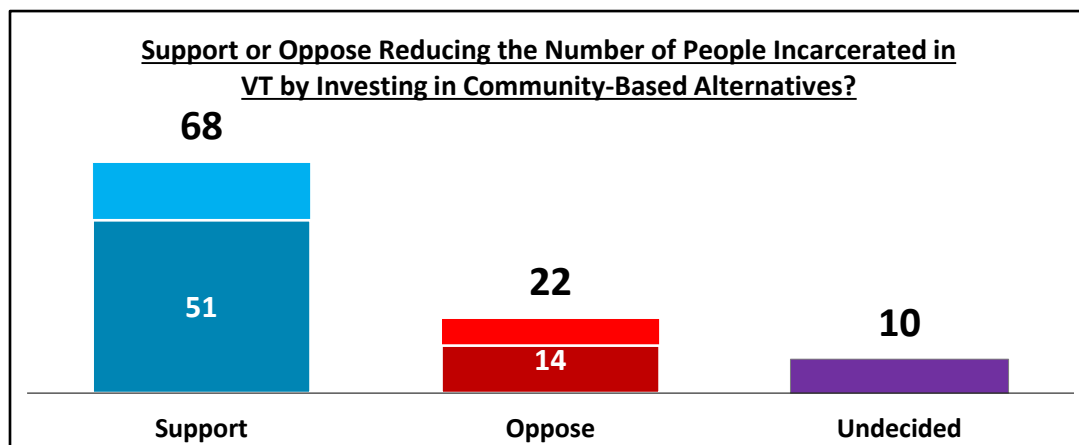


To: Interested Parties  
 From: Daniel Gotoff and Celinda Lake, *Lake Research Partners*  
 RE: Strong Support among Vermont Voters for Reducing the State’s Incarcerated Population  
 Date: January 21, 2020

A recent survey of likely voters in Vermont finds strong and consistent support for reducing the state’s incarcerated population by investing in community-based alternatives, such as drug and mental health treatment, restorative justice centers, and other community-based programs. Not only are an overwhelming majority of voters in favor of this proposal today, but support remains remarkably consistent even after voters hear arguments on both sides of the debate, including strongly-worded attacks on proposed reforms. The vast majority of Vermonters support making changes to the state’s criminal justice system, especially when it comes to offering alternatives to incarceration for people with histories of complex trauma as well as for people whose offenses result from substance misuse, mental health conditions, and poverty.<sup>1</sup>

- **Robust Support Among Vermont Voters for Reducing the State’s Incarcerated Population.** At the outset, a sizable majority (68%) of voters says it supports reducing the state’s incarcerated population by investing in community-based alternatives, including 51% who support doing so “strongly”. Just 22% of voters oppose reducing the incarcerated population, with the intensity of the opposition voter (14% “strongly” oppose) much less pronounced. Only one-in-ten (10%) voters is undecided.



- **Voters are Especially Adamant about Reforming the Criminal Justice System for Victims of Abuse and People Dealing with Substance Misuse, Mental Health Conditions, and Poverty.** Voters are most intensely supportive of reforms that focus on the need to offer alternatives for people whose offenses result from substance misuse, mental health conditions, and poverty; and alternatives to incarceration for people with histories of complex trauma such as physical, sexual, or mental abuse. Several other proposals generate support among between two-thirds to over eighty percent of voters, signifying their broad and intense levels of acceptance across the state’s electorate.

<sup>1</sup> LRP survey of 500 likely 2020 voters in Vermont, conducted by live professional interviewers via landlines and cell phones. The survey fielded between January 8<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020. The margin of error for the full sample is +/- 4.4%

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## Broad and Intense Support for Incarceration Reform Proposals

■ Strongly Support    ■ Total Support

Instead of prison for offenses that result from substance misuse, mental health conditions, and poverty, provide community-based alternatives, like treatment, job training, rehabilitation programs, and community service.

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81

Collect more data on Vermont's criminal justice system—including data on decisions of police, judges, and elected prosecutors—so that policymakers can make more informed decisions and address disparities involving race, gender, or region.

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Expand diversion programs based on restorative justice, which require people to pay restitution, participate in counseling or treatment, and do community service, rather than go to prison.

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Rather than prioritizing funding for prisons, instead prioritize funding for community-based programs that prevent crime -- like treatment, rehabilitation, and job training.

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Move more funding from the state's incarceration budget into community-based programs that prevent crime -- like treatment, rehabilitation, and job training.

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Reduce the length of sentences by reforming Vermont's sentencing laws to be consistent with current expert research and best practices.

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Instead of prison for men and women who commit crimes who have extensive histories of complex trauma -- such as physical abuse, sexual abuse, mental health disorders, and substance use disorders -- provide community-based alternatives, like treatment, counseling, job training, and other rehabilitation programs.

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Reform Vermont's community supervision system, which sends people back to prison for technical violations, like drinking or being late for curfew, at the highest rate in the country.

