



## Approval of state's criminal justice reforms grows

Yet, few believe the system is fair or effective at keeping communities safe

*The fifth in a series of six reports from the 2019 Louisiana Survey, a project of the Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs*



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# Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs

The Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs is partnership-driven, action-oriented, and dedicated to exploring contemporary issues at the intersection of mass communication and public life. Its interdisciplinary approach draws together experts from diverse fields to advance research and dialogue. The intent is to inspire our communities to think deeply, develop solutions, take action and broaden knowledge. The Center's role, within the state's flagship university, is to respond quickly to the needs of state governance in addressing challenges facing Louisiana, particularly in times of crisis such as during Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill and the 2016 historic floods. Underlying the Center's endeavors is to strengthen and advance the Manship School's national and state leadership in media and politics.

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## About the Louisiana Survey

The *2019 Louisiana Survey* is the eighteenth in an annual series sponsored by the Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs at Louisiana State University's Manship School of Mass Communication.

The mission of the *Louisiana Survey* is to establish benchmarks as well as to capture change in residents' assessments of state government services. The survey is further dedicated to tracking public opinion on the contemporary policy issues that face the state. Each iteration of the *Louisiana Survey* contains core items designed to serve as barometers of public sentiment, including assessments of whether the state is heading in the right direction or wrong direction, perceptions about the most important problems facing the state, as well as evaluations of public revenue sources and spending priorities.

In the *2019 Louisiana Survey*, this core is supplemented by measures of support for compromise; support for increases in teacher pay, the minimum wage, and the gasoline tax; approval of major recent policy developments such as criminal justice reform and Medicaid expansion; and attitudes toward a number of social issues such as gun policy, marijuana legalization, and sports gambling.

As part of an effort to ensure that the *Louisiana Survey* fulfills its public service mission, the research team solicited input about topics for the survey from members of the government and policy community across the political spectrum. Additionally, the research team drew upon expertise in public policy and polling from Louisiana State University faculty. These advisors provided invaluable insight into the design of the questionnaire and in identifying the contemporary policy questions that could most benefit from an understanding of the public's views. While we are indebted to them for their time and contributions, they bear no responsibility for final decisions on the questionnaire, analysis, and interpretation presented in this report or any mistakes therein.

We especially thank the Reilly Family Foundation for their generous support and vision in helping to create the Louisiana Survey.

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## Summary

This is the fifth of six reports from the *2019 Louisiana Survey*, a project of the Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs at Louisiana State University's Manship School of Mass Communication.

This report includes results for opinions on criminal justice.

Key findings include

- The percentage of Louisiana residents who approve of the state's criminal justice reforms is up from 61 percent in 2018 to 70 percent today. This growth is especially strong among Republicans (+14 percentage points) and independents (+12 percentage points).
- Despite the popularity of criminal justice reform, few Louisiana residents believe the system is fair or believe it is effective at keeping communities safe. Only about one-third (32 percent) agree with the statement that the current criminal justice system in Louisiana is fair. Most state residents (54 percent) disagree with this statement. Similarly, 32 percent agree that Louisiana's current criminal justice system is effective at keeping communities safe, and 55 percent disagree.

