

Decoding the Cicero Institute's 2023 Kentucky Homelessness Poll

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The December 2023 poll conducted by the Cicero Institute on homelessness in Kentucky purports to offer a window into the public's perceptions and attitudes towards this pressing social issue. However, a closer examination of the poll's methodology and the nuances of its questions reveals a complex picture that extends beyond mere numbers and percentages. This report delves into these aspects, highlighting how the methodology may affect the representativeness of the poll and how the framing of questions can influence public opinion. Additionally, the report will explore how the responses reflect the need for a comprehensive, compassionate approach to homelessness, emphasizing the importance of funding and structured support over punitive measures. The goal is to provide a nuanced understanding of Kentucky voters' perspectives on homelessness, laying the groundwork for policies that align with both the public sentiment and the principles of effective and humane social intervention.

Methodology Issues in the Cicero Institute's Poll

The methodology section of the Cicero Institute's 2023 Kentucky Homelessness Poll raises several questions about its representativeness and scientific rigor. This section aims to dissect the methodology to highlight areas where the poll may not fully represent the state or adhere to the highest scientific standards.

1. Sampling Frame and Diversity of Methods

The poll gathered responses from 1,508 likely Kentucky voters using three different methods: live calls, online panels, and automated telephone interviews. While the diversity of methods can be advantageous, ensuring a broader range of respondents, it also introduces complexities in data consistency and quality. Live calls, typically seen as the gold standard due to their interactive nature, differ significantly from automated methods in terms of respondent engagement. Online panels, while efficient, often struggle with self-selection bias and representativeness.

2. Timing of the Survey

Conducted between December 27 and 30, 2023, the poll's timing could be a factor in its representativeness. This period, falling right after Christmas and leading up to New Year's Day, is often characterized by lower response rates, leading to a potentially different demographic profile than usual.

3. Margin of Sampling Error

While a ± 2.52 percentage points margin of error is within acceptable limits for a sample of this size, it's crucial to note that this figure can be misleading. The margin of error does not account for other types of errors such as non-sampling errors — inaccuracies not related to the sample size, like measurement errors, nonresponse bias, or data processing errors. Furthermore, as noted, the margin of error for subgroups (like age, race, or income levels) is often higher, which can be significant when looking at specific demographic analyses.

4. Post-Stratification and Weighting

The use of weighted demographic information for post-stratification is a common practice to align the sample with known population parameters. However, this technique hinges heavily on the accuracy of the demographic information used for weighting. In this case, the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey Voting and Registration Supplement and data from state election authorities were used. While these are reputable sources, any discrepancies or outdated information in these sources can lead to inaccurate weights, thereby skewing results.

5. Use of Past Voter Demographics

The construction of sample target weights based on demographic information of actual voters in past elections is a sound approach but has limitations. This method assumes that future elections will mirror past ones in terms of voter demographics, which might not always be the case. Shifts in voter behavior, emerging political issues, or changes in the electorate composition could render past data less predictive of current trends.

6. Sponsorship and Potential Bias

Lastly, the fact that the Cicero Institute paid for all costs associated with the survey introduces a potential for bias. While not indicative of intentional manipulation, the sponsorship of polls can sometimes lead to unconscious biases in survey design, question framing, or data interpretation.

In conclusion, while the Cicero Institute poll employs several standard practices in polling methodology, its representativeness and adherence to scientific rigor are subject to scrutiny. The timing of the survey, the diverse methods of data collection, and reliance on past voter demographics are key areas that might affect its accuracy in representing the current state of Kentucky voters' opinions. As with all polls, this survey should be interpreted with an understanding of its methodology and the limitations therein.

Addressing the perception of increased homelessness

Question 1: Kentuckians perceive homelessness to be increasing

Addressing the perception of homelessness trends in Kentucky, as indicated by the Cicero Institute's study, is crucial in the context of the proposed ban on street camping. The study claims that a significant majority of voters across all political affiliations perceive homelessness as either increasing or persisting at the same levels. Specifically, 60% of all voters, encompassing 65% of Republicans, 55% of Democrats, and 60% of Independents, believe that homelessness is on the rise.

