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Desistance as a Signal of Rehabilitation: Understanding Public Perception and the Moderating Role of Redeemability

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Jasmyn Stevens

DESISTANCE AS A SIGNAL OF REHABILITATION: UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC
PERCEPTION AND THE MODERATING ROLE OF REDEEMABILITY

by

JASMYN STEVENS

(Under the Direction of Kristin Lloyd & Caitlin Brady)

ABSTRACT

The criminal offender label is enduring and comes with significant real-world consequences.
While there is a wealth of literature on offender rehabilitation, less emphasis has been placed on
the varying ways that individuals define this concept. The goal of this study is to understand how
variations in both punitiveness and rehabilitative definitions affect general beliefs about
desistance from crime. Additionally, belief in redeemability is examined as a moderator of this
relationship. Using data from an anonymous, national-level, opt-in survey collected through
Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) platform, I test three hypotheses using logistic regression.
Results indicate that while increased punitiveness is not a significant predictor of belief in
desistance signals, certain rehabilitative definitions are positively and significantly associated
with belief in desistance signals. Redeemability does not moderate this relationship. Individuals
are more likely to believe in desistance signals if an offender's rehabilitation consists of certain
actions. Thus, certain rehabilitative acts increase the likelihood of individuals removing the
criminal label from former offenders, which holds important policy implications.

INDEX WORDS: Rehabilitation, Public perception, Desistance, Criminal justice

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by

JASMYN STEVENS

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JASMYN STEVENS

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate my thesis to both God and my family—I would not have gotten this far without either of them.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The principle of rehabilitation has been a pillar of the United States prison system for centuries (Clear et al., 2009). Since the creation of Walnut Street Jail in the early 18th Century, rehabilitative efforts have been put forth to reform those who commit crime (Clear et al., 2009). Some early versions of the penitentiary promoted the idea that solitude and contemplative silence (e.g., Pennsylvania System, Auburn System) were all that were needed to change an offender's behavior; others believed it was continuous hard labor (Johnston, 2009; Morris & Rothman, 1998). Whatever the school of thought, there was an underlying sense of optimism that reformation—or in more contemporary terms, rehabilitation—was indeed an achievable and worthwhile goal (Garfinkel, 2017).

However, the process by which the general public comes to view former offenders as successfully rehabilitated is less understood. An increasing body of literature suggests that the label of "criminal offender" is enduring (Denver et al., 2017; Dollar & Tietjen, 2023; Moore et al., 2016). This poses a problem as the public's belief in when someone is no longer an offender has major implications for a range of public issues, including hiring and housing decisions and restrictions on access to social welfare safety nets (Alexander, 2010; Holloway & Weiner, 2020; Young & Powell, 2015). "Rehabilitated," within this framework, is a tag that has real consequences for public policy mandates and largely revolves around when an individual should be restored to full citizenship (Maruna, 2012). Distinct from this is the multitude of public perceptions about what it means for an individual to be rehabilitated (Forsberg & Douglas, 2020). Is it the programming they undertake? Is it the beliefs they espouse? Each of these things

presents a "signal" to the community that an individual will desist from criminal behavior more generally and are thus distinct from the desistance behavior itself (Bushway & Apel, 2012).

How the public becomes willing to remove the criminal label from a former offender should be of much interest to public opinion researchers and policymakers alike. In many ways, this public willingness directs the role and nature of the system in the desistance process (i.e., treatment vs. punitive practices). Yet, several elements—how the public views system effectiveness, desire for punitive facets of punishment, and the overall possibility that individuals can change—can shape the extent of actual desistance needed for a citizen to believe in the return of full citizenship rights. This study examines attitudes about individuals, the criminal justice system, desistance signals, and their relationship to the removal of the criminal label.

Current Study

The term "rehabilitation" has been used in different contexts by many different people. What this study is not attempting to do is set forth another definition. It is, however, seeking to understand what actions the public considers rehabilitative and what impacts this determination. This study attempts to understand how these variations predict general beliefs about desistance from crime. More specifically, this thesis seeks to determine whether believing in the redeemability of an offender—or conversely, not believing—significantly impacts the relationship between personal rehabilitative definition and belief in desistance signals. Additionally, this thesis seeks to understand whether increased punitiveness predicts an individual's belief in desistance signals.

Given this information, the independent variables are *personal rehabilitative definition* and *punitiveness*. The dependent variable is *belief in desistance signals*. *Belief in redeemability* is examined as a potential moderator. The data for this study is collected using an anonymous,

national-level, opt-in survey through the Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) platform. With a sample size of 717, both bivariate correlations and logistic regression are used to examine the relationship between someone's personal definition of rehabilitation and their belief in desistance signals. Moderator analyses are performed to discover whether belief in redeemability affects the above relationship. Finally, logistic regression is used to determine if punitiveness predicts belief in desistance signals.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Criminal Label

From an anthropological perspective, criminalization can be understood as the process by which the sociopolitical majority and its associated entities come to define peoples and practices as "criminal" (Schneider & Schneider, 2008). In doing so, a criminal "other" is created, and that which does not conform to the established societal norm is punished and given a criminal label. The purpose of this criminalization, and the criminal label, has been the subject of speculation by sociologists, such as Émile Durkheim and G.H. Mead. A Durkheimian analysis argues that society is built upon a foundation of shared definitions and moralities—a 'collective conscience' if you will (Durkheim, 1893/1933). Punishment, therefore, was simply an extension of that collective conscience, rife with the weight of society's condemnation. According to Durkheim, punishing criminals served the purpose of strengthening the social bond through mutual outrage at those who engage in behavior considered criminal. Aside from the rogue vigilante, the modern public is not involved in the administration of justice and thus looks to higher authorities to reaffirm order and cultural values. Therefore, mutual outrage is solidified and institutionalized into a nation's penal processes (i.e., rituals), whereby the justice system acts as the mechanism that satisfies the public's desire for retribution (Durkheim, 1893/1933; Garland, 1990).

Other scholars have pushed back on Durkheim's assessments. Mead (1918) observes that witnessing penal rituals reaffirms both the public's group solidarity as well as their feeling of being a citizen. However, Mead describes a distinctive type of solidarity which he coins "the emotional solidarity of aggression" (Mead, 1918, p. 586). In other words, the hostility of the group is unleashed on those who are determined to be the enemy; in this case - those who

commit crime. This mentality has its own consequences, as the excess emotion towards criminals inhibits the rational discussion of the causes of crime, instead encouraging a blind faith in social institutions tasked with enforcing social order (Baer & Chambliss, 1997). Uncompromising intolerance for the "otherized" enemy, Mead (1918) argues, is the dark side of the solidarity discussed above. One only has to look to the rhetoric of the War on Drugs to recognize that truth (Gately et al., 2018). Consider the shift from an abstract other—those on drugs—to a concrete domestic enemy that the America's justice system should be armed against. Stuart (2011) notes the consequences of the increasing use of militaristic language when describing the enemy, observing that the War on Drugs transformed political rhetoric into something more literal. Police departments across the country militarized against entire segments of the population in response to a "government[al] marketing strategy" (Stuart, 2011, p. 4).

There is something to be said for the creation of America's "other"—more specifically, the hierarchy of classes whose lower ranks comprise said "other". W.E.B. Du Bois famously notes the power structures which inform any system that might be put in place — the rich over the poor, the upper class over the working class, the racial majority over the racial minority (Du Bois, 1899). Those belonging to the powerful minority, through various social, political, and economic means, have the power to determine the place of others in the systems that they institute. This creates "in-groups" and "out-groups", according to Canon (2022). In other words, those who are aligned with the beliefs and values of the dominant group, and those who are not, respectively (Canon, 2022; Garland, 1990). Throughout American history, boundaries were drawn upon racial lines, making African Americans the understood "other." In *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander (2010) details how legislative policy was shaped with the express aim of maintaining an out-group at every point in

time. However, as overt discrimination has become condemned within modern culture, other labels have gained prominence. As Alexander (2010) notes, blatant racism gave way to race-neutral policies that resulted in mass incarceration and an immense criminal class.

Indeed, the criminal label is timeless and endlessly destructive. It extends past an individual's contact with the justice system and affects every area of their life (Burton et al., 2021). In defining certain behaviors — and by extension individuals as criminals, those within the in-group can effectively distance themselves from the out-group — in this case, the criminal. The public nature of criminal justice procedures further hardens the boundary between in-group and out-group (Garland, 1990). The punishment of a criminal label does not cease when the sentence is completed, however. Rather, criminal stigmatization and continual social shunning have become part and parcel to America's treatment of formerly incarcerated individuals.

This stigmatization, research suggests, is neither helpful to those who have been incarcerated nor inherent in most theories of punishment (Boppre & Reed, 2021; Hadjimatheou, 2016). Hadjimatheou (2016) argues that publicly labeling someone as a criminal undermines the goals of both the communicative and deterrence theories of punishment. Furthermore, the stigmatizing effects of criminal labeling, while not always unwarranted, necessitates a well-founded justification (Hadjimatheou, 2016). Boppre & Reed (2021), after surveying incarcerated women, detail various negative consequences of criminal labeling. They found that participants reported intersectional stigma (e.g., combined stigma related to being a woman in addition to being a criminal), internalization of the criminal label, dehumanization, and employment barriers due to their criminal status.

