

Public Attitudes To Prison

February 2007



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Introduction

Background

- The Irish Penal Reform Trust commissioned TNS mrbi to gauge public reaction to a range of issues related to the prison system.
- Interviewing was completed amongst with a nationally representative sample of adults aged 18+ years at 100 sampling points around the country.
- All interviews were conducted face-to-face in the respondent's own home between 8th – 26th January 2007.

Findings

Preferred Crime Initiative: €10 Million Budget

Base: All Respondents

	Total (1,000)	Party Support		
		F.F. (294) %	F.G. (150) %	Labour (76)* %
400 additional Gardaí	37%	41	33	37
300 additional youth workers to work with children	17%	17	13	24
840 additional drug treatment places	15%	14	16	11
<hr/>				
2000 additional community supervision places for offenders	7%	5	11	8
400 additional places in mental health treatment programmes	5%	5	5	7
110 additional prison places	5%	5	5	4
<hr/>				
1500 additional probation places for offenders	4%	2	5	4
30 additional CCTV schemes	4%	5	5	4
Other	2%	2	3	-
<hr/>				
Don't know	5%	4	4	3

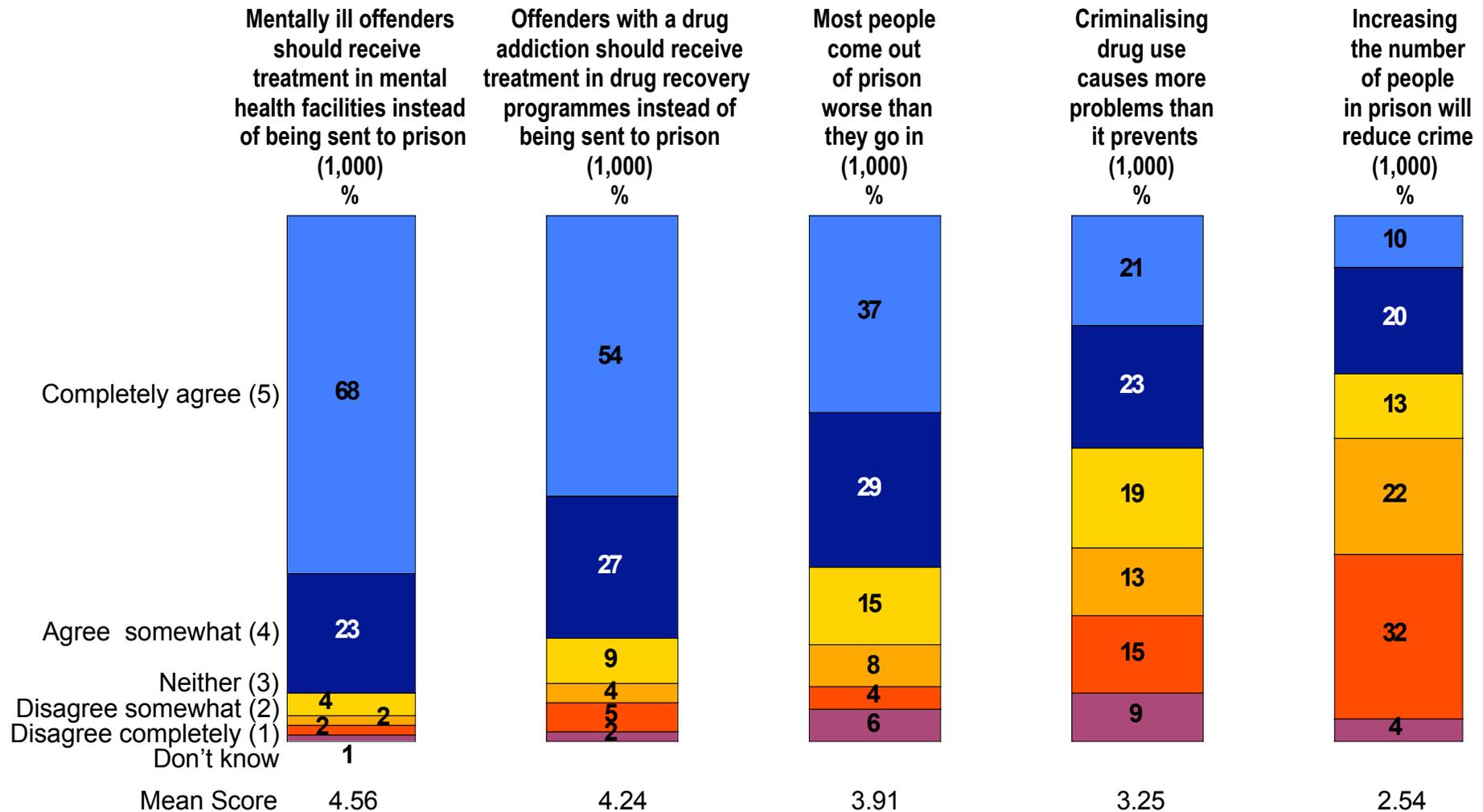
* Caution: Small Base

Q. If you had a budget of €10 million to spend on tackling crime, which one of the initiatives on this card do you think would be the best way to spend that €10 million?

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Agreement With Statements Regarding The Penal System: Summary

Base: All Respondents



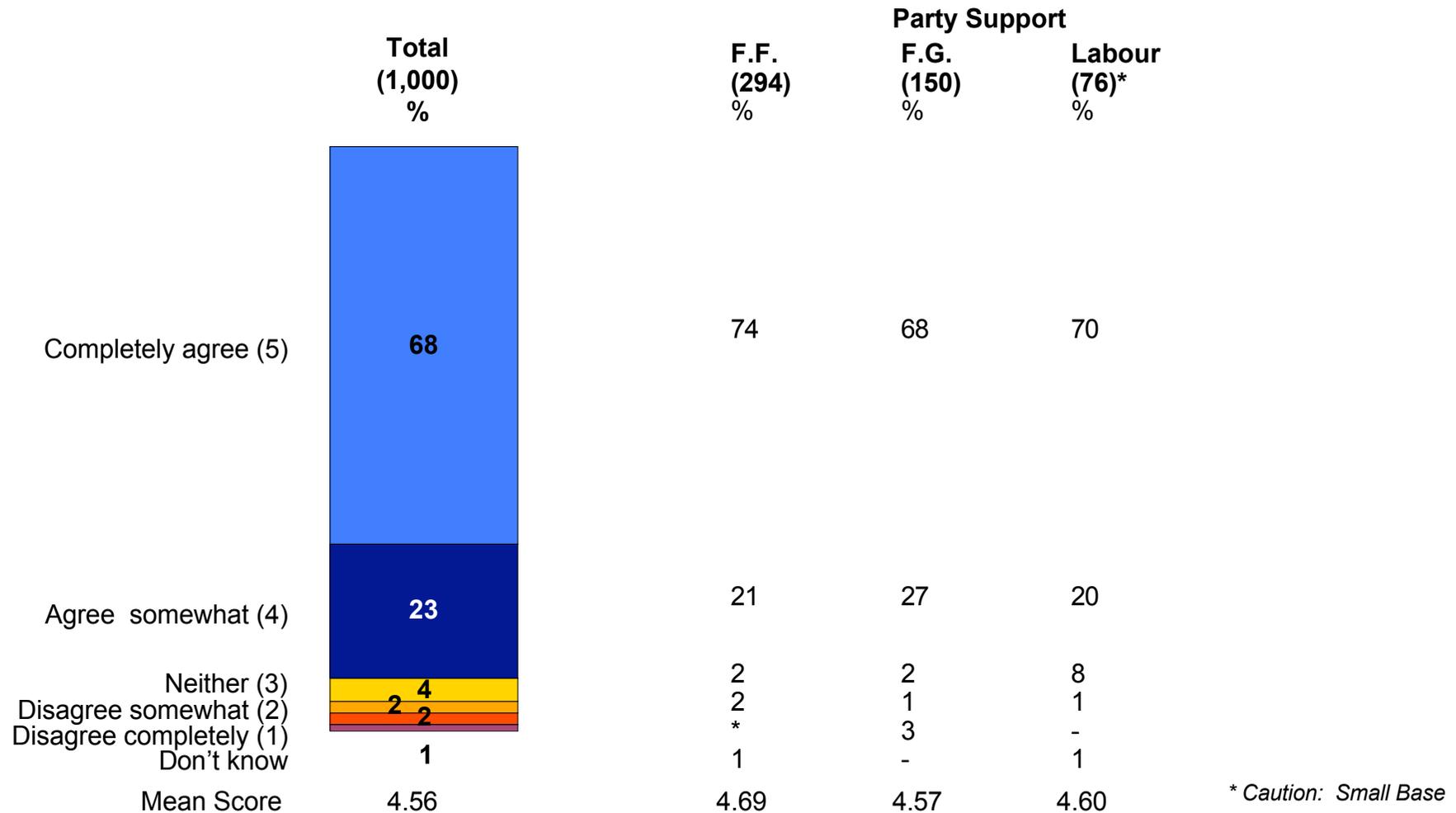
Q. Using a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is completely agree and 5 is completely disagree, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements.

