Redemption at a Correctional Turning Point: Public Support for Rehabilitation Ceremonies

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NEARLY TWO DECADES ago, Shadd Maruna (2001) transformed the study of life-course criminology with his classic *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives.* For most of its existence, American criminology had focused on juvenile delinquency (Cullen, 2011), assuming that crime peaked during the teen years and that most youths then experienced "maturational reform" as they aged out of crime (Matza, 1964). Starting in the 1990s, however, criminology experienced a major shift as understanding grew that a smaller but consequential group of chronic or career criminals continued to offend deep into adulthood (Laub, 2004). Crime across the life course became a central criminological concern, as major works focused on criminal persistence and desistance during this stage in life. Prominent scholars debated the causal importance of adult social bonds (Sampson & Laub, 1993), the existence of distinct developmental pathways (Moffitt, 1993), and the effects of stable individual propensities (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). The intellectual ferment thus was already high when Maruna added another insight: What offenders thought about themselves and their future shaped their capacity to avoid crime and "make good" in life (see also Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009).

Maruna's novel perspective was based on his work as the co-director of the Liverpool Desistance Study in which he interviewed 65 persistent offenders. The members of his sample all had multiple criminogenic risk factors that predicted a destiny of continued law-breaking. Maruna observed, however, that despite similar backgrounds, some of his interviewees continued to offend whereas others did not. As he probed their lives in more detail, he discovered that a key distinguishing factor was their narrative identity—or the biographical stories they told about who they were and what their future might hold (McAdams, 2001). Maruna used the term of "scripts" to capture these self-stories.

Thus, those who seemed trapped in a criminal life embraced what Maruna called a "condemnation script." They saw themselves as "doomed to deviance" and "condemned" to a criminal life course by circumstances beyond their control. By contrast, those who embraced a "redemption script" believed that, although they had done bad things, they were not at their core a permanently bad person. "Deep down they were good people," so being a criminal was not their "real me" (Maruna, 2001, pp. 88-89). They would be made stronger by their past waywardness, becoming more resilient and being in a position to help others (e.g., juveniles) avoid their mistakes. This sense of self-efficacy and prosocial identity motivated them to surmount life's difficulties and to strive to "make good" in society.

Importantly, Maruna's (2001) *criminological theory* of desistance led him to an important recommendation for *correctional policy*. As labeling theory had long pointed out (Cullen & Cullen, 1978), stigmatization and exclusion from society made offender reform especially challenging (see also Braithwaite, 1989). More recently, attention has been paid to how a criminal record, now "eternally" available on the internet, exposes offenders to scores of collateral consequences that bar them from economic, social, and civic participation (see, e.g., Alexander, 2010; Burton, Fisher, Jonson, & Cullen, 2014; Jacobs, 2015; Pager, 2009). Those convicted of a crime thus face daunting challenges in escaping their past from policies that, in effect, manifest a condemnation script for them.

Maruna's (2001) views on redemption scripts led him to reject condemnation—what Garfinkle (1956) famously called "degradation ceremonies"—to offer a competing correctional policy: the implementation of formal rituals or ceremonies that would recognize offender redemption (pp. 155-165). At the core of this policy is the premise that "not only must a person accept conventional society in order to go straight, but conventional society must accept that person as well." True redemption—full acceptance back into society—thus requires more than the wayward being rehabilitated. As noted, even the most prosocial face many barriers to

reintegration, whether formal collateral consequences or informal discrimination (Pager, 2009; Western, 2018). Unless "we" agree to forgive past transgressions and wipe their slate clean, they will always remain "ex-offenders" and never escape their eternal criminal status (Cullen, Lee, Butler, & Thielo, 2020). Such a transformation of offenders' legal status and public identity from a criminal to a citizen can only be achieved through an official legal act—again, preferably marked by a public ceremony (Maruna, 2001).

Following *Making Good*, Maruna (2011a, 2011b) built on these initial insights to map out in more detail what a formal rehabilitation or redemption ceremony might entail. Note that expungement offers one means of cancelling a criminal record (Love, Gaines, & Osborne, 2018; Love & Schlussel, 2019). However valuable, this legal mechanism has the disadvantage of asking society not to forgive offenders but to forget that a crime has occurred. Rather than affirming that a person has moved beyond his or her criminal past, expungement seeks to hide that past and pretend it never existed. Redemption is more public and aims at transforming an offender's status. Much like the Catholic Church's practice of confession where sins are admitted and absolved, the purpose is to use forgiveness to wipe the slate clean.

