



# Public attitudes polling on prison and criminal justice

---

October 2024

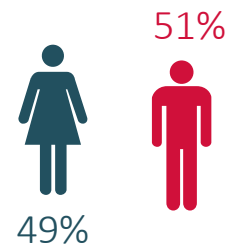
749224



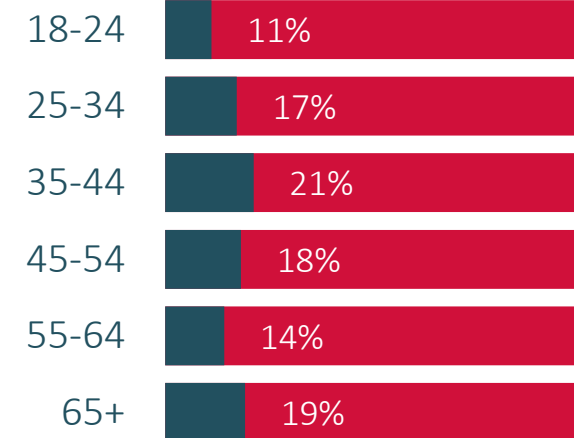
# RED Line Methodology

- Research was conducted using RED C's online omnibus, the RED Line.
- Through an online panel of over 45,000 members, RED Line allows us to reach a representative sample of the adult population 18+ across Ireland in a cost effective and timely manner.
- Quota controls are used to ensure a nationally representative sample of ROI adults aged 18+, with interlocking quotas to provide extra confidence in sample profile.
- Data was weighted across gender, age, region and social class so as to ensure a nationally representative sample based on latest CSO projections.
- Data was further weighted on past vote behaviour
- A nationally representative sample of n=1,006 adults aged 18+ was completed.
- Fieldwork took place from the 3<sup>rd</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> October 2024

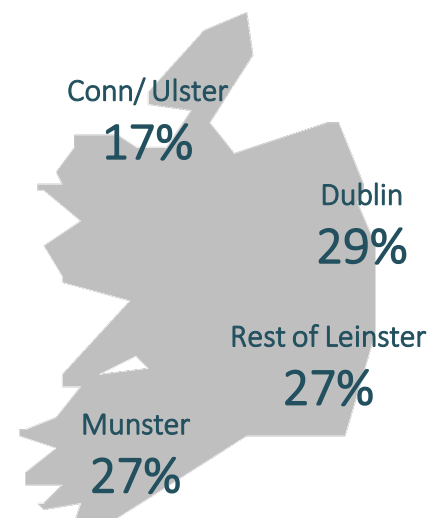
## Gender



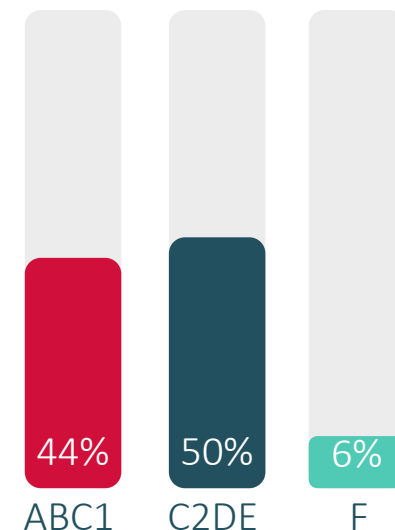
## Age



## Region



## Social Class



# Majority are open to reforms within the criminal justice system to tackle overcrowding and want to see a focus on alternatives to imprisonment in the next programme for government, specifically in the case of non-violent offenders



## Appetite for change

81% believe it's important to focus on alternatives to prison for non-violent offenders in the next programme for government. Support is consistently high across voters of the main political parties and independents.

## Irish adults would prioritise range of measures to tackle crime over additional prison spaces

When given options as to what measures should be prioritised to tackle crime, 41% choose additional Gardaí as their top priority over other measures, followed by drug treatment places (21%) and youth services (10%). Additional prison spaces (7%) ranked fifth in a list of seven options.

## Scepticism about effectiveness of prison for non-violent crime

Only 1 in 4 believe prison is effective at reducing non-violent crimes, compared to the 80% who believe it's effective at reducing violent offences. Specialised courts, victim mediation, reparations, and probation are all viewed as viable alternatives to prison for non-violent crimes.

## High agreement that root causes of crime should be tackled

68% believe prison expansion is not the solution to reducing crime and that crime should be tackled at its root, while only 32% believe that crime levels would reduce as a result of increased prison spaces.

## Alternatives for offenders with psychological challenges

Most feel that offenders with either mental health (71%) or addiction difficulties (63%) should receive treatment in a dedicated facility instead of being sent to prison. This strategy in addition to community service, are the most favoured approaches to tackle overcrowding in Irish prisons.