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Agreement With Statements Regarding The Penal System X Party Support

Base: All Respondents

"Mentally ill offenders should receive treatment in mental health facilities instead of being sent to prison"



Q. Using a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is completely agree and 5 is completely disagree, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements.

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Agreement With Statements Regarding The Penal System X Party Support

Base: All Respondents

“Offenders with a drug addiction should receive treatment in drug recovery programmes instead of being sent to prison”

	Total (1,000) %	Party Support		
		F.F. (294) %	F.G. (150) %	Labour (76)* %
Completely agree (5)	54	54	62	54
Agree somewhat (4)	27	29	28	22
Neither (3)	9	7	6	13
Disagree somewhat (2)	4	5	-	3
Disagree completely (1)	5	3	3	5
Don't know	2	2	1	3
Mean Score	4.24	4.28	4.46	4.20

* Caution: Small Base

Q. Using a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is completely agree and 5 is completely disagree, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements.

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Agreement With Statements Regarding The Penal System X Party Support

Base: All Respondents

"Most people come out of prison worse than they go in"

	Total (1,000) %	F.F. (294) %	F.G. (150) %	Labour (76)* %
Completely agree (5)	37	38	38	36
Agree somewhat (4)	29	33	23	36
Neither (3)	15	13	18	9
Disagree somewhat (2)	8	6	8	11
Disagree completely (1)	4	4	5	4
Don't know	6	5	8	5
Mean Score	3.91	4.02	3.89	3.93

* Caution: Small Base

Q. Using a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is completely agree and 5 is completely disagree, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements.

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Agreement With Statements Regarding The Penal System X Party Support

Base: All Respondents

“Criminalising drug use causes more problems than it prevents”

	Total (1,000) %	F.F. (294) %	Party Support F.G. (150) %	Labour (76)* %
Completely agree (5)	21	19	20	33
Agree somewhat (4)	23	25	21	18
Neither (3)	19	21	17	20
Disagree somewhat (2)	13	14	13	11
Disagree completely (1)	15	16	14	12
Don't know	9	5	14	7
Mean Score	3.25	3.19	3.23	3.54

* Caution: Small Base

Q. Using a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is completely agree and 5 is completely disagree, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements.

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Agreement With Statements Regarding The Penal System X Party Support

Base: All Respondents

"Increasing the number of people in prison will reduce crime"

	Total (1,000) %	F.F. (294) %	F.G. (150) %	Labour (76)* %
Completely agree (5)	10	12	14	3
Agree somewhat (4)	20	21	21	18
Neither (3)	13	13	11	16
Disagree somewhat (2)	22	22	18	18
Disagree completely (1)	32	28	32	41
Don't know	4	5	3	4
Mean Score	2.54	2.67	2.66	2.21

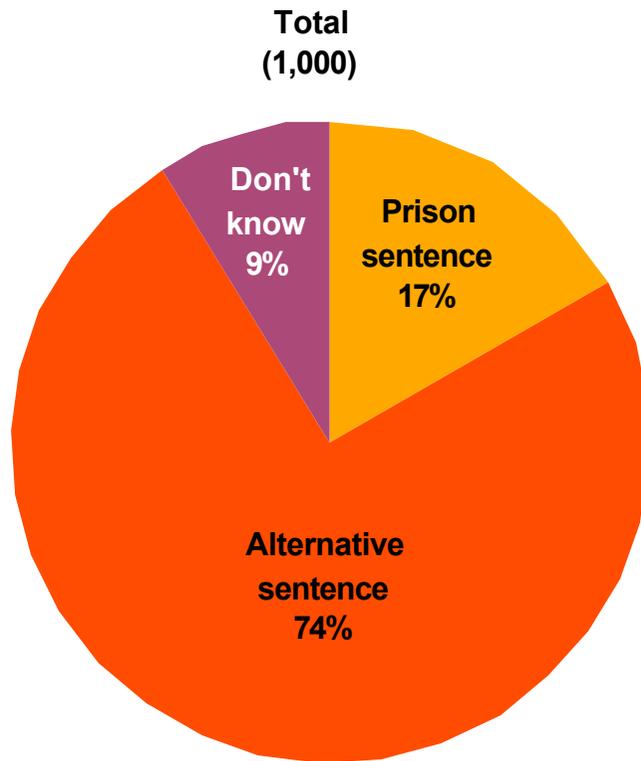
* Caution: Small Base

Q. Using a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is completely agree and 5 is completely disagree, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements.

