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 illnesses1 who are convicted of nonviolent crimes.

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.

1 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.”

These findings unless otherwise noted are from the 2009 Kentucky Health Issues Poll, funded by the Foundation for a Healthy Kentucky and The Health Foundation of Greater Cincinnati. The Kentucky Health Issues Poll was conducted October 8–November 6, 2009, by the Institute for Policy Research at the University of Cincinnati. A random sample of 1,669 adults from throughout Kentucky was interviewed by telephone. This included 1,464 landline interviews and 205 cell phone interviews with people who did not have a landline telephone. In 95 of 100 cases, the statewide estimates will be accurate to ±2.4%. In addition to sampling error, there are other sources of variation inherent in public opinion studies, such as non-response, question wording, or context effects that can introduce error or bias. For more information about the Kentucky Health Issues Poll, please visit www.healthy-ky.org or www.healthfoundation.org/khip.html.