## Majority of people recognise adverse conditions in Irish prisons

Half the population believe that overcrowding in Irish prisons is poor. A similar number believe that most people come out of prison worse than they go in. 61% of people recognise that many people in prison have experienced trauma or have been victims of harm or abuse themselves.



# Public perceptions of crime and what works to tackle it

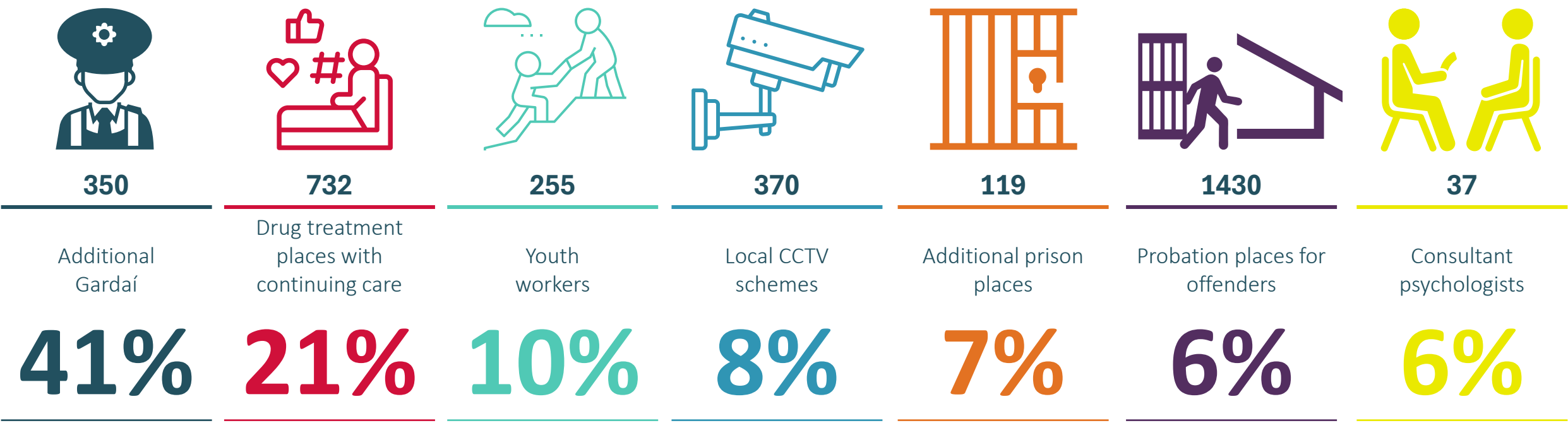


# Under 1 in 10 see extra prison spaces as top priority in tackling crime



While additional Gardaí is seen as the top priority for investment, over 1 in 3 would prioritise person-centred interventions such as additional drug treatment places, extra youth workers, and more consultant psychologists.

## Crime budget top priorities - Summary



All adults 18+ (n=1,006)  
Q. If you had an annual budget of €10 million to spend on tackling crime, which one of these initiatives do you think would be the best way to spend that €10 million.

# Most voters want extra gardaí and drug treatment prioritised



This is consistent across voters of the three main parties, while only a minority select additional prison or probation spaces as their top priority in tackling crime

## Crime budget priorities x party support

	Total	Fianna Fáil	Fine Gael	Sinn Féin
<i>Base</i>	<i>(n=1,006)</i>	<i>(n=150)</i>	<i>(n=174)</i>	<i>(n=152)</i>
350 additional gardaí	41%	45%	51%	31%
732 drug treatment places with continuing care	21%	21%	17%	27%
255 youth workers	10%	7%	8%	12%
370 local CCTV schemes	8%	8%	10%	9%
119 additional prison places	7%	5%	6%	9%
1430 probation places for offenders	6%	6%	7%	5%
37 consultant psychologists	6%	8%	2%	7%

■ Significant difference vs. Total  
All adults 18+ (n=1,006)  
Q. If you had an annual budget of €10 million to spend on tackling crime, which one of these initiatives do you think would be the best way to spend that €10 million.