Criminal Justice & The Public

Penal populism, which refers to the advocation of policies for their electoral advantage rather than their penal effectiveness, is a key concept in research aimed at understanding (Pratt, 2007; Roberts et al., 2003). To be sure, supporting a popular policy is not in and of itself a bad thing; consider a politician who supports effective policies for the sole reason of being popular with the public. Instead, this thesis is concerned with a malignant form of penal populism — the advocation of legislation that, while politically attractive, is "unfair, ineffective, or at odds with a true reading of public opinion" (Roberts et al., 2003, p. 5).

The inability of proponents of penal populism to "read the room," so to speak, has the unfortunate effect of masking the true feelings of the public they represent. Individual differences are camouflaged under the banner of universal punitiveness (Frost, 2010). Unearthing those differences, then, is vital to understanding what the public believes the national response to crime should be.

Keeping that in mind, it is still helpful to understand how these policies shaped the public response to crime, and more specifically, criminals. Early opinions of the corrections system ranged from positive to apathetic. However, as Farrington (1992) notes, the overarching narrative was still rooted in sympathy towards and optimism for criminal offenders. Despite the apparent immutability of the rehabilitative pillar of corrections, a perfect storm of sociocultural factors arrived, including the rising crime rates of the 1970s and its associated fears, the mass disillusionment of the American public regarding the government due to the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal, and the research findings that were coming out in opposition to the long-held standard of correctional rehabilitation (Phelps, 2011). Politicians capitalized on these factors and shifted their rhetoric accordingly, focusing on how prisons were the answer to lowering the

crime rate and decreasing recidivism. The public latched onto this new position, steering policy to become far more punitive than in years prior (Mauer, 1991).

While the aggressive shift towards punitiveness resulted from many factors, Francis Allen (1981) posits that the waning belief in the "rehabilitative ideal" laid the foundation (p.34). Allen describes two components that must be culturally present in order to foster widespread support for rehabilitation: (1) a "vibrant faith" in people's ability to be reformed and reshaped and (2) a consensus on what the goals of correctional treatment should be (Allen, 1981; Phelps, 2011). The two conditions outlined by Allen (1981) were prominent through the 1960s, but public support faded by the 1970s with the shift towards punitiveness; losing these two conditions renders a rehabilitative paradigm virtually impossible and creates an environment that inevitably views offenders negatively (Phelps, 2011).

Nevertheless, despite the popularity of "tough on crime" rhetoric, there were unintended consequences that led to changes in public perceptions of offenders and reentry. First, the discourse surrounding super-predators led to the criminal typification of race (Chiricos et al., 2004) and the racial typification of crime (Chiricos & Eschholz, 2002). Indeed, media reports and individuals' recollection of offenders was often racially typified, overwhelmingly showing racial and ethnic minorities as the face of crime. One particularly popular idea that gained traction was the notion that the spike in crime was driven by "super-predators," or teenagers who had no morality, mercy, or remorse for any of their actions (Baer & Chambliss, 1997). Taken together, these factors led Americans to believe that there was no choice but to incarcerate offenders for extended periods of time (Baer & Chambliss, 1997).

Beckett (1999) further developed another topic pertinent to this thesis — the concept of elite manipulation, which entails guiding the public towards a specific end. Rather than the

public *initiating* a grassroots movement for reform, political actors across the spectrum utilize cultural symbols and references to garner positive *reception* for a political ideology (Frost, 2010). At first glance, it can be hard to understand the direction of the relationship, whether legislation is being guided by the people or the elite. Further work by Beckett and Sasson (2004) answers that question, at least in part. A look at trends over the past fifty years shows that there have been spikes of public concern over crime; upon closer inspection, it is revealed that these spikes occur in response to elevated levels of political coverage on crime. Subsequently, "when politicians stop emphasizing crime…public concern about crime…declines," lending support to the theory of elite manipulation (Beckett & Sasson, 2004, p. 108).

When taken together with penal populism, the last few decades of punitiveness can be understood as a sort of feedback loop. Politicians used the tools at their disposal to garner support for legislation, even if statistics indicated the public was not overly concerned with the issue at hand. Once presented with the option for "tough on crime" penalties, however, the American public was amenable given it did not contradict central American values like individualism and self-reliance (Beckett & Sasson, 2004; Frost, 2010). Now that the public was receptive, political actors fought to claim ownership of the issue, attempting to prove that they were the "toughest" on crime and garner even more support from the masses (Holian, 2004; Newell, 2013; Zimring et al., 2001). In a nutshell, they fell over themselves to feed a beast they created themselves.

This "beast" of punitiveness was soon undone by the fact that it was never supposed to exist. Given that the overemphasis on crime was manufactured by the political elite, the lack of authentic support from the masses meant that the public soon grew dissatisfied with the state of the corrections system and were willing to lend their support to other measures (Frost et al.,

2019; Gately et al., 2018). For example, in their recent study, Lee and colleagues (2022) found that the public supports reform in the areas of "punitiveness, rehabilitation, reentry, reintegration, and redemption and redeemability" (p. 14). This is a common theme that has emerged in literature over the last several decades (Applegate et al., 1997; Burton et al., 2021; Butler et al., 2020; Cullen, 2006; Cullen et al., 1990; Nagin et al., 2006; Thielo, 2017; Thielo et al., 2016).

This statement further illustrates one of the core issues surrounding criminal justice and public policy: a lack of understanding on the part of policymakers of how Americans feel about both criminal justice effectiveness and the concept of rehabilitation. Contrary to popular belief, the relationship between public opinion and the corrections arm of the criminal justice system is quite complex (Frost, 2010, Pratt, 2018). When asking Americans direct questions about how they feel about specific corrections policies, there are many nuances (Frost et al., 2019; Ouellette et al., 2017). For instance, Frost and colleagues (2019) suggest that while the American public is open to a variety of rehabilitative corrections policy, the specific legislation that an individual supports is linked to political orientation and core belief systems.

Despite the currently available literature detailing the complexities of public opinion, the last few decades of policy and rhetoric camouflaged most—if not all—of the variations within public opinion and support for rehabilitative policies. Indeed, policy and political rhetoric pushed the idea that prisons are total institutions, capable of "warehousing" those who threaten the overall safety of the American public (Farrington, 1992, p. 10). This message, in essence, was the antithesis to that of rehabilitation. It touted incarceration and expansion of the corrections system as the lone solution to the crime problem. As James Q. Wilson (1975) explained in his book, the protection of innocent people from those who are bad or wicked is essential, and the only way to do this is to separate the two. At least, this was the prevailing thought during the

1970s. The "wicked people" in Wilson's book, however, were a significant portion of the American populace, made up primarily of minorities and low-income individuals (p. 235). To make matters worse, this shift in legislative focus did not achieve its goal of dramatically reducing the crime rate (Farrington, 1992). This is not surprising, as prisons were never intended to be used in this manner (Pratt, 2018). To be sure, correctional facilities impact crime rates, and they operate most efficiently when they are being used for their most basic function: incapacitation of offenders who genuinely pose a threat to public safety and wellbeing (Cole & Gertz, 2013).

Fortunately, the past few decades have seen a significant shift in the rhetoric towards the correctional system as well as with punitiveness in general, especially when broken down into generational cohorts (as defined by the Pew Research Center). A recent study by Lee (2022) found that Millennials (1981–1996) have a very different mindset towards corrections compared to previous generations. The findings suggest that overall, Millennials—while still slightly punitive—were more likely to favor rehabilitative policies than older individuals. In addition, they, along with Gen Z (1997–), were supportive of the restoration of rights for ex-offenders (Lee et al., 2022). This will have important policy implications as these two generations will become a significant portion of the voting electorate, replacing Baby Boomers (1946–1964) and the Silent Generation (1928–1945).

Additionally, recent public opinion research has emerged showing that most Americans, irrespective of their generation, are growing increasingly frustrated with both the correctional system and its policies (The Mellman Group & Public Opinion Strategies, 2016; Public Opinion Strategies & Mellman Group, 2012; The Tarrance Group, 2016). The public's chief complaints include the incarceration of too many nonviolent drug offenders, the system's failure to reduce

recidivism, and general ineffectiveness. Most of the frustrations expressed by the public are consequences of punitive correctional policy. One of its most well-documented consequences is mass incarceration.

Beginning in the late 1970s, the prison population has increased exponentially, from 307,159 in 1978, to approximately 1,215,800 as of 2020 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1980; Kluckow & Zeng., 2022). This massive increase in the size of the U.S. corrections population has come with numerous side effects, including increases in prison and correctional expenditures to remain operational. Because the increase in expenditures is paid through public tax dollars, Americans have become much more vocal, overwhelmingly coming to the conclusion that more prisons are not the answer (Frost et al., 2019). The result is a major shift in public opinion away from the punitive paradigm surrounding incarceration that has dominated the last forty years of correctional policy.

This shift coincided closely with the 2009 decrease in the incarceration rate, producing emerging research that promoted offender reformation (Frost et al., 2019; Glaze, 2010; Ouellette et al., 2017). For example, a 2014 meta-analysis found significant shifts concerning the public opinion surrounding the criminal justice system, more specifically corrections (Mizell & Siegel, 2014). Their results suggested support for the "rehabilitation, treatment, [and] education" of offenders (p. 3).