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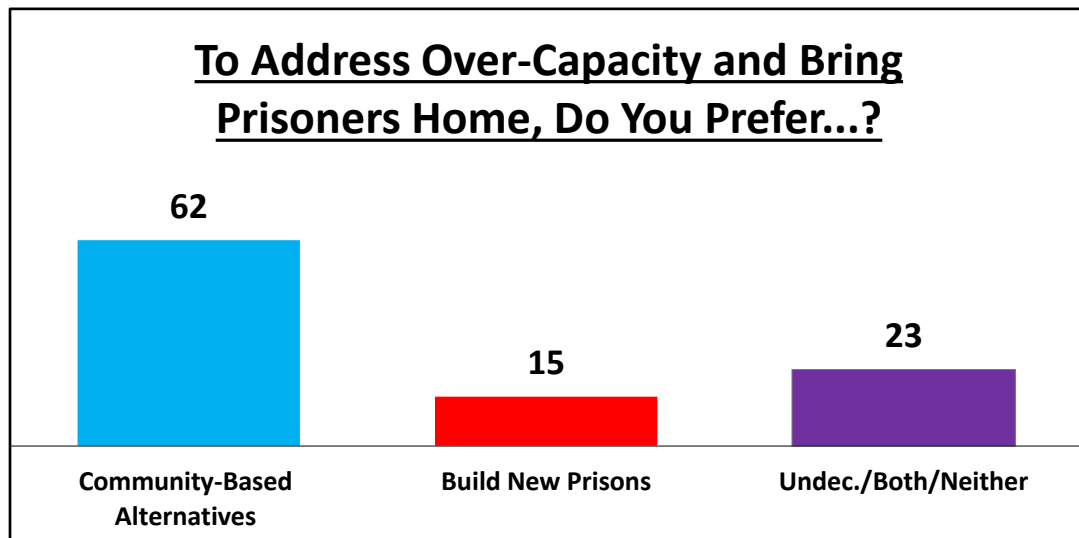
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Stop the practice of putting people back in prison for low-level "technical violations" of probation, parole, and furlough that are not new crimes.

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- **Most Vermonters Support Community-Based Alternatives to Incarceration over Building New Prisons.** When told that Vermont’s prisons are over capacity, requiring hundreds of prisoners to be sent to a private prison in Mississippi, just 15% favor building new prisons compared to over 6-in-10 voters who prefer reducing the number of people in prison by providing more access to community-based alternatives (62%).



- **Support only increases as voters hear messages on both sides of the debate, including a strongly-worded attack against reducing Vermont’s incarcerated population.** These criticisms fail to move voters away from their pro-reform views, with the “Yes” vote expanding slightly and the “No” vote shrinking after voters hear contrasting arguments. Instead, voters respond strongly to an economic-oriented argument that highlights the burdensome costs of over-incarceration to Vermont taxpayers and how the cost savings from reform that could be invested in other priorities. After voters hear these two arguments, 69% say they support reform (incl. 47% “strongly” support) compared to only 22% who say they oppose. Similarly, an alternative frame anchored around the benefits of reform to public safety easily defeats the opposition line of attack as well – 67% support reform (incl. 50% “strongly” support) vs. 22% oppose.

TEXT OF INFORMED BALLOT (ENGAGED DEBATE)	
<b>Opposition Statement</b>	
Releasing prisoners back into our communities is dangerous and irresponsible. Today's world is less safe, with threats we never could have imagined 50 years ago. Criminals find new ways to prey on us and the law struggles to keep up. Ignoring the reality of murder, rape, sexual predators, and other violent crimes won't make them go away. Commonsense reforms like DNA testing and advanced forensics are important tools but opening up our prisons on a large-scale would risk the work we've done to track down criminals and hold them accountable, especially when violent criminals commit new crimes once released.	
Pro-Statement (Economic Frame – ½ Sample)	Pro-Statement (Safety Frame – ½ Sample)
<i>Vermont's prison system costs taxpayers more than \$150 million dollars every year, depleting essential resources we could be using to invest in strong, thriving communities. A recent report showed 80% of those sentenced to prison each year are there for violations of supervised release programs like parole, probation, and furlough—the majority of which are technical violations, like lack of housing or missing a curfew. Instead wasting money on this failed approach, we could be investing in community-based alternatives that actually prevent crime and keeps people out of prison—like treatment, rehabilitation, and job training—costing Vermonters far less.</i>	<i>Right now, our overreliance on incarceration is not making us safer. Instead it's destroying lives and tearing families and communities apart. A recent report showed 80% of those sentenced to prison each year are behind bars for violations of parole, probation, or furlough—the majority of which are technical violations, like lack of housing or missing a curfew. If we want to make Vermont safer, we should prioritize community-based alternatives—like treatment, rehabilitation, and job training—all of which are proven to prevent crime, reduce rates of returning to prison, and make communities safer.</i>
<b>(69% Support Vs. 19% Oppose)</b>	<b>(67% Support Vs. 22% Oppose)</b>

- Support for Reducing Vermont's Incarcerated Population is Broad-based, Crossing Demographic, Regional, and Partisan Subgroups.** Solid majorities of nearly every major subgroup of voters within the state are supportive of reducing Vermont's incarcerated population, including men (67%) and women (69%); younger (71%) and older (64%) voters; and across all major regions of the state, including Chittenden County (74%), Eastern Vermont (73%), Central Vermont (70%), Southwest Vermont (58%), and Northern Vermont (60%). Support is highest among Democrats (91%), and still strong among independents (62%) and Republicans (38%).

## Bottom Line

This survey shows strong, consistent, and broad-based support for major reforms to reduce Vermont's incarcerated population through meaningful investments in community-based alternatives. Moreover, voters overwhelmingly agree with the justifications for these reforms, even in the face of harsh attacks. Support at the subgroup level only underscores the popularity and political viability of a criminal justice reform agenda.

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