# Women over-index on priority of drug treatment places



Meanwhile, men and older age cohorts are more likely to favour extra Gardaí

## Crime budget priorities x demographics

	Total	Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+
Base	(n=1,006)	(n=480)	(n=522)	(n=240)	(n=388)	(n=378)
350 additional gardaí	41%	49%	34%	29%	38%	54%
732 drug treatment places with continuing care	21%	16%	26%	23%	21%	18%
255 youth workers	10%	9%	11%	14%	10%	6%
370 local CCTV schemes	8%	9%	8%	10%	9%	6%
119 additional prison places	7%	8%	7%	7%	8%	8%
1430 probation places for offenders	6%	7%	6%	7%	7%	6%
37 consultant psychologists	6%	3%	8%	9%	7%	3%

■ Significant difference vs. Total

All adults 18+ (n=1,006)

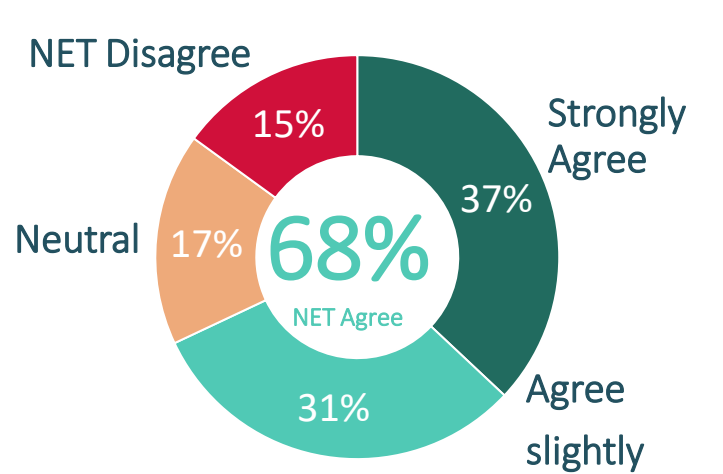
Q. If you had an annual budget of €10 million to spend on tackling crime, which one of these initiatives do you think would be the best way to spend that €10 million.

# Expanding prison capacity is not a magic bullet

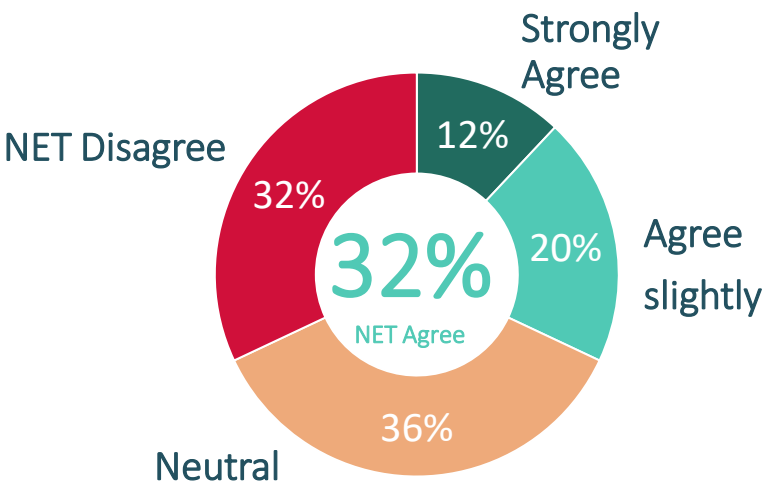


Most believe that crime prevention would be better achieved by tackling crime at its roots. Uncertainty around whether increasing prison numbers would reduce crime.

## Attitudes towards the use of imprisonment in Ireland



Expanding prison capacity is not the solution to reducing crime, rather, we should focus on preventing crime and addressing its root causes



Increasing the number of people in prison would reduce crime

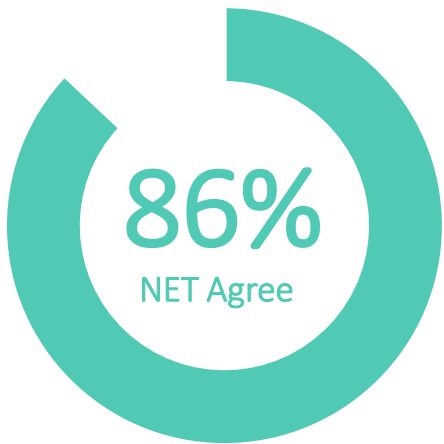


# Social issues such as cost of living seen to impact crime rates

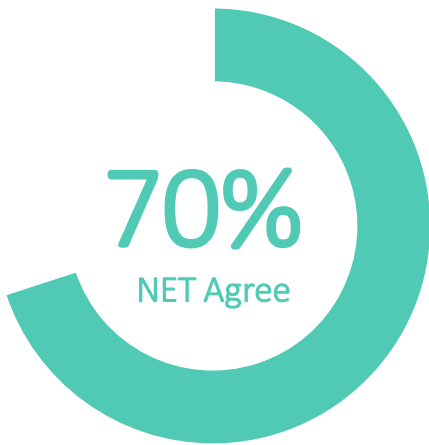


Recidivism among those being released into homelessness is recognised as an issue by the vast majority of the population

## Attitudes towards the use of imprisonment in Ireland



Those being released from prison into homelessness are highly likely to reoffend



Rising cost of living is leading to higher rates of crime



I feel a lot of people think that very violent criminals do not get a lengthy enough sentence and when they are released, they have no support and are therefore most likely going to re-offend. I also think that people that do minor offenses are put in prison and come out worse and more likely to go on to do worse crime as prison changes them for the worse.