Variations in Punitiveness

It is important to note, however, that the public opinion towards punitiveness is not equally distributed across society. Indeed, there are observable racial differences as it pertains to punitiveness. More specifically, there are differences in opinions between Black Americans and White Americans with respect to punitive prison policies (Frost et al., 2019; Mizell & Siegel,

2014). For example, Mizell and Siegel (2014) found that White Americans hold more punitive attitudes than Black Americans regarding correctional policy, and Black Americans hold consistently less punitive attitudes when it comes to the prison system overall. Ghandnoosh (2014) suggests that this difference may be because Black Americans come into contact with the prison system more often. Further, the interactions between Black Americans and the correctional system are often more negative (Kovera, 2019). The result, then, is more support for rehabilitative policies and less harsh punishments compared to their White counterparts.

Interestingly, research suggests that despite the observable differences in racial punitiveness, Americans as a whole are increasingly dissatisfied with the way the U.S. prison system currently operates, and support programs, policies, and legislation that rectify some of the issues noted above. This support is nearly universal. Regardless of political affiliation, religion, gender, age, and race/ethnicity, research suggests that Americans would prefer a shift toward a more rehabilitative, less punitive model of corrections (Frost et al., 2019; Rade et al., 2017).

Today, rehabilitation and other less punitive measures are more popular among the American public than punitive measures (e.g., mandatory minimums, restrictions in prison programming, etc.) (Frost et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2022; The Tarrance Group, 2016). Recent scholarship illustrates that public support for rehabilitative programming within prisons, such as educational and job-training initiatives, is very popular. Further, there is general support for rehabilitation to be the focal goal of the American corrections system (Ouellette et al., 2017). A significant portion of the change in public perceptions of offenders and reentry among the American public can be credited to the social justice movements that Millennials and members of Gen Z are passionate about (Lee et al., 2022).

However, while there is bipartisan support for rehabilitative policies and programs among Millennials and Gen Z, there are still many people who believe in a "tough on crime" approach, and do not perceive rehabilitation as an appropriate goal for offenders (Gately et al., 2018). Consequently, there is still some resistance among sections of the American population to fully commit to less punitive, rehabilitation-focused policies.

Despite the conflict surrounding which legislative direction to take, recent literature examining public support for offenders and rehabilitative programming has produced important findings. Ouellette's (2017) study differentiated between broad-level support and specific, more personal-level support for offenders among the American public and found that respondents overwhelmingly supported rehabilitative programming for individuals who are incarcerated. For example, Ouellette and colleagues asked whether respondents supported rehabilitative measures more broadly (i.e., prison programming, rehabilitative treatment) and the respondents overwhelmingly responded in the affirmative. This is consistent with prior literature conducted within the last ten to fifteen years—largely focusing on previous generations—regarding public opinion of offender rehabilitation (Garland et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2022; Ouellette et al., 2017).

However, when Ouellette and colleagues (2017) asked those same respondents how they felt about an offender's location in relation to themselves—living in their county, versus living in their neighborhood, versus living right next door—varying levels of support begin to emerge. In essence, support for offenders drops the closer an offender gets to the public, even if the proximity is theoretical. These findings have important implications for correctional policy, because they suggest that there may be enough public support to pass broad-level legislation that would greatly benefit former offenders and those still incarcerated. However, it might also mean that once these offenders are released back into the community, the demonstrated level of

support is no longer present. This would present practical barriers to re-entry when it comes to an offender fully re-integrating back into society.

While the literature illustrates growing support for less punitive correctional measures by the American public, there is statistically significant and substantively meaningful variation in support by demographic categories. For instance, Pickett et al. (2022) noted that when discussing violence prevention strategies that would aid in offender rehabilitation and reintegration, individuals who identified as Republican were significantly less likely to support the intervention in every case. Additionally, African Americans, on average, tend to report lower levels of punitiveness that correlate with higher levels of support for rehabilitative measures (Ghandnoosh, 2014; Frost et al., 2019). Beyond this, factors such as perceived redeemability and the conceptualization of rehabilitation among the American public are salient factors in public support for rehabilitation.

Conceptualizing Rehabilitation

Historically, rehabilitation has been a topic of discussion within philosophical literature beginning in Greco-Roman times (Sverdlik, 2014). Philosophers put forth definitions of rehabilitation and whether it should be pursued as a means of reforming offenders; this tradition was continued with thinkers like Bentham and Ewing (Sverdlik, 2014). Other philosophers, despite being touted as proponents of rehabilitation, rejected the label of rehabilitation being placed upon their work at all (Forsberg & Douglas, 2020; Hampton, 1984; Morris, 1981). Consensus within criminological literature is no less forthcoming. McNeill (2014) observes that it is important to understand, both conceptually and practically, the various notions of rehabilitation.

Today, rehabilitation has become a catch-all term. Forsberg and Douglas (2020) note that the phrase "criminal rehabilitation" tends to be used by researchers in a variety of different ways. For instance, some literature—although support for this view is waning—recommends emphasizing punishment, believing that its effects are rehabilitative (Honderich, 2006). Still, other research argues that addressing an offender's specific risk level is the most effective method of rehabilitation (Miller, 2019). While the latter is the more widely accepted framework for correctional rehabilitation, it still contains the implicit assumption that every action taken on behalf of the offender serves to decrease their likelihood of recidivating.

In practice, dealing with such a broad term often creates a gray area when trying to determine what can be considered rehabilitative. However, while there are many different definitions, each conceptualization usually falls within five general categories based on the *aim* of the rehabilitation: rehabilitation as *anti-recidivism*, rehabilitation as *harm-reduction*, rehabilitation as *therapy*, rehabilitation as *moral improvement*, and rehabilitation as *restoration* (Forsberg and Douglas, 2020).

Rehabilitation as anti-recidivism is likely the most well-known objective, one that is used by governments and researchers alike as it is easily measured and operationalized (Phelps, 2011). However, a broader conceptualization is *rehabilitation as harm-reduction*, whereby the explicit aim of rehabilitation is to attempt to prevent offender conduct that is likely to result in harm to themselves or the community at large (Forsberg and Douglas, 2020).

Rehabilitation as therapy is yet another way to interpret the goals of rehabilitation. Overlapping with psychiatry, the rationale behind this conceptualization argues that addressing any underlying "mental deficits" in offenders benefits them in a way that leads to other social good (Forsberg & Douglas, 2020, p.112). In contrast, *rehabilitation as moral improvement*,

endorsed by researchers like Herbert Morris and Jean Hampton, is seen as an alternative, non-therapeutic view in which the chief objective is for offenders to recognize their moral responsibility to rehabilitate themselves in a way that allows them to more reliably make moral decisions (Forsberg & Douglas, 2020).

A final way of thinking about rehabilitation is *rehabilitation as restoration*, in which the primary goal is to re-establish an offender's place in society within their broader community and/or amongst their peers (Forsberg and Douglas, 2020). One helpful way to approach this conceptualization is to consider it a continuation of restorative justice – which tends to emphasize victims—that more intentionally seeks to restore an offender to their former place in society (Menkel-Meadow, 2007; Van Ness & Strong, 2014).

In thinking about rehabilitation, it is important to recognize the various opinions within the broader conversation concerning the most salient objective of rehabilitation. It is also useful to remember that a diversity of opinion does not end in academia, extending far into the minds of the general American populace. Individuals, informed or not, will come to their own conclusions about not only what rehabilitation consists of, but also what its chief aim should be. Uncovering these opinions will give both researchers and legislators a better grasp of the dominant paradigms currently circulating around rehabilitation.

The Redeemability Factor

Redeemability, while a newer concept in corrections literature, can be conceptualized as a person's "beliefs about the ability of deviants to change their ways" (Maruna and King, 2009, p. 7). Underlying this sentiment, however, is the question of how the public views criminality. That is, a person's position on redeemability is directly related to their views on how permanent a person's behavior is or how much it may change (Maruna & King, 2009). This has direct

implications for the current study which essentially seeks to understand how belief in redeemability may affect both an individual's view of the concept of rehabilitation, but also the belief in the permanence of those rehabilitative practices.

Since Maruna and King's (2009) initial study on redeemability, there have been many other studies that have tried to measure how it impacts concepts like punitiveness and rehabilitative support (Burton, 2020). The small yet growing body of literature related to redeemability has consistently found a large amount of public support (Burton et al., 2021; Dominguez, 2021; O'Sullivan et al., 2017; Reich, 2017; Thielo, 2017). Specifically, Burton and colleagues (2020) revisited Maruna and King's (2009) work and found that an increased belief in redeemability was negatively associated with punitive attitudes. Further, they note that believing in an offender's capacity for change seems to be instrumental in understanding fluctuations in crime-control public policy (Burton et al., 2020). This is important because it shows that public opinion leans heavily towards rehabilitative, more progressive correctional measures regardless of individual sociodemographic characteristics (Butler, 2020; Lee et al., 2022).

Several studies have found belief in redeemability to be negatively related to punitiveness; in other words, as the belief in redeemability increases, the support for harsher, more punitive policy decreases (Lee et al., 2022). Ouellette et al. (2017) also found that believing in offender redeemability significantly predicts to what degree the public is willing to embrace reentry programming. This is in line with the findings of the other literature in this area (Frost et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2022), which highlights an important shift in Americans' public opinion on correctional policy from the late Twentieth Century until the present.

