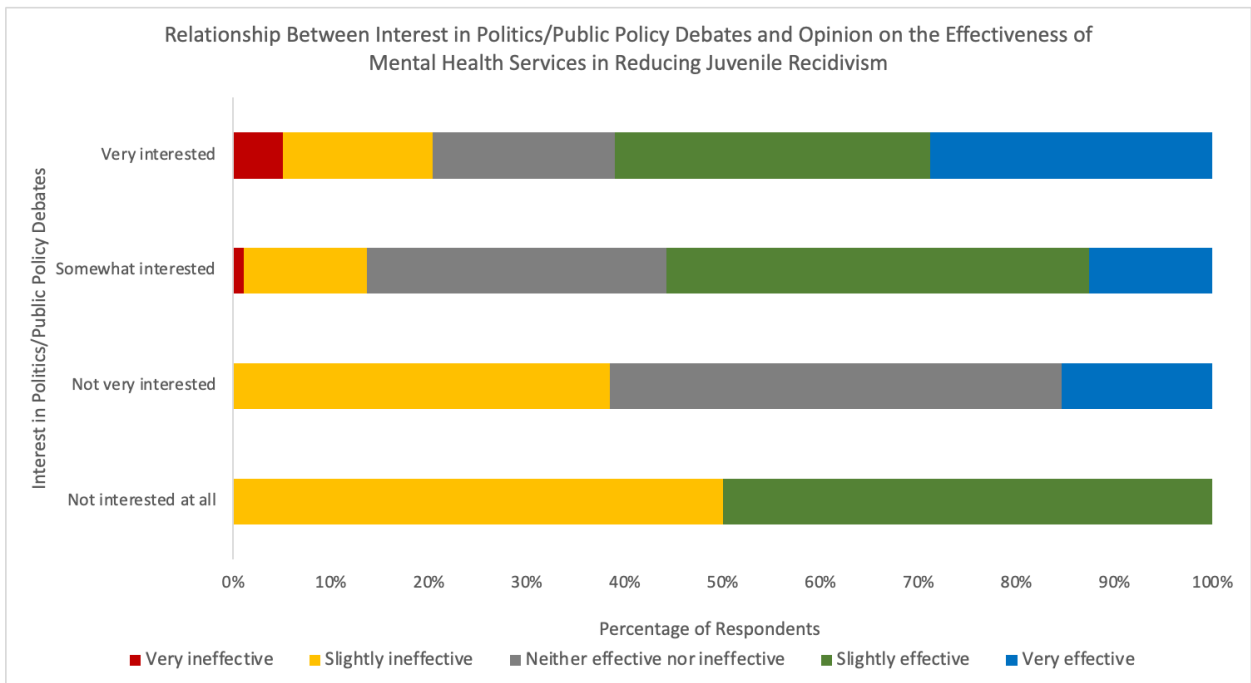


Figure 2: Relationship between Interest in Politics/Public Policy and Opinion Data

Source: MTurk Survey

Table 2 shows that only 15 of the 169 respondents expressed little or no interest in politics/public policy debates. A majority of the respondents expressed being somewhat interested or very interested in politics/public policy debates, with ninety-five responding that they were somewhat interested. The high level of interest in politics/public policy debates that were observed in the survey data is not representative of California’s adult population.

Interest in Politics/Public Policy Debates	Very ineffective	Slightly ineffective	Neither effective nor ineffective	Slightly effective	Very effective
Not interested at all	0	1	0	1	0
Not very interested	0	5	6	0	2
Somewhat interested	1	12	29	41	12
Very interested	3	9	11	19	17

Table 2: Interest in Politics/Public Policy and Opinion Data Source: MTurk Survey

When looking at income level, interaction with the justice system, knowing someone involved with the system, race/ethnicity, political affiliation, and age, no significant correlation was found in relation to opinions about mental health services being effective in reducing juvenile recidivism. The level of interaction with the justice system through current job and political affiliation were the most surprising when it came to the results. Both factors were analyzed using the chi-square test, and the p-values of 0.168 and 0.893 were found, respectively. **Figure 3** shows the relationship between interaction with the justice system and opinions on the effectiveness of mental health services in reducing recidivism among juveniles. The graph shows that while there was no statistically significant impact based on interaction, there is a noticeable trend that more interaction tends to lead to more positive opinions.

