



## What Kentuckians Think about *Treatment vs. Prison for People with Severe Mental Illnesses*

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Results From the Foundation for a Healthy Kentucky  
and The Health Foundation of Greater Cincinnati



Many studies have estimated that about 10% of people in jails and prisons have **severe** mental illnesses. Many people with severe mental illnesses cycle between the community and criminal justice systems without getting treatment for their illnesses. Community-based treatment is more effective than prison in preventing repeated offenses for many people with severe mental illnesses.

What do Kentucky adults think about treatment versus incarceration for people with severe mental illness convicted of nonviolent crimes? The Foundation for a Healthy Kentucky and The Health Foundation of Greater Cincinnati asked adults questions about this topic on the 2009 *Kentucky Health Issues Poll*.

### Three-Fourths of Kentuckians Favor Treatment over Incarceration

Assuming that both treatment and incarceration cost the same, 72% of Kentuckians favor replacing prison sentences with mandatory mental illness treatment programs for people with severe mental illnesses<sup>1</sup> who are convicted of nonviolent crimes.

**Suppose that sending a severely mentally ill person to a mandatory mental illness treatment program cost the same amount as sending that person to prison.<sup>+</sup>**

**Would you favor or oppose replacing prison sentences with mandatory mental illness treatment programs for...** (Graph presents only those who said they strongly or somewhat favor replacing prison sentences with treatment.)

People with severe mental illnesses who are convicted of non-violent crimes



People with severe mental illnesses who are convicted of non-violent crimes and who have no prior criminal record



■ Strongly favor      ■ Somewhat favor

<sup>+</sup> Treatment and incarceration costs vary dramatically and almost never cost the same. The question was worded this way so that respondents' perceptions of cost would not affect their answers.

The cost of treatment and incarceration vary dramatically depending on what is included in the calculation. They almost never cost the same amount, but the question was worded in this fashion so that respondents' perceptions of cost would not affect their answers.

An even larger percentage of Kentuckians (79%) favor treatment over incarceration when the person has no prior criminal record and if

both treatment and incarceration cost the same amount.

There was strong support for treatment over incarceration across all demographic groups tracked by the Poll.

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this poll, "severe mental illnesses" were described as "serious chronic illness that affect the brain. People with these illnesses may hear voices, have hallucinations or serious delusions,

experience profound depression or paralyzing anxiety, or have uncontrollable mood swings. These disorders can profoundly disrupt a person's thinking, ability to relate to others, and ability to cope with the demands of life.

When the illness is active, a person may lose touch with reality or may not be able to process information normally."