All adults 18+ (n=1,006)  
Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements people have made about the use of imprisonment in Ireland?

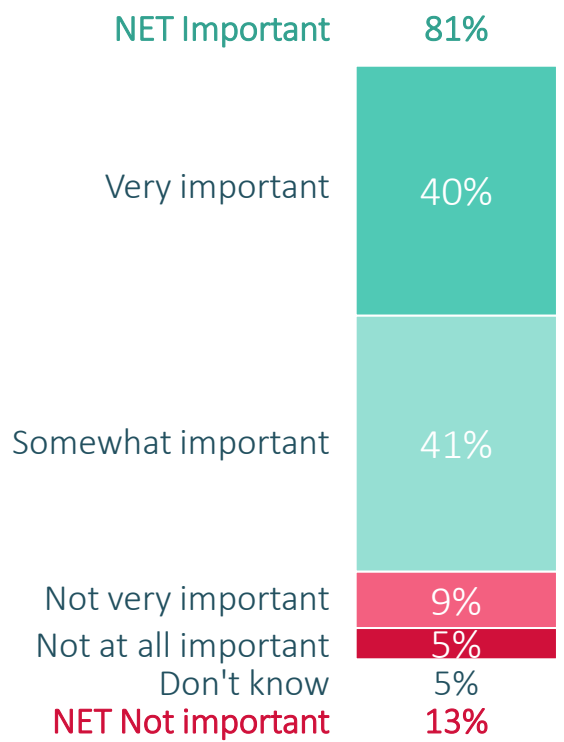
# Appetite for Prison Reform and Alternatives to Custody



# Strong majority support alternatives to imprisonment for people convicted of non-violent offences

Importance on focus on alternatives to imprisonment for non-violent offenders in next programme for government

(86% excluding DK)



NET Important by voter preference

- Fianna Fail: 88%
- Fine Gael: 86%
- Sinn Féin: 79%
- Independents: 85%

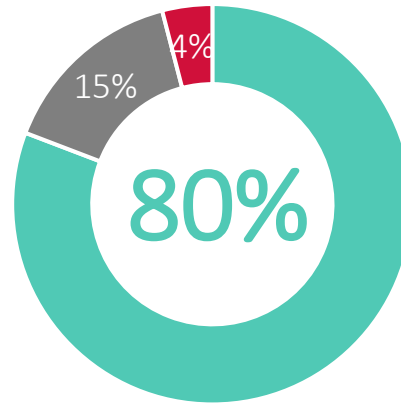
All adults 18+ (n=1,006)  
Q. In your opinion, how important is it for the next Irish government to prioritise alternatives to imprisonment (e.g. community service, rehabilitation programs) when dealing with non-violent offenders in the next programme for government?



**Only 1 in 4 believe that prison sentences for people convicted of non-violent offences are effective at reducing crime**

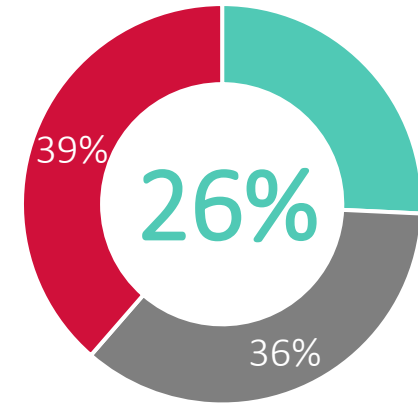
Effectiveness of sending people to prison for...

Violent Crimes



Effective Don't know/neutral Not effective

Non-violent Crimes



Effective Don't know/neutral Not effective

All adults 18+ (n=1,006)

Q. How effective do you believe the following are in reducing crime in Ireland? Please give your answer on a 5 point scale where 5 is very effective and 1 is not at all effective.

