

STUDENT ATTITUDES TOWARDS OFFENDER REINTEGRATION

HONORS THESIS

Presented to the Honors College of  
Texas State University  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements

for Graduation in the Honors College

by

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San Marcos, Texas  
May 2019

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank Texas State University for allowing me the opportunity to prepare a research project and thesis as an undergraduate. This experience will allow me to excel in graduate school and with future writing projects, and I am grateful to already have experience doing this.

I would also like to give a huge thanks to Dr. Donna Vandiver, my thesis supervisor and professor, for being extremely supportive and a huge resource every step of the way. I would not have been able to complete this work without her continued support and expertise. Aside from being an amazing supervisor, she also is an amazing professor that made learning about research exciting.

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines Texas State University students' attitudes regarding the purposes of incarceration, their perceptions of obstacles faced by previously incarcerated individuals, and their personal opinions of previously incarcerated individuals. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics' 2015 report on correctional populations, approximately 6.7 million people were under some form of correctional supervision (Kaeble & Glaze, 2016). The majority of the approximately two million who are currently incarcerated will, in fact, return to the community. A common perspective of incarcerated individuals is "out of sight, out of mind," but there are more ex-offenders outside of prison walls than there are inside. The aim of this study is to determine how students rationalize supportive and punitive regimes previously incarcerated individuals often face. This study highlights the consequences of the United States' lack of rehabilitative efforts and successful reintegration of previously incarcerated individuals. To gain a clearer insight into student attitudes, a survey of 125 Texas State students was conducted. Additionally, five semi-structured interviews were conducted. This mixed-methods approach revealed that Texas State students revealed discord between their own views and societal views. Also, students conveyed a "not in my backyard view" on reentry issues in that they often supported rehabilitative efforts of formerly incarcerated individuals, yet were weary of such offenders being part of their close network.

## **Introduction**

The U.S. criminal justice system has evolved throughout history with themes of punitive and rehabilitation emerging at different times. During 1960s, the political climate catalyzed a tough-on-crime stance that depicted a crime-ridden America. As a result of the rising fear of crime and punitive laws, incarceration rates throughout the country skyrocketed (Mauer, 2001). Policymakers continue to rely on lengthy sentences and high rates of convictions to address crime and criminals. According to Tonry (2006, p. 45), politicians and policymakers often “enact laws they know cannot and will not operate as seemingly envisioned” in order to “send a message.” According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics 2015 report on correctional populations, approximately 6.7 million people were under some form of correctional supervision (Kaeble & Glaze, 2016). The current incarcerated population in the U.S. is 2.3 million people, but an even a larger number of people, 7 million, are on probation, parole, and/or in a correctional facility (Wagoner & Sawyer, 2019). This being said, it is important to assess the adversities and processes involved in offender reintegration, In this study the attitudes of Texas State students towards the concepts of offender reintegration are examined through a quantitative and qualitative approach.

## **Literature Review**

### **Four Purposes of Incarceration**

Four main purposes of punishment were consistently identified in the literature. Identifying the various rationales for punishing individuals allows us to gain insight into various punishment philosophies and helps explain why now, more than ever, so many people are incarcerated in America.. The four identified purposes of punishment

includes deterrence, incapacitation, retribution, and rehabilitation (Raaijmakers, Keijser, Nieuwbeerta, & Dirkzwager, 2017).

**Deterrence.** Deterrence theory assumes that people are rational beings that weigh the costs and benefits of their actions (Raaijmakers et al., 2017). Simply put, a person will commit a crime if they deem the benefit more attractive than the potential legal cost of committing the crime. Boeglin (2017) explains two forms of deterrence, general and specific, as purposes of incarceration under deterrence theory. General deterrence means that the entire population is deterred from committing crime because they see the negative consequences other offenders have faced; specific deterrence occurs when the punishment from committing a crime is enough to keep that specific offender from committing future crime.

Three main concepts are critical to deterrence: certainty, celerity, and severity (Raaijmakers et al., 2017). Deterrence is more effective if the population is sure that committing crime will result in a consequence (i.e., certainty), if the punishment occurs soon after the crime is committed (i.e., celerity), and if the punishment is severe enough to outweigh the benefits of committing the crime (i.e., severity) (Raaijmakers et al., 2017). These assumptions have propelled the United States to build the justice system it has today. However, some studies show that all of the components of deterrence theory are not in place in the U.S. criminal justice system. Kleiman (2015), a professor of public policy at the University of California Los Angeles, expressed that operational deficiencies within the criminal justice system do not allow for swift and certain punishment; therefore voiding the effectiveness of deterrence (Kleiman, 2015).

**Incapacitation.** Incapacitation is another rationale that policymakers cite as a purpose for incarceration (Traum, 2013). According to this rationale, the criminal justice system should identify and isolate offenders that pose a threat to society, in order to protect people and deter future crimes (Boeglin, 2017). Prison populations have continued to rise as a result of incapacitation theory, and as a result 2.3 million people are incarcerated in the United States (Wagner & Sawyer, 2018). If the criminal justice system continues to incapacitate every person they deem threatening, the prison population will only continue to sky rocket. Blumstein (2016) conducted a study that found offenders more likely to become career criminal as a result of continued incapacitation. The longer a person is surrounded by other criminals, the more likely they will be to learn tips and tricks regarding criminal activity and their chances for successful life in a legal way outside of prison diminishes (Blumstein, 2016).

