Rehabilitation vs. Incarceration of Juvenile Offenders:

Over the past few decades, American juvenile justice policy has become progressively more punitive. During the 1990s, in particular, legislatures across the country enacted statutes under which growing numbers of youths can be prosecuted in criminal courts and sentenced to prison. Indeed, today, in almost every state, youths who are 13 or 14 years of age (or less) can be tried and punished as adults for a broad range of offenses, including nonviolent crimes. Even within the juvenile system, punishments have grown increasingly severe. It is generally accepted that intense public concern about the threat of youth crime has driven this trend, and that the public supports this legislative inclination toward increased punitiveness. But it is not clear whether this view of the public’s attitude about the appropriate response to juvenile crime is accurate. On the one hand, various opinion surveys have found public support generally forgetting tougher on juvenile crime and punishing youths as harshly as their adult counterparts. At the same time, however, scrutiny of the sources of information about public opinion reveals that the view that the public supports adult punishment of juveniles is based largely on either responses to highly publicized crimes such as school shootings or on mass opinion polls that typically ask a few simplistic questions. It is quite plausible that assessments of public sentiment about juvenile crime, and the appropriate response to it, vary greatly as a function of when and how public opinion is gauged. In our own work, we have found that very slight variations in the wording of survey questions generate vastly different pictures of public attitudes about juvenile justice policy. An assessment of the public’s support for various responses to juvenile offending is important because policy makers often justify expenditures for punitive juvenile justice reforms on the basis of popular demand. Punitive responses to juvenile crime (e.g., the incarceration of juvenile offenders in correctional facilities) are far more expensive and often less effective than less harsh alternatives (e.g., providing juvenile offenders rehabilitative services in community settings). If politicians’ misreading of public sentiment has led to the adoption of more expensive policy alternatives than the public actually wants, tax dollars are likely being wasted on policies that are costly and possibly ineffective, and that also may be less popular than is widely assumed.