

What do Americans think about the U.S. prison system?

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The United States is home to 16% of all incarcerated people in the world, and that share has been on the rise since the 1980s. What do Americans think of the current levels of incarceration and the living conditions inside prisons in the U.S.? Recent YouGov polling on this topic found that Americans are fairly split on whether or not the level of incarceration is a problem in the U.S.: 36% say the U.S. incarcerates too many people, 21% say about the right number of people are incarcerated, and 24% say too few people are incarcerated. And few Americans say prisoners are treated inhumanely. But majorities say several bad outcomes such as sexual abuse and physical harm happen often to prisoners, and most think poor people are disproportionately likely to be locked up for committing crimes.

About half of Democrats (51%) say the U.S. imprisons too many people, while only 37% of Independents and 18% of Republicans agree. Americans who have been to prison or have family members or friends who have been to prison are also more likely to say the U.S. imprisons too many people. By age and race, the differences are starker for the shares who say the country imprisons too few people. Americans 65 and older and white Americans are more likely to say the U.S. imprisons too few people than are younger adults and Black and Hispanic Americans.

Half of Democrats say the United States imprisons too many people

In your opinion, does the United States imprison...? (%)

Too many people	About the right number of people	Too few people
U.S. adult citizens		
	36%	24%
Democrats		
	51%	13%
Independents		
	37%	18%
Republicans		
	18%	45%
18- to 29-year-olds		
	41%	10%
30- to 44-year-olds		
	37%	15%
45- to 64-year-olds		
	37%	26%
65 and older		
	30%	44%
White Americans		
	35%	29%
Black Americans		
	42%	12%
Hispanic Americans		
	35%	14%
People who have been in prison, or have a friend or family member who has been in prison		
	48%	23%
People who have not been in prison, and who don't have a friend or family member who has been in prison		
	31%	24%

Note: The classification of Americans according to whether they have been in prison or have a friend or family member who has been in prison is based on responses to the question, "Do you know anyone who has ever served time in prison in the U.S.? Select all that apply."

Despite varying opinions on the number of incarcerated people in the U.S., majorities of Americans are supportive of prisoners’ basic rights: more than half of Americans say prisoners should have the right to each of the following: medical care, religious expression, free speech, and working and earning wages. While similar shares of Democrats and Republicans support most of the rights polled about, smaller shares of Republicans

than Democrats say prisoners should have the right to the following: privacy, voting, and freedom from unreasonable searches and seizures.

Most Americans say people serving time in prison should have a right to medical care, religious expression, and legal counsel

Do you think that people serving time in prison in the U.S. should have a right to the following? (% who say "Yes, they should have this right")