This perception underscores the urgency of addressing homelessness with solutions that extend beyond criminalization. Instituting a ban on street camping at a time when homelessness is believed to be increasing or at least not decreasing, without having supportive services in place, could lead to negative outcomes. It risks pushing individuals experiencing homelessness into even more precarious situations, without addressing the root causes of their circumstances.

The data suggests that now is a critical time to focus on providing more comprehensive support systems, such as low-barrier shelters and increased funding for mental health and recovery

services. These interventions can offer more sustainable and compassionate solutions to homelessness, rather than punitive measures that fail to address the underlying issues.

In examining the Cicero Institute's study, two questions stand out for their framing and implications, especially in the context of discussing street camping and the need for comprehensive services for the homeless.

Question 2: Avoidance of Areas with Homeless Individuals

The phrasing of this question, focusing on avoidance behavior, implicitly frames interactions with the homeless in a negative light. This can reinforce stigma and overlook the systemic issues contributing to homelessness. The responses, with 26% of all voters always avoiding such areas and 21% doing so usually, suggest a discomfort or fear among the public. However, this perspective can overshadow the need for compassionate solutions.

Instead of framing the conversation around avoidance, there's a critical need for increased funding for services that assist the homeless. Providing adequate support can help reduce the visibility of homelessness, not by displacement or criminalization, but by genuinely addressing the issue. Additionally, the prospect of incarcerating individuals for street camping could further burden an already overcrowded county jail system, diverting resources that could be better used for supportive services.

Question 3: Homeless Encampments as a Threat to Public Safety

This question's framing implies that homeless encampments inherently pose a safety threat, which can bias responses. The poll claims that a majority (56% of all voters) perceive these encampments as a safety threat, a perception likely influenced by the question's wording. However, it's important to consider that the presence of homeless encampments is more a symptom of underlying societal and economic issues rather than a direct causative factor in public safety concerns.

Highlighting the need for more funding for services is crucial here. By investing in mental health, substance abuse treatment, and low-barrier shelters, the state can address the root causes of homelessness, which is a more effective and humane approach than criminalization. Moreover, criminalizing homelessness and potentially increasing the jail population would not only strain the correctional system but also divert resources from essential services that could help prevent homelessness in the first place.

These questions from the Cicero Institute's study, while revealing in terms of public perception, also highlight the need for a shift in discourse. A focus on providing comprehensive services and

support for the homeless, rather than punitive measures, is essential for a sustainable and compassionate approach to addressing homelessness in Kentucky.

Addressing root causes of homelessness

Analyzing the subsequent questions from the Cicero Institute's poll, we can draw insights that not only reveal public perceptions of homelessness but also underscore the need for a comprehensive and supportive approach to this complex issue.

Question 4: Perceived Root Causes of Homelessness

The responses to this question, indicating that a significant portion of voters across all parties view drug or alcohol addiction and mental illness as the primary causes of homelessness, highlight a crucial aspect of the homelessness crisis. While these factors are indeed significant contributors, the responses may oversimplify the issue. Lack of affordable housing and insufficient economic support, though rated lower, are also key factors that deserve attention. This suggests a need for a multi-faceted approach to homelessness that includes not only mental health and addiction services but also economic and housing solutions.

Question 5: Compulsory Treatment for Severe Mental Illness

A majority across all political affiliations support the idea of legally compelling individuals with severe, unmanaged mental illnesses into healthcare settings. This response underscores a recognition of the necessity for mental health interventions. However, it also raises ethical and logistical questions about how such measures are implemented and underscores the need for sufficient and humane mental health care facilities.