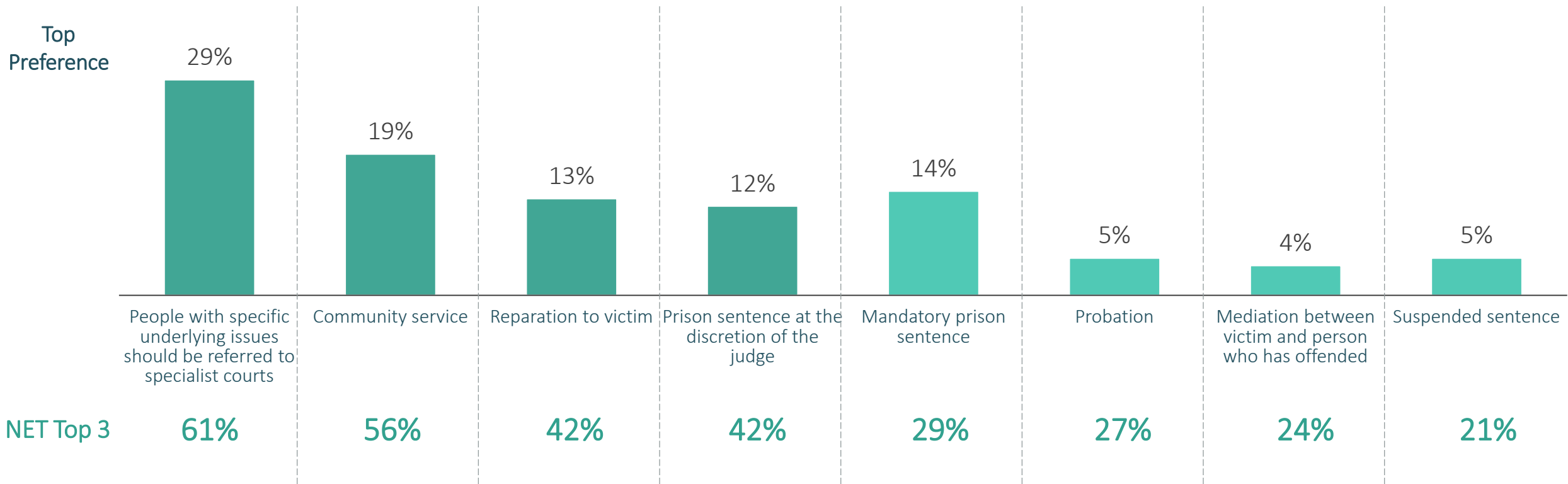


# Specialist courts preferred for dealing with less serious offences



The most favoured option for dealing with less serious offences is specialist courts such as drug treatment courts or mental health courts.

Preferred methods for dealing with *less serious* offences - Summary

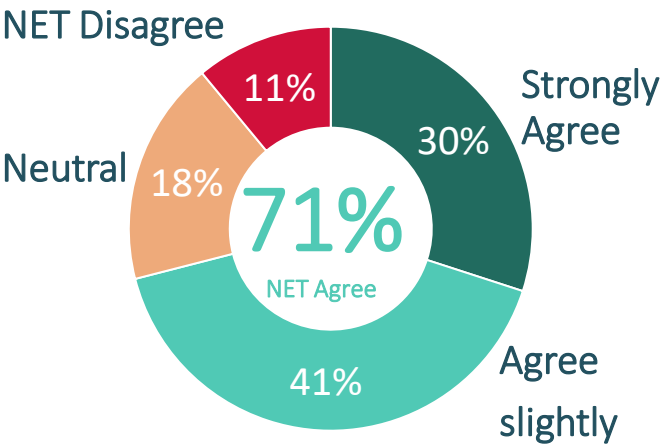


All adults 18+ (n=1,006)  
Q. Thinking now about how the Irish criminal justice system deals with different types of offences, please rank these methods for how the courts might deal with each of the following types of offender in order of how effective they are likely to be: Convicted of a less serious offence that attracts a sentence of 12 months imprisonment of less (e.g. minor theft or drug offences)

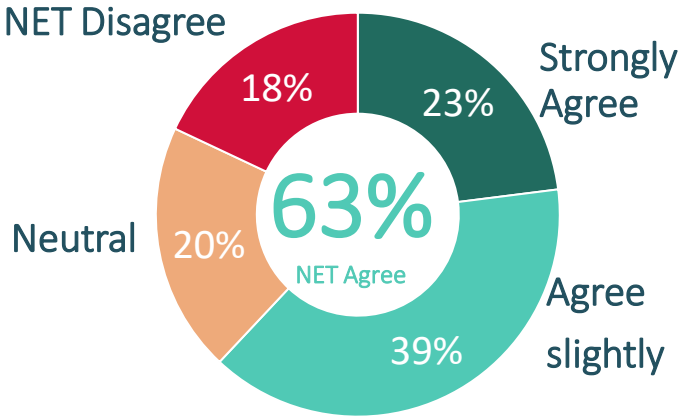


# Majority feel offenders with mental health or addiction challenges should be afforded prison alternatives

Attitudes towards the use of imprisonment in Ireland



People with mental health challenges who commit an offence should receive treatment in a mental health facility instead of being sent to prison



People with an addiction who commit an offence should receive treatment in a dedicated facility instead of being sent to prison



All adults 18+ (n=1,006)  
Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements people have made about the use of imprisonment in Ireland?

