ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: UTILIZING PUBLIC OPINION TO BETTER
IMPLEMENT AND EVALUATE REENTRY
COURTS

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The United States criminal justice system is the largest in the world, with individuals

incarcerated at a rate almost five times the overall world rate (Walmsley 2003). Mass

incarceration has led to mass reintegration, with an estimated 1,900 prisoners released each day

back into society (Sabol, Harrison, and Minton 2007). Formerly incarcerated individuals are

often placed into a strained and ineffective parole system and face a myriad of barriers to

successful reentry. This has led to high recidivism rates across our nation, specifically, 62% of

released individuals are rearrested within 3 years (Durose and Antenangeli 2021). These high

rates contribute to a cycle of victimization and disadvantage in communities. Researchers and

policymakers have started to explore reforms to our reentry management system. However, too

much focus on short-term recidivism rates in the research and policy field has hampered support

for rehabilitative programs that focus on combatting the barriers previously incarcerated

individuals face that influence their decision to continue committing crimes. One promising

reform, reentry courts, have been introduced as a model for reentry management in which

participants benefit from more individualized case management and greater access to social

services. Reentry court research has not explored public perceptions of this model. Reentry

reforms involve new programs taking place in communities, so it is vital to understand what the

public does and does not support for politicians to enact change.

This study seeks to examine this gap in the research by assessing the public's perception

of and support for offender rehabilitation, and how their opinions toward offender rehabilitation

impact their support for reentry court services. The goal of this research is to better understand

whether the public is more focused on punitiveness than rehabilitation regarding our criminal

justice reentry system and their level of support for reentry court services. Using an electronic

survey, this research found that individuals have a strong belief in the effectiveness of using

rehabilitative services and are the most supportive of the education, employment, and substance

abuse programs provided in reentry courts. This study has both policy and research implications

for increasing the use of reentry courts, improving the implementation of new courts, and

enhancing the evaluations of current reentry courts.

UTILIZING PUBLIC OPINION TO BETTER IMPLEMENT AND
EVALUATE REENTRY COURTS

by

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Since the growth in the use of incarceration in the 1970s, the United States criminal justice system has remained the world leader in incarceration rates, with individuals incarcerated at a rate almost five times the overall world rate (Walmsley 2003; Weiss and MacKenzie 2010). As a direct effect of mass incarceration in the United States, the number of formerly incarcerated individuals re-integrating into society has been growing each year. At the end of 2020, the Bureau of Justice Statistics estimates there were 3,890,400 adults under community supervision (probation or parole), and an estimated 1,900 prisoners are released each day back into the communities they left facing old and new obstacles (Kaeble 2021; Sabol et al. 2007). With over 79% of state prisoners being rearrested within five years of their release and around 50% of federal prisoners rearrested within eight years of their release, it is clear there are issues with our criminal justice system's management of reentering individuals (Hunt and Dumville 2016; Alper, Durose, and Markman 2018). High recidivism rates among this population create a cycle of damaging effects in communities and have led researchers to study possible reforms to our current parole system. However, research into reentry reform has relied widely on how new programs impact recidivism rates and do not explore other possible benefits of more rehabilitative services. Evidence shows that participants' choice to recidivate is influenced by the environment they are released into and their access to services, so it is important to understand the impact of reentry programs beyond recidivism.

As policy and research interest in prisoner reentry reforms has grown, one initiative that is seeing increased attention is reentry courts (Burke 2001). Reentry courts are specialized courts that are modeled after drug and other problem-solving courts. Problem-solving courts have been more successful at supporting individuals released from incarceration by utilizing a non-

adversarial method of support and encouraging collaboration between treatment services, the judiciary, parole agencies, prosecution and defense offices, and law enforcement officials (Vance 2011). Problem-solving courts, like drug courts, are available for those sentenced to certain types of crimes. This court model has been introduced for all types of offenders, in the form of a reentry court, in which participants are given clear reentry goals, supported by a large, non-adversarial team, and given direct access to a network of treatment and social services. The goal of reentry courts is to ensure reentry is less of a challenge for individuals and to streamline support services.

Policymakers tend to not support the development of rehabilitative reentry reforms, such as reentry courts, due to an assumption that the public prefers punitive policies (Steen, Lacock, and McKinzey 2012). For elected policymakers to put forth legislation for reentry reform and to sustain financial support for these programs over time, the public must find these policies beneficial to the overall community (Ouellette, Applegate, and Vuk 2017; Pickett 2019). Given the importance of public opinion to the implementation of reforms, one aspect of reentry courts that has yet to be researched is public opinion toward reentry courts and the services they provide. More thorough evaluations of public opinion toward reentry courts would be beneficial to the criminology research community and criminal justice practitioners that rely on this research when crafting policies.

The current research adds to the gap in the literature on reentry courts by analyzing the public's level of support for reentry court services through a survey. Since previous reentry court research has focused narrowly on participants' success in avoiding crime, policymakers may be overlooking the possibility to implement a program that improves individuals' quality of life and is more supported by the public than once thought. Expanding reentry court research to gauge

public support will help inform policymakers of their constituents' opinions and contribute to identifying ways to improve the experience of returning individuals and the likelihood of their success.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Criminal Justice Research on Offender Reentry

With the rise in imprisonment and recidivism, growing attention has been directed to prisoner reentry. Once released from incarceration, ex-offenders often do not fare well, with 68% of released individuals "arrested for a new crime within three years of release from prison" and 49.7% "had an arrest that resulted in a conviction [...] or were returned to prison without a new conviction because they violated a technical condition of their release" (Sipes 2022: n.p.).

The barriers that released individuals face during their reentry process and the challenges communities face due to prisoner reentry cannot be understated. Individuals released from incarceration most often come from disadvantaged backgrounds, including social and economic disadvantages, substance abuse issues, and poor educational and employment histories (Visher 2007:95). After release, these individuals "may experience social stigma and discrimination, lessened employment prospects, reduced access to housing, loss of family and social ties, negative mental health effects, increased risk of suicide and early death, and difficulties in finding needed services and supports" (Visher 2007:95). Furthermore, navigating the conditions of post-release, such as mandatory meetings, employment and housing requirements, and payment for services can be complicated for those who spent time in detention away from a normal routine (Burke 2001). The obstacles and high-crime neighborhoods individuals face day-to-day once released have been found to contribute to unsuccessful reentry because they "amplify…the characteristics that are thought to be associated with continued criminal activity"

(National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2022:4). Understanding these challenges and needs of reentering individuals is an important consideration of reentry research.