Question 6: Support for Increased Funding

The strong support for increased government funding for in-patient mental illness and addiction treatment (67% of all voters) indicates a public consensus on the need for more robust support systems for the homeless. This aligns with the argument against criminalizing street camping without adequate services in place. Increasing funding for these services is a step towards addressing the root causes of homelessness.

Question 7: Effectiveness of Subsidized Housing vs. Recovery Programs

Voters seem to lean more towards mental health and substance abuse recovery programs as a solution to chronic homelessness. However, the fact that a significant portion also sees the value in subsidized housing programs suggests that an integrated approach, combining housing solutions with mental health and recovery services, is likely to be more effective. Stable housing is often crucial to an individual's recovery.

Question 8: Compassion in Dealing with Homelessness

The poll claims that the overwhelming majority of voters favor moving homeless individuals into shelters rather than allowing them to camp wherever they choose. This response reflects a preference for structured support over unregulated street living. However, it's important to consider the availability and accessibility of these shelters. The response also indicates a public perception that shelters are a preferable and compassionate alternative, which underscores the need for increased investment in low-barrier shelters that are more accessible to the homeless population.

Question 9: Right to Camp in Public Spaces

A significant majority of voters believe that homeless individuals do not have the right to camp in public spaces if shelter options are available, the poll claims. This viewpoint suggests a public inclination towards regulated solutions for homelessness. However, it also highlights the necessity for ensuring that these shelter options genuinely meet the diverse needs of the homeless population, considering aspects like location, capacity, and the provision of supportive services.

Question 10: Prohibition of Homeless Camps

The poll claims that more than half of voters across all groups support prohibiting homeless camps on streets and other public places. This stance indicates a desire for order and regulation but also implies a need for adequate alternative solutions. Simply banning street camping without providing sufficient and accessible alternatives would likely exacerbate the issue.

Question 11: Support for Ban with Increased Shelter Access

There is a notable increase in support for a ban on street camping if it is accompanied by increased access to well-equipped homeless shelters. This response reinforces the idea that the public is not opposed to regulation per se but is more supportive when it is paired with humane and practical solutions.

These responses from the Cicero Institute's poll reveal a public preference for structured and supportive approaches to homelessness over unregulated street living. While there appears to be a significant inclination towards prohibiting street camping, this is coupled with a clear expectation that adequate, accessible, and supportive shelter options should be available. This underscores the argument against criminalizing street camping without ensuring the provision of sufficient low-barrier shelters and comprehensive services. The data suggests that policies should focus on expanding and improving shelter access and support services, which align with public

opinion and offer a more effective and compassionate approach to addressing homelessness in Kentucky.

Funding and policy approaches

The final set of questions from the Cicero Institute's poll offers significant insights into public opinion on funding and policy approaches to homelessness in Kentucky. These responses are crucial in understanding the public's stance on prioritizing improved services before implementing restrictive measures like bans on street camping.

Question 12: Funding for Homeless Shelters

A majority of voters across political affiliations support increasing government funding for homeless shelters providing temporary emergency housing. This indicates a broad consensus on the need for better-funded shelters as a critical component of addressing homelessness.

Question 13: Conditional Support for Prohibiting Homeless Camps

More than half of the respondents indicate that their support for prohibiting homeless camps is contingent upon increased funding for homeless shelters. This ties directly into the argument that improved services should precede restrictive policies. It reflects a public understanding that without adequate shelter options, a ban on camps would be unjust and ineffective.

Question 14: Ban on Panhandling

The majority support for a statewide ban on panhandling reflects a desire for regulated public spaces. However, this also highlights the necessity for alternative means of support for those who resort to panhandling, emphasizing the need for robust social services and safety nets. A ban on panhandling would also need to overcome legal challenges: the City of Lexington recently attempted such a policy locally, but was rebuked in court.¹

Question 15: Auditing Expenditure on Homelessness

There is strong support across the voter spectrum for auditing cities and counties on their expenditure for addressing homelessness. This underscores a desire for transparency and efficiency in the use of taxpayer funds, potentially leading to more effective homelessness programs.