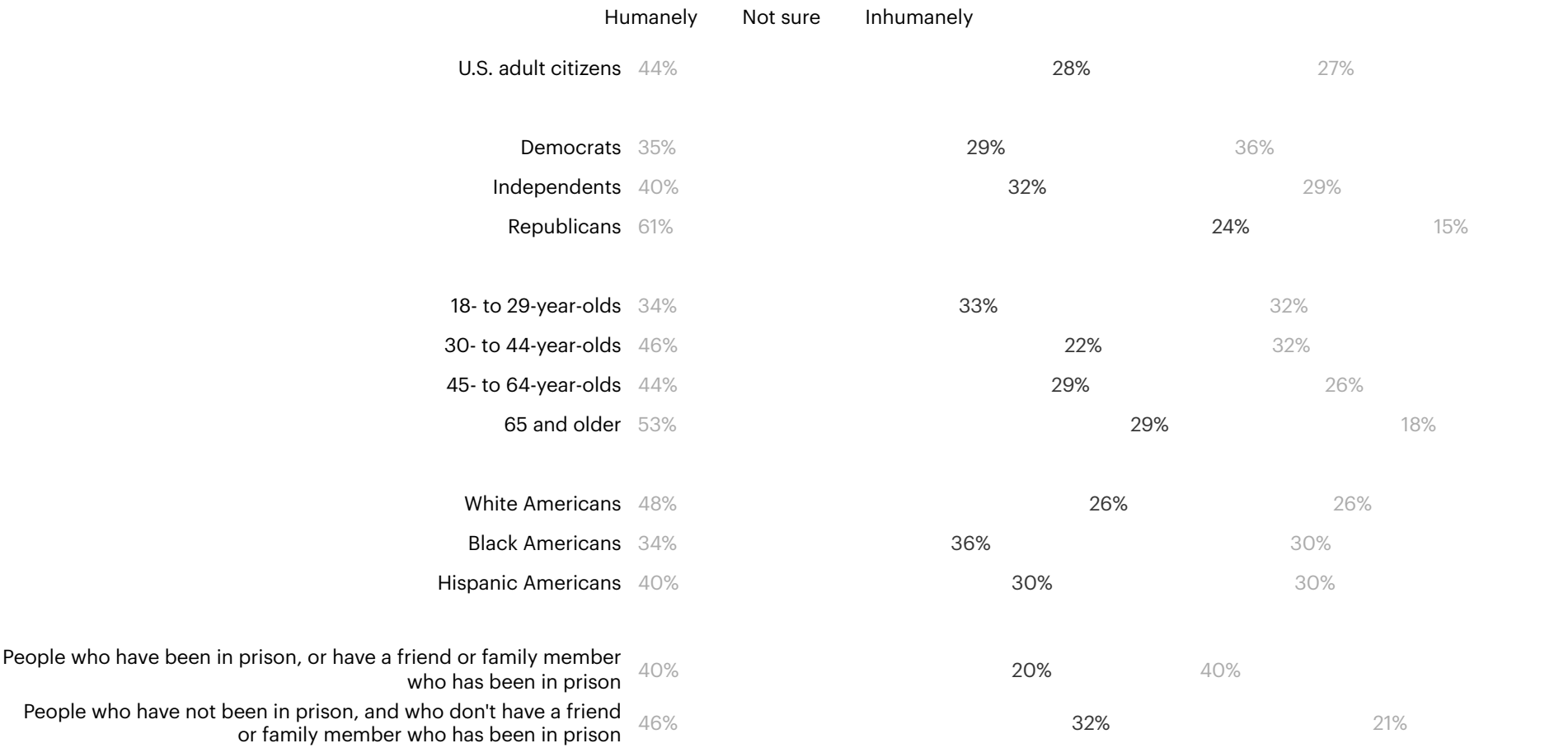
U.S. adult citizens	Democrats	Republicans		
	Medical care	82%	84%	82%
	Religious expression	82%	78%	89%
	Legal counsel	82%	81%	84%
	Fair and equal treatment under the law	79%	78%	81%
	Freedom from cruel and unusual punishment	74%	75%	74%
	Free speech	68%	70%	65%
	Work and earn wages	64%	71%	61%
	Own personal property	52%	55%	45%
	Retain their parental rights	44%	48%	46%
	Privacy	43%	51%	34%
	Freedom from unreasonable searches and seizures	38%	47%	29%
	Vote in local elections	33%	47%	24%
	Vote in national elections	32%	44%	24%

Note: Responses of "No, they should not have this right" and "Not sure" are not shown.

More Americans say that people in prisons are treated humanely than say they are treated inhumanely. While Democrats are divided on the matter, Republicans are far more likely to say that people in prisons are treated humanely rather than inhumanely. White Americans are also more likely than Black and Hispanic Americans to say people in prison are treated humanely. Another characteristic linked to differences of opinion on this question is having been to prison or having a friend or family member who has been to prison: People in this category are twice as likely as others to say people in prisons are treated inhumanely.

Most Republicans say people in prisons in the U.S. are treated humanely

Do you think that people in prisons in the United States are generally treated...? (%)



Note: The classification of Americans according to whether they have been in prison or have a friend or family member who has been in prison is based on responses to the question, "Do you know anyone who has ever served time in prison in the U.S.? Select all that apply."

Even though just 27% of Americans say people in prisons are treated inhumanely, majorities of Americans say they think that each of the following happens somewhat or very often to people in prisons: being physically harmed by other prisoners (72%), being in overcrowded conditions (70%), and being sexually abused by other prisoners (64%). At least 40% of Americans say each of the following happens somewhat or very often to people

in prisons: They attempt to commit suicide (52%), they are physically harmed by prison employees (49%), they are sexually abused by prison employees (43%), and they die due to a lack of adequate health care (41%).

One-third of Americans say they think people serving time in prisons are very often physically harmed

How often do you think the following happens to people serving time in prisons in the U.S.? (%)

Very often	Somewhat often	Not sure	Not very often	Never
		They are in overcrowded conditions	35%	34%
		They are physically harmed by other prisoners	34%	38%
		They lack access to mental health care	31%	29%
		They are sexually abused by other prisoners	29%	35%
		They are not protected from the spread of communicable diseases	26%	28%
		They lack access to adequate sanitation	23%	26%
		They lack access to adequate nutrition	22%	27%
		They are forced to perform labor without pay	21%	26%
		They are physically harmed by prison employees	20%	29%
		They are isolated in solitary confinement	18%	33%
		They are sexually abused by prison employees	16%	28%
		They attempt to commit suicide	15%	37%
		They die due to a lack of adequate health care	15%	27%
		They are unable to access legal representation	14%	30%
		They successfully escape from prison	4%	11%