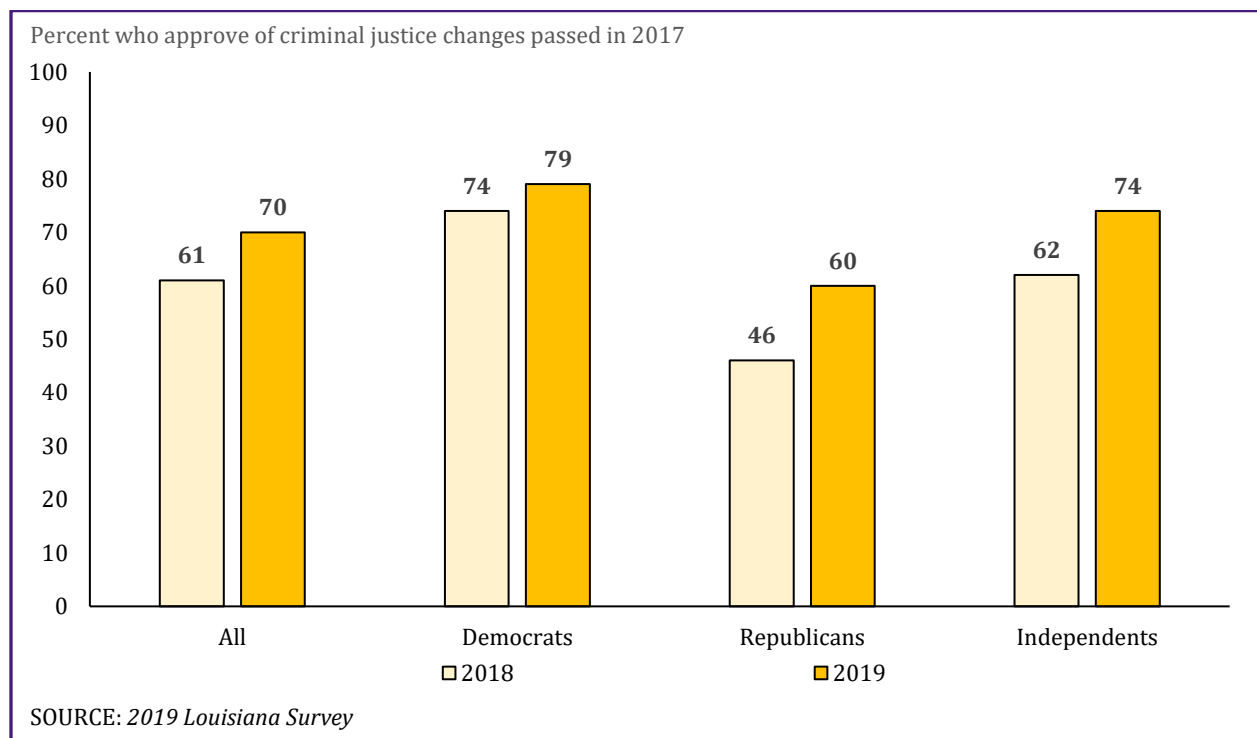
# Criminal Justice

## Most approve of criminal justice reforms

In 2017, Louisiana launched a number of reforms to its criminal justice system, such as shortening sentences for some crimes. Seventy percent of Louisiana residents approve of these changes to the state’s criminal justice system. This percentage is up from 61 percent in 2018 (figure 1). This growth is especially strong among Republicans (+14 percentage points) and independents (+12 percentage points).

The 2019 Louisiana Survey also includes two questions about specific criminal justice policies we previously asked in 2017, just prior to the legislative session in which the state adopted a criminal justice reform package. Comparing responses from the 2017 and 2019 surveys allows us to examine how opinions about criminal justice policy has changed since adoption of the reform package.

**Figure 1: Bipartisan approval of state's criminal justice reforms**



Today, 65 percent of state residents support judicial flexibility to determine appropriate criminal sentences rather than mandatory minimum sentences – stable since 2018, but a modest slip from 72 percent in 2017. Meanwhile, opinions about offering more alternatives to prison, such as drug treatment and rehabilitation programs, for people convicted of non-violent offenses has remained stable since 2017.

### **Few Louisiana residents think system is fair or effective at keeping communities safe**

Despite the popularity of criminal justice reform, few Louisiana residents believe the system is fair or believe it is effective at keeping communities safe. Only about one-third (32 percent) agree with the statement that the current criminal justice system in Louisiana is fair. Most state residents (54 percent) disagree with this statement. Similarly, 32 percent agree that Louisiana's current criminal justice system is effective at keeping communities safe, and 55 percent disagree.

In general, more Republicans than Democrats (+20 percentage points) agree with the statement that the current criminal justice system is fair and more Democrats than Republicans (+22 percentage points) disagree with the statement. There is no difference

between Democrats and Republicans in their perceptions about how effective the system is at keeping communities safe.

Despite the remarkable similarity in topline response frequencies between these two questions, it is worth noting that the participants who agree (or disagree) with the statement about fairness are not the same participants who agree (or disagree) with the statement about safety. Overall, 18 percent of participants agree with both statements and 41 percent disagree with both statements. Nine percent agree that the system is fair but disagree that it is effective at keeping communities safe. Likewise, another nine percent disagree that the system is fair but agree that it is effective at keeping communities safe.

Republicans are more inclined (+7 percentage points) than Democrats are to agree that the system is fair but disagree that it keeps communities safe. In contrast, Democrats are more inclined (+15 percentage points) than Republicans are to agree that the system keeps communities safe but disagree that it is fair. The percent of Republicans who agree with both statements is 11 percentage points higher than the percent of Democrats who agree with both. The percent of Democrats who disagree with both statements is five percentage points higher than the percent of Republicans who disagree with both.