For Maruna, a rehabilitation ceremony should manifest four key elements. First, such ceremonies should involve a formal ritual—much like a graduation ceremony—which would serve as a rite of passage (Maruna, 2011b). Rather than imposing status degradation as court hearings that end with conviction, these events would be status affirming. The state would "acknowledge and formally recognize that people can change, that good people can do bad things, and that all individuals should be able to move on from past convictions" (Maruna, 2011a, p. 97; see also Maruna, 2001). Second, similar to a diploma, graduating offenders should be given a "certificate of rehabilitation"—a formal document that advertises their reform and restores all rights and privileges of full citizenship (Maruna, 2011a, p. 111). Offenders "need a 'rehabilitation credential,'" observes Maruna (2011a, p. 106), "to counter their criminal stigma."

Third, redemption would not be automatic but merited—earned through actions that show an effort to "make good" (2011b, p. 19) and deserving of a place on an "honor roll" (2001, p. 163). These acts "might include immediate efforts to apologize or make amends to one's victims, a period of 'good behavior' on the outside, and efforts to recover from addiction, find productive work, 'give something back' to one's community, or contribute to one's family responsibilities" (2011b, p. 19). Fourth and more generally, a rehabilitation ceremony fosters a "rebiographing" of an offender. "In this liberating model," observes Maruna (2001, p. 164), "an ex-offender is therefore legally enabled to rewrite his or her history to make it more in line with his or her present, reformed identity."

In this context, the current project explores the extent to which the American public would support the implementation of rehabilitation ceremonies, including certificates. We address this issue using a national-level survey that we commissioned YouGov to undertake. In addition, we examine public views about the redeemability of offenders—whether they believe that offenders are intractably criminal or have the potential to change for the better. As we show, the data reveal substantial belief in offender redeemability and support for rehabilitation ceremonies and certificates.

As a prelude to presenting the survey data, we place this issue within the prevailing American correctional context, arguing that the nation is in the midst of a historic turning point in correctional policy, politics, and rhetoric. We also examine extant practices that have similarities to rehabilitation ceremonies and imply general acceptance of this policy reform.

A Correctional Turning Point

From the early-1970s until 2010, the United States was mired in what Clear and Frost (2014) termed "the punishment imperative" or what Garland (2001) called "the culture of control." The centerpiece of this correctional era was the nation's embrace of "mass incarceration," with the daily count of inmates behind bars multiplying several times over and eventually surpassing 2.3 million (Cullen & Jonson, 2017). Beyond being "addicted to incarceration" (Pratt, 2009), however, this period was marked by harsh rhetoric and policies. Rehabilitation was attacked as ineffective and overly lenient (Allen, 1981; Cullen & Gilbert, 1982), and punitive public attitudes grew steadily (Enns, 2016; Pickett, 2019). Politicians embraced a range of get-tough policies, including three-strikes and truth-in-sentencing laws, mandatory-minimum sentences, harsh penalties for drug offenses, boot camps and scared straight programs, control-oriented community corrections (e.g., electronic monitoring, house arrest), and austere prison conditions (Cullen & Jonson, 2017; Pfaff, 2017; Tonry, 2019). Statutes increasing the number and variety of collateral consequences attached to criminal convictions became ubiquitous, which proved a social disability to more than 20 million Americans whose felony records were now "eternally" available on the internet (Alexander, 2010; Chin, 2017; Jacobs, 2015; Whittle, 2018). Equally disquieting, offenders were often portrayed as beyond redemption—as wicked, super-predators, or unpredictably risky (DiIulio, 1995; Simon, 2014; Wilson, 1975).

A decade ago, however, the United States experienced a sudden turning point—away from mass incarceration and policies used to exclude offenders from civil society (Petersilia & Cullen, 2015; Pickett, 2016). A library of books has been written on the mass incarceration era, and rightfully so given its enduring effects on the nation (see, e.g., Alexander, 2010; Clear & Frost, 2014; Garland, 2001; Gottschalk, 2006; Hinton, 2016; Kohler-Hausman, 2017; Pfaff, 2017; Simon, 2007; Tonry, 2004). But few works have explained why this four-decades' experiment with imprisonment and get-tough policies ended with few defenders (for exceptions, see Avram, 2015; Petersilia & Cullen, 2015; Simon, 2014). What had been hegemonic lost its legitimacy. Regardless of the reasons, a correctional turning point is under way that is characterized by at least five developments.