Notably, there are some factors that impact belief in redeemability. Dominguez (2021) found that both perspective taking and empathetic concern significantly predicted belief in

redeemability in criminal offenders. In other words, being able to place yourself in someone else's shoes, and feel troubled over their hardships increases an individual's likelihood of believing that offenders could redeem themselves (Dominguez, 2021).

Additionally, Butler (2020) found that racial sympathy, egalitarianism, and being concerned with the welfare of vulnerable individuals were also positively associated with belief in redeemability (Graham et al., 2009). White nationalism produced an expected negative relationship to belief in redeemability. However, Butler (2020) also noted that republicanism and conservatism were positively correlated to belief in redeemability, illustrating that the beliefs undergirding inclusionary ideals find support not only among liberals, but also among more conservative Americans.

One interrelated idea to the belief in offender redeemability is the belief in desistance signaling. Bushway & Apel (2012) noted that employment-based reentry programming acted as a desistance signal to employers that an offender should be hired. Maruna (2012) further expanded on the idea of desistance signaling, arguing that it was the "legitimation of a labeling theory of rehabilitation" (p. 73). He separated the concept of rehabilitation from the traditional treatments used to correct offender behavior and instead viewed it as the full restoration of an individual to society. Essentially, Maruna viewed rehabilitation as a label awarded in place of that of "criminal." The use of the term "rehabilitation" in such a way, then, goes hand in hand with that of redeemability. As a reminder, the belief in redeemability necessitates a belief in change. Therefore, it is logical to assume that if one believes that an offender is redeemed, then one also believes they are rehabilitated and no longer an offender — and if so, should be restored to their former social standing before a criminal conviction. While this thesis readily admits that individuals are rarely logical when expected, it also argues that there is a growing segment of the

American population who do, in fact, follow this line of reasoning (Burton et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2022; Reich, 2017). These findings, though tentative, should provide hope not only for bipartisan legislators, but also for offenders themselves.

Summary

Criminologists have conducted research—albeit limited—about individual perceptions of social problems related to crime, corrections, and other public policies. For example, a recent study by Pickett and colleagues (2022) noted that, while public punitiveness has steadily declined, the framing of a correctional initiative's risks and economic rewards impacts how the public perceives it. This area of scholarship is becoming so popular that the American Society of Criminology (ASC) recently established a Division of Public Policy (ASC, n.d.). Notably absent from the literature, however, is a deeper investigation into the factors that influence individual perceptions of successful offender rehabilitation. Therefore, it remains an open empirical question the extent to which individual sentiments about criminal justice policy and effectiveness, as well as general beliefs about redeemability, impact the support for the eventual removal of the criminal label via belief in desistance signals.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

The goal of this thesis is to better understand individual public perceptions of rehabilitation and desistance concerning formerly incarcerated individuals. Little research has been conducted to understand when individuals believe that an offender is no longer an offender. In other words, how much time needs to pass before the label of "criminal offender" is taken away? This study is concerned with several things. It is interested in evaluating the relationship between a respondent's personal definition of rehabilitation and the belief that desistance signals rehabilitation as well as the moderating effect of perceived redeemability. It is also interested in the relationship between punitiveness and the belief that desistance signals rehabilitation. Specifically, this thesis will address the following research questions:

> RQ1: Is there a relationship between personal rehabilitative definition and the belief that desistance signals rehabilitation?
>
> RQ2: Does perceived redeemability moderate the relationship between personal rehabilitative definition and the belief that desistance signals rehabilitation?
>
> RQ3: Is there a relationship between punitiveness and the belief that desistance signals rehabilitation?

Data

The data are derived from an anonymous, national-level, opt-in survey conducted in May 2021, through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) platform. Responses were collected from 777 respondents. The respondents were compensated $2.25, which exceeds the U.S. federal minimum wage when calculated on a per-hour basis. A consent form was shown at the beginning of the survey, and completion of the survey was taken as agreement to consent. On average,

respondents completed the survey in eleven minutes and thirty-seven seconds. There are many benefits to using the MTurk platform for data collection (Aguinis et al., 2021). To begin, the platform has access to a large, more diverse sample population compared to other types of surveys (Aguinis et al., 2021; Mortensen & Hughes, 2018). Further, platforms such as MTurk allow researchers to tap into a nationally reflective participant pool for a reasonable cost.

The MTurk survey was disseminated to English speaking respondents who had accumulated 500 Human Intelligence Tasks (HITs). Individuals who do not speak, read, or write the English language were removed from the participant pool for this survey. Consistent with prior social science research using MTurk, respondents who completed less than 95% of the survey were excluded from the analysis (Aguinis et al., 2021). One respondent was excluded due to entering incorrect information concerning their age. Seven respondents who responded "not sure" on the political viewpoint question were excluded from analysis. Finally, two respondents were excluded from analysis due to missing information on a key variable, resulting in a sample size of 717. Table 1 (at end of Chapter) reports the descriptive statistics of the sample.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable is the *belief that desistance signals rehabilitation* (Table 2 below). Respondents were asked the following: "Would you consider an adult to still be rehabilitated as opposed to being a criminal offender if they: have not offended again in 1-3 years (Q11_1)" or "never reoffended again (Q11_2)." For each question, respondents could choose "No, a criminal offender (0)" or "Yes, rehabilitated (1)." The questions were then recoded and made into a binary measure: 1 = respondents who believe that offenders are rehabilitated after 1-3 years as well as forever (Q11_1 = 1 & Q11_2 = 1) and 0 = everyone else (respondents who believe offenders can never be rehabilitated (Q11_1 & Q11_2 = 0);

respondents who believe that offenders are not rehabilitated after 1-3 years but are if they never offend again (Q11_1 = 0 & Q11_2 = 1); and respondents who believe that an offender is rehabilitated at the 1-3 year mark, but not forever (Q11_1 = 1 & Q11_2 = 0)). While a binary outcome variable loses nuance, creating a non-dichotomous measure results in inadequate cell size when attempting to analyze the data.

Table 2. Dependent Variable

	No, criminal offender (0)	Yes, rehabilitated (1)
Have not reoffended in 1-3 years? (1)	205 (28.6%)	512 (71.4%)
Never reoffend again? (2)	145 (20.2%)	572 (79.8%)

Independent Variables

The first independent variable is *personal rehabilitative definition*. This variable was created by using responses from the following question, shown in the form of a matrix: "Would you consider an adult to still be rehabilitated as opposed to being a criminal offender if they…". The statements which respondents could select included: "Completed rehabilitative services (e.g., education, drug treatment, job skills) (3)", "Found Jesus/God/Religion (4)", "Are remorseful for their crime (5)", "Served their sentence (6)", "Moved to a different state after release from prison/jail (7)", "Moved to a different neighborhood after release from prison/jail (8)." For each statement, the respondent chooses "No, a criminal offender (1)" or "Yes, rehabilitated (2)."

The statements can be sorted by type of rehabilitation belief, as described by Forsberg & Douglas (2020). Additionally, separate analyses were run by type of rehabilitation belief. Statement 3 fits within rehabilitation as anti-recidivism, Statements 4 & 5 fit within rehabilitation as moral improvement, Statement 6 fits within punishment as rehabilitation, and Statements 7 & 8 fit within the concept of "knifing off." Note that punishment as rehabilitation refers to the

belief that the prison sentence itself is rehabilitative, and statements 7 & 8 draw from research by Kirk (2009) as well as Maruna & Roy (2007).

The second independent variable is *punitiveness*. It was measured using previously validated items to create an index (Brown & Socia, 2017; Cullen et al., 2000), attempting to capture the belief that offender punishment should emphasize the use of prisons, harsh legislation, and the death penalty (Smith & Jiang, 2019). A higher score on the index (ranging from 0-3) represents an increased level of punitiveness. The items include: "What do you think should be the main emphasis in most prisons – punishing the individual convicted of a crime, trying to rehabilitate the individual so that he or she might return to society as a productive citizen, or protecting society from future crimes he or she might commit?" "In general, do you think the courts in this area punish criminals too harshly or not harshly enough?" and "Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for people convicted of murder?"

Moderating Variable

To create the moderating variable, *belief in redeemability*, responses from the question "How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?" were used. The following list of statements was shown in the form of a matrix: "Given the right conditions, a great many adult offenders can turn their lives around and become law-abiding citizens," "Most adult offenders can go on to lead productive lives with help and hard work," "Most adult criminals are unlikely to change for the better," "Some adult offenders are so damaged that they can never lead productive lives." For each statement, the respondent is presented with a Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The moderating variable for this thesis was transformed into a scale ($\alpha = .63$) consistent with prior literature (Burton et al., 2020; Maruna & King, 2009).

Statements three and four were reverse coded in order to decrease the chance of acquiescence bias (Pickett & Baker, 2014).