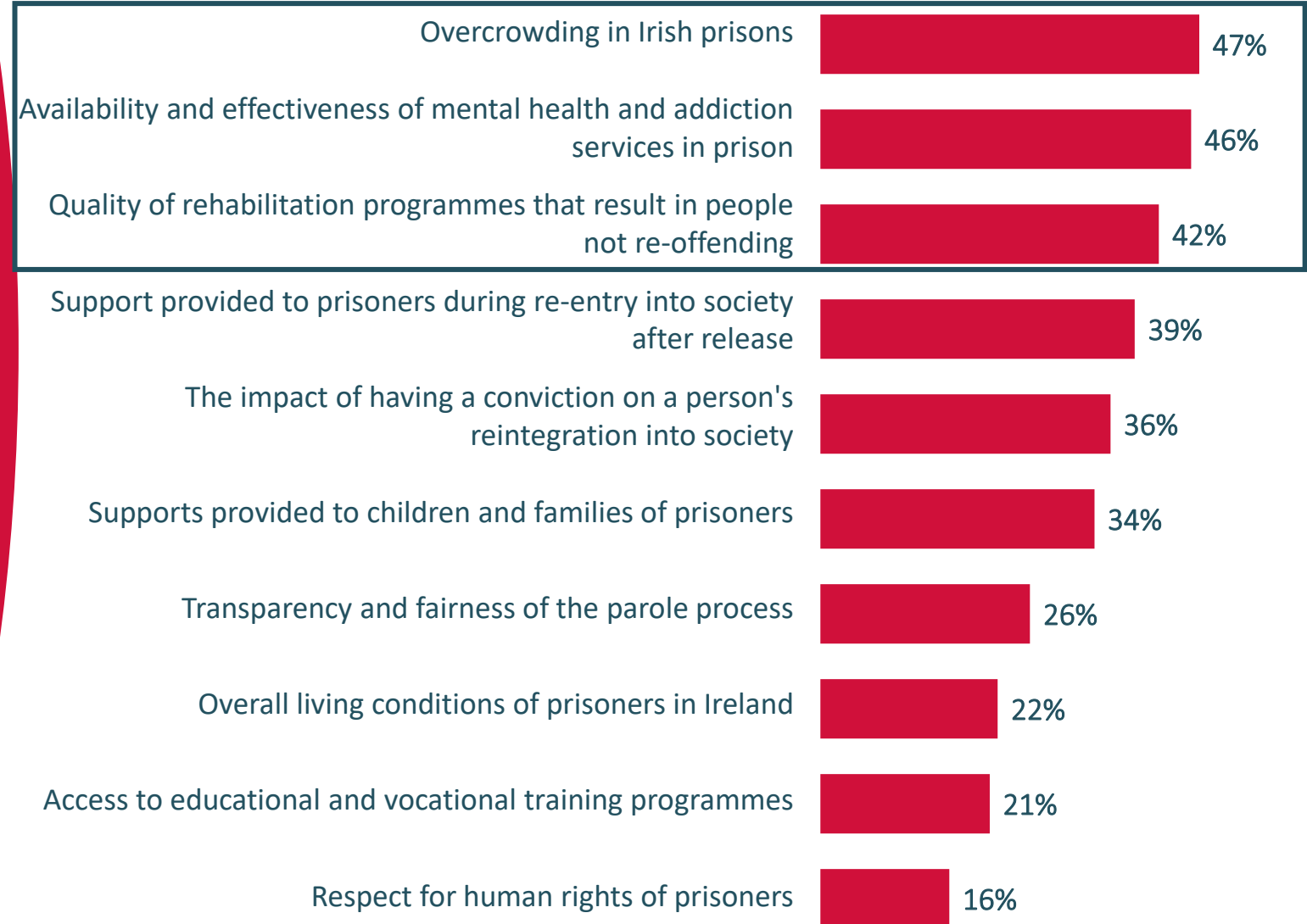
# Conditions and overcrowding in Irish Prisons



# Half of the population rate overcrowding in prisons as poor

Other key conditions rated as poor included the availability of services, including mental health and rehabilitation programmes that will help stop re-offending

Rating of elements of criminal justice system in Ireland NET POOR 0-4:



All adults 18+ (n=1,006)

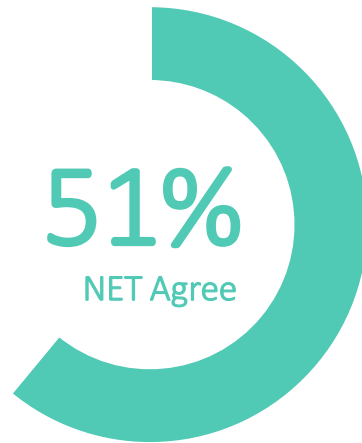
Q. Thinking about the following elements of the criminal justice system in Ireland, please rate the following on a scale of 0 to 10 where 0 means very poor and 10 means excellent.