Beyond the individual struggles of reentry, prisoner reentry also impacts policy concerns and communities because of the public safety, economic, and social cohesion consequences. The high recidivism rates of ex-offenders cause a cycle of victimization within communities, growth in government spending for the criminal justice system, and harms connections between families (Visher 2007). Recently incarcerated individuals that reoffend are contributing to neighborhood crime and further victimizing their communities. This means neighborhoods suffer from crime committed by new individuals and those who cycle in and out of the system. This increases criminal justice spending, such as policing, corrections, and court expenditures, and costs incurred to victims (Chamberlain and Wallace 2015; Visher 2007). Family members are also impacted by their loved one's incarceration. Returning individuals rely on their families for emotional, social, and economic support, which is crucial to reentry success. However, many of these ties become strained as family members also experience financial and emotional hardship due to their loved one's incarceration (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2022). The flaws within our current system and the consequences of high recidivism rates have led researchers and policymakers to explore alternative reentry initiatives.

A majority of individuals populating jails and prisons will reenter society under a conditional release called parole, but this current system is flawed at providing successful offender reintegration (Wiggins et al. 2022). Pressure has been growing on parole agencies to make reforms as resources have thinned out and caseloads have grown. As the number of individuals in incarceration and under community supervision has grown, funding for more parole officers and programs has diminished, with "almost nine out of [every] ten corrections

dollars spent on prisons" (Pew Center on the States 2009:11). Ineffective supervision is more likely with the large caseloads officers have today, and research has shown parole to be less than effective, with "less than half (46 percent) of all parolees successfully complet[ing] parole without violating a condition of release, absconding, or committing a new crime" (Solomon 2006:27; Glaze and Palla 2005). In an article on the history of parole, Wiggins and colleagues (2022) outline how individuals are selected for conditional release based on meeting certain conditions while incarcerated or at the end of their sentence. These individuals must abide by numerous restrictions and requirements depending on their individual sentences, such as reporting to their parole office, maintaining a known address, drug testing, requiring regulations on travel, attending specified treatments, instituting possible location surveillance, maintaining employment, and payments for treatments or restitution. Violations of these conditions can lead to intermediate sanctions, such as enhanced surveillance or drug testing, or parole revocation in which the individual returns to incarceration.

Researchers and policymakers have utilized the growing interest in prisoner reentry to explore reforms to parole as it currently operates. Political efforts, such as the National Reentry Policy Council, Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI), the Prisoner Reentry Initiative (PRI), and the Second Chance Act, among others, aim to establish comprehensive research on the best practices to improve the chances of success for those released from incarceration (Visher 2007). In an article examining the experiences of returning prisoners, Visher (2007) explains the most successful re-entry initiatives utilize individualized treatment and release plans for offenders to receive the treatment they most need, providing adequate treatment programs that are accessible for parolees regardless of cost, and coordinating release management across community organizations, local support services, and criminal justice

agencies. Under current constraints, corrections and parole agencies do not have the resources to incorporate every best practice into their system. Without adequate support while incarcerated and facing complicated supervision requirements upon release, individuals involved with the criminal justice system are not given the best chance for successful, meaningful change in their lives. When examining the current research on how to maximize successful prisoner reentry, it is clear "the aim of an effective approach to prisoner reentry services is reintegration of ex-offenders into the community [...] not simply reduced recidivism, but active and productive community participation by ex-offenders" (Visher 2007:99).

Reentry Courts and Evaluation Outcomes

In 1999, reentry courts were introduced as a reentry management tool that utilizes the practices outlined above to improve offender reentry. Reentry courts are modeled after widely used drug courts, which specialize in handling substance-abusing offenders and have been found to reduce recidivism among participants (Mitchell et al. 2012). The current parole system faces high levels of recidivism and inadequate supervision, and reentry courts are one option for reforming our parole model (Vance 2011). However, research into the implementation and benefits of reentry courts is limited, due to the small scale they are used on.

In one evaluation of a Harlem reentry court, Hamilton (2011) outlines the general model of these courts and how they differ from traditional parole. The reentry court model, despite some variations depending on the particular court, follows a general design:

- Individualized assessment and planning to identify an offender's treatment needs and develop a plan for reentry alongside a team of case managers, parole officers, and the reentry court judge.

- Increased oversight and participation for participants through frequent court appearances, open group discussions about shortcomings and successes of reentry, and increased meetings with a parole officer or reentry team.

- Participants are better linked with social services, which allow participants easier access to treatment programs, such as therapy or substance abuse programs.

- Providing graduated sanctions in lieu of parole revocation, which gives participants the ability to remain in the community and receive punishment for any violations rather than returning to incarceration.

- Acknowledging and celebrating successes in the program through rewards, graduation ceremonies, and decreased sentences.

- Encouraging community collaboration and support for participants.

This model allows participants to take responsibility for sticking to their reentry plan and making the necessary changes while providing a more thorough support system and centers the judge as a mentor and guide rather than an adversarial figure. In contrast to traditional parole, participants have more frequent contact with parole officers and the court, easier access to treatments and services without needing to go outside their program, and more lenience for missteps in reentry alongside celebrating successes. Reentry courts support individual parolees' reentry process and provide participants an active role in their rehabilitation to overcome typically unmanageable disadvantages.

Spread across federal and state jurisdictions, there are currently over two dozen reentry courts in the United States (Wolf 2011). Past evaluations of these programs reveal mixed results on measures of recidivism, such as a new arrest or a technical violation of release resulting in reincarceration (Hamilton 2011; Hassoun Ayoub and Pooler 2015; Taylor 2020; Vance 2011).