Control Variables

The following sociodemographic characteristics were chosen as control variables: age, sex, ethnicity, race, education level, income, victim/offender status, political viewpoint, and being employed within the criminal justice system. *Age* represents the age the respondent was at the time of survey completion (mean age = 38.78). *Sex* was recorded by asking respondents "What is your sex?" The sample yielded 39.1% females and 60.9% males (female = 0, male = 1). Individuals' *ethnicity* was measured by asking respondents "Do you identify as Hispanic or Latino/a?" (yes = 1, no = 0), with 19.9% responding "yes" and 80.1% responding "no." *Race* was measured by asking respondents "How would you describe yourself?" The categories included: American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, White or Caucasian, Middle Eastern, and Other (1.1%). Race was collapsed into a dichotomous measure of White (81.2%) and Other (18.8%) (White = 1, Other = 0).

Education level (*M* = 5.60, SD = 1.33) was measured by asking respondents their highest degree earned (1 = less than high school degree, 8 = doctoral degree). *Income* (*M* = 4.31, SD = 1.41) was recorded by asking respondents to give an estimate of their entire household income before taxes for the year 2020 (1 = 0-$9,999, 7 = $100,000+). To capture *victim/offender status*, two separate measures were created: one for victims and one for offenders. A dichotomous measure was created (yes = 1, no = 0) from the question "Have you ever been the victim of a crime?" To measure offender status, a scale (α = .82) was created by combining three dichotomous questions (yes = 1, no = 0): "Have you ever been convicted of a criminal offense?",

"Have you ever had to carry out a sentence on probation?", and "Have you ever had to carry out a sentence in a jail or prison?"

To determine whether someone was currently *employed within the criminal justice system*, a dichotomous measure was created (1 = yes, 0 = no) from the question "Are you currently working within the criminal or juvenile justice system (i.e., law enforcement, courts, corrections)?" *Political viewpoint* ($M = 2.87$, SD = 1.34) was captured by asking the question "In general, how would you describe your own political viewpoint?" (1 = *very liberal* to 5 = *very conservative*).

Data Analysis

The analysis proceeds in four steps. First, bivariate correlations are conducted to understand the relationship between key variables (Table 3 in Appendix A). Second, given that the dependent variable is categorical, bivariate logistic regression is used to examine the relationship between someone's personal definition of rehabilitation and the belief that desistance signals rehabilitation (Model 1 in Tables 4-9). Third, moderator analyses are conducted to understand how someone's perception of redeemability conditions the relationship between an individual's personal definition of rehabilitation and the belief that desistance signals rehabilitation (Model 2 in tables 4-9). Finally, bivariate logistic regression is used to analyze the relationship between punitiveness and the belief that desistance signals rehabilitation (Table 10). All statistical analyses were carried out in IBM SPSS Data Statistics Version 28.

Table 1. Study Descriptives

Variable	N	M/%	SD	Range
Dependent				
Removal of Criminal Label[a]	439	61.2		
Independent				
Personal Definitions				
Completed Rehab Services[b]	518	72.2		
Found Jesus/God/Religion[b]	372	51.9		
Became Remorseful[b]	463	64.6		
Served Sentence[b]	350	48.8		
Moved States[b]	319	44.5		
Moved Neighborhoods[b]	303	42.3		
Punitiveness		.88	.873	0-3
Covariates				
Age		38.78	11.098	20-78
Race				
White	582	81.2		
Other	135	18.8		
Ethnicity				
Hispanic	574	80.1		
Non-Hispanic	143	19.9		
Sex				
Male	437	60.9		
Female	280	39.1		
Income		4.31	1.405	1-7
Education		5.60	1.334	2-8
CJ Employee				
Yes	150	20.9		
No	567	79.1		
Victim Status				
Yes	250	34.9		
No	467	65.1		
Offender Status				
Offender	181	25.2		
Non-Offender	536	74.8		
Political Viewpoint		2.87	1.341	1-5

[a]N and % reflect the proportion of individuals who agreed with the removal of the criminal label. [b]N and % reflect the proportion of individuals who agreed that the given definition constituted offender rehabilitation.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The first research question (RQ1) examines the relationship between personal rehabilitative definitions and the belief that desistance signals rehabilitation. The second research question (RQ2) examines the moderating effect of redeemability on the relationship between personal rehabilitative definition and the belief that desistance signals rehabilitation. For easier comparison, the regression of each rehabilitative definition is grouped with its corresponding moderating regression. Within each table (4-9), Model 1 corresponds to RQ1, and Model 2 corresponds to RQ2. The third research question (RQ3) examines the relationship between punitiveness and the belief that desistance signals rehabilitation. The results of this regression are reported in Table 10. Tables 4-10 are located at the end of the chapter.

Services as Rehabilitation

As Model 1 in Table 4 indicates, respondents are more likely to believe that desistance signals rehabilitation if they define rehabilitation as a completion of services (e.g., therapeutic, educational, vocational) while incarcerated ($b = .84$, $p < .001$, OR = 2.31). Specifically, those who agree with this definition have increased odds of believing that desistance signals rehabilitation by 131% in comparison to those who do not. Age ($b = .02$, $p < .05$, OR = 1.02), victim status ($b = .52$, $p < .01$, OR = 1.68), offender status ($b = -.62$, $p < .05$, OR = .54), and redeemability ($b = -.59$, $p < .001$, OR = .56) are statistically significant control variables within the model. Overall, the model explains 18% of the variance (Nagelkerke R^2), classifying 67.2% of cases correctly.

Model 2 reports the moderating effect of redeemability on the relationship between defining rehabilitation as completion of services while incarcerated and the outcome variable.

Consistent with the main effect of redeemability in Model 1, Model 2 illustrates that there remains a statistically significant and substantively meaningful negative effect of redeemability on the belief that desistance signals rehabilitation (b = -.60, p < .001, OR = .55). However, there is not a statistically significant moderating effect of redeemability on the relationship between services as rehabilitation and the belief that desistance signals rehabilitation (b = .02, p > .05, OR = 1.02). Additionally, Model 2 demonstrates that age (b = .02, p < .05, OR = 1.02), victim status (b = .52, p < .01, OR = 1.68), and offender status (b = -.62, p < .05, OR = .54) are significant control variables within the model. Overall, the model explains 18% of the variance (Nagelkerke R^2), classifying 67.1% of cases correctly.

Taken together, the findings from Model 1 support the idea that individuals view desistance as a sign of rehabilitation if they define rehabilitation as completing services. The results from Model 2 illustrate that, while redeemability does have a statistically significant main effect on desistance signals, it does not condition the relationship between defining rehabilitation as services completed and believing in desistance signals. In other words, the relationship between outcome and predictor variable is separate from the concept of redeemability and does not depend on it in any way.

Religion as Rehabilitation

As Model 1 in Table 5 indicates, respondents are more likely to believe that desistance signals rehabilitation if they define rehabilitation as finding religion (b = .40, p < .05, OR = 1.49). Specifically, those who agree with this definition have an increased odds of believing that desistance signals rehabilitation by 49% in comparison to those who do not. Age (b = .02, p < .05, OR = 1.02), education (b = -.17, p < .05, OR = .84), victim status (b = .52, p < .01, OR = 1.68), offender status (b = -.54, p < .05, OR = .58), and redeemability (b = -.67, p < .001, OR =

.51) are statistically significant control variables within the model. Overall, the model explains 15% of the variance (Nagelkerke R^2), classifying 65.1% of cases correctly.

Model 2 reports the moderating effect of redeemability on the relationship between defining rehabilitation as finding religion and the outcome variable. Consistent with the main effect of redeemability in Model 1, there is a statistically significant and substantively meaningful negative effect of redeemability on the belief that desistance signals rehabilitation (b = -.83, p <.001, OR = .44). However, there is not a statistically significant moderating effect of redeemability on the relationship between religion as rehabilitation and the belief that desistance signals rehabilitation (b = .35, p > .05, OR = 1.41). Additionally, Model 2 demonstrates that age (b = .02, p < .05, OR = 1.02), education (b = -.17, p < .05, OR = .85), victim status (b = .53, p < .01, OR = 1.70), and offender status (b = -.56, p < .05, OR = .57) are significant control variables. Overall, the model explains 16% of the variance (Nagelkerke R^2), classifying 65.8% of cases correctly.

To summarize, the findings from Model 1 support the idea that individuals view desistance as a sign of rehabilitation if they define rehabilitation as finding religion. The results from Model 2 illustrate that, while redeemability does have a statistically significant main effect on desistance signals, it does not condition the relationship between defining rehabilitation as finding religion and believing in desistance signals. In other words, the relationship between outcome and predictor variable is separate from the concept of redeemability and does not depend on it in any way.

Remorse as Rehabilitation

As Model 1 in Table 6 indicates, respondents are more likely to believe that desistance signals rehabilitation if they define rehabilitation as being remorseful for one's crimes (b = .86, p

< .001, OR = 2.36). Specifically, those who agree with this definition have an increased odds of believing that desistance signals rehabilitation by 136% in comparison to those who do not. Age (b = .02, p < .05, OR = 1.02), education (b = -.15, p < .05, OR = .86). victim status (b = .50, p < .05, OR = 1.64), offender status (b = -.58, p < .05, OR = .56), and redeemability (b = -.66, p < .001, OR = .52) are statistically significant control variables within the model. Overall, the model explains 19% of the variance (Nagelkerke R^2), classifying 67.2% of cases correctly.