First, growth in state and federal prison populations has reversed or, in the least, slowed (Petersilia & Cullen, 2015). As Bronson and Carson (2019, p. 1) show in their Bureau of Justice Statistics report, "the imprisonment rate for sentenced prisoners [in 2017] was the lowest since 1997." Between 2007 and 2017, "prisoners under jurisdiction of state or federal correctional authorities" declined by 6.7 percent (Bronson & Carson, 2019, p. 1). Second, the public "mood" or "sensibility" about crime has shifted (Tonry, 2004). As noted, punitive attitudes have declined in recent years (Enns, 2016; Pickett, 2019), and public support for rehabilitation and alternatives to incarceration, including in Red States, is extensive (Sundt, Cullen, Thielo, & Jonson, 2015; Thielo, Cullen, Cohen, & Chouhy, 2016). Third, criminal justice reform has become bipartisan, as seen most visibly by President Trump's signing into law the First Step Act (Cohen, 2019). Reforms aimed at limiting prison populations have been particularly

notable in southern Red States (Cohen, 2017; Warnberg & Olsen, 2019). Instructive as well is the recent action taken by two Republican governors—the commutation of the sentences of 527 inmates by Kevin Stitt of Oklahoma and the pardon of 428 inmates by Matt Bevin in Kentucky (Casiano, 2019; Maxouris, 2019). Bevin justified his action by arguing that "America is a nation that supports redemption" (Craig, 2019). Fourth, efforts have been made to reduce barriers to offenders' inclusion in the community. These include the extensive growth of prisoner reentry programs, ban-the-box laws, therapeutic-justice specialty courts (e.g., drug courts), and statutes facilitating criminal record expungement and reducing collateral consequences (Cullen et al., 2020; Jonson & Cullen, 2015; Love et al., 2018; Love & Schlussel, 2019; Mears & Cochran, 2015; Thielo, Cullen, Burton, Moon, & Burton, 2019). Fifth, rhetoric about law-breakers has shifted dramatically. As Simon (2014, p. 23) notes, the prevailing "mind-set" was that "most criminals have a high and unchanging potential for criminal activity, including violence, even if their present offense is not violent." This view justified "total incapacitation" to protect public safety. Now, however, policymakers disaggregate criminals into categories, including the non-violent drug and low-risk offenders who "do not belong in prison" (Obama, 2018; Simon, 2014).

In short, the correctional turning point over the past decade has created a context in which policymakers increasingly have turned away from punitive, exclusionary practices and toward supportive, inclusionary practices. This politically bipartisan development raises the possibility that new innovations—including rehabilitation ceremonies and certificates seeking offender redemption—might be possible. Remnants of the get-tough era certainly exist, but opportunities for reform are palpable (Goshe, 2017; Petersilia & Cullen, 2015). Indeed, as the next section details, beginning efforts at correctional ceremonies already have been undertaken.

Correctional Ceremonies

Formal ceremonies that embody the four central elements of rehabilitation ceremonies identified by Maruna (2011b) have been implemented in courts and correctional systems throughout the United States. A comprehensive record of such ceremonies does not exist, because their implementation is often limited to specific municipalities or even to specific persons who have committed particular offenses or who have certain criminogenic needs. However, examples of rehabilitation ceremonies can be documented throughout some of the thousands of problem-solving courts in the United States.

Problem-solving courts (also known as specialty courts or problem-oriented courts) are specialized courts developed to address the unique risks and criminogenic needs of subsets of persons who come into contact with the criminal justice system, such as those who abuse drugs or alcohol, trafficking victims arrested for prostitution, those with mental illness, and veterans (Kulig & Butler, 2019; Thielo et al., 2019). One of the key recommendations for these courts is that they have specific outcomes for participants to achieve (Office for Victims of Crime, n.d.), and many courts hold formal, celebratory ceremonies for participants who achieve the required outcomes and successfully "graduate" from the court.

For example, the drug court (Court) in the District of Columbia holds a graduation ceremony for those who successfully complete court requirements. The ceremony begins with remarks from guest speakers who were past graduates of the Court (Adams, n.d.). New graduates of the drug court then receive a certificate of completion and have a few moments to speak about how the Court has impacted them personally before the prosecutor states before the Court that their charges are dismissed and the judge "embrace[s] each graduate" (Adams, n.d.). One pretrial services officer wrote in an account of the ceremony that she was "so happy for everyone having another chance at living the life they deserve, having a fresh start" (Adams, n.d.).

Twin Falls Drug Court—located in Twin Falls, Idaho—holds a similar graduation ceremony in which new graduates hear speeches from former graduates and receive a diploma. One graduate also "received a book stipend to further his education" from the court, and another received "two bunches of roses from her supporters" (Ferraro, 2019). The judge who oversees the court praised the graduates for their accomplishments and "also praised those in the audience," stating "it truly takes a community effort" (Ferraro, 2019). Both the D.C. ceremony and the Twin Falls ceremony contain each of the four elements Maruna (2011b) described as key to rehabilitation ceremonies in that they are formal ceremonies, individuals earn the right to participate in them through their achievements in the Court, graduates receive a formal certificate, and the court conveys the message that graduates have reoriented themselves toward desistance.

