

Examining Public Support For “Correcting” Offenders

By Brandon Applegate and Robin King Davis

What should be done with those who break the law and are placed in the hands of corrections officials? This is a very broad question, and in a broad way, people have debated the most appropriate approach. As most observers are aware, “corrections” was taken literally for most of the 20th century. Thus, the question of what should be done with offenders was generally answered, “They should be rehabilitated.” Beginning in the 1970s, however, politicians and criminologists questioned the viability and effectiveness of offender treatment. Furthermore, many of the practices of the 1980s and 1990s arguably sought to increase the punitive aspects of corrections, and polls are readily available showing that the public embraced these trends. In recent polls, for example, two-thirds of Americans thought their local courts should hand down harsher sentences, and about the same portion favored the death penalty for murderers.¹

This situation might lead someone to question, “Does the American public still embrace treatment of offenders as an integral part of what correctional agencies ought to be doing?” For those invested in changing offenders through rehabilitative efforts, the news on this front is encouraging: Although lower than it once was, support for correctional treatment still exists among the public.

The research assessing public views on treatment has asked people about rehabilitation in a variety of ways. Most often, questions have focused on rehabilitation within prison. A 1968 Harris poll asked Americans to choose between protection of society, punishment and rehabilitation as what should be the main goal of imprisonment. More than 70 percent of the respondents selected rehabilitation as the most important, compared

with only 12 percent for protecting society and 7 percent for punishment (another 9 percent said “other”).² Since that time, support for rehabilitation as the principal goal of prisons has declined although the recent research shows that a substantial portion of the public still endorses treatment as the overriding aim. A study conducted in 1996 using the same question used previously by Harris revealed that the percentage choosing rehabilitation as the top priority fell to 41 percent; however, it was still ranked as the most frequently selected goal of prisons.³

In the studies just described, the public was asked to choose only one goal. When citizens are asked to select only the most important goal of corrections, no information is provided on their secondary preferences or on the relative priority that they assign to each goal. In fact, focusing on a forced choice distorts a key feature of public opinion about corrections: Citizens want the system to accomplish multiple goals. Thus, when a 1996 study asked Ohioans about their views on various goals of prisons, 96 percent said that punishment was important, but 83 percent also thought that rehabilitation was an important goal.⁴ More recently, a 2003 poll conducted by the Pew Research Center showed that 72 percent of Americans believed the criminal justice system should “try to rehabilitate criminals, not just punish them.”⁵ A study in Canada revealed similar levels of support. People were asked to rate the importance of several purposes of sentencing on a scale of 1 to 10. “Assisting in the rehabilitating of offenders” netted an average rating of about 8. This ranked treatment as slightly less important than deterring additional crimes (about 8.2), but more important than separating offenders from the rest of society (about 6.6).⁶

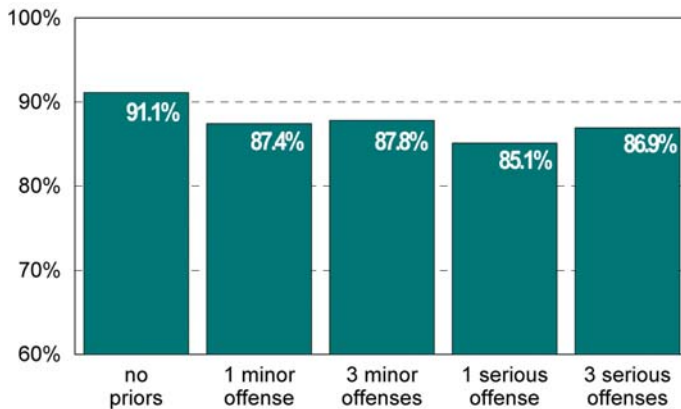
Research has also sought to determine in what situations support for rehabilitation might be higher or lower. Two patterns are particularly clear. First, with dangerous offenders, it appears that concern for public protection trumps the desire to reform offenders. This conclusion is backed by studies showing that support for treatment is lower for those with an extensive criminal history and for those who have been convicted of a violent offense. The public also expresses relatively favorable views on rehabilitation once an offender is in prison and, presumably, does not pose a risk to the community. Second, the public expresses greater support for treating juveniles than adults. It appears that this is because they believe juvenile offenders are more malleable. For example, a 1995 study asked the public how effective they thought that rehabilitation would be for different types of offenders. More than 75 percent said that treatment would be “helpful” or “very helpful” for juveniles; for adult offenders, only 40 percent were as confident in the effectiveness of rehabilitation.⁷

The existing studies, however, tell us little about what happens in the intersection of these two patterns. That is, how does the public view rehabilitation for juveniles when they have a history of criminal involvement? A recent study investigated this question and examined the possible influence of other characteristics on public views of rehabilitation for juvenile offenders (see Figure 1).

Data were collected from a statewide sample of Floridians by asking them to read a description of a juvenile offender and say whether they thought that “the authorities should try to rehabilitate this youth through treatment and educational programs.” Overall, 88 percent favored rehabilitation

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Figure 1. Percentage of the Public who Support Treatment for Offending Juveniles



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for the youth. Several of the characteristics that were thought to influence the extent of support for treatment actually made virtually no difference. For example, when the youth was described as 12 years old, 91 percent supported rehabilitation. When the youth was described as 17 years old, support declined only slightly to 86 percent. Similarly, people expressed equally favorable views toward treating violent offenders and property offenders (89 percent) and only slightly less enthusiasm for drug offenders (78 percent). Finally, Floridians also generally agreed that youths should be given the opportunity to rehabilitate themselves even if they have committed several serious crimes in the past.

Although rehabilitation was once maligned as impractical and ineffective, recent research reveals that treatment can produce considerable reductions in offending. Particularly when efforts use techniques such as cognitive-behavioral treatment and target high-risk offenders and factors known to be related to offending, recidivism rates can be cut dramatically.⁸ However, such efforts can be difficult to implement when there are political barriers. The public's views on what should be done with people who break the law, for example, help to establish the boundaries of policy choices. Thus, public attitudes present an important consideration for those "doing" corrections. The research on public desires reveals that rather than being confronted with an obstacle to treatment, correctional practitioners and policy-makers are supported in their efforts to

reduce offending through rehabilitative programming.

ENDNOTES

¹ Bureau of Justice Statistics. 2005. *Sourcebook of criminal justice statistics online*. Available at www.albany.edu/sourcebook.

² Harris, L. 1968. Changing public attitudes toward crime and corrections. *Federal Probation*, 32(4):9-16.

³ Applegate, B.K., F.T. Cullen and B.S. Fisher. 1997. Public support for correctional treatment: The continuing appeal of the rehabilitative ideal. *Prison Journal*, 77(3):237-258.

⁴ Applegate, B.K. et al. 1997.

⁵ Bureau of Justice Statistics. 2005.

⁶ Doob, A.N. 2000. Transforming the punishment environment: Understanding public views of what should be accomplished at sentencing. *Canadian Journal of Criminology*, 42(3):323-340.

⁷ Sundt, J.L., F.T. Cullen, B.K. Applegate and M.G. Turner. 1998. The tenacity of the rehabilitative idea revisited: Have attitudes toward offender treatment changed? *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 25(4):426-442.

⁸ Cullen, F.T. and P. Gendreau. 2000. Assessing correctional rehabilitation: Policy, practice, and prospects. In *Policies, processes and decisions of the criminal justice system*, ed. J. Horney, 109-175. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice.

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