Model 2 reports the moderating effect of redeemability on the relationship between defining rehabilitation as being remorseful for one's crimes and the outcome variable. Consistent with the main effect of redeemability in Model 1, there is a statistically significant and substantively meaningful negative effect of redeemability on the belief that desistance signals rehabilitation (b = -.43, p <.05, OR = .65). However, there is not a statistically significant moderating effect of redeemability on the relationship between remorse as rehabilitation and the belief that desistance signals rehabilitation (b = -.39, p > .05, OR = .68). There is also a significant relationship between remorse as rehabilitation and believing that desistance signals rehabilitation (b = 2.01, p < .01, OR = 7.50), indicating that respondents who believe in this definition are 750% more likely to believe in desistance signals. Additionally, Model 2 demonstrates that age (b = .02, p < .05, OR = 1.02), education (b = -.15, p < .05, OR = .86), victim status (b = .50, p < .05, OR = 1.64), and offender status (b = -.57, p < .05, OR = .56) are significant control variables. Overall, the model explains 19% of the variance (Nagelkerke R^2), classifying 68.1% of cases correctly.

The findings from Model 1 support the idea that individuals view desistance as a sign of rehabilitation if they define rehabilitation as exhibiting remorse. The results from Model 2 illustrate that, while redeemability does have a statistically significant main effect on desistance

signals, it does not condition the relationship between defining rehabilitation as exhibiting remorse and believing in desistance signals. In other words, the relationship between outcome and predictor variable is separate from the concept of redeemability and does not depend on it in any way.

Sentence Completion as Rehabilitation

As Model 1 in Table 7 indicates, respondents are more likely to believe that desistance signals rehabilitation if they define rehabilitation as completion of one's prison/jail sentence ($b = .70$, $p < .001$, OR $= 2.01$). Specifically, those who agree with this definition have an increased odds of believing that desistance signals rehabilitation by 101% in comparison to those who do not. Age ($b = .02$, $p < .05$, OR $= 1.02$), education ($b = -.19$, $p < .01$, OR $= .83$), victim status ($b = .61$, $p < .01$, OR $= 1.85$), offender status ($b = -.62$, $p < .05$, OR $= .54$), and redeemability ($b = -.66$, $p < .001$, OR $= .52$) are statistically significant control variables within the model. Overall, the model explains 17% of the variance (Nagelkerke R^2), classifying 67.4% of cases correctly.

Model 2 reports the moderating effect of redeemability on the relationship between defining rehabilitation as completion of one's prison/jail sentence and the outcome variable. Consistent with the main effect of redeemability in Model 1, there is a statistically significant and substantively meaningful negative effect of redeemability on the belief that desistance signals rehabilitation ($b = -.73$, $p < .001$, OR $= .48$). However, there is not a statistically significant moderating effect of redeemability on the relationship between sentence completion as rehabilitation and the belief that desistance signals rehabilitation ($b = .19$, $p > .05$, OR $= 1.21$). Additionally, Model 2 demonstrates that age ($b = .02$, $p < .05$, OR $= 1.02$), education ($b = -.19$, $p < .01$, OR $= .83$), victim status ($b = .62$, $p < .01$, OR $= 1.85$), and offender status ($b = -.63$, $p <$

.05, OR = .53) are significant control variables. Overall, the model explains 17% of the variance

(Nagelkerke R²), classifying 66.5% of cases correctly.

The findings from Model 1 support the idea that individuals view desistance as a sign of

rehabilitation if they define rehabilitation as sentence completion. The results from Model 2

illustrate that, while redeemability does have a statistically significant main effect on desistance

signals, it does not condition the relationship between defining rehabilitation as sentence

completion and believing in desistance signals. In other words, the relationship between outcome

and predictor variable is separate from the concept of redeemability and does not depend on it in

any way.

Moving States as Rehabilitation

As Model 1in Table 8 indicates, respondents are not more likely to believe that desistance

signals rehabilitation if they define rehabilitation as an individual moving away from the state in

which they committed criminal offenses ($b = .26$, $p > .05$, OR = 1.30). Those who agree with this

definition do not have significantly increased odds of believing that desistance signals

rehabilitation in comparison to those who do not. However, age ($b = .02$, $p < .05$, OR = 1.02),

education ($b = -.17$, $p < .05$, OR = .84), victim status ($b = .55$, $p < .01$, OR = 1.73), offender

status ($b = -.61$, $p < .05$, OR = .54), and redeemability ($b = -.69$, $p < .001$, OR = .50) are

statistically significant control variables within the model. Overall, the model explains 15% of

the variance (Nagelkerke R²), classifying 65.4% of cases correctly.

Model 2 reports the moderating effect of redeemability on the relationship between

defining rehabilitation as an individual moving away from the state in which they committed

criminal offenses and the outcome variable. Consistent with the main effect of redeemability in

Model 1, there is a statistically significant and substantively meaningful negative effect of

redeemability on the belief that desistance signals rehabilitation ($b = -.75$, $p < .001$, OR = .47). However, there is not a statistically significant moderating effect of redeemability on the relationship between a state move as rehabilitation and the belief that desistance signals rehabilitation ($b = .21$, $p > .05$, OR = 1.24). Additionally, Model 2 demonstrates that age ($b = .02$, $p < .05$, OR = 1.02), education ($b = -.17$, $p < .05$, OR = .84), victim status ($b = .55$, $p < .01$, OR = 1.74), and offender status ($b = -.62$, $p < .05$, OR = .54) are significant control variables within the model. Overall, the model explains 15% of the variance (Nagelkerke R^2), classifying 65.4% of cases correctly.

The findings from Model 1 do not support the idea that individuals view desistance as a sign of rehabilitation if they define rehabilitation as moving states. Furthermore, the results from Model 2 illustrate that, while redeemability does have a statistically significant main effect on desistance signals, it does not condition the relationship between defining rehabilitation as moving states and believing in desistance signals. In other words, the relationship between outcome and predictor variable is separate from the concept of redeemability and does not depend on it in any way.

Moving Neighborhoods as Rehabilitation

As Model 1 in Table 9 indicates, respondents are not more likely to believe that desistance signals rehabilitation if they define rehabilitation as an individual moving away from the neighborhood in which they committed criminal offenses ($b = .17$, $p > .05$, OR = 1.19). Those who agree with this definition do not have significantly increased odds of believing that desistance signals rehabilitation in comparison to those who do not. However, age ($b = .02$, $p < .05$, OR = 1.02), education ($b = -.16$, $p < .05$, OR = .85), victim status ($b = .52$, $p < .01$, OR = 1.68), offender status ($b = -.57$, $p < .05$, OR = .57), and redeemability ($b = -.69$, $p < .001$, OR =

.50) are statistically significant control variables within the model. Overall, the model explains 15% of the variance (Nagelkerke R^2), classifying 65.4% of cases correctly.

Model 2 reports the moderating effect of redeemability on the relationship between defining rehabilitation as an individual moving away from the neighborhood in which they committed criminal offenses and the outcome variable. Consistent with the main effect of redeemability in Model 1, there is a statistically significant and substantively meaningful negative effect of redeemability on the belief that desistance signals rehabilitation ($b = -.77$, $p < .001$, OR = .46). However, there is not a statistically significant moderating effect of redeemability on the relationship between a neighborhood move as rehabilitation and the belief that desistance signals rehabilitation ($b = .30$, $p > .05$, OR = 1.35). Additionally, Model 2 demonstrates that age ($b = .02$, $p < .05$, OR = 1.02), education ($b = -.16$, $p < .05$, OR = .85), victim status ($b = .52$, $p < .01$, OR = 1.69), and offender status ($b = -.58$, $p < .05$, OR = .56) are significant control variables. Overall, the model explains 15% of the variance (Nagelkerke R^2), classifying 65.3% of cases correctly.

The findings from Model 1 do not support the idea that individuals view desistance as a sign of rehabilitation if they define rehabilitation as moving neighborhoods. Additionally, the results from Model 2 illustrate that, while redeemability does have a statistically significant main effect on desistance signals, it does not condition the relationship between defining rehabilitation as moving neighborhoods and believing in desistance signals. In other words, the relationship between outcome and predictor variable is separate from the concept of redeemability and does not depend on it in any way.

Punitiveness

Table 10 reports the relationship between punitiveness and the outcome variable. As Model 1 indicates, respondents are not less likely to believe that desistance signals rehabilitation as levels of punitiveness increase (b = -.14, p > .05, OR = .87). This model indicates that age (b = .02, p < .05, OR = 1.02), education (b = -.15, p < .05, OR = .86), victim status (b = .51, p < .01, OR = 1.67), offender status (b = -.56, p < .05, OR = .57), and redeemability (b = -.69, p < .001, OR = .50) are statistically significant control variables. Overall, the model explains 14% of the variance (Nagelkerke R^2), classifying 64.7% of cases correctly.