**Retribution.** Retribution is one of the older concepts of punishment cited in today's literature. It relies on the basic premise that criminal offenders should suffer for their crimes, as a payment of the pain they have caused others (Boeglin, 2017). This concept has been modernized to include an emphasis on the victim and victims' families. Some scholars see retribution as a revenge-based punishment, while others see it as a means to restore social order and keep societal norms in place (Boeglin, 2017; Collica-Cox & Sullivan, 2017). Retribution dates back to the Latin phrase, *lex talionis*, which translates to "an eye for any eye, a tooth for a tooth." According to r this principle, offenders should receive a punishment to fit the crime.

**Rehabilitation.** Rehabilitation holds that an offender who commits a crime will serve time in prison or jail in order to realign with social norms and become a functioning

member of society (Boeglin, 2017). The rationale may not be logic, as many incarcerated offenders experience trauma that actually hinders their ability for rehabilitation (Davis, Bahr, & Ward, 2012). Offenders have very little capacity for rehabilitation in prison due to limited resources and funds. Also, the environment within prison is not conducive to rehabilitation and develops post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and other mental illnesses (Davis, Bahr, & Ward, 2012). Though this is a rationale for punishment, it does not necessarily work in the current system.

### **Important Factors for Reintegration**

**Treatment.** A common theme throughout relevant studies was the necessity of some sort of treatment for the ex-offender (Bahr, Harris, Fisher, & Armstrong 2009; Davis, Bahr, & Ward 2012). Treatment, in this context, can mean physical (drug-related) or psychological. Multiple studies cited that the completion of a substance abuse class by ex-offenders was highly important to successfully finishing their parole (Bahr, Harris, Fisher, & Armstrong 2009; Davis, Bahr, & Ward 2012). In Bahr et al.'s (2009) study, they found that 94% of the 51 parolees they examined over a three year period had current or previous drug problems, so drug treatment was necessary for embarking on a stabilized lifestyle. For offenders with substance abuse issues, being subjected to the same environment they lived in prior to arrest without any type of intervention is likely to create a pattern of recidivism.

In assessing a community reintegration program named Community Wise, researchers found that after the completion of a 12-week program, offenders that participated reported a decrease in PTSD symptoms at the 6-week mark (Windsor, Jemal, & Benoit 2014). This was reported after the participants participated in group therapy and

a few other individualized therapy programs. This shows the importance of treatment practices in rehabilitating offenders who are undergoing the reintegration process.

**Social Life.** Another critical factor for offender reintegration was stable social ties (Bahr et. al, 2009) . When offenders are released from prison, their ties with family, friends, and coworkers might be different than they once were. Offenders reported that “a suitable support system” was necessary for them to ease back in to society (Tarpey & Friend, 2016). A certain level of support is required for ex-offenders to feel as if they belong in society, not in an institution. After being isolated for so long, coming back into the real world and experiencing a similar type of isolation can be discouraging. Wright and Cesar (2013) constructed a theoretical model to assess which kind of support systems ex-offenders need to reintegrate into society. The researchers found that individual, community, and systematic support are tied to the success of integration in ex-offenders’ lives.

**Basic Needs.** Most obviously, the main components for offender reintegration are meeting the basic needs of a sustainable human being. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs informs us that we cannot reach a level of societal belonging, unless physiological and safety related needs are fulfilled first (Porta & Last, 2018). Basic needs we often take for granted, such as employment, shelter, food, hygiene, and education are the most difficult things for ex-offenders to secure (Geller & Curtis, 2010). Many people are under the assumption that ex-offenders are given adequate resources when they leave prison. Prisoners are usually only given bus fare to get back home and the clothes they entered the facility with. It is difficult for ex-offenders, especially those with a prior felony, to gain any type of employment. Employers do not want to hire someone with a criminal

background because they consider it a liability. One study showed that offenders that worked more hours during the week were less likely to fail conditions of their parole (Bahr, Harris, Fisher, & Armstrong 2009).

Aside from a job, finding a place to live also causes significant stress for these offenders. The residence in which they lived before prison might not belong to them anymore or their friends and family might have moved. A requirement parole is usually secure housing, so this forces offenders to shack up in a group home, rehabilitation center, or track down a friend or family member willing to let them live in their home. Geller and Curtis (2010) found that housing was extremely difficult for ex-offenders to find because many land lords require background checks of tenants and often deny those with a criminal history.

### **Structural Hardships Faced by Offenders During Reintegration**

The crucial factors for reintegration listed above are prominent sources of hardship for ex-offenders. Adversities relating to the structure of the criminal justice system and how the government treats offenders is often overlooked. Probation and parole are required routes for prisoners upon their release, which are often difficult to successfully complete because usually restrictions apply that they did not experience in their life before prison. In a sense, probation and parole require the limited freedom of an offender who is supposedly free. Oftentimes, ex-offenders are sent back to jail or prison because they violated