For example, findings from an evaluation of a reentry court in Philadelphia show that the program "does not appear to significantly reduce the likelihood of future arrests", but participants had more access to social services and better employment outcomes (Taylor 2020:148). Conversely, evaluations of reentry courts in Massachusetts and Harlem show that participants had a reduction in new charges compared to comparison groups and a greater likelihood of success in employment and sobriety (Hassoun Ayoub and Pooler 2015; Vance 2011). Participants in reentry courts are better coordinated with social service providers and programs compared to typical parolees, which leads to better outcomes related to employment, education training, therapies, and substance abuse treatments, among others. As Hamilton (2011) explains, participants in reentry courts are typically under greater supervision in reference to the amount of contact a participant has with the court and their parole officer, so it is expected that participants are caught violating the conditions of their release more often. This is referred to as a supervision effect and can appear as a negative consequence of courts in which the goal is to reduce recidivism. Due to these aspects of reentry courts, findings on the number of parole revocations and increases in access to services, and better employment outcomes are not surprising. Overall, reentry courts have been found to be somewhat effective at reducing recidivism, especially when targeting the correct populations, and they have been successful in improving other aspects of the reentry process, such as issues with securing employment, housing, and seeking necessary treatment programs (Hassoun Ayoub and Pooler 2015).

Measuring Beyond Recidivism

When evaluating criminal justice programs and policies, researchers and policymakers rely widely on recidivism rates as the leading indicator of success. Since crime has such a large effect on individuals and society, it is not surprising that criminal justice practitioners strive to

reduce the likelihood of individuals committing new crimes. However, basing the success of programs and individuals on recidivism rates gives an "incomplete and sometimes misleading picture of formerly incarcerated individuals' progress in the reentry process" (Chen and Meyer 2020:14). Recidivism rates only capture an individual's interactions with the criminal justice system, meaning they may fail to capture undetected crime or include wrongful convictions. Furthermore, recidivism rates fail to reflect "disparities in [the] likelihood of arrest, conviction, and reincarceration based on an individual's identity or community context" (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2022:5). Given the barriers returning individuals face, especially in under-resourced communities, regarding housing, employment, reestablishing social networks, lack of access to services, and more, recidivism rates are naturally "shaped by the environment into which [individuals] are released, and [can be] expanded or constrained by the opportunities or barriers to which they are exposed" (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2022:6). Programs like reentry courts provide services to individuals that target these barriers and have had successful outcomes when looking beyond recidivism towards aspects of the reentry experience that may influence an individual's likelihood to recidivate.

By looking beyond short-term recidivism, researchers and policymakers can better understand if an individual's new criminal activity is a failure or a part of their desistance process, which is the "cessation of criminal activity [that] occurs incrementally and can involve setbacks" (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2022:5). Promoting desistance would contribute to a long-term reduction in prison and jail populations and reduce the cycle of those exiting and reentering incarceration because it focuses on reducing criminal offending over a period of time, resulting in the ending of criminal behavior. Research has

established key indicators that an individual is on a path toward desistance such as maintaining employment, securing housing, completing an education program, achieving sobriety, building prosocial family and peer networks, and contributing to civic society (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2022; Taylor 2020). By improving the quality of life for returning individuals, they are better equipped with resources and tools to achieve stability rather than returning to criminal offending and face fewer day-to-day struggles. Labeling a program or policy as ineffective based solely on recidivism ignores the idea that an individual may have made a minor mistake, such as failing a drug test, despite doing well in other aspects of their reentry, like maintaining a stable job.

It is beneficial to measure success across all aspects of an individual's life to identify what works and what does not when it comes to preventing repeated criminal behavior. Since reducing recidivism is a legitimate goal of our criminal justice system, it is vital to "gather data that shed light on the effectiveness of programs and interventions designed to accomplish that goal" (Chen and Meyer 2020:5). If we do not know why individuals are struggling with rehabilitation, we cannot design and deliver effective reentry programs. By implementing better reentry programs, we will see more successful reintegration, which benefits communities through "economic vitality [...] family stability and by strengthening civil society" (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2022:84). Keeping individuals out of the criminal justice system reduces the negative effects of incarceration on individuals, lessens financial hardships on families, cuts down on criminal justice costs, minimizes familial separation, and reduces the disadvantages within communities with high numbers of individuals involved with the criminal justice system (Colgan 2007). Reentry courts, based on the evaluations done, are a promising initiative in improving an offender's overall reentry experience

and overall public safety through this desistance lens. Expanding research on this topic to include measuring quality of life outcomes would provide an even fuller picture of the positive impact reentry courts can have in communities.

Public Perception of Offender Reentry and Influence on Policymaking

Although findings on the effectiveness of reentry courts are mixed, perhaps dependent on the chosen outcome of interest, this criminal justice reform should be further investigated as a promising avenue to reduce recidivism because of evidence that providing rehabilitative and support services for participants contributes to more successful reintegration into society and an overall reduction in criminal justice system involvement. Solely measuring program success through recidivism is not sufficient, given these rates do not reflect individuals' full reentry experience and may obscure what is and is not working within a reentry program. If only viewed through the lens of recidivism, some reentry courts have been labeled as ineffective investments from past program evaluations (Vance 2011). Policymakers utilize research, like program evaluations, when deciding to implement new criminal justice policies, as there has been a push in recent decades toward data-driven policymaking to address past injustices (Justice Counts 2022). However, politicians work to preserve their careers by satisfying their constituents' policy concerns and, thus, also need to look to public opinion when allocating budget resources and proposing policies. Past research into reentry courts has focused too narrowly on recidivism and has not explored the level of the public's support for the rehabilitative services provided that have been found to improve communities overall. Given policymakers' reliance on both research and public opinion, expanding research into the public's opinion on reentry court services would give policymakers a clearer view of what their community would support when it comes to

reforming local criminal justice institutions and indicates support for them to make policy changes.