Similar ceremonies exist throughout the United States, such as in the drug treatment court in Frederick County, Maryland, which requires participants to "undergo uncomfortable periods of self-examination and intense scrutiny of their lives and mistakes" but culminates with a celebratory ceremony for graduates (Arias, 2019). Although the elements of the ceremonies performed by courts vary, they are all comparable in that they are formal rituals merited by the participants' completion of goals that are expected to facilitate their desistance from crime (e.g., finding a job, undergoing drug treatment, remaining sober) (Adams, n.d.; Arias, 2019; Ferraro, 2019).

Human trafficking problem-solving courts also hold formal ceremonies celebrating participants' completion of court requirements. Changing Actions to Change Habits (CATCH) Court is a problem-solving court in Columbus, Ohio, that serves victims of human trafficking who have been arrested for prostitution or other related crimes. The goal of CATCH Court and others like it is to treat those who have been trafficked as victims rather than as offenders (Kulig & Butler, 2019). Those who successfully complete the two-year program participate in a graduation ceremony, and charges against them can be expunged (Pfleger, 2019; Sukosd, 2019).

Another human trafficking problem-solving court, Michigan's Washtenaw County Human Trafficking Court, not only honors graduates of the court program with a ceremony (Weir, 2015) but also allows graduates to become certified as a "peer support specialist and drug recovery coach" working with the current court participants (Atherton, 2016). Thus, the court allows graduates to "give back" to their court and community, another element Maruna (2011b) suggests should be incorporated into rehabilitation ceremonies. In addition to the ceremonies described above, ceremonies that contain the elements Maruna (2011b) describes can be found in veterans' treatment courts (see, e.g., Pilger, 2019) and mental health courts (see, e.g., Geibel, 2019).

In addition to problem-solving courts, other programs intended to facilitate desistance from crime also incorporate formal ceremonies to mark successes. Some boot camps for juvenile offenders also may hold formal ceremonies (Office of Justice Programs, n.d.). For example, Camp Roulston, was "an

intensive, quasi-military residential program" for juveniles located in Cuyahoga County, Ohio (Institute for Criminological Research, 1992, p. 20). Although the program is now closed, an evaluation of Camp Roulston indicates that the last month of the 90-day boot camp was "focus[ed] on reintegration of the youth in his community" and includes a "graduation ceremony attended by parents and court officials…offering an opportunity for the participants to demonstrate and achieve recognition for their progress" (p. 24). According to the evaluation, both friends and family members of the graduates and the graduates themselves "treated the graduation as an extremely important occasion" (p. 34). This example demonstrates that formal ceremonies that involve elements similar to those in rehabilitation ceremonies have been embraced by the criminal justice system for decades, though the scope of this embrace is unclear.

As noted by Love et al. (2018, p. 15), some jurisdictions throughout the United States also provide individuals with "certificates of relief" that "avoid or mitigate collateral consequences and provide some reassurance about a person's rehabilitation." They explain that certificates of relief are "available from the courts in ten states, and from administrative agencies in a handful of others" (2018, p. 15; see also Jacobs, 2015). Although it is unclear whether these certificates are handed out during a rehabilitation ceremony, the existence of such certificates suggests that they are embraced by officials and members of the public. That rehabilitation ceremonies are ongoing in problem-solving courts throughout the country also indicates that court officials are optimistic about the potential for ceremonies to be part of the process of successful reintegration for those who have committed crimes.

However, rehabilitation ceremonies are expected to impact desistance not only because they reorient the former offender toward a life free of crime but also because they mark a formal removal of collateral consequences that may impede full reintegration. This includes changing the public's perception of those who participate in such ceremonies from *offenders* condemned to a life of crime to *citizens* whose slate has been wiped clean. Thus, it is important to establish not only whether criminal justice practitioners are willing to implement rehabilitation ceremonies and certificates, but also whether members of the public support doing so. There is increasing recognition of the robust connection between popular public attitudes and criminal justice policy and practice (Enns, 2016; Pickett, 2019). As noted, the current study provides estimates of public belief in the redeemability of offenders and the degree to which the public supports rehabilitation ceremonies and certificates.

Methods

Sample

To assess whether the public supports the use of rehabilitation ceremonies and certificates of rehabilitation, we commissioned YouGov to interview a national sample of 1,000 American adults (18 and older). The survey was administered between March 3–7, 2017. YouGov is considered a reliable source of survey data and, as a result, has been used by criminal justice scholars to study a variety of topics. For example, YouGov data have been used to examine public punitiveness (Lehmann & Pickett, 2017), support for private prisons (Enns & Ramirez, 2018) and problem-solving courts (Thielo, Cullen, Burton, Moon, & Burton, 2019), attitudes toward the police (McManus, Cullen, Jonson, Burton, & Burton, 2019), and gun control (Haner, Cullen, Jonson, Burton, & Kulig, 2019).