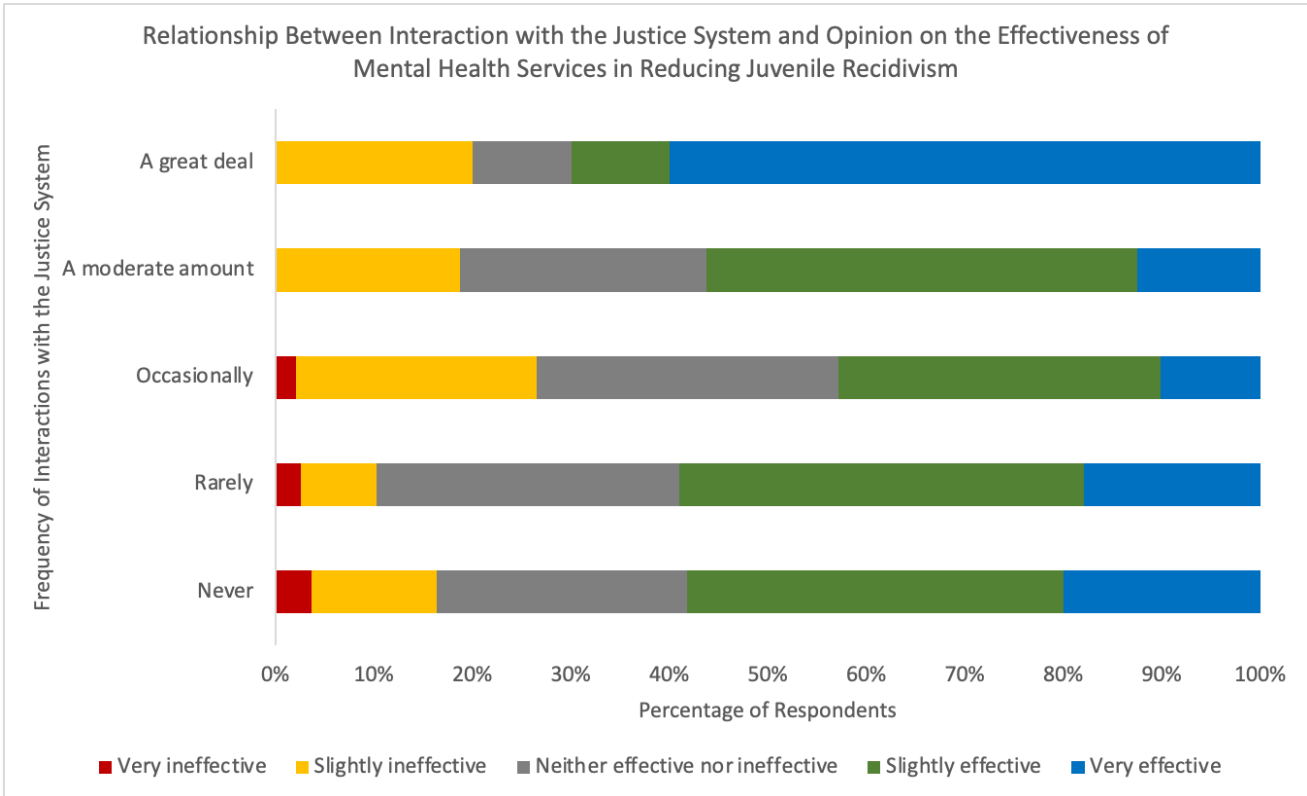


Figure 3: Relationship between Interaction with the Justice System and Opinion Data

Source: MTurk Survey

In **Table 3**, a pretty even distribution of responses can be seen across the “never,” “rarely,” and “occasionally” answer choices. Fifty-five of the respondents answered that they never interacted with the justice system through their job, with forty-nine respondents saying they occasionally do and thirty-nine respondents saying they rarely do. Out of the ten respondents who said that they interact a great deal with the system through their job, six of them saw mental health services as very effective in reducing recidivism among juveniles.