Maruna and LeBel (2003) outlined two opposing narratives that typify conversations surrounding offender reentry: first, the control narratives that are focused on reducing recidivism and center around reducing the risks that ex-offenders pose to the public; second, the support narratives that are focused on successful reintegration and acknowledge that reentering individuals possess deficits that need to be targeted in order to reduce recidivism (Steen et al. 2012). Criminal justice practitioners and policymakers have leaned into control narratives and emphasized public safety during policymaking since it can be argued it is more politically reliable than targeting the needs of those who committed crimes (Maruna and LeBel 2003; Steen et al. 2012). For example, Enns (2014) studied the relationship between public opinion and tough-on-crime policies and found that "the public's increasing punitiveness has been a primary determinant of the incarceration rate and that shifts in the public punitiveness appear to have preceded shifts in congressional attention to criminal justice issues" (858). Overall, communities strive for lower crime rates, and it is easier to rely on policies that lock up criminals rather than invest in their rehabilitation.

However, researchers have found that policymakers overestimate the punitiveness of the public's opinion, with polling that shows "71 percent of Americans agree that incarceration is often counterproductive to public safety" compared to rehabilitative services (American Civil Liberties Union 2017; Drakulich and Kirk 2015; Frost 2010; Steen et al. 2012). Since public punitiveness is influential to policymakers, it is vital to have an accurate measure of the public's opinion. One piece of making meaningful policy changes is the public motivation for reform, and the work of researchers is important for developing "a more informed public discussion

about crime policy" and "may also serve as a tool for those wishing to promote changes" (Drakulich and Kirk 2015:174–75). By overestimating the public's level of support for punitive policies, policymakers may be ignoring reforms that the public supports and are more beneficial to society. For this reason, widening reentry court research to include public opinion would bolster our understanding of public punitiveness and inform policymakers on possible reforms.

Summary

Although there are only a little over two dozen reentry courts in operation, reentry courts are a promising model for reforming how individuals returning from incarceration are supervised and managed (Hassoun Ayoub and Pooler 2015; Taylor 2020; Vance 2011). Reentry courts, once implemented in a jurisdiction, have been shown to improve the reentry experience of participants and reduce the cycling of individuals in and out of prison, which benefits the community fiscally and socially. However, evaluations of reentry courts are often limited in scope by focusing on short-term recidivism and prior research has not delved into broader support for these courts (Taylor 2020). This research focuses on filling the gap that exists in reentry court research by analyzing individuals' support for and belief in offender rehabilitation, and how their opinions toward offender rehabilitation impact their support for reentry court services. This research adds to the literature on reentry courts by providing data on the public's level of support for reentry court services and informs the decision-making process of policymakers who value public support for new policies. Establishing public support for reentry courts is one element of expanding the use of these courts in new jurisdictions. The idea of expanding the focus of reentry research beyond programs' impact on recidivism rates is also critical to designing and implementing effective reentry courts. By more broadly studying aspects of rehabilitative

services provided, researchers and policymakers can identify ways to improve the experience of participants and the likelihood of their success.

Current Research

The purpose of this research is to better understand the public's belief in criminal justice rehabilitation and support for reentry court services by asking two questions: To what extent does the public believe in the effectiveness of rehabilitative services? And, how does this influence their level of support for reentry court services? If the respondents believe that rehabilitative services can be effective when used, it is predicted that they will also have a high level of support for reentry court services. Understanding the public's opinion on criminal justice reforms and what they view as most crucial to successful offender reintegration will allow researchers to better evaluate programs for effectiveness and policymakers to implement changes that are publicly supported.

Chapter 3: Data and Research Method

Collection Method

The current study utilizes an electronic survey designed by the researcher and distributed between January 26, 2023 and February 16, 2023. It was disseminated through social media sites (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Reddit) and group message threads for the researcher's on-campus job and classes. To capture as wide of an audience as possible, participants were encouraged to share the survey link with any of their friends or family. This distribution method was chosen because online surveys have a wider reach regarding participants' location, age, and personal connection to the researcher.

Sample

The sample included for this survey was individuals 18-years-of age or older who live in the United States of America. This sample was selected because individuals over 18 are eligible to vote and their opinions should have the most considerable influence over the election of policymakers and their decisions. The survey was interacted with by 234 individuals, with 52 (22%) individuals exiting before completing the survey; and an additional 13 (6%) provided incomplete data in the last section of the survey, so their responses were excluded from the analysis. The analytic sample consists of 169 individuals.

Demographic information was collected because past research has found relationships between criminal justice system opinions and characteristics such as age, sex, race, and political affiliation. Younger individuals, women, minorities, and liberals have been found to be more supportive of rehabilitative policies and hold positive views of incarcerated individuals compared to whites, men, and conservatives (Applegate et al. 1996; Hirschfield and Piquero 2010). A majority (67.5%) of the sample identified as women, 31.4% self-identified as men, and 1.1% self-identified as other/non-binary. On average, respondents were 33 years of age (range 18-82 years old). Regarding race and ethnic heritage, the majority of participants, 85.2%, identified themselves as "White", 5.9% of the sample identified themselves as "Latino or Hispanic, 4.1% identified as "Black, Afro-Caribbean, or African American", and 3.0% identified as "Asian or Pacific Islander". The remaining 1.8% of the sample chose to enter their own answer, and these included "biracial", "mixed", and "Middle Eastern". In terms of location, most participants reside in either the Northeast/mid-Atlantic (42.0%) or the South (36.1%). The majority (73.4%) of respondents identified themselves as "Liberal" and 17.2% identified as "Conservative". The remaining 9.5% of respondents chose to enter their own answers, and these

included "progressive", "independent", "libertarian", and multiple ways to say "moderate". See Table 1 for a full breakdown of the sample demographics.