YouGov uses a two-stage, sample-matching design when fielding the survey. To begin, YouGov selects a matched (on the joint distribution of a large number of covariates, e.g., political party affiliation, voter registration status) sample of respondents from its online panel (over two million adult U.S. panelists), using distance matching with a synthetic sampling frame (constructed from probability samples, including the American Community Survey [ACS]). It then uses propensity score matching to weight the sample to resemble the U.S. population on the matched covariates (Ansolabehere & Rivers, 2013; Vavreck & Rivers, 2008). Evidence exists showing that findings from YouGov surveys generalize to the U.S. population (Ansolabehere & Schaffner, 2014; Sanders, Clark, Stewart, & Whiteley, 2007; Simmons & Bobo, 2015). Moreover, several studies find YouGov's sampling design may outperform probability sampling strategies (Kennedy et al., 2016; Vavreck & Rivers, 2008). Weighted data are reported for all data analyses.

When compared to estimates from the U.S. Census and the ACS (in parentheses), our weighted sample looks much like the U.S. population: non-Hispanic White, 66.8% (64.5%); male, 48.5% (48.7%); bachelor's degree, 26.5% (28.4%); married, 44.1% (48.2%); Northeast, 18.7% (17.2%); Midwest, 20.1% (20.9%); South, 36.0% (38.1%); West, 25.3% (23.8%). When compared to the Pew Research Center's estimates of party identification among registered voters (in parentheses), our weighted sample also looks like the U.S. population: lean Republican or Republican, 34.5% (42%); lean Democrat or Democrat, 43.9% (50%). Given these similarities in major population demographics, we have greater confidence that the sample generalizes to all American adults.

Note that we used the 2017 data for our main policy-related questions in the study (on rehabilitation ceremonies and certificates). However, we later conducted a 2019 YouGov survey, between June 7–10, that contained items assessing belief in various aspects of offender redemption (see Table 1). These results, which provide a context for the policy questions, are included in Table 1. The sample characteristics were similar to those reported for the 2017 sample and compared favorably to the U.S. Census and Pew Research Center estimates (see above). This information is available upon request.

Measures

Belief in Offender Redemption. As just noted, in a 2019 YouGov survey, we asked a battery of questions to assess whether the respondents agreed or disagreed (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) that offenders are capable of making positive and lasting change in their lives (i.e., whether their criminality is malleable or fixed). Seven items tapped three orientations: the belief that offenders, despite committing a crime, should have the opportunity to be included in society; the belief that offenders can become law-abiding; and the belief that efforts should be made to support offenders who are in the community. See Table 1 for the full set of items asked in the 2019 YouGov survey. All the measures described below are drawn from our 2017 survey.

To further assess belief in offender redemption, we included a measure to gauge the percentage of offenders the respondents perceived could lead law-abiding lives after they are released into their community. Specifically, we asked:

> If an effort is made to provide specialized rehabilitation services in prison, what percentage of prison inmates do you think can lead a law-abiding life after they are released to their community?

Then, the respondents were directed to choose between the following eight options: under 20 percent, 21–30 percent, 31–40 percent, 41–50 percent, 51–60 percent, 61–70 percent, 71–80 percent, and over 80 percent.

Rehabilitation Ceremonies. To assess support for the policy of rehabilitation ceremonies for offenders, we asked respondents to read the following introductory paragraph:

> Some courts hold "rehabilitation ceremonies" for ex-offenders who have done certain things to prove to the community that they have left behind a life of crime—such as completing rehabilitation programs and community service activities, taking responsibility and apologizing for their past crimes, and/or staying crime-free for a certain period of time (such as five years). At these public rehabilitation ceremonies, ex-offenders are declared "rehabilitated" and free from all legal penalties and other collateral sanctions of their crimes.

The respondents were then asked how much they agreed or disagreed (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree) that rehabilitation ceremonies for ex-offenders would help them reintegrate back into the community and stay out of crime.

Certificates of Rehabilitation. To assess support for the policy of providing offenders with certificates of rehabilitation, we asked respondents to read the following introductory paragraph:

> At some rehabilitation ceremonies, ex-offenders are given "certificates of rehabilitation." These certificates are like letters of recommendation, which state that an ex-offender has been formally "rehabilitated." Ex-offenders can give these certificates to licensing agencies, employers, and state officials to show that they have paid their debt to society for their crimes.

The respondents were then asked whether they agreed or disagreed (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree) that certificates of rehabilitation would help ex-offenders be reintegrated into their communities and stay out of crime.

Results

The data in Table 1 probe the extent to which the American public supports the general idea of offender redemption. Are criminals seen as intractably wayward or capable of reform? Three issues are examined: whether offenders merit the opportunity to be included in society, their potential for change, and whether efforts should be made to support offenders. The "TA" category is the total percentage of the respondents who agreed with the items.

