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Sample Project Report

PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR CORRECTIONAL TREATMENT:
THE CONTINUING APPEAL OF THE REHABILITATIVE IDEAL

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Public Views of Rehabilitation

During the 1970s and 1980s, and particularly following Martinson's (1974) work ostensibly revealing the ineffectiveness of treatment, considerable doubts were raised about the standing of rehabilitation with the public. Studies of public attitudes conducted throughout the 1980s, however, showed that the public continued to believe that rehabilitation should be an integral part of correctional policy.

The most prevalent approach that researchers have taken to evaluate the public's position on rehabilitation has been to provide respondents with a list of goals and ask which one is the most important. For example, 73 percent of respondents chose rehabilitation as the preferred emphasis of prisons in a 1968 Harris poll (Hindelang, Dunn, Aumick, & Sutton, 1975, p. 218). Harris repeated this poll five times, conducting the last survey in 1982. In this final poll, support for rehabilitation had declined to 44 percent, but it still was rated higher than protection of society (32 percent) or punishment (19 percent) (McGarrell & Flanagan, 1985, p. 233). More recently, a group of researchers asked the residents of two major Ohio cities what "should be the main emphasis of prisons?" The respondents more often chose rehabilitation (55 percent and 59 percent) than protection (35 and 30 percent) or punishment (6 and 7 percent) (Cullen, Skovron, Scott, & Burton, 1990).

In addition to asking people to compare correctional goals, researchers also have presented the public with questions about specific types of rehabilitation, the perceived effectiveness of rehabilitation, and expansion of treatment programs. Further, several authors have developed multiple-item scales to measure support for rehabilitative ideology. These studies show much the same result as when goals are pitted against each other: citizens endorse both

punishment and treatment (Cullen et al., 1990; Johnson, 1994; McCorkle, 1993).

These findings might appear to make further assessments of the public mood unnecessary. It seems that citizens want offenders to be punished, but that they also want reformation through correctional treatment. Despite this knowledge, the movement to expand the use of penal harm in the United States that began in the 1970s shows little sign of subsiding in the 1990s (Clear, 1994). In fact, many of the recent innovations in corrections could be characterized as mean-spirited attempts to humiliate, punish, or control offenders. Some examples of these developments include the reimplementation of chain gangs--teams of inmates shackled together who perform "stoop labor" ("Alabama Prisoners", 1995)--the introduction of "three-strikes-and-you're-out" legislation in 37 states (Turner, Sundt, Applegate, & Cullen, 1995), and reductions in the amenities afforded prison inmates (Wunder, 1995).

Given the persistence of the "get tough" or "penal harm" movement, we might ask whether rehabilitation still is supported by the public. Do citizens support a policy agenda that devotes attention mainly to harming rather than improving offenders? Unfortunately, the existing research conducted during the 1990s is limited in the information that it may provide to correctional policy makers. In particular, each study has posed *either* global questions or ones that focus on a specific offender or situation. Recent research has indicated that punitive attitudes vary dramatically depending on whether they are measured using a broad opinion-poll type question or by a more specific question (Cumberland & Zamble, 1992). Broader questions about punitiveness, which tap global attitudes, tend to result in harsher responses than questions that measure specific attitudes by asking respondents to evaluate a particular offender or situation. No study has yet reported whether support for rehabilitation also varies depending on whether

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measures of global or specific attitudes are used.

In an effort to provide a clearer picture of public attitudes and their implications for correctional reform, the present study seeks to address these methodological limitations. Thus, we seek to advance the available literature on rehabilitation attitudes by addressing two questions. First, what currently is the level of support for rehabilitation among the public? Second, do different types of questions produce consistent results or paint a divergent picture of public views of rehabilitation?