Dependent Variable

   Support for Rehabilitation: Respondent's support for rehabilitative services as an effective way to rehabilitate offenders was measured by asking their level of agreement using a Likert scale with the following five statements: 'Our criminal justice system should have programs and services in place to help recently released prisoners', 'Most previously incarcerated individuals can never lead productive lives', 'Most previously incarcerated individuals can go on to lead productive lives with help from rehabilitative services', 'Recently released prisoners are not as deserving of help as law-abiding citizens', and 'I would support policies that reform the management of individuals exiting prisons or jails'. The extent to which respondents agree with these statements measures their belief that reentry services can be effective at rehabilitating offenders. To establish a mean scale of belief in effectiveness, responses to each question were recoded, summed, and averaged. Individual items were coded 5 = 'Strongly Agree', 4 = 'Agree', 3 = 'Neither Agree nor Disagree', 2 = 'Disagree', and 1 = 'Strongly Disagree'. Negatively worded questions, i.e. question two and question three from above, were reverse coded so that higher scores reflect more support for the effectiveness of rehabilitative services. Therefore, the minimum score is 5 and the maximum is 25. See Table 2 for a descriptive breakdown of responses related to attitudes toward criminal justice reentry.

Independent Variable

   Support for Programming Outcomes and Services: Respondents' support for specific programming services and outcomes was measured by proposing the following vignette:

Please imagine that you are the governor of a state that has saved money in its criminal justice budget. State officials are interested in implementing a reentry court, which is a special court for those released from prison that emphasizes rehabilitation and provides more services to participants than the current parole system. How would you allocate this extra money in a proposed reentry court?

For each category, list the percentage of the budget you would allocate to each area. You do not have to give money to every option unless you want to. Choose only the ones you want to fund.

Respondents were able to allocate up to $100 across eight categories. The first four categories focused on reentry court services, such as increasing supervision (i.e. hiring more parole officers for more check-ins, drug testing, etc.), increasing education programs, increasing employment trainings, or increasing substance abuse treatment programs. These items were chosen because previous evaluations of reentry courts have found reentry court participants regularly have a higher level of access to these services and are more likely to have favorable outcomes, excluding reduced recidivism (Hassoun Ayoub and Pooler 2015; Taylor 2020). The other four categories allocated money towards non-rehabilitative criminal justice spending or other types of community spending, such as hiring more police officers, increasing crime prevention programs in public schools, providing a tax rebate to citizens, or funding new jobs in their community. See Figure 1 and Table 3 for a full breakdown of budget allocations and Table 4 for descriptive statistics related to the independent and dependent variables.

Analytic Strategy

Univariate descriptive analyses were done using SPSS to examine the distribution (frequency distribution, mean, and mode) of the demographic, independent, and dependent

variables. To examine the relationship between respondents' belief that rehabilitative services are effective and their support for reentry court services, a bivariate correlation was run using SPSS. A two-tailed test was used, and the results were analyzed using a .05 significant level.

Chapter 4: Results

Descriptive Analysis of Attitudes Toward Criminal Justice Reentry

The first research question asked: To what extent does the public believe in the effectiveness of rehabilitative services? Respondents had an average belief in effectiveness score of 21.54. This is on the higher end of the range, so on average, respondents held supportive views of rehabilitative services. The majority of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that our criminal justice system should have programs in place for recently released prisoners (97.7%), that these rehabilitative services can help individuals lead productive lives (79.3%), and that they support reforming the management system of reentering individuals (90.5%). Furthermore, a sixth statement, 'Our criminal justice system is effective at reintegrating individuals from incarceration into society as law-abiding citizens' was also presented to capture respondents' view of our current criminal justice reentry system. A majority (83.4%) of the sample selected either 'Disagree' or 'Strongly Disagree'. As such, it can be suggested that among this sample, most respondents support and believe in the use of rehabilitative services for previously incarcerated individuals, but they also believe that reforms need to be made to our current system.

Descriptive Analysis of Budget Spending

When looking at how respondents decided to allocate their budgets, the most money was spent on the following three options: increasing employment trainings for a reentry court, increasing education programs for a reentry court, and increasing the number of substance abuse

treatment programs for a reentry court. An average of $59.92 out of $100 was spent by participants toward these three options. Respondents spent an average of $67.81 from the $100 budget on the four reentry court services. Respondents spent an average of $31.31 toward the other four categories, in which the money is not directly going towards a reentry court. The next two most popular options, funding new jobs in the community and increasing funding for public school crime prevention programs, received an average of $25.64. The least money was spent on: hiring more parole officers to increase supervision in a reentry court, hiring more police officers in the community, and giving money back to taxpayers in the form of a rebate. An average of $13.80 was spent on these options. It can be suggested that, among this sample, respondents are in favor of criminal justice spending going toward reentry court services.

Bivariate Analysis

The second research question asked: How does belief in effectiveness influence the level of support for reentry court services? The analysis began by examining the association between respondents' belief in effectiveness scores and the money allocated towards both the four reentry court services (Supervision, Education, Employment, and Substance Abuse Treatment) and the four non-reentry court categories (Police, Tax Rebate, Crime Prevention, and Community Jobs). There was a significant correlation (r= .164, p < .05) between belief in effectiveness scores and reentry court spending, meaning respondents who believe rehabilitative services are an effective aspect of the criminal justice system are more likely to spend available money on developing reentry courts. There was a negative, but not significant relationship (r = -.107, p > 0.05), between belief in effectiveness scores and non-reentry court spending. See Table 5 for more information on the bivariate correlation between the independent and dependent variables.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

This research aimed to better understand the public's attitudes toward whether rehabilitative services for previously incarcerated individuals are effective and their level of support for the services provided in reentry courts. Our current parole system is strained for resources and characterized by high recidivism rates (Travis 2000). In the face of these current issues, researchers and policymakers have been exploring reforms to our reentry system. A promising reform, reentry courts, have been introduced in over two dozen jurisdictions. These courts provide participants with access to rehabilitative services, enhanced supervision, and more individual case management in a less adversarial environment than traditional parole (Taylor 2020). Reentry courts have been found to improve the quality of participants' life in regard to finding and keeping stable employment, acquiring health insurance, bettering family relationships, and reducing substance abuse (Hassoun Ayoub and Pooler 2015). However, when policymakers evaluate reentry management reforms, they often utilize recidivism rates as the leading indicator of program success. Furthermore, policymakers, too, rely on recidivism rates when making criminal justice reforms because it is politically safe to emphasize public safety and lower community crime, even though many Americans want fewer punitive policies than politicians think (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2022; Drakulich and Kirk 2015; Maruna and LeBel 2003). Since research into reentry courts focuses heavily on recidivism and has not aimed to understand how the public feels about these services, it is more difficult to build support for and momentum to implement reentry courts. This research fills that gap by looking at both areas lacking in reentry court research — whether the public is more

focused on punitiveness than rehabilitation regarding our criminal justice reentry system and their level of support for specific reentry court services.