¹ DENNIS CHAMPION APPELLANT v. COMMONWEALTH OF KENTUCKY APPELLEE (2017)
Docket No: 2015-SC-000570-DG
(https://caselaw.findlaw.com/court/ky-supreme-court/1791774.html#footnote_1)
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Question 16: Conditional Funding for Enforcing Street Camping Bans

The majority of respondents support requiring major cities like Louisville and Lexington to enforce bans on street camping as a condition for receiving increased homelessness program funding. This response shows a public inclination towards structured approaches to homelessness but also implies that funding for comprehensive services should be a prerequisite to enforcement measures.

Question 17: Assessment of Officials' Performance on Homelessness

A significant portion of voters, regardless of political affiliation, perceive state and local elected officials as doing a poor job in managing homelessness. This dissatisfaction highlights the public's desire for more effective strategies and solutions.

The responses from the Cicero Institute's poll illustrate a public consensus favoring improved funding and services for the homeless as a primary approach. There is clear support for increasing government funding for shelters, a preference for structured approaches to homelessness, and an expectation for transparency in spending. However, there is also a conditional nature to the support for more restrictive policies like bans on street camping and panhandling, which the public seems to favor only if accompanied by enhanced support services. This reinforces the argument that improving services should be the first step before implementing punitive measures, aligning with the broader public sentiment for a more compassionate and effective response to homelessness in Kentucky.

Conclusion

The analysis of the Cicero Institute's poll on homelessness in Kentucky underscores a crucial narrative: while the data provides insight into public perception, the methodology and question framing exhibit significant flaws that must be acknowledged. These limitations suggest that the poll's findings, although indicative of certain trends, might not fully encapsulate the nuanced realities of homelessness in the state. Therefore, caution must be exercised in using this data as the sole basis for policy decisions.

A critical oversight in the Cicero Institute's poll is its failure to acknowledge Kentucky's alarmingly high rates of homelessness among children, a grim statistic that places the state among the worst in the nation in this regard. This crucial piece of information, if included in survey questions, would likely have provided a more comprehensive view of the homelessness issue, potentially leading to a shift in the perspectives of Kentucky voters.

By highlighting the plight of one of the most vulnerable segments of the homeless population, the survey could have elicited responses that are more empathetic and understanding of the depth

and complexity of the homelessness crisis in Kentucky. This omission underscores the necessity of a well-informed approach in capturing public opinion on such a multifaceted social issue.

The poll's results do, however, highlight a critical public inclination towards supporting more comprehensive services for the homeless. This sentiment aligns with the broader recognition that addressing homelessness effectively requires more than just punitive measures. The preference for structured and supportive approaches, as opposed to outright criminalization of street camping, is evident. The public's support for increased funding in shelters and services, coupled with the conditional nature of their support for restrictive policies, suggests an understanding that improved services should precede, not follow, any stringent measures.

Given these insights, it is imperative that state legislators and policymakers approach the issue of homelessness with a measured, informed, and compassionate strategy.

Before considering any drastic actions, such as bans on street camping, a period of thorough research and dialogue is essential. Legislators should engage in a comprehensive two-year consultation process with every service provider in the state, gathering insights and understanding the on-ground realities and needs of the homeless population.

This period of exploration and discussion will ensure that any subsequent policies are grounded in a deep understanding of the issue, tailored to the specific needs of Kentucky, and shaped by the experiences of those who work directly with the homeless community.

Kentucky's path forward should be one of building comprehensive, low-barrier services and enhancing care for the homeless population. The Cicero Institute's poll, despite its methodological shortcomings, ultimately reinforces the need for a thoughtful, service-oriented approach to homelessness. Kentucky has the opportunity to set a precedent in how state governments address this complex social issue — not by dropping the homeless population off a cliff with abrupt and punitive policies, but by uplifting them through a scaffold of support, care, and compassion.