Methodology

Sample

For this study, we randomly selected a statewide sample of 1,000 Ohio residents. Questionnaires were mailed to each member of the sample beginning in May of 1996, with reminder mailings following one, three, and seven weeks later. Questionnaires were returned completed or nearly completed by 559 respondents. In addition, 105 questionnaires were returned unanswered because the intended respondent could not be located, had moved out of the state, was too ill to complete the survey, or was deceased. The resulting response rate for those members of the sample who received a survey and were capable of completing it was 62.4 percent (559/895).

Based on comparisons with the 1990 census, it appears that our sample over represents men (66.7 percent), whites (92.5 percent), and people who are older ($\bar{x} = 53.5$), who have college educations (27.9 percent), and who earn higher incomes (median = \$35,000-49,999) (U. S. Bureau of the Census 1994). Prior studies indicate that older respondents, white respondents,

and those with higher incomes tend to be more punitive and less supportive of rehabilitation; those who are more educated, on the other hand, tend to favor treatment. Although these relationships typically are weak, past research suggests that, if any bias exists, support for rehabilitation might be slightly attenuated in the current study.

Measures

Support for rehabilitation was assessed in a variety of ways. First, we replicated the question posed by Harris:

Now 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 might return to society as a productive citizen, or protecting society from future crimes he might commit?

The respondents were instructed to choose one main goal and were afforded four response options: "punish," "rehabilitate," "protect society," and "not sure."

Because other research has revealed that rehabilitation may be a secondary correctional goal for many people, we also asked the respondents to indicate how important each goal was to them (see Table 2): "very important," "important," "a little important," or "not important." These questions ask for citizens' preferences without referring to any specific offender or situation; therefore they are used to measure global attitudes.

Specific attitudes were assessed by presenting the respondents with a vignette. This vignette described a specific offender and several aspects of his or her situation--criminal history, drug use, employment history, current offense, sentence, and type of rehabilitation program (see Appendix for a sample vignette).

Each respondent in the sample received one, unique, randomly-generated vignette to rate. After reading the vignette, the respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with five statements about the hypothetical offender:

I support the use of rehabilitation with Gary/Lisa;

It is right to put people like Gary/Lisa in programs that try to cure the particular problem that caused them to break the law;

This type of rehabilitation program should be expanded so that more offenders could be involved;

Trying to rehabilitate Gary/Lisa probably will lessen the chances that he/she will go back into crime;

If Gary/Lisa successfully completes his/her rehabilitation program, he/she should have the opportunity to have his/her sentence reduced.

The respondents rated each statement on a six-point Likert scale from disagree strongly (1) to agree strongly (6). An additive index of these statements also was developed and showed substantial internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .87).¹

Finally, we measured several respondent characteristics: age, race, sex, education, family income, political party, and political conservatism.

Results

Level of Support

As detailed above, one way we measured citizen support for rehabilitation was to replicate Harris's question about the preferred emphasis of prisons. Table 1 reports the percent of the

¹ The index employed in this research was constructed as a mean of the valid responses. The sum of each respondents' answers was divided by the number of questions answered.

respondents who chose each goal or indicated that they were "not sure" for our sample and for two of Harris's samples (1968 and 1982). Of the 552 individuals who provided a response in the present study, approximately 41 percent stated that rehabilitation "should be the main emphasis" of imprisonment. This goal was chosen by the largest percentage of the respondents, revealing that a substantial minority of these participants strongly endorsed correctional treatment. It might be argued that less than half of the sample selected rehabilitation as the preeminent correctional goal. Still, the other two options individually garnered less support. Thus, only 32 percent chose protection of society as what should be the most important goal of incarceration, and only 20 percent indicated that they thought it most important to punish offenders. The remaining respondents reported that they were not sure of the appropriate aim of prisons.

Notably, the pattern of responses in our 1996 sample is quite similar to Harris's 1982 results. As shown in Table 1, nearly the same percentage of respondents chose protection of society and punishment in both samples. More relevant to the present discussion, 44 percent of Harris's respondents indicated that rehabilitation should be the main emphasis in most prisons. Thus, there is less than a three percent difference in support for rehabilitation between the two surveys. In comparison, support for treatment had declined 28 percent from 1968 to 1982 (see Table 1). It seems that support for rehabilitation, which appears to have weakened during the 1970s, may have stabilized in the last decade-and-a-half.