The results of this survey found that almost all respondents in this sample agree that our current criminal justice system is ineffective at managing the reentry of incarcerated individuals and they would support reforms. Straying away from the typical assumption that everyday citizens prefer tough-on-crime policies, the majority of respondents also agree that rehabilitative services are important in helping previously incarcerated individuals lead productive lives, with an average score of 21.5 out of 25 using the constructed belief in effectiveness scale. Policy changes are only feasible if the public is also motivated to make reforms, and respondents in this sample are open to and encourage changes to our criminal justice reentry system. The significant positive correlation found between respondents believing that rehabilitative services are effective and their willingness to allocate spending toward a reentry court instead of other options highlights their support for reentry court initiatives over other traditional crime prevention methods, like increasing policing and prevention programs in schools. This relationship shows that if more of the public believes in the effectiveness of rehabilitative services than politicians assume, those citizens likely also support spending on rehabilitative services in a reentry court model.

Results further suggest that respondents are most supportive of the services that are key indicators that individuals are on a path to desistance and have proven to be the most helpful for reentry court participants. Respondents allocated more money towards the four reentry court options than not, and particularly allocated the most money towards increasing employment trainings for a reentry court, increasing education programs for a reentry court, and increasing the number of substance abuse treatment programs for a reentry court. Maintaining employment,

completing an education program, and achieving sobriety are key markers that individuals are on the path to ceasing their criminal behavior, and evaluations of current reentry courts have shown participants have better outcomes related to employment, education, and sobriety compared to non-reentry court individuals (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2022; Vance 2011). The two options that would most reflect a crackdown on recidivism, increasing supervision for participants and hiring more police, received $8.01 and $3.70 on average. The common control narrative for criminal justice practitioners and researchers focuses on public safety and reducing crime in the community at the cost of not providing as much rehabilitation for individuals (Maruna and LeBel 2003). This has led to a focus on reducing recidivism as the main goal of criminal justice reentry programs, however, results from this survey highlight that the public sees the value of investing in the quality of life of reentering individuals, more so than investing in them being policed.

Limitations

This research has several limitations. Due to the sample size, manner of participant recruitment, and sample demographics, this sample is limited in generalizability. There were 169 usable responses, and many participants were reached through their personal connection to the researcher. It is possible that respondents who chose to take this study due to knowing the researcher through the University of Maryland's Criminology and Criminal Justice Department may be more aware of the benefits of rehabilitation services named throughout this research and hold less punitive opinions toward previously incarcerated individuals. Furthermore, this sample is primarily composed of younger, liberal women. Research has found that younger individuals, women, minorities, and those with higher levels of education hold less stigmatizing views of previously incarcerated individuals and are more likely to support rehabilitative policies

(Hirschfield and Piquero 2010). Assuming this holds true for the current sample, it is not surprising the results showed a high level of support for rehabilitative services. Since 85.2% of respondents self-identified as "White", the positive bias seen is most likely based on gender, age, and political ideology.

Prior research has identified a difference in individuals' opinions toward previously incarcerated individuals on a personal versus a public level, meaning individuals may vocalize support for investing in previously incarcerated individuals, but in reality, would not want these individuals in their own community (Ouellette et al. 2017). This survey captures what respondents generally believe but does not represent their support for these changes being practically put in place in their community. Respondents' views may change if they were asked to personally work or live beside previously incarcerated individuals. Furthermore, research has found that individuals who have been involved in the criminal justice system or know someone who has been incarcerated hold less stigmatizing views of previously incarcerated individuals (Hirschfield and Piquero 2010). This research does not ask respondents about their personal connection to the criminal justice system, so it is unknown if this may be playing a role in the survey results. Future research may aim to address these limitations, but the current research still provides important insight into how a selection of the population views rehabilitative services and reentry courts.

Implications and Future Directions

This research fills the gap that exists in the literature about reentry courts. There is no research that directly looks at public opinion regarding reentry courts, and the majority of reentry court research is focused on evaluating the performance of participants based on recidivism rates. Without research to show that the public is aware of reentry courts, their benefits, and support for

them, policymakers may also not be aware of this reform as an option. This research adds to past research which has shown the public is far less punitive than policymakers assert and adds to our understanding of which services the public would most like to see given to participants in reentry courts. By developing more research related to public opinion and reentry courts, policymakers would have more resources to draw from that show the public is open to fewer tough-on-crime policies and want investments to be made to rehabilitate individuals, leading to the possible expansion of reentry courts. Given the current issues facing our reentry management system and high recidivism rates, policymakers are looking for possible changes, but need to have their voters support to do so. Currently, released individuals face systemic barriers to achieving stability and high recidivism rates cause a cycle of victimization and negative effects on communities (Visher 2007). Reentry courts are an example of a reform in which caring for participants' quality of life can lead to long-term reductions in crime and individuals' overall stability. Reducing community crime is a legitimate goal of our criminal justice system, and providing rehabilitative services does this over time, but may be overlooked by short-term recidivism rates. This research could lead to breaking down those systemic barriers and increasing public safety through policy changes in which policymakers see the benefits of investing in reentry courts and that they have the public support to do so.

Furthermore, this research could be utilized to better design, implement, and make changes to reentry courts. The majority of program evaluations rely on short-term recidivism rates as an indicator of success, despite evidence that this measure may be misleading about individuals' progress with the reintegration process (Chen and Meyer 2020). Other measures, such as participants' access to housing, employment, and therapies, are more insightful when considering if they are on the right path or not. This survey suggests that the public also values

these quality-of-life services, so they are just as important when measuring if programs are beneficial to public safety and the goals of corrections. It would be detrimental to dismiss possible reforms, like reentry courts, if they do not show drastic changes in recidivism rates because that is not the public's only concern. Rather, if researchers delved deeper into which services specifically help participants the most, they would be able to identify what is and is not working in reentry courts that is leading to recidivism. By improving the evaluations of current reentry courts, we would be more able to make changes to programs and implement courts to adhere to the best practices.