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Preferred Handling Of Young Offenders

Base: All Respondents



	Party Support		
	F.F.	F.G.	Labour
	(294)	(150)	(76)*
	%	%	%
Prison	22	17	14
Alternative	73	74	70
Don't know	5	9	16

* Caution: Small Base

Q. Do you think young offenders (i.e. offenders under 18 years of age) should generally be punished with a prison sentence or with an alternative sentence such as community service, counselling or rehabilitation?

Preferred Measures For Dealing With Non-Violent Offenders

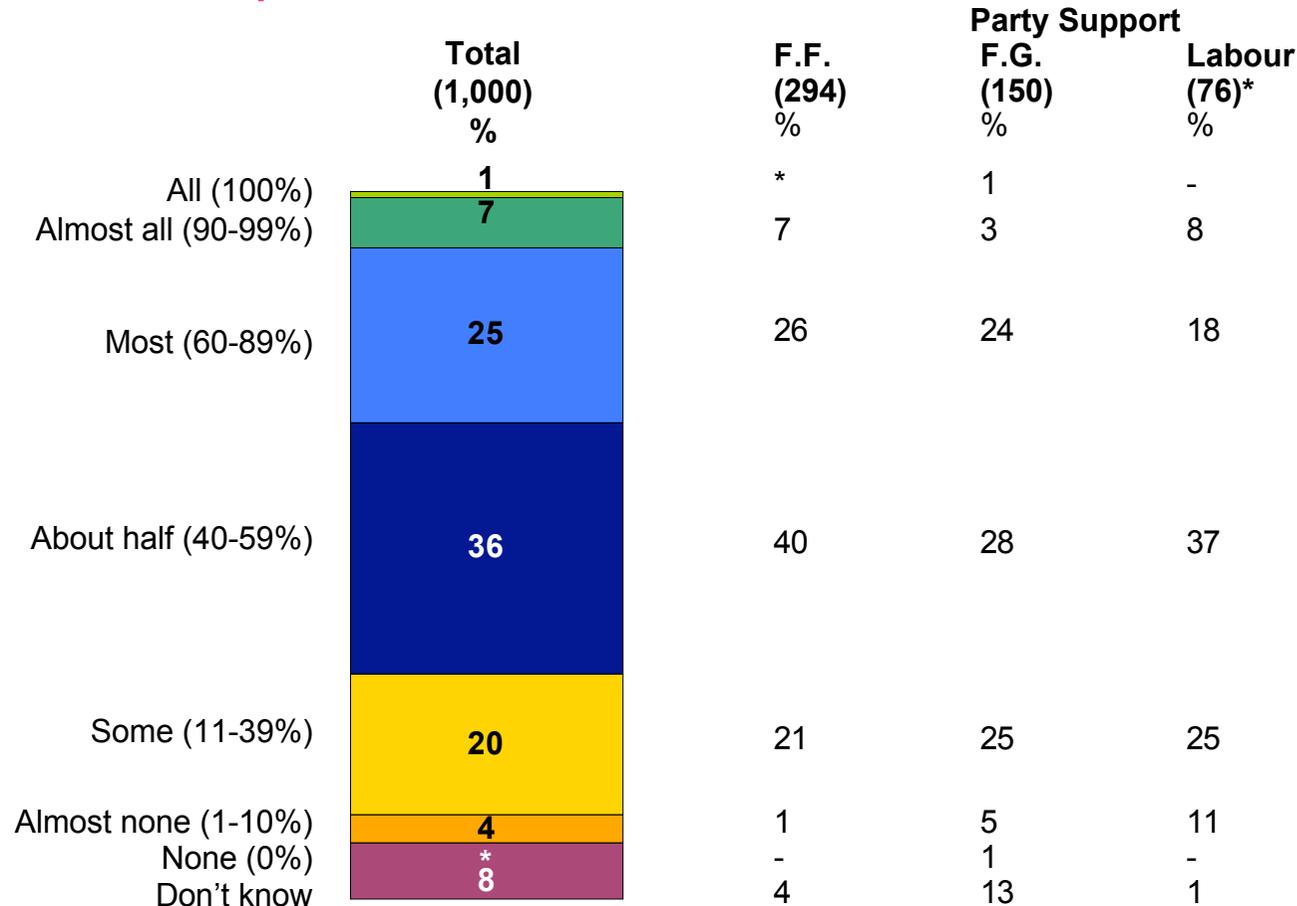
	First Preference (1,000)	Total Preferences (982)	Total Preferences X Party Support		
			F.F. (294) %	F.G. (150) %	Labour (76)* %
Drug treatment programmes for non-violent offenders with a drug problem	12%	41%	42	42	37
Community service	17%	39%	37	43	39
Mental health treatment programmes for non-violent offenders with a mental health problem	7%	34%	35	32	35
Prison sentencing at the judge's discretion	17%	30%	30	30	25
Compensation given by the offender to the victim	8%	29%	27	30	39
Probation/supervision in the community by probation workers	5%	27%	28	26	24
Suspended sentences with attached conditions	7%	24%	25	22	31
Mandatory/compulsory sentences	13%	24%	24	24	21
Counselling for anger management/aggression	5%	17%	14	18	15
Mediation talks between the offender and the victim	3%	14%	14	11	16
Suspended sentences	3%	13%	14	14	9
Other	1%		1	-	1
Don't know/none of these	2		n/a	n/a	n/a