As can be seen, substantial percentages of the respondents agreed that those who commit crimes should have the opportunity to regain their status as valued and respected members of the community (Items 1 and 2). Item 3 is instructive because it shows that more than half the sample (51.3 percent) agreed that offenders should be able to "wipe the slate clean" and "move on with their life," whereas only 17.8 percent disagreed. The large middle category—30.8 percent choosing "neither agree nor disagree"—suggests that this segment of the sample might support wiping the slate clean but only for some offenders (e.g., nonviolent, those completing treatment programs). This is an issue future research can explore.

It is equally clear that the public believes that offenders have the potential to change. Nearly 8 in 10 respondents (78.9 percent) agreed that "it is possible" for criminals "to change and lead a law-abiding life." By contrast, only 1 in 10 (10.4 percent) agreed with the dictum, "once a criminal always a criminal" (Items 4 and 5). Similarly, more than 3 in 4 respondents (74.8 percent) agreed that "it is a good idea to provide treatment for offenders" in the community, whereas only 1 in 10 (10.1 percent) favored avoiding prisoners who return to society (Items 6 and 7). Taken together, these opinions drawn from our 2019 survey show robust support for the concept of offender redemption. Americans believe that offenders merit access to rehabilitation programs, have the potential to change, and warrant the possibility of gaining genuine acceptance.

Table 2 approaches the issue of redeemability in a different, more numeric way, asking what percentage of prison inmates receiving rehabilitation services can lead law-abiding lives upon reentry. The respondents reject the idea that a high proportion of returning prisoners will avoid recidivism, with only

TABLE 1.
Public Support for Offender Redemption (percentages reported)

Items	TA	SA	A	NAND	D	SD
Being Included						
1. Having committed a crime should be no obstacle to becoming a valued member of society again.	64.9	25.9	39.0	24.7	7.9	2.5
2. People who have committed crimes deserve the opportunity to regain the respect of the community.	78.1	33.0	45.1	17.5	2.5	1.9
3. After time served, an offender should have a clean slate and be able to move on with their life.	51.3	18.5	32.8	30.	13.5	4.3
Potential for Change						
4. In general, it is possible for people who commit crime to change and lead a law-abiding life.	78.9	36.9	42.0	16.3	2.6	2.3
5. Once a criminal, always a criminal.	10.4	3.8	6.6	21.6	33.7	34.3
Supporting Offenders						
6. It is a good idea to provide treatment for offenders who are supervised by the courts and live in the community.	74.8	29.5	45.3	21.6	2.6	1.0
7. When prisoners return to society, we should avoid them and let them try to make it on their own.	10.1	4.7	5.4	21.3	37.0	31.5

Abbreviations: TA = total agree; SA = strongly agree; A = agree; NAND = neither agree nor disagree; D = disagree; SD = strongly disagree

9.1 percent saying that more than 70 percent will fall into that category. Nearly half the sample (47 percent) places the reformed group of offenders at least in the 41–50 percent category, whereas two-thirds (65.8 percent) believe that at least 31–40 percent of released offenders will go straight. These responses suggest that the American public refrains from a Pollyannaish view of offenders. Given that studies show that about two-thirds of released prisoners are arrested within three years of reentry (Jonson & Cullen, 2015), the public seems to have a generally realistic picture of the challenges of inmate reform (see also Western, 2018). These views, however, potentially make evidence signaling offender reform all the more important (Bushway & Appel, 2012). Citizens believe that offender redemption is possible, and they favor efforts to support it. At the same time, they face the daunting prospect of separating the wheat from the chaff—of trying to discern which offenders merit acceptance and a clean slate.

Notably, Table 3 shows widespread support—about 8 in 10 respondents—for both rehabilitation ceremonies (81.9 percent agree) and certificates of rehabilitation (79.4 percent agree). Note that, in the reform presented, eligibility for a ceremony requires that offenders earn this honor by completing rehabilitation programs and community service, assuming accountability for their transgressions, and staying crime-free for a period of time. In exchange, the public is willing to grant them the possibility of being declared rehabilitated and of recapturing all rights and privileges attached to full-fledged citizenship. Again, most respondents endorsed this reform as a means of offender reintegration and helping them "stay out of crime." Similarly, the public expressed the belief that rehabilitation certificates should be awarded at rehabilitation ceremonies. These might be used by ex-offenders to show "licensing agencies, employers, and state officials" that "they have paid their debt to society for their crimes." Having this document was viewed as a means of assisting offender reintegration.

Although the percentage opposing rehabilitation ceremonies and certificates was limited (around 1 in 5 respondents), about half of those favoring these reforms chose the "agree somewhat" category. This finding suggests that these views, although generally supportive, might vary depending on other considerations. For example, they might become more robust if evaluation evidence confirmed high success rates among ceremony graduates. They also might be more optimistic about ceremonies and certificates "working" depending on the portfolio of prosocial activities engaged in by those seeking the honor of a certificate. Again, future research needs to explore these contingencies. Still, the national-level data presented here demonstrate that the American public is open to experimentation with this proposed reform.