Interaction with the criminal justice system	Very ineffective	Slightly ineffective	Neither effective nor ineffective	Slightly effective	Very effective
Never	2	7	14	21	11

Rarely	1	3	12	16	7
Occasionally	1	12	15	16	5
A moderate amount	0	3	4	7	2
A great deal	0	2	1	1	6

Table 3: Relationship between Interaction with the Justice System and Opinion Data

Source: MTurk Survey

When looking at political affiliation, most of the survey respondents identified as Democrats. Despite this, the variance in responses across Republicans and Democrats was largely the same. **Figure 4** shows that a majority of Democrats and Republicans responded that they believed mental health services were slightly effective in reducing recidivism among juveniles. The overall pattern of the graph shows a similar skew in both parties, whereas the respondents who identified as independent do not show the same skew.

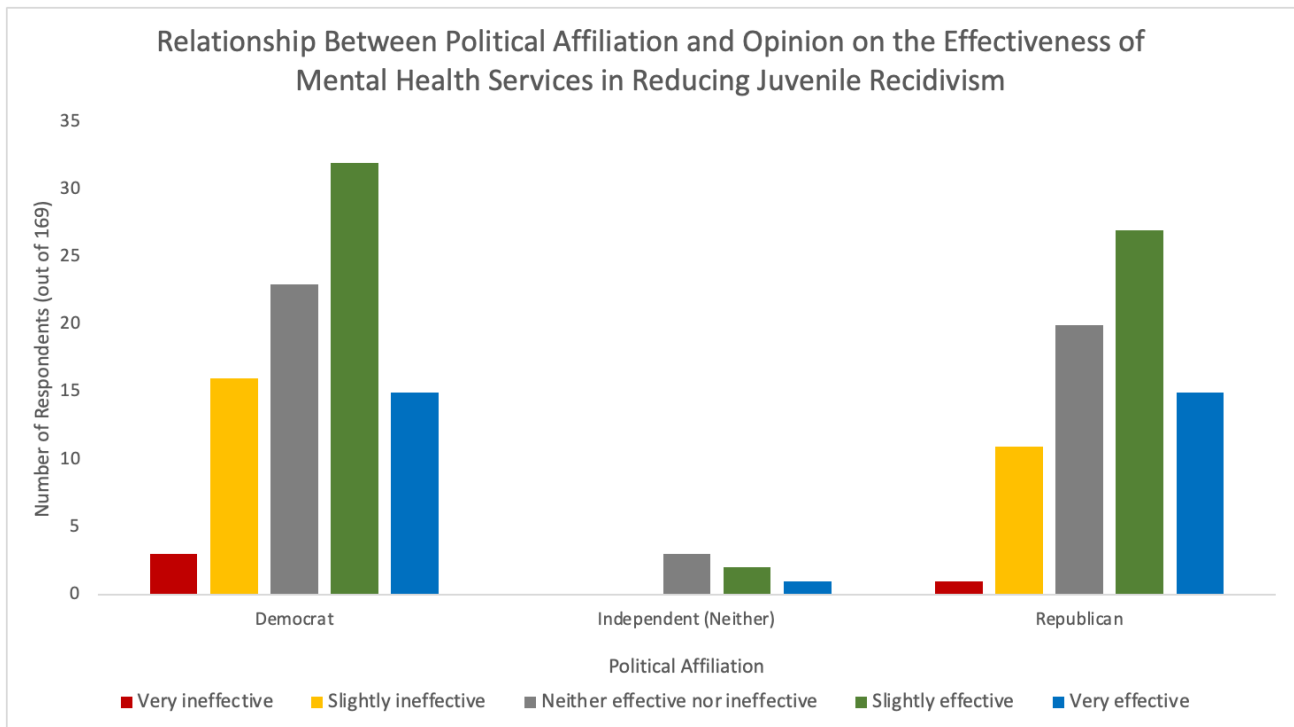


Figure 4: Relationship between Political Affiliation and Opinion Data Source: MTurk Survey

Overall, 36.1% of the respondents said that mental health services were “slightly effective” in reducing juvenile recidivism. Only 18.3% of respondents said that mental health services were ineffective in some capacity in reducing juvenile recidivism. Out of the eight factors that I tested, only two had statistically significant correlations to my dependent variable, but with the number of trends that appeared in some other factors, it is possible that more responses could uncover additional significant patterns.

Implications

Public policy is heavily dependent on public opinion. Being aware of what the public knows and feels about an issue is a key element in creating and implementing policies and building support for new regulations. Additionally, knowing what types of policies, funding, and regulations the public favors can help accelerate future decision-making on complex issues. Through the research I conducted, the public opinion data supports the 2016 data that people want to see a more rehabilitative model of care for juveniles. The data on public opinion and policies addressing mental health care for those who are incarcerated are still lacking. By collecting more data on public opinion through surveys, policymakers will be able to understand what the public supports in terms of mental health care for incarcerated youth. Overall, the findings show that California adults view providing mental services as an effective way of reducing recidivism rates among juveniles.

Knowing that there is support for providing mental health services to incarcerated juveniles in hopes of reducing recidivism means that policymakers can use the information to create more effective policies that address this issue. Furthermore, this information can help

improve and expand access to mental health services for incarcerated juveniles. The programs, caregiving training, and diversity of care can all be improved so that juveniles who are incarcerated and struggling with mental health problems can get proper and timely treatment.