Future research should seek to explore similar topics on a larger scale. Due to the current small sample size, this research may not be generalizable. It is important to gather more of the public's opinion to understand if there actually is widespread support for the implementation of reentry courts. This research did not explore the correlation between demographic information and opinions toward reentry courts. Research could look more deeply at differences in opinion across geographic areas, gender, race, education level, political ideology, and personal connection to the criminal justice system. This would provide more insight into who is supportive of reentry courts, where they live, and their motivations for support. Research has found that an important aspect of understanding public opinion for criminal justice reform is that people of different backgrounds are motivated by different issues. Some individuals are persuaded by the long-term cost reduction of justice reform and others are motivated by the idea of our system better promoting human rights and equality (Gottschalk 2016). In hopes of implementing reentry courts across the country, it is necessary to understand who supports these reforms and why for policymakers to make the best argument to their constituents.

Future research would also benefit from utilizing different research methods. Since public opinion in practice may differ from answers given on a survey, it would be beneficial to perform more qualitative and longitudinal research on this topic. Looking at the opinions of individuals who live in jurisdictions with reentry courts would better highlight the benefits and drawbacks of these courts in communities. Open-ended questions and interviews with the public would shed more light on the nuances of their opinions that a survey cannot capture. It would be worthwhile to use longitudinal methods to study the impacts of reentry courts for participants and communities to better understand the outcomes compared to focusing on short-term returns. Individuals may not see a change in their community's safety right away, but due to the long-term benefits of reentry courts, these improvements may be seen over time.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research and potential future research is important to the development of reentry courts across the country and to broader acceptance of investing in the rehabilitation of previously incarcerated individuals. Given the large population of justice-involved individuals and high recidivism rates that indicate our current system is ineffective at reducing the cycle of incarceration, it is crucial to reform our reentry management system to see the most return out of our investments, improve public safety, and improve the wellbeing of all individuals. The limited research on reentry courts supports their benefits to participants, and the current research highlights public support for this reform option. Meaningful justice reform requires data-driven research support, action to be taken by policymakers, and backing from the public to sustain programs. Reentry courts, and offender reentry research overall, will benefit from exploring these topics on a larger scale.

Tables

Table 1. Sample Demographics

	Frequency	Percent / Mean	Standard Deviation
Gender			
Man	53	31.4%	
Woman	114	67.5%	
Other	2	1.1%	
Age		32.67	16.4
Race			
White	144	85.2%	
Asian/Pacific Islander	5	3.0%	
Black/Afro-Caribbean	7	4.1%	
Latino or Hispanic	10	5.9%	
Other	3	1.8%	
Region			
Northeast or Mid-Atlantic	71	42.0%	
Midwest	28	16.6%	
South	61	36.1%	
West	7	4.1%	
Registered Voter			
Yes	164	97.0%	
No	5	3.0%	
Political Ideology			
Liberal	124	73.4%	
Conservative	29	17.2%	
Other	16	9.5%	

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics – Attitudes Toward Criminal Justice Reentry

	Frequency	Percent
Attitudes Toward Criminal Justice Reentry		
Our criminal justice system should have programs and services in place to help recently released prisoners.		
Strongly Agree	124	73.4%
Agree	41	24.3%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	3	1.8%
Disagree	1	0.6%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0%
Most offenders can never lead productive lives.		
Strongly Agree	4	2.4%
Agree	12	7.1%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	16	9.5%
Disagree	65	38.5%
Strongly Disagree	72	42.6%
Our criminal justice system is effective at reintegrating individuals from incarceration into society as law-abiding citizens.		
Strongly Agree	2	1.2%
Agree	2	1.2%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	24	14.2%
Disagree	73	43.2%
Strongly Disagree	68	40.2%
Most previously incarcerated individuals can go on to lead productive lives with help from rehabilitative services.		
Strongly Agree	46	27.2%
Agree	88	52.1%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	24	14.2%
Disagree	10	5.9%
Strongly Disagree	1	.6%
Recently released prisoners are not as deserving of help as law-abiding citizens.		
Strongly Agree	2	1.1%
Agree	5	2.8%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	18	10.7%
Disagree	59	34.9%
Strongly Disagree	85	50.3%
I would support policies that reform the management of individuals exiting prisons or jails.		
Strongly Agree	91	53.8%
Agree	62	36.7%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	14	8.3%

Disagree	0	0.0%
Strongly Disagree	2	1.2%

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics Mean Percentage Budget Allocations

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Mean Percentage Budget Allocations		
Increase the level of supervision for participants in the reentry court (i.e. hiring more parole officers for more check-ins, drug testing, etc.)	8.01	11.074
Increase the number of education programs for reentry court participants.	20.48	9.12
Increase the number of employment trainings for reentry court participants and assisting with job placement.	21.64	11.10
Increase the number of substance abuse treatment programs in the reentry court.	17.80	9.47
Hire more police officers in the community.	3.70	8.64
Give money back to taxpayers through a tax rebate, rather than implementing a reentry court.	2.09	5.72
Increase funding for public school crime prevention programs.	10.38	9.32
Fund community economic development to create jobs in the community.	15.26	11.94

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics – Independent and Dependent Variables

|	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Belief in Effectiveness Scale	15	25	21.54	2.43
Reentry Court Spending	14	100	67.81	17.16
Other Category Spending	0	80	31.31	16.66

Table 5. Bivariate Correlation Between Belief in the Effectiveness of Rehabilitative Services and Reentry Court Spending

Variable	Reentry Court Spending	Non-Reentry Court Spending
Belief in Effectiveness Scale	.164*	-.107