Finally, Table 4 (next page) explores whether Americans generally found to be more punitive—political conservatives, Republicans, and Whites—oppose these reforms (Chiricos, Welch, & Gertz, 2004; Ramirez, 2013). Similar to research drawn from Texas regarding progressive reforms (Thielo et al., 2016), this does not appear to be the case. The results are presented for the three groups separately and then, in the last column on the table, for those respondents who are conservative, Republican, and White. As can be seen, although a few percentage points lower than the general sample (see Table 3), the support for both rehabilitation ceremonies and

TABLE 2.
Public Belief in Offender Redemption, by Percentage Redeemable

Question: If an effort is made to provide specialized rehabilitation services in prison, what *percentage of prison inmates* do you think can lead a law-abiding life after they are released to their community?

Answer	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Over 80%	3.6	3.6
71-80%	5.5	9.1
61-70%	7.3	16.4
51-60%	14.9	31.3
41-50%	15.7	47.0
31-40%	18.8	65.8
21-30%	17.5	83.3
Under 20%	16.7	100.0

TABLE 3.
Public Support for Rehabilitation Ceremonies

Questions/Replies	Percent
1. Some courts hold "rehabilitation ceremonies" for ex-offenders who have done certain things to prove to the community that they have left behind a life of crime—such as completing rehabilitation programs and community service activities, taking responsibility and apologizing for their past crimes, and/or staying crime-free for a certain period of time (such as five years). At these public rehabilitation ceremonies, ex-offenders are declared "rehabilitated" and free from all legal penalties and other collateral sanctions of their crimes.	
How much would you agree or disagree that rehabilitation ceremonies for ex-offenders will help them reintegrate back into the community and stay out of crime?	
Total Agree	81.9
Agree Strongly	17.7
Agree	24.1
Agree Somewhat	40.2
Disagree Somewhat	11.9
Disagree	3.2
Disagree Strongly	3.0
2. At some rehabilitation ceremonies, ex-offenders are given "certificates of rehabilitation." These certificates are like letters of recommendation, which state that an ex-offender has been formally "rehabilitated." Ex-offenders can give these certificates to licensing agencies, employers, and state officials to show that they have paid their debt to society for their crimes.	
How much would you agree or disagree that "certificates of rehabilitation" will help ex-offenders be reintegrated into their communities and stay out of crime?	
Total Agree	79.4
Agree Strongly	14.8
Agree	25.9
Agree Somewhat	38.6
Disagree Somewhat	14.5
Disagree	4.1
Disagree Strongly	2.0

certificates is high, upwards of three-fourths of the respondents. Even for the combined group (Cons/Rep/White), more than 7 in 10 favored both policies. These results indicate that there is a widespread consensus among the American public supportive of providing a formal means of offender redemption.

Discussion

Contact with the criminal justice system plays a significant role in the lives of many Americans and has a disparate impact on African Americans and other minorities (Alexander, 2010). Research shows that 45 percent of Americans, including 63 percent for Blacks, have had a family member incarcerated (Enns et al., 2019). By age 23, 49 percent of Black males and 39 percent of White males have been arrested (Brame, Bushway, Paternoster, & Turner, 2014). The Sentencing Project (2019, p. 1) estimates that "between 70 and 100 million—or as many as one in three Americans—have some type of criminal record." Most concerning are felony convictions, which often result in incarceration and come with a range of collateral consequences. As noted, Jacobs (2015) calculates the number of Americans with felony records as surpassing 20 million. Felony convictions grew in past decades. As Shannon et al. (2017, p. 1795) show in a sophisticated study tracking justice involvement from 1948 to 2010, "people with felony convictions account for 8 percent of all adults and 33 percent of the African American adult male population."

Even after completing their sentences—"paying their dept to society"—offenders are never fully free of their criminal record. As labeling theorists pointed out decades ago, these individuals must serve what amounts to a life sentence as a stigmatized "ex-offender" (Cullen & Cullen, 1978; Pager, 2009). Again, legally stipulated collateral consequences are part of this life sentence in which a range of civil, economic, and social disabilities are imposed daily (Burton, Cullen, & Travis, 1987). Even if offenders work diligently at their rehabilitation and stay crime free, there

TABLE 4.
Public Support for Rehabilitation Ceremonies, by Conservatives, Republicans, and Whites