In addition to inquiring about the main emphasis of incarceration, we also asked the respondents to indicate how important they believed each goal was to prisons. This assessment revealed that the respondents viewed rehabilitation as an important goal, although less important than punishment or protection. As shown in Table 2, 60 percent and 54 percent of the

respondents said that protection of society and punishment, respectively, were "very important." By comparison, only 38 percent of the respondents chose this level of importance for rehabilitation. Even so, nearly 83 percent of the respondents felt that rehabilitation was "very important" or "important," and less than 4 percent thought that it was not important at all. Clearly, citizens believe that prisons should serve multiple goals and that correctional treatment should be an integral component of prison policy.

Turning to the specific measure of attitudes, Table 3 reports the level of support for rehabilitation that the respondents expressed in response to the vignettes. This table presents the percentage of people providing each response without regard for the variations that were introduced across the vignettes. In this way, we are able to examine the approximate average level of support.

When the agree categories are combined, the results in Table 3 reveal that a majority of the respondents agreed with each of the five statements. Thus, over 88 percent agreed with the idea of using rehabilitation with the hypothetical offender, while nearly 87 percent of the respondents agreed that individualized treatment should be employed to "cure the particular problem" of the offender. The respondents also indicated that they favored the expansion of treatment opportunities, and that they thought rehabilitation would reduce the likelihood of recidivism for the offender. The respondents were least supportive of basing decisions about the offender's sentence length on his or her progress in treatment. Even here, however, more than 55 percent of the respondents expressed agreement that successful completion of a rehabilitation program should be considered in reducing an offender's sentence.

Correlates of Support

The previous section revealed substantial support for rehabilitation. It also is important, however, to determine whether any substantial cleavages exist in public views of treatment. Conflicting opinions among identifiable social groups could hamper correctional reform efforts. On the other hand, relative consensus in thinking about crime may provide a foundation for implementing and expanding rehabilitative treatment programs and policies.

Previous research suggests that women's views on crime may be different from those of men. In this section, we examine the possibility of divergence in support for rehabilitation among males and females. More specifically, we explore the relationship of the respondents' sex with three measures of attitudes toward correctional treatment. First, two dependent variables were constructed from the questions that asked about the goals of incarceration. We divided the responses to the question about the main emphasis of prisons into two categories where one equaled rehabilitation and zero equaled all other responses. Second, we dichotomized the question about the importance of rehabilitation by collapsing the categories "very important" and "important" (1) to indicate support, and "a little important" and "not important" (0) to indicate an absence of support. We also examined the effects of sex on responses to the vignette. The responses to the vignettes were combined into an index of support, ranging from one to six, by summing the responses and dividing by five.

Table 4 displays the results for each dependent variable by the sex of the respondents. As shown, women tended to be more supportive of treatment than men. Regarding the main emphasis of prisons, women were about equally likely to select rehabilitation or one of the other options. Conversely, only 37 percent of the men favored rehabilitation. A similar divergence in

attitudes was observed regarding the importance of rehabilitation, with more than 90 percent of the women and less than 79 percent of the men reporting that it was very important or important. Finally, the average response to the vignettes was higher for the female respondents, indicating that they were more enthusiastic than the male respondents about rehabilitation for the offender described in the vignette. Although the difference here appears small (see Table 4), it is statistically significant.

Discussion

Many studies seem to show that the public has grown intolerant of crime and is ready to impose stringent punishment on offenders in pursuit of retribution, deterrence, and incapacitation (see Pettinico, 1994). Research showing that citizens endorse such punitive measures as capital punishment, long sentences, restrictions on early release, harsher courts, and abolishment of plea bargaining is plentiful. Frequently, these findings are taken as indicators that the public is *exclusively* punitive--that they no longer favor efforts to reform offenders through treatment.