Table 4. Logistic regression results of services as rehabilitation predicting belief in desistance signals

	Model 1			Model 2		
	b	*SE*	Exp(B)	*b*	*SE*	Exp(B)
Independent Variable						
Services as Rehabilitation	.84	.18	2.31***	.77	.84	2.17
Punitiveness	-.14	.10	.87	-.14	.10	.87
Moderation						
Redeemability	-.59	.13	.56***	-.60	.23	.55**
Services x Redeemability	--	--	--	.02	.27	1.02
Covariates						
Age	.02	.01	1.02*	.02	.01	1.02*
Male	-.02	.17	.98	-.02	.17	.98
White	-.11	.22	.90	-.11	.22	.90
Hispanic	.14	.23	1.15	.14	.23	1.15
Education	-.14	.07	.87	-.14	.07	.87*
Income	-.09	.06	.92	-.09	.06	.92
Victim Status	.52	.20	1.68**	.52	.20	1.68**
Offender Status	-.62	.25	.54*	-.62	.25	.54*
CJ System Employee	-.23	.26	.80	-.23	.26	.79
Political Viewpoint	-.07	.06	.93	-.07	.06	.93
LR χ^2		101.62***			101.62***	
-2 Log Likelihood		855.90			855.90	
Nagelkerke R^2		.18			.18	

Notes: *$p<.05$, **$p<.01$, ***$p<.001$

Table 5. Logistic regression results of religion as rehabilitation predicting belief in desistance signals

	Model 1			Model 2		
	b	*SE*	Exp(B)	*b*	*SE*	Exp(B)
Independent Variable						
Religion as Rehabilitation	.40	.17	1.49*	-.61	.76	.54
Punitiveness	-.15	.10	.86	-.14	.10	.87
Moderation						
Redeemability	-.67	.13	.51***	-.83	.18	.44***
Religion x Redeemability	--	--	--	.35	.25	1.41
Covariates						
Age	.02	.01	1.02*	.02	.01	1.02*
Male	-.03	.17	.98	-.02	.17	.97
White	-.06	.22	.94	-.05	.22	.94
Hispanic	.13	.23	1.14	.13	.23	1.15
Education	-.17	.07	.84*	-.17	.07	.85*
Income	-.07	.06	.93	-.07	.06	.94
Victim Status	.52	.20	1.68**	.53	.20	1.70**
Offender Status	-.54	.24	.58*	-.56	.24	.57*
CJ System Employee	-.27	.26	.76	-.33	.26	.75
Political Viewpoint	-.09	.06	.91	-.11	.06	.91
LR $\chi 2$		86.20***			88.07***	
-2 Log Likelihood		871.32			869.44	
Nagelkerke R^2		.15			.16	

Notes: *$p<.05$, **$p<.01$, ***$p<.001$

Table 6. Logistic regression results of remorse as rehabilitation predicting belief in desistance signals

	Model 1			Model 2		
	b	*SE*	Exp(B)	*b*	*SE*	Exp(B)
Independent Variable						
Remorse as Rehabilitation	.86	.17	2.36***	2.01	.77	7.50**
Punitiveness	-.18	.10	.83	-.18	.10	.84
Moderation						
Redeemability	-.66	.13	.52***	-.43	.19	.65*
Remorse x Redeemability	--	--	--	-.39	.25	.68
Covariates						
Age	.02	.01	1.02*	.02	.01	1.02*
Male	.00	.17	1.00	.01	.17	1.01
White	-.06	.22	.94	-.05	.22	.95
Hispanic	.07	.24	1.08	.08	.24	1.08
Education	-.15	.07	.86*	-.15	.07	.86*
Income	-.06	.06	.94	-.06	.06	.94
Victim Status	.50	.20	1.64*	.50	.20	1.64*
Offender Status	-.58	.25	.56*	-.57	.25	.56*
CJ System Employee	-.24	.26	.79	-.22	.26	.80
Political Viewpoint	-.06	.06	.94	-.06	.06	.94
LR χ^2		105.54***			107.94***	
-2 Log Likelihood		851.97			849.57	
Nagelkerke R^2		.19			.19	

Notes: *$p<.05$, **$p<.01$, ***$p<.001$

Table 7. Logistic regression results of sentence completion as rehabilitation predicting belief in desistance signals

| | Model 1 | | | Model 2 | | |
	b	*SE*	Exp(B)	*b*	*SE*	Exp(B)
Independent Variable						
Sentence Completion as Rehabilitation	.70	.18	2.01***	.13	.78	1.14
Punitiveness	-.17	.10	.85	-.17	.10	.84
Moderation						
Redeemability	-.66	.13	.52***	-.73	.16	.48***
Sentence Completion x Redeemability	--	--	--	.19	.26	1.21
Covariates						
Age	.02	.01	1.02*	.02	.01	1.02*
Male	-.04	.17	.96	-.04	.17	.96
White	-.05	.22	.96	-.05	.22	.95
Hispanic	.09	.23	1.10	.10	.23	1.11
Education	-.19	.07	.83**	-.19	.07	.83**
Income	-.06	.06	.94	-.06	.06	.94
Victim Status	.61	.20	1.85**	.62	.20	1.85**
Offender Status	-.62	.25	.54*	-.63	.25	.53*
CJ System Employee	-.34	.26	.71	-.35	.27	.71
Political Viewpoint	-.08	.06	.92	-.08	.06	.92
LR χ^2		96.67***			97.21***	
-2 Log Likelihood		860.84			860.30	
Nagelkerke R^2		.17			.17	

Notes: *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

Table 8. Logistic regression results of moving states as rehabilitation predicting belief in desistance signals

	Model 1			Model 2		
	b	*SE*	Exp(B)	*b*	*SE*	Exp(B)
Independent Variable						
State Move as Rehabilitation	.26	.18	1.30	-.36	.81	.70
Punitiveness	-.15	.10	.86	-.15	.10	.86
Moderation						
Redeemability	-.69	.13	.50***	-.75	.15	.47***
State Move x Redeemability	--	--	--	.21	.27	1.24
Covariates						
Age	.02	.01	1.02*	.02	.01	1.02*
Male	-.04	.17	.96	-.04	.17	.96
White	-.12	.22	.89	-.12	.22	.89
Hispanic	.13	.23	1.14	.13	.23	1.14
Education	-.17	.07	.84*	-.17	.07	.84*
Income	-.06	.06	.94	-.06	.06	.94
Victim Status	.55	.20	1.73**	.55	.20	1.74**
Offender Status	-.61	.25	.54*	-.62	.25	.54*
CJ System Employee	-.24	.26	.79	-.25	.26	.78
Political Viewpoint	-.08	.06	.92	-.08	.06	.92
LR χ^2		82.87***			83.49***	
-2 Log Likelihood		874.65			874.02	
Nagelkerke R^2		.15			.15	

Notes: *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

Table 9. Logistic regression results of moving neighborhoods as rehabilitation predicting belief in desistance signals

	Model 1			Model 2		
	b	*SE*	Exp(B)	*b*	*SE*	Exp(B)
Independent Variable						
Neighborhood Move as Rehabilitation	.17	.17	1.19	-.71	.81	.49
Punitiveness	-.14	.10	.87	-.15	.10	.86
Moderation						
Redeemability	-.69	.13	.50***	-.77	.15	.46***
Neighborhood Move x Redeemability	--	--	--	.30	.27	1.35
Covariates						
Age	.02	.01	1.02*	.02	.01	1.02*
Male	-.03	.17	.98	-.02	.17	.98
White	-.11	.22	.89	-.12	.22	.89
Hispanic	.12	.23	1.13	.13	.23	1.14
Education	-.16	.07	.85*	-.16	.07	.85*
Income	-.07	.06	.93	-.06	.06	.94
Victim Status	.52	.20	1.68**	.52	.20	1.69**
Offender Status	-.57	.24	.57*	-.58	.24	.56*
CJ System Employee	-.23	.26	.79	-.25	.26	.78
Political Viewpoint	-.08	.06	.92	-.08	.06	.92
LR χ^2		81.62***			82.85***	
-2 Log Likelihood		875.89			874.67	
Nagelkerke R^2		.15			.15	

Notes: *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

Table 10. Logistic regression results of punitiveness predicting belief in desistance signals

| | Model 1 | | |
	b	*SE*	Exp(B)
Independent Variable			
Punitiveness	-.14	.10	.87
Covariates			
Age	.02	.01	1.02*
Male	-.02	.17	.98
White	-.12	.22	.89
Hispanic	.12	.23	1.13
Education	-.15	.07	.86*
Income	-.07	.06	.93
Victim Status	.51	.19	1.67**
Offender Status	-.56	.24	.57*
CJ System Employee	-.19	.26	.83
Political Viewpoint	-.08	.06	.92
Redeemability	-.69	.13	.50***
LR χ^2		80.60***	
-2 Log Likelihood		876.91	
Nagelkerke R^2		.14	

Notes: *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This thesis extends the existing scholarship on the relationship between offender

rehabilitation and beliefs about desistance. Special emphasis is placed on the potential

moderating effect of redeemability on this relationship. More specifically, the current study

examined whether certain personal rehabilitative definitions affect a respondent's belief in

desistance signals. In other words, this study examined individuals' willingness to remove the

criminal label. This thesis also examined how this relationship was moderated by the concept of

offender redeemability, or the belief that former offenders can positively change their lives.

Finally, the current study examined the relationship between punitiveness and belief in

desistance signals. The findings suggest that certain rehabilitative definitions do increase the

likelihood of believing in desistance signals. However, redeemability was not a significant

moderator. Put simply, the factors that affect belief in desistance signals are nuanced and varied.

Table 11 below summarizes the main findings presented in the results section.