* Caution: Small Base

Q. Which one of these measures would you most prefer to see used to deal with non-violent offenders?

Perceived Proportion Of Violent Offenders Committed To Prison In 2005

Base: All Respondents



Q. Approximately 5,000 people served a prison sentence in Ireland last year.
What proportion of these do you think were convicted of a violent offence?

* Caution: Small Base

Management Summary

Management Summary

Preferred Crime Initiatives

- When asked which initiative they would most like to see implemented given a budget of €10 million, approaching 4 in 10 (37%) adults would opt for 400 additional Gardaí. This was followed at some remove by 300 youth workers to work with children (17%) and 840 additional drug treatment places (15%).

Opinions Of The Penal System

- Those who participated in the research agreed almost universally that mentally ill offenders should be treated in a mental health facility instead of being sent to prison (91%). Whilst 8 in 10 agreed that offenders with a drug addiction should be placed in drug recovery programmes instead of serving a prison sentence (81%).
- Most respondents agreed that more people come out of prison worse than they go in (66%). Whilst the majority (54%) disagreed with the statement 'increasing prison numbers will reduce crime', a sizeable minority (30%) agreed with this solution.
- Just over 4 in 10 (44%) agreed that criminalising drug use causes more problems than it prevents, while 28% disagreed. Interestingly, the question of whether or not criminalising drug use causes more problems than it prevents attracted the highest level of uncertainty with 19% answering 'neither agree nor disagree' and a further 9% answering 'don't know'.

Management Summary

Young Offenders

- Three quarters (74%) of those interviewed were in favour of using alternatives to prison when dealing with young offenders. Fianna Fail supporters were marginally more likely to favour prison sentencing.

Preferred Measures For Non-Violent Offenders

- The preferred options for non-violent offenders are drug treatment for offenders with drug problems (41%), community service (39%) and mental health treatment for offenders with mental health problems (34%).

Perceived Proportion Of Violent Offenders Committed To Prison

- There is widespread misconception amongst the public regarding the proportion of prisoners who served a sentence for a violent offence in 2005. Figures from the Irish Prison Service Annual Report 2005 show that 15% of prisoners were convicted of a Group 1 or Group 2 offence.
- However, the research findings show 69% of respondents overestimated the proportion of prisoners sentenced for violent offences, compared to just 4% who underestimated the proportion.

Conclusions

- On balance, the public would prefer to see resources diverted towards preventing crime (more Gardaí, more youth workers) than towards prisons.
- Public opinion suggests that the severity of penal sentencing should reflect the crime and personal circumstances of the offender.
- Less punitive measures are preferred for non-violent offenders (drug and mental health programmes and community service).
- There is a persistent preference to see more treatment programmes available for those with drug or mental health problems.
- Despite political party stereotyping, there is very little difference of opinion between supporters of the three main political parties in terms of opinions of the penal system and preferred measures for tackling crime.