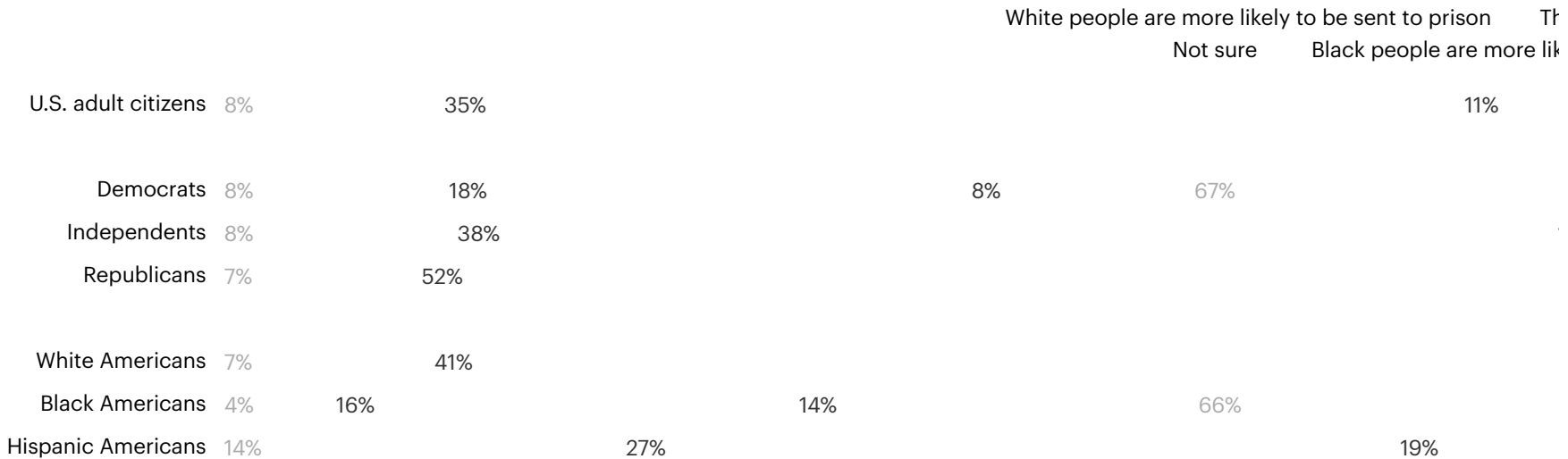
Black Americans make up a disproportionately large share of incarcerated people in the U.S. relative to their share of the population. Do Americans say some groups are more likely to go to prison than others?

Nearly half of Americans say that Black people are more likely to be sent to prison than white people committing equivalent crimes, including 67% of Democrats, 39% of Independents, and 31% of Republicans. White and

Hispanic Americans are less likely to take this position than Black Americans. Just 8% of Americans say white people are more likely to be sent to prison than Black people committing equivalent crimes.

Two-thirds of Black Americans say Black people are more likely to be sent to prison in the U

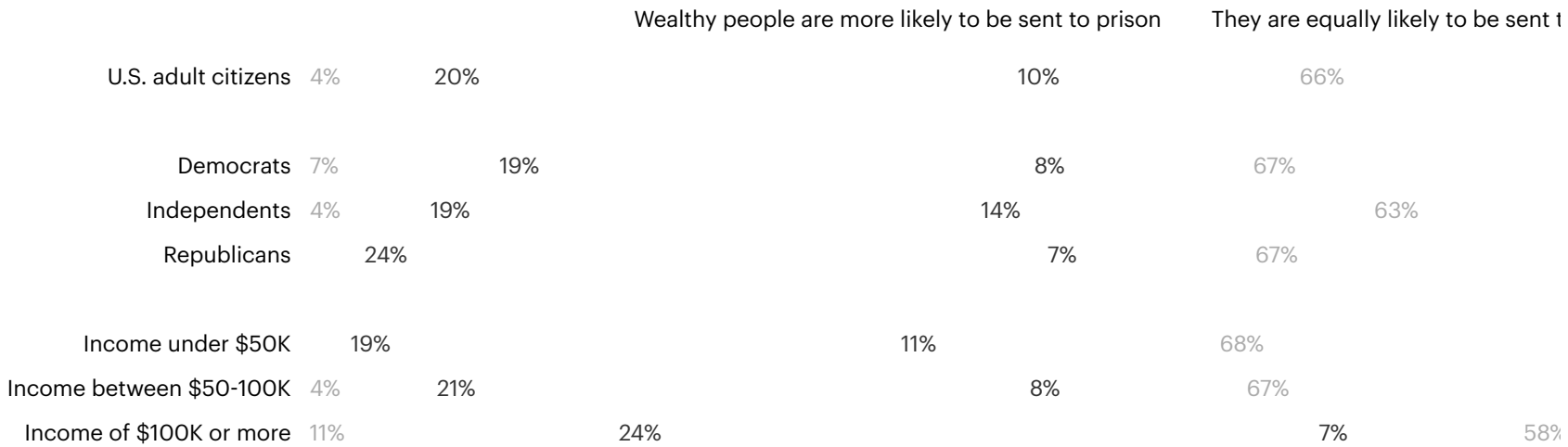
In the United States today, do you think that white people and Black people who commit equivalent crimes are equally likely to be sent to prison, or is one group more likely