# Most think people leave prison worse than when they entered

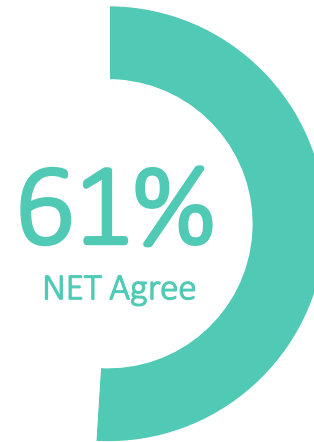


3 in 5 believe many in prison have experienced trauma or abuse themselves, while half agree that most people come out of prison worse than when they go in.

## Attitudes towards the use of imprisonment in Ireland



Most people come out of prison worse than they go in



Many people in prison have experienced trauma or have been victims of harm or abuse

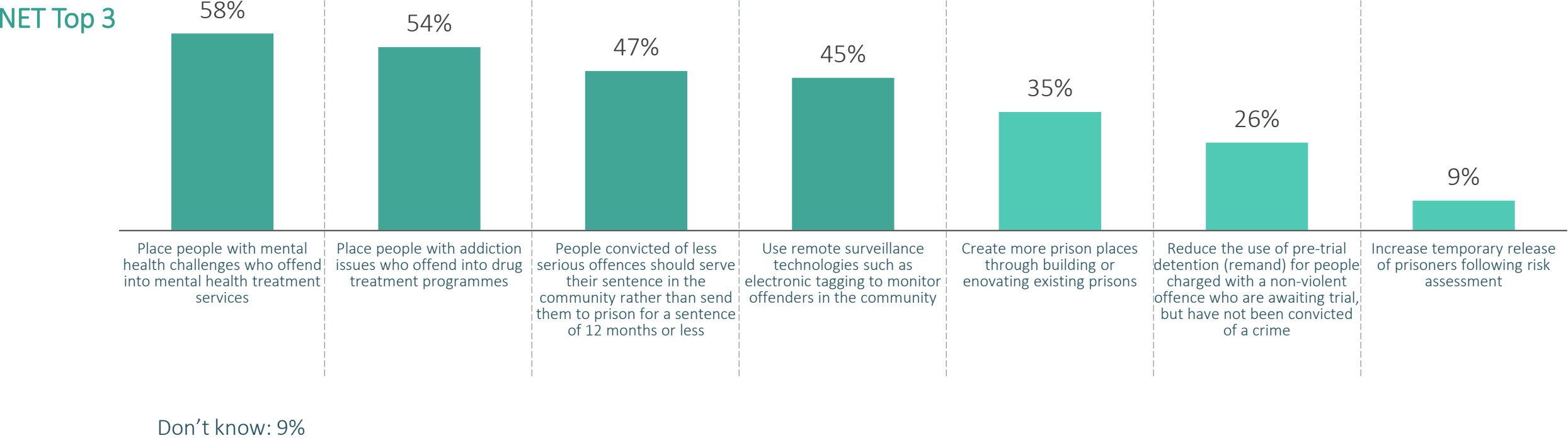


You often hear that an offender has 20 or 30 previous convictions. The question is, is the system failing these people or are they inherently evil. Are there underlying issues like drug use, homelessness etc

# Several strategies in contention to deal with prison overcrowding

The most favoured strategy to tackle overcrowding is placing people with mental health challenges in appropriate services. Placing those with addiction issues in treatment programmes also see high support.

## Preferred strategies to deal with overcrowding in Irish prisons - Summary



All adults 18+ (n=1,006)  
Q. Below are a list of proposed strategies to deal with overcrowding in the Irish prison system. Please rank your top three preferred measures.