The results reported here directly contradict such a conclusion and confirm what less contemporary or more limited assessments of attitudes toward rehabilitation suggest: Despite perceptions to the contrary, the public supports correctional treatment for offenders. Furthermore, our findings demonstrate that a great deal of consistency exists in attitudes toward rehabilitation. First, comparisons of our results with those of national Harris polls suggest that although public attitudes toward rehabilitation became less favorable during the 1970s, since the early 1980s support for the treatment ideal appears to have stabilized at a moderately high level. Despite the penal harm movement and repeated attacks on liberal crime policies, the public continues to embrace rehabilitation as an integral part of the correctional enterprise.

Second, support was fairly consistent across the different measures. The mean index score for the vignettes (4.29) reveals substantially favorable attitudes. Similarly, in response to the global questions, the largest percentage of the respondents chose rehabilitation as the most important aim of prisons and over 80 percent thought that rehabilitation was a "very important" or "important" goal. Thus, regardless of whether we measured global or specific attitudes, the results indicate that the public has not given up on reforming offenders.

The only notable exception to the consistency in attitudes was the observed difference by respondents' sex. Females tended to be more supportive of rehabilitation than males. Still, even the male respondents were not opposed to rehabilitating offenders.

After reviewing public opinion polls on crime policies over the past two decades, Pettinico (1994) concludes:

Simply put, Americans are fed up. They see crime rising all around them and, at the same time, they see a criminal justice system that, in their view, is far too lenient, lax, and forgiving. In response, the public is demanding a stress on retribution over rehabilitation, long prison terms over early release, increased use of the death penalty, and placing the safety of society over the happiness of the incarcerated...when it comes to criminals, it appears that the American people have run out of cheeks to turn. (p. 32)

The findings presented here challenge such a pessimistic view of the public mood. We do not deny that the public desires punishment and that people want to be protected from predatory criminals. It appears, however, that the public still is receptive to treating offenders; the appeal of the rehabilitative ideal remains widespread.

Appendix

Sample vignette:

Lisa, a 30 year old White female threatened a victim with a weapon and demanded money. The victim gave her \$10 and was not harmed. After being convicted for this crime, the court discovered that Lisa had held a steady job for several years, and had a serious drug habit. Her prior record showed that she had been convicted once before for a crime in which she knowingly wrote bad checks for a total of \$1,000.

For her current offense, Lisa was sentenced to intensive supervision probation, where she will continue to live in the community but must meet with a probation officer twice per week. As a part of her sentence, Lisa is in a rehabilitation program. She is enrolled in a psychological treatment program that teaches offenders to give up criminal values and encourages good behavior through a system of rewards and punishments.

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TABLE 1: Percent of Respondents Reporting Their Preferred Emphasis of Incarceration