Expanding awareness can also help preventive programs that operate outside the justice system. Systems like education and programs like social services that also interact with juveniles can also benefit from more awareness of the public's opinion on providing additional mental health services to troubled juveniles. Better evaluation tools mean the possibility of early diagnosis and treatment, which can help prevent juveniles from entering the justice system in the first place. Knowing that interest in politics/public policy debates has a noticeable impact on the opinion of mental health services means that more people should be encouraged to take an interest in learning about what is happening around them, especially in areas they care about and support.

Further research into the public's opinion about the factors that were tested in my research and their effects on opinion is warranted in addition to other factors that were unaccounted for. The survey results that I collected were not representative or random, meaning that the application of the data is limited. Creating a more detailed survey or surveys that look at the different factors more closely can help get a better understanding of the influencing factors on opinion. Getting a larger sample size would also mean better and more accurate data that can be applied to the California adult population.

Some of the factors from my research that could be looked into further based on patterns seen include political affiliation, race/ethnicity, interaction with the justice system through a job, age, and income. In the future, creating a survey that dives more deeply into each one of these factors by not only looking at surface answers but also why can help better the understanding of

how effective the public sees mental health services in reducing recidivism. Additionally, experts in fields that interact with juveniles, such as educators, social workers, law enforcement, healthcare workers, and mental health professionals, could have more information about juvenile behavior and underlying causes.

In general, very little is known about mental health problems, including their causes, effects, and treatments. Stigmas around mental health have slowly started to be chipped away as the younger population is bringing more awareness and being more supportive of taking care of mental health. More access to appropriate treatment is also spreading, and those who struggle with mental health problems are slowly being able to access the care they need. However, things need to speed up and become more accessible, especially for those who are at high risk of entering the justice system because of mental health struggles. The only way that can be done is through more research and effective policy building.

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