*p<0.05

Figures

Figure 1. Average Spending Across All Categories

Average Spending Across All Categories
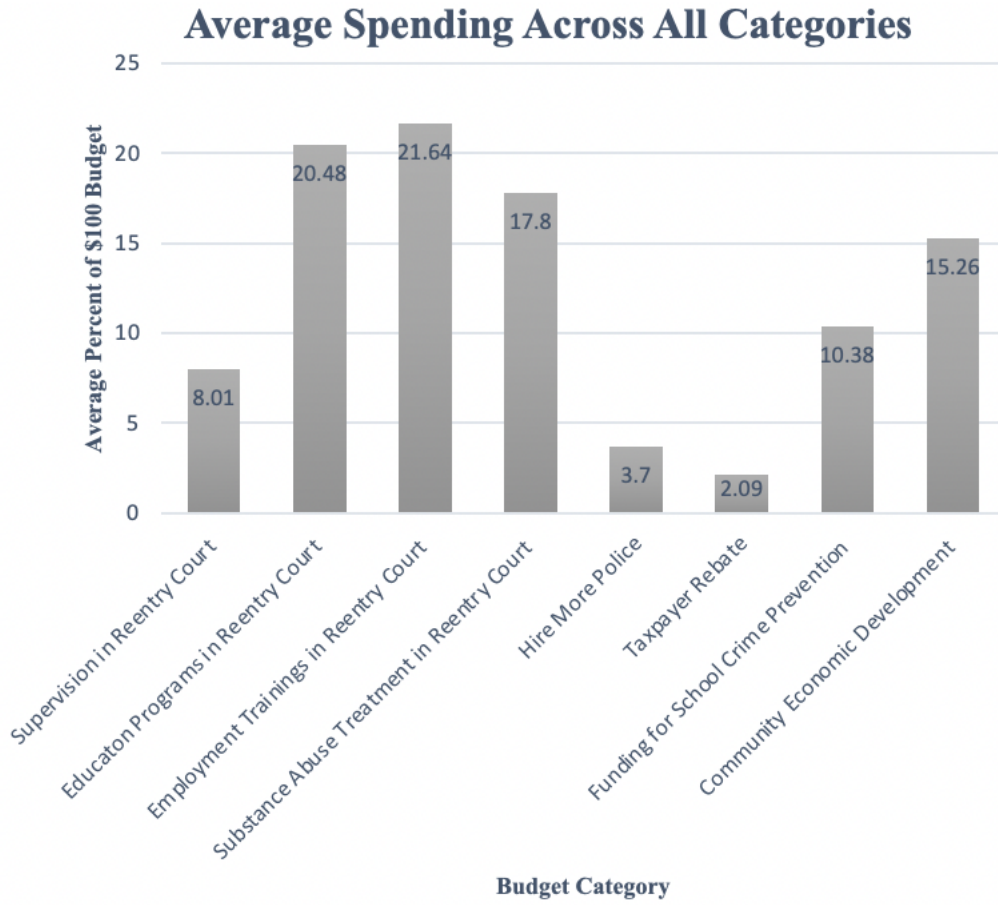
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Appendix

Appendix A. Survey

Hello! For my undergraduate thesis, I am interested in learning more about public support for a variety of services available to individuals exiting prisons and jails. If you are 18 years of age or older and live in the United States, please consider completing this survey.

The survey takes five minutes or less to complete, is voluntary, confidential and anonymous. You may skip any question in the study and/or exit the survey at any time.

You can find more information about the study here [embedded consent form link]. Your responses are greatly appreciated!

The following questions will be related to your demographics. Please answer by selecting the option you most agree with, or fill in the blank.

1. What gender do you most identify with?
    1. Man
    2. Woman
    3. Nonbinary
    4. Other: (Please specify)
2. What is your age?
    1. Free response
3. Which of the following best represents your racial or ethnic heritage?
    1. Asian or Pacific Islander
    2. Black, Afro-Caribbean, or African American
    3. Latino or Hispanic
    4. Native American or Alaskan Native
    5. White or Caucasian
    6. Other: (Please specify)
4. In what region of the United States is your permanent residence?
    1. Northeast or Mid-Atlantic (CT, ME, MA, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, VT)
    2. South (AL, AR, DE, FL, GA, KY, LA, MD, MS, NC, SC, OK, TN, TX, VA, WV)
    3. Midwest (IL, IN, IA, KS, MI, MN, MO, ND, NE, OH, SD, WI)
    4. West (AK, AZ, CA, CO, HI, ID, MT, NV, NM, OR, UT, WA, WY)
5. Are you registered to vote?
    1. Yes
    2. No
6. Which political leaning are you most aligned with?
    1. Liberal
    2. Conservative
    3. Other: (Please specify)

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
7. Our criminal justice system should have programs and services in place to help recently released prisoners.					
8. Most previously incarcerated individuals can never lead productive lives.					
8. Our criminal justice system is effective at reintegrating individuals from incarceration into society as law-abiding citizens.					
9. Most previously incarcerated individuals can go on to lead productive lives with help from rehabilitative services.					
10. Recently released prisoners are not as deserving of help as law-abiding citizens.					
11. I would support policies that reform the management of individuals exiting prisons or jails.					

Now, please imagine that you are the governor of a state that has saved money in its criminal justice budget. State officials are interested in implementing a reentry court, which is a special court for those released from prison that emphasizes rehabilitation and provides more services to participants than the current parole system. How would you allocate this extra money in a proposed reentry court?

For each category, list the percentage of the budget you would allocate to each area. You do not have to give money to every option unless you want to. Choose only the ones you want to fund.

	%
11. Increase the level of supervision for participants in the reentry court (i.e. hiring more parole officers for more check-ins, drug testing, etc.).	
12. Increase the number of education programs for reentry court participants.	
13. Increase the number of employment trainings for reentry court participants and assisting with job placement.	
14. Increase the number of substance abuse treatment programs in the reentry court.	
15. Hire more police officers in the community.	
16. Give money back to taxpayers through a tax rebate, rather than implementing a reentry court.	
17. Increase funding for public school crime prevention programs.	
18. Fund community economic development to create jobs in the community.	