# Public attitudes to government policy on criminal justice

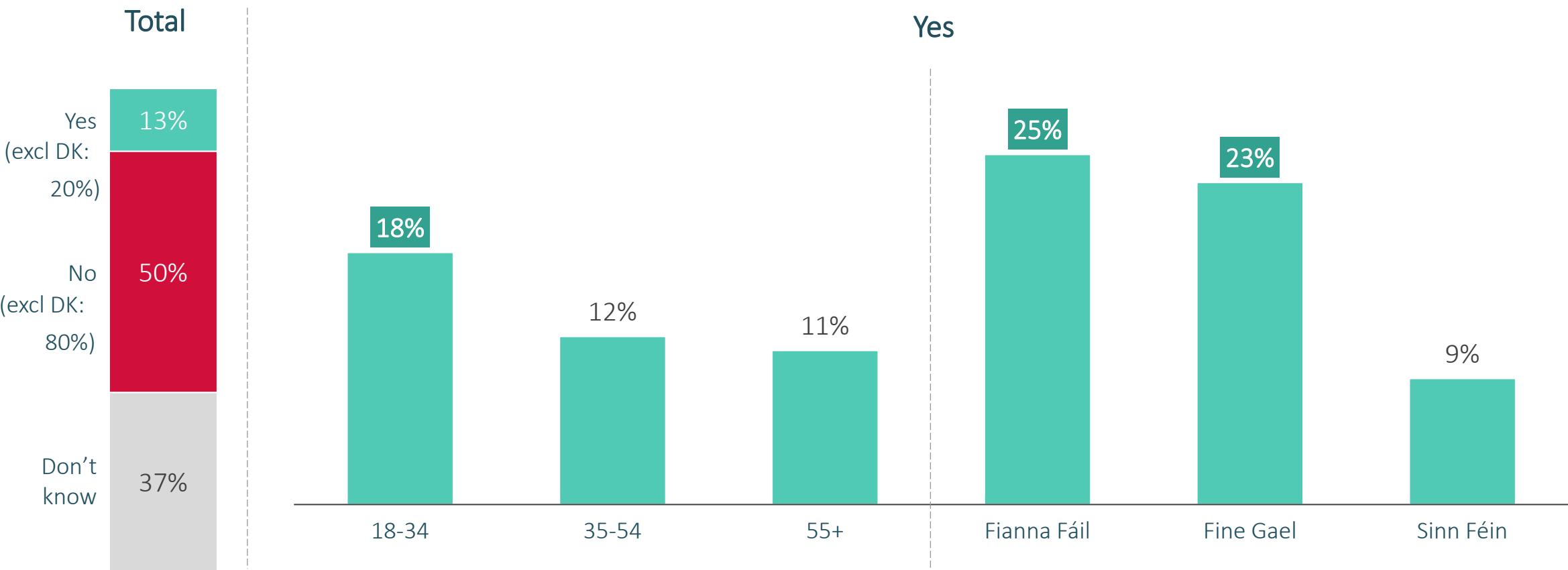


# Half say government policy does not reflect public opinion



Those who believe government policy does reflect public opinion are outnumbered 4 to 1 by those who say they do not reflect public opinion on criminal justice issues

Does government policy reflect public opinion of criminal justice issues?



■ Significant difference vs. Total

All adults 18+ (n=1,006)

Q. In your opinion, do you believe the current government's policies reflect public opinion on criminal justice issues, specifically as it relates to the prison service in Ireland?

# Here is what the public has to say about the government reflecting public opinion of criminal justice issues



Because it is difficult to maintain a fair balance in a free society and I think that the government are trying to achieve this



Because some people feel that the justice system in Ireland is a bit harsh, so the govt tries to find a middle ground to appeal the public and also, punish offenders.



The government act swiftly and have a very good result, regarding to crime and sentencing



Custodial sentences as applied by the Irish government through the judicial system are fair and appropriate and I would agree that they reflect the views of the vast majority most Irish people.



I believe people want a more enlightened approach. Just locking people up will not solve anything. I believe the government understands this



The judiciary is very competent and fair in most cases. They appoint the judges.

...

# Here is what the public has to say about the government not reflecting public opinion of criminal justice issues?



Government seems to be focused on punishing people more and harsher sentences for a lot of crimes, instead they should focus on rehabilitation and why offending happens in the first place. They should also focus on expanding the spent convictions legislation.



Because some violent crimes get ridiculously low sentence, and some minor crimes get ridiculously high sentences.



I do not think they listen to the public or want to face the reality of what is happening in the prison service.



Current government is out of touch with the public on many aspects and policies and this is just one example. They are soft on crime and punishment and prevention.



Building more jails only solves a short-term problem and does not address the bigger issue of why people commit crimes and targeting youths so they don't commit crimes as youths or as adults.



Government not doing much to address the issue and prisons are becoming overcrowded as not clearing the cases in the courts.



I think blue collar crime/smaller crimes seem to be punished more harshly than other offences. Crash the economy, declare bankruptcy, miss a mortgage payment, labelled for life.



It's underfunded, prisons are over-crowded, not enough gardai, sentencing too discretionary, too many people in prison for small crimes, over representation of people from lower economic backgrounds.