Table 11. Simplified Table of Main Effects

Predictor	Main Effects	Moderating Effects
Personal Definition		
Services	Services significant ($p <.001$)	Redeemability not sig. ($p > .05$)
Religion	Religion significant ($p <.001$)	Redeemability not sig. ($p > .05$)
Remorseful	Remorse significant ($p <.001$)	Redeemability not sig. ($p > .05$)
Served Sentence	Sentence significant ($p <.001$)	Redeemability not sig. ($p > .05$)
Moved States	State Move not sig. ($p > .05$)	Redeemability not sig. ($p > .05$)
Moved Neighborhoods	Neighborhood Move not sig. ($p > .05$)	Redeemability not sig. ($p > .05$)
Punitiveness	Punitiveness not sig. ($p > .05$)	

Main Findings

There are four main findings worth discussing. First, four of the six rehabilitative

definitions significantly predicted a belief that desistance signaled rehabilitation (RQ1).

Believing that completing services was sufficient to be considered rehabilitated was associated

with a 131% higher likelihood of believing in desistance signals. A former offender finding

religion predicted a 49% increase in belief in desistance signals. Respondents were 136% more

likely to believe in desistance signals if former offenders expressed remorse. Finally, believing

that former offenders completing their sentence was rehabilitative in nature predicted a 101% in

belief in desistance signals. In effect, respondents were more willing to remove the criminal label

from former offenders if they conceptualized rehabilitation in these ways. Furthermore, these

conceptualizations are consistent with the categories of rehabilitation as defined by Forsberg and

Douglas (2020). Their taxonomy proves useful in distinguishing rehabilitative definitions based

on both their means and their intended ends. By being able to pinpoint which conceptualizations

have the highest likelihood of garnering widespread public support, policymakers can effectively

focus their efforts on promoting interventions that fall within those conceptual categories.

The second major finding was that redeemability is *not* a moderator (RQ2). However, it

was significant as a variable in every model. Interestingly, the direction of the relationship was

negative — meaning that increased belief in redeemability predicted lower belief in desistance.

Practically, this means that the respondents who indicated their belief in offender redeemability

did not indicate belief in desistance signals. This suggests two things: (1), these two concepts

may be separate and (2) that these respondents believe that simply desisting from crime is not

enough to remove the criminal label from a former offender. In other words, *action* is what

demonstrates meaningful change to the public. From a policy standpoint, this means that

rehabilitative and reentry programming that emphasizes tangible results stands the highest chance of being well-received by the public.

The third major finding of this thesis was that there was no significant relationship between punitiveness and belief in desistance signals (RQ3). More specifically, punitiveness is only significant when redeemability is removed from the model. However, further analysis into the punitiveness variable uncovered interesting findings. For instance, the respondents who indicated the highest levels of punitiveness also indicated the highest levels of belief in offender redeemability. This is even more intriguing considering the majority of the sample demonstrated low levels of punitiveness. One potential explanation is the wording of the punitive items in comparison to the redeemability items. The punitive items were very focused and specific, while the redeemability items were much more general, evidenced by not only the wording of survey items but also the distribution of responses. Responses for the punitive scale were heavily skewed to the right while those for the redeemability scale were normally distributed. This suggests that each set of items tapped into a different set of attitudes. Frost (2010) observes a similar phenomenon when studying global vs. specific attitudes concerning prisons. Broad, conceptual questions are well-suited for uncovering general trends in public opinion, but they lose nuance. The opposite observation can be applied to specific, practical questions. This highlights a need for future research to develop more specific, focused measures of redeemability. By being able to compare the public's specific attitudes concerning punitiveness and redeemability, both researchers and policymakers are able to better evaluate the actual impact of public policy.

Fourth, several control variables—age, victim status, offender status—were significant in every model. Education was significant in every model except those in Table 4. Sex, race,

ethnicity, and income were *not significant* in every model, which may be due in part to the demographics of this sample. However, it does hold interesting policy implications. For instance, the research in this thesis suggests that it may be helpful to focus of factors like age and education over sex and race when crafting public policy. Given that recent work by Lee et al. (2022) notes the generational differences in support for rehabilitative prison reform, policymakers should remain cognizant of the differential amounts of support that varying pieces of legislation garner. As younger generations continue to age, they will represent a larger portion of eligible voters. In light of this, it is the responsibility of researchers to better understand what factors influence their support on key criminal justice issues. This may look like targeting this age group to uncover how they would vote on prison reform issues like criminal record expungement and increased employment and housing opportunities for former offenders.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this thesis. To begin, the sample demographics prevented this study from wide generalization. While this anonymous opt-in survey was open to anyone who met the study criteria, on average, the respondents were more highly educated, earned higher income, and were predominately White males. This leads into the second limitation pertaining to the shortcomings of the MTurk platform. Because MTurk is an online platform, it was susceptible to selection bias, internet "bots," and respondent inattention (Aguinis et al., 2021). Third, the wording of survey questions could have been clarified to capture the key concepts of desistance and redeemability in a more specific, focused manner. Additionally, the robustness of the outcome variable could have been improved by including more questions concerning other facets of belief in desistance and increasing the number of response options to gain a better understanding of the nuances within this concept. Finally, the control variable age

exhibited a curvilinear effect. As respondents get older, levels of punitiveness increase instead of following a normal distribution. It should be noted, however, that the mean age for this study sample was thirty-nine years old.

Implications/Future Research

There are several things that should be taken away from this study. First, given that an individual's view of rehabilitation had an impact on the willingness to remove the criminal label, more emphasis should be placed on understanding the nuances of rehabilitative definitions. For instance, what services exactly are seen as rehabilitative, and in what capacity? Does finding religions include simply viewing oneself as spiritual without identifying with a specific religious framework? Does being remorseful for one's crime have to be followed by actions that demonstrate remorse, or is verbal admission enough? Being aware of these specific variations in individual perceptions can aid in understanding the public's overall mood and its implications on public policy. Additionally, it should be noted that the definitions that significantly predicted a willingness to remove the criminal label fell into three of Forsberg and Douglas's (2020) categories— *rehabilitation as anti-recidivism, rehabilitation as moral improvement,* and *punishment as rehabilitation*. Given America's historic focus on these areas, this suggests that individual definitions of rehabilitation broadly align with the rehabilitative and reentry goals of state and local agencies. There are nevertheless nuances within these three overarching goals— especially when attempting to understand individual attitudes. Consider the reality that: (1) all interventions undertaken by the criminal justice system may not be considered equally likely to reduce recidivism, (2) moral improvement is highly subjective and culturally defined, and (3) the practical barriers that arise from incarceration may inhibit any rehabilitative qualities the prison

sentence on a former offender. These are just a few questions that arise when thinking deeper about public beliefs about rehabilitation.

Second, redeemability is indeed a concept that should be taken into account when considering how individuals perceive criminality. The findings suggested that increased belief in redeemability was predictive of decreased belief in desistance signals. There are two potential reasons for this. One, it is possible that redeemability and desistance are two different concepts. For instance, believing that someone is capable of change does not mean that engaging in certain practices is enough to trigger that belief. Additionally, it is also possible that the concept of redeemability was not adequately measured by the items included in the survey.

Third, researchers should be sure to account for pertinent individual experiences when attempting to understand public beliefs about rehabilitation and desistance. For instance, in every model, respondent victim/offender status significantly predicted whether belief in desistance signals increased or decreased. Individuals who had been victimized were more likely to believe in desistance signals, while the opposite was true for those who identified as offenders. When crafting criminal justice policy, especially in states where former offenders are able to exercise their right to vote, officials should note that those who have been incarcerated may be wary of certain legislation given their own experiences. However, there was an interesting victim/offender overlap, with 17% of the sample identifying as both victims and offenders. This may account for the increased level of belief in desistance signals that victims displayed. In any case, further research on the effect of victim/offender status should attempt to understand the nuances of this relationship with more detailed questions regarding how both victims and offenders perceive themselves and the criminal justice system.

Future research on the topics covered in this thesis should aim to achieve two main goals. First, researchers should attempt to further understand and explain the underpinnings of belief formation (i.e., definition-making) and how it fits into CJ opinion/theories on criminality broadly and criminal labels more specifically. Utilizing an interdisciplinary, psychological perspective would be beneficial as this field contains a plethora of literature pertaining to this topic. Additionally, it would be useful to see how these results generalize to other populations. As this sample was not representative of the larger population, it is essential to replicate this work in other settings with other groups of individuals to better pinpoint the circumstances and populations in which these results hold true.

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APPENDIX A

Bivariate Correlation of Key Variables

Table 3. Bivariate Correlations for Key Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Belief in Desistance Signals (DV)	-								
2. Services as Rehabilitation	.216***	-							
3. Religion as Rehabilitation	.064	.120**	-						
4. Remorse as Rehabilitation	.201***	.218***	.226***	-					
5. Sentence Completion as Rehabilitation	.101**	.169***	.242***	.222***	-				
6. State Move as Rehabilitation	-.019	.097**	.250***	.153***	.378***	-			
7. Neighborhood Move as Rehabilitation	-.015	.089*	.242***	.155***	.379***	.552***	-		
8. Punitiveness	-.136***	-.080*	.085*	.048	.074*	.101**	.086*	-	
9. Redeemability	-.240***	-.214***	-.038	-.091*	.067	.041	.020	.276***	-

***Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed).
**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).