Democrats, Independents, and Republicans are slightly more aligned when it comes to discrimination based on income: Majorities of all three groups say poor people are more likely to be sent to prison than wealthy people are. This opinion is less popular among Americans whose families' annual income is \$100,000 or more than it is among Americans from lower-income families.

Two-thirds of Americans say poor people are more likely to be sent to prison

In the United States today, do you think that wealthy people and poor people who commit equivalent crimes are equally likely to be sent to prison, or is one group more likely?



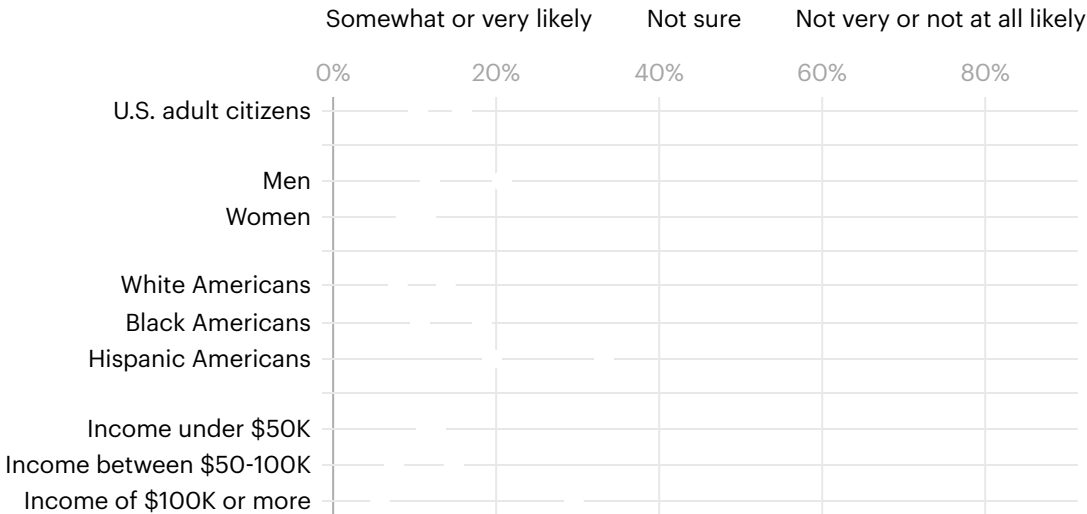
Note: The classification of Americans by income is based on responses to the question, "Thinking back over the last year, what was your family's annual income?"



Looking ahead, only 9% of Americans say it is likely that they will be sentenced to prison at some point in the future. Larger shares of men, Hispanic Americans, and Americans with a family income of at least \$100,000 than other groups say it is likely that they will be sentenced to prison.

One in five Hispanic Americans say they think it is **somewhat or very likely** that they will be sentenced to prison at some point in the future

How likely do you think it is that you will personally be sentenced to prison at some point in the future? (%)



Note: The classification of Americans by income is based on responses to the question, "Thinking back over the last year, what was your family's annual income?"



May 15 - 18, 2023

— Taylor Orth, Linley Sanders, and Carl Bialik contributed to this article.

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See the results for this YouGov poll

Methodology: The YouGov poll was conducted online on May 15 - 18, 2023 among 1,000 U.S. adult citizens. Respondents were selected from YouGov’s opt-in panel using sample matching. A random sample (stratified by gender, age, race, education, geographic region, and voter registration) was selected from the 2019 American Community Survey. For both polls, the sample was weighted according to gender, age, race, education, 2020 election turnout and presidential vote, and current voter registration status. Demographic weighting targets come from the 2019 American Community Survey. The sample also was weighted by baseline party

identification, which is the respondent's most recent answer given prior to March 15, 2022, and is weighted to the estimated distribution at that time (33% Democratic, 28% Republican). The margin of error for the overall sample is approximately 3%.

Image: Pexels ([RDNE Stock project](#))

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