Questions	Conservatives	Republicans	Whites	Con/Rep/White
Percent Supporting Rehabilitation Ceremonies				
1. How much would you agree or disagree that rehabilitation ceremonies for ex-offenders will help them reintegrate back into the community and stay out of crime?				
Total Agree	78.4	76.1	79.9	71.6
Agree Strongly	12.4	13.3	17.4	9.3
Agree	22.1	24.3	22.0	21.8
Somewhat Agree	43.9	38.5	40.5	40.5
Disagree Somewhat	14.7	18.2	12.8	21.2
Disagree	4.7	3.2	3.5	4.9
Disagree Strongly	2.2	2.5	3.8	2.3
Percent Supporting Certificates of Rehabilitation				
2. How much would you agree or disagree that "certificates of rehabilitation" will help ex-offenders be reintegrated into their communities and stay out of crime?				
Total Agree	76.8	77.0	77.1	73.4
Agree Strongly	9.6	10.0	13.5	7.8
Agree	24.0	29.4	27.4	27.0
Somewhat Agree	42.8	37.6	36.2	38.6
Disagree Somewhat	16.2	17.0	15.9	19.0
Disagree	4.3	3.1	4.4	3.5
Disagree Strongly	3.0	3.0	2.6	4.0

Abbreviations: "Con/Rep/White" refers to all respondents that reported being conservative, Republican, and White (n =153).

are few avenues to escape their criminal status. Expungement offers one possibility, but this requires legal knowledge and the capacity to hire a lawyer; it also is an option unavailable in many states to those with a serious felony conviction (Love et al., 2018).

Bushway and Apel (2012) have illuminated the problem reformed offenders face when lumped together with all others sharing the same criminal record—including the nonreformed. They note that offenders capable of a prosocial life must be granted some means to "signal" that they are no longer criminogenic and are capable of "making good." Building on the economics literature, they note that in the labor market, employers often use a college degree as a signal that applicants possess the personal traits (e.g., persistence, reliability) to merit hiring. In a similar way, they argue that for offenders, completion of a job-training program might be used as a "desistance signal" that will give them preference in employment decisions. Importantly, Bushway and Apel recognize the broader policy implications of their signaling framework. "Policies such as certificates of rehabilitation, like those offered by New York State," they note, have the potential to improve life outcomes drastically for a growing class of individuals at little cost" (2012, p. 45). That is, rehabilitation ceremonies that come with a certificate would offer official "signals" for the state that offenders are now "just like the rest of us."

The broader point of this line of argument is that true offender reintegration will remain incomplete if the burden is placed solely on offenders not only to be rehabilitated but also to overcome the stigmatizing, life-long barriers potentially faced by all "ex-offenders." As Cullen et al. (2020) have recently argued in proposing their R&R Model (Rehabilitation and Redemption Model), redemption is the missing component of corrections. To remove labeling effects and to give offenders incentives, the state needs to offer a realistic way to regain moral and legal status. Again, redemption is not simply handed out but must be earned through good deeds, the completion of treatment programs, stable employment, and staying crime free. Empirically, research shows that after about 7 to 10 years of remaining crime-free, the risk of reoffending falls below that of the general public or declines to near zero (Blumstein & Nakumura, 2009; Bushway, Niewbeerta, & Blokland, 2001). Given the prosocial activities of those seeking redemption, risk instruments (e.g., Level of Service Inventory-Revised) are likely to place them in a low-risk category, perhaps shortening the time they must stay crime free to be eligible for a rehabilitation ceremony (see Bonta & Andrews, 2017).

Rehabilitation ceremonies are not being proposed as a panacea for all that ails the problem of recidivism by correctional populations. As Western's (2018) compelling study of reentering prisoners shows, many offenders suffer an array of disabilities—substance addiction, chronic mental and physical illness, low employability, and homelessness—that makes their ability to avoid crime, let alone qualify for a rehabilitation ceremony, problematic. It is likely that such ceremonies will be most helpful to those offenders who are healthy, possess job skills, receive strong family support, and are free from illness (Western, 2018). Ceremonies also are likely to be accessed more often by those who are not incarcerated but serve sentences in the community. Still, the argument that a reform has inequities is a poor reason not to make it available to those who can benefit from it. Further, once in place and shown to be effective, special wrap-round reentry programs can be developed to assist all offenders, including those with special challenges, to take steps toward earning a rehabilitation ceremony graduation (see Cullen et al., 2020).

The current study is important precisely because it presents compelling national-level opinion data showing that the public supports the reforms of rehabilitation ceremonies and certificates that restore offenders officially to full citizenship. In short, for those who are meritorious, Americans are willing to offer them *true redemption*. The generosity is widespread and cuts across political lines, demonstrating that Americans believe in the *opportunity* for a second chance. The details of this reform, of course, will have to be worked out and likely will vary across states. For example, it remains to be known if some categories of offenders (e.g., sex or violent offenders) will be excluded, and what criteria will have to be met to warrant a ceremony and certificate. At this stage, experimentation in a few jurisdictions would be a major step forward in modeling the implementation process and evaluating the reform's effects. The good news is that the American public is on board in undertaking these first steps.

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