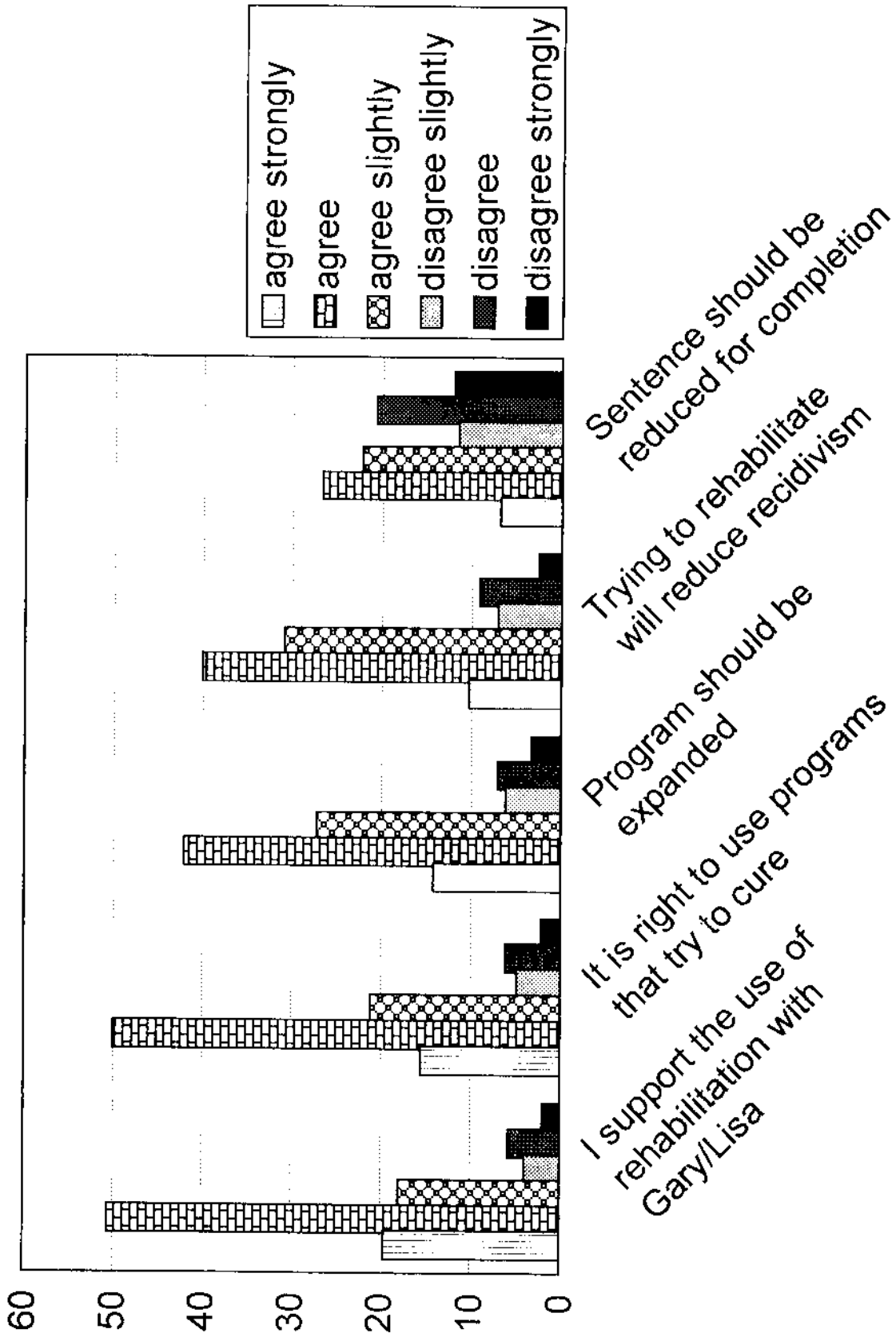
Emphasis Should Be	Current 1996 Sample (N=552)	Harris (1982)	Harris (1968)
Rehabilitate	41.1%	44%	72%
Protect Society	31.9	32	12
Punish	20.3	19	7
Not Sure	6.7	5	9

TABLE 2: Percent of Respondents Reporting the Importance of Each Goal of Imprisonment (N=551)

Importance	Rehabilitation	Protection	Punishment
Very Important	37.7%	60.3%	54.3%
Important	45.1	34.3	41.0
A Little Important	13.6	4.9	4.0
Not Important	3.6	0.5	0.7

Question: Some people believe that prisons should work toward only one goal. Other people believe that many goals are important. You have just told us what you think should be the main emphasis in most prisons. We would also like to know how you feel about the other goals. Please show how important you think each goal is by circling your answers below.

Figure 3: Percent Support for Rehabilitation in Response to the Vignette (n=550)



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TABLE 4: Support for Rehabilitation by Sex of Respondent

Support Measure	Females	Males
Main Goal of Prisons*		
Rehabilitation	49.2%	37.0%
Other	50.8	63.0
Importance of Rehabilitation*		
Very Important/Important	90.7%	78.6%
A Little/Not Important	9.3	21.4
Vignette Index Mean*	4.46	4.20

* p < .05

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