## Survey Methodology

The analysis in this report is based on telephone interviews conducted among a statewide sample of 917 adults (18 years of age or older) living in Louisiana. The survey was conducted by interviewers at Louisiana State University's Public Policy Research Lab. The sample includes 385 respondents interviewed via landline telephone and 532 respondents interviewed on a cellphone, including 365 who do not have a landline telephone. Interviews for this survey were conducted from February 7 to March 15, 2019.

Approximately three-fourths of the sample (76 percent) was stratified across parishes proportional to their adult population to ensure geographic representation across the state. The remaining 24 percent of the sample was drawn statewide. For both the parish and statewide samples, the design of the landline samples ensures representation of both listed and unlisted numbers by use of random digit dialing. Similarly, the cell phone samples are randomly drawn from known, available phone number banks dedicated to wireless service. Both samples, landline and cellphone, were provided by Marketing Systems Group.

The combined landline and cell phone sample is weighted using an iterative procedure that matches race, education, household income, gender, and age to known profiles for the adult population of Louisiana found in the Census Bureau's American Community Survey 2017 one-year estimates. Weighting cannot eliminate every source of nonresponse bias. However, proper administration of random sampling combined with accepted weighting techniques has a strong record of yielding unbiased results.

The sample has an overall margin of error of +/- 4.6 percentage points. The margin of error includes adjustment due to the weighting procedure. The design effect due to weighting is 1.4 percentage points; that is, the margin of error is 1.4 percentage points larger than it would be for a simple random sample of this size without weighting.

In addition to sampling error, as accounted for through the margin of error, readers should recognize that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls. As often as possible, the *Louisiana Survey* follows the wording of relevant questions repeatedly used by reputable public opinion research institutions and projects, such as the Pew Research Center, Gallup Inc., and the American National Election Studies.

The *2019 Louisiana Survey* has a response rate of six percent. This response rate is the percentage of eligible residential households or personal cell phones in the sample for which an interview is completed. The rate is calculated using the American Association for Public Opinion Research's method for Response Rate 3 as published in their Standard Definitions. Response rates for telephones have been on decline for several decades and frequently fall in the single digits even among the very best survey research organizations.

Louisiana State University's Public Policy Research Lab, a division of the Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs, designed the survey questionnaire and sampling strategy, computed the survey weights, and conducted all statistical analysis.



## Question Wording and Toplines

Unless otherwise indicated, results are for the total sample. Not all respondents were asked each question, and questions asked to a subset of respondents are labelled accordingly. For these questions, percentages are only for those respondents who were asked the particular question. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

### Q1.

Now we would like to ask you about criminal justice in Louisiana. Please tell me whether you agree, disagree, or neither agree nor disagree with each of the following statements. First - Louisiana's current criminal justice system is fair.

|                                 |    |
|---------------------------------|----|
| Agree.....                      | 32 |
| Disagree.....                   | 54 |
| Neither .....                   | 11 |
| Don't know/Refused [VOL.] ..... | 3  |

### Q2.

Next - Louisiana's current criminal justice system is effective at keeping communities safe.

|                                 |    |
|---------------------------------|----|
| Agree.....                      | 32 |
| Disagree.....                   | 55 |
| Neither .....                   | 12 |
| Don't know/Refused [VOL.] ..... | 1  |

### Q3.

Do you support or oppose having more alternatives to prison - such as drug treatment or rehabilitation programs - for people convicted of non-violent offenses?

|                                 |    |
|---------------------------------|----|
| Support .....                   | 88 |
| Oppose.....                     | 11 |
| Don't know/Refused [VOL.] ..... | 2  |

### Q4.

Recently, Louisiana made several changes to its criminal justice system such as shortening prison sentences for some crimes. Do you approve or disapprove of these changes?

|                                 |    |
|---------------------------------|----|
| Approve .....                   | 70 |
| Disapprove .....                | 21 |
| Don't know/Refused [VOL.] ..... | 9  |

**Q5.**

As you may know, mandatory minimum sentences require those convicted of certain crimes to serve a certain length of time in prison. Some people say that instead of mandatory minimums, judges should have the flexibility to determine sentences based on the facts of each case. Do you support or oppose letting judges have the flexibility to set sentences?

|                                 |    |
|---------------------------------|----|
| Support .....                   | 65 |
| Oppose.....                     | 31 |
| Don't know/Refused [VOL.] ..... | 4  |