

Churchgoer Views of Prison Ministry

SUMMARY REPORT



**CORRECTIONAL
MINISTRIES INSTITUTE**

Methodology

The Churchgoer Views on Prison Ministry was conducted by LifeWay Research. Its objectives were to quantitatively measure current churchgoer involvement in correctional ministry and to measure Protestant churchgoers' experience and attitude toward engaging in ministry among those affected by incarceration.

Project sponsors were:

- Correctional Ministries Institute at Wheaton College Billy Graham Center
- Prison Fellowship
- Correctional Ministries and Chaplains Association (CMCA)
- Kairos Prison Ministry International

The quantitative questionnaire was designed by LifeWay Research in consultation with a team of correctional ministry experts representing each of the sponsors. Many thanks go to:

- Karen Swanson, Director, Correctional Ministries Institute, Wheaton College Billy Graham Center.
- Tim Robison, Executive Vice President Administration, Prison Fellowship
- Romney Ruder, Executive Team member, CMCA and President, Lifeline Global Ministries
- Evelyn Lemly, CEO, Kairos Prison Ministry International

The online survey of 1,006 American Protestant churchgoers was conducted January 8-12, 2024, using a national pre-recruited panel. Respondents were screened to include those who identified as Protestant/non-denominational and attend religious services at least once a month. Quotas and slight weights were used to balance gender, age, region, ethnicity, education, and religion to more accurately reflect the population. The completed sample is 1,006 surveys. The sample provides 95% confidence that the sampling error from the panel does not exceed $\pm 3.2\%$. This margin of error accounts for the effect of weighting. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups.

Definitions

Evangelical Beliefs are defined using the NAE Lifeway Research. Evangelical Beliefs Research Definition based on respondent beliefs. Respondents are asked their level of agreement with four separate statements using a four-point, forced choice scale (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree). Those who strongly agree with all four statements are categorized as having Evangelical Beliefs

- The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe
- It is very important for me personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior
- Jesus Christ's death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin
- Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God's free gift of eternal salvation

Research Summary

This brief summary contains key findings from a study of 1,006 Protestant churchgoers conducted in January 2024.

CHURCHGOER EXPERIENCE WITH PRISON MINISTRY

More than half of Protestant Churchgoers (1+ times a month) have **no past experience** (not participated, church doesn't participate, and not heard of this outside my church) with:

- Writing letters or cards to prisoners (53%)
- In-Person visits to prisoners (53%)
- In-Person ministry with prisoners (56%)
- Assisting families with loved ones in prison (50%)
- Assisting children with parents in prison (53%)
- Foster parenting for children (65%)
- In-person aftercare ministry with former prisoners (62%)

CHURCHGOER INTEREST IN PRISON MINISTRY

One in three churchgoers are at least somewhat interested in ministry in-person with the incarcerated; almost half are somewhat interested in writing letters or cards to prisoners; and more than half are somewhat interested in assisting families and children of the incarcerated.

- Writing letters or cards to prisoners (46%)
- In-person visits to prisoners (33%)
- In-person ministry with prisoners (33%)
- Assisting families with loved ones in prison (51%)
- Assisting children with parents in prison (55%)
- Foster parenting for children (30%)

ENGAGEMENT OF CHURCHES IN PRISON MINISTRY

About half of churchgoers say individuals or their church conducts prison ministry. The most prevalent ongoing church activity in correctional ministry is performed by individuals rather than a church coordinated ministry.

- Almost half (47%) of Protestant churchgoers report individuals or a ministry at their church conducts prison ministry.
 - Formal prison ministry 12%
 - Not formal 16%
 - No, but members of my church are involved in prison ministry 19%
 - Not involved 34%
 - Not sure 20%
- How does your church engage in prison ministry?
 - 23% say individual members minister in correctional facilities.
 - 22% say individual members minister to families of the incarcerated.
 - 20% say a team from our church ministers in correctional facilities.

- 17% say individual members minister to people leaving correctional facilities.
- 12% say my church has a formal ministry to families of the incarcerated.
- 10% say my church has a formal ministry to people leaving correctional facilities.
- Half say their church does not engage in any of the six ways asked about in prison ministry or is not involved in prison ministry.
- Among churchgoers in a church with someone doing prison ministry.
 - 34% say individual members minister in correctional facilities.
 - 33% say individual members minister to families of the incarcerated.
 - 30% say a team from our church ministers in correctional facilities.
 - 25% say individual members minister to people leaving correctional facilities.
 - 18% say my church has a formal ministry to families of the incarcerated.
 - 15% say my church has a formal ministry to people leaving correctional facilities.
 - A quarter say their church engages in none of these ministries.
- In which of the following activities is your church currently involved?
 - 30% say their church provides counseling for families of individuals during incarceration or returning from correctional facilities.
 - 29% say their church provides counseling for individuals returning from correctional facilities.
 - 24% say their church talks about imprisonment openly so that the topic is not so taboo.
 - 23% say their church supports residential programs that help with reentry of people leaving correctional facilities.
 - 16% say their church financially supports a ministry outside the church serving the incarcerated and their families.
 - Half (51%) say their church is not engaged in any of the listed activities or is not involved in a prison ministry.
- Among churchgoers in a church with someone doing prison ministry report their church is engaged in the following activities.
 - 45% say their church provides counseling for families of individuals during incarceration or returning from correctional facilities.
 - 43% say their church provides counseling for individuals returning from correctional facilities.
 - 36% says their church talks about imprisonment openly so that the topic is not so taboo.
 - 35% says their church supports residential programs that help with reentry of people leaving correctional facilities.
 - Almost a quarter (24%) say their church financially supports a ministry outside the church serving the incarcerated and their families.
 - A quarter (26%) say their church is not engaged in any of the listed activities.

INDIVIDUAL PARTICIPATION IN PRISON MINISTRY

Individual participation in prison ministry ranged from 10-25% of churchgoers. A wide range of ministries were identified including churches and non-profit organizations. Most (65%) did not name any ministry. The greatest hinderances to serving in prison ministry is a lack of calling, too busy (work, life, ministry) distance, lack of ministry and need awareness, fear, and don't know where to

learn about this ministry. One in five report a lack of interest, pastors should handle this or prisoners are not deserving of redemption.

- A quarter of Protestant churchgoers (25%) report having been involved in prison ministry in the past (21%) or present (4%).
- One in ten churchgoers say they have been involved in prison ministry activities or training. When asked to specify the name of the ministry only 89 of the 250 responded with 31 listing the type of ministry or location, and 23 specified a church. Twenty-nine (29) different prison ministries were named and only two ministries were named by more than one churchgoer.

Which of the following hinders your ability to serve in prison ministry? Among churchgoers not currently involved on prison ministry?

- 26% do not feel called to serve prisoners.
- 25% are too busy with family, work and life.
- 20% say the distance.
- 20% are not aware of ministries in my area.
- 18% are already involved in other ministries.
- 16% say fear.
- 16% are not aware of the need in my area.
- 15% do not know where to learn about this ministry.
- 14% lack interest.
- 7% say pastors or church leaders should handle this.
- 1% say prisoners are not deserving of redemption
- 5% other
- 6% not sure
- 6% none of these (almost half cited physical health/disability issues)

BELIEFS OF CHURCHGOERS

Almost 8 out of 10 churchgoers believe that people with a felony can change and lead productive lives. About 7 out of 10 believe the church has a responsibility to care for the incarcerated, yet 8 in 10 believe Christians have a responsibility to care for the incarcerated. Over 7 in 10 churchgoers believe the church should care for families and children of the incarcerated and provide resources for youth and adults returning to the community from incarceration.

- Believe people can change for the better (redemption). People with a felony can go on to lead productive lives with help and hard work (89%), 77% do NOT believe that most people who commit crimes have little hope of changing for the better.
- 66% agree that local churches have a responsibility to care for the incarcerated in their community.
- 75% agree local churches have a responsibility to care for families and children of the incarcerated.
- 84% of Christians have a responsibility to minister to the incarcerated.

- 74% agree local churches have a responsibility to provide resources and support to youth and adults leaving correctional facilities.
- 74% say seeking justice requires prison or jail time for those guilty of crimes.
- Positive view (79%) of prisoners blessing those who serve – Where does this come from?
- Primary advocacy areas include: Second chance opportunities (70%), offering rehabilitation in jail and prison (66%), ensuring prison humane conditions (57%), and ensuring all punishments fit the severity of the crime (39%).
- 41% have heard a sermon mention incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, or families in the last year.
- Almost half report having had a friend or acquaintance spend time behind bars. One in three report having an immediate family member ever incarcerated and 27% report having never been a victim, incarcerated or family or friend incarcerated, or visiting a correctional facility.
- 86% agree that prison ministry contributes positively to public safety
- 94% agree that formerly incarcerated people can contribute to understanding the Gospel message
- 89% agree that formerly incarcerated people can be leaders in the broader Christian community
- 55% agree that racial disparity within the prisoner population in America is unjust
- 54% agree that difficulty reentering society from jail and prison is an issue in their community
- 62% agree that many jails and prisons offer rehabilitation programs for those in custody
- 72% believe that participating in rehabilitation programs in prison will reduce recidivism.

COMFORT LEVELS

Comfort levels increase when the personal engagement is less proximate or if spiritually focused.

I am very comfortable or comfortable with people who have been incarcerated

- 34% as a neighbor
- 77% attend church with me
- 71% attend a small group with me
- 34% come to my home for a meal
- 39% as my pastor
- 62% as a friend

I am very comfortable or comfortable having families with an incarcerated member

- 64% move into my neighborhood
- 80% attend church with me
- 78% attend small group with me
- 63% come to my home for a meal

BELIEFS ABOUT THE INCARCERATED

Almost 7 in 10 churchgoers believe people who are incarcerated deserve a second chance and help. One in four believe the incarcerated are a victim of circumstance. Almost 8 in 10 believe the incarcerated are not likely to commit more crimes.

Most people who have been incarcerated are...

- Deserving a second chance (79%)
- Deserving of help (69%)
- Victims of circumstance (24%)
- Likely to commit more crimes after release (19%)
- As trustworthy as anyone else (18%)
- Dangerous (9%)
- Dishonest (8%)
- Basically bad people (4%)
- Not worth the money and time to rehabilitate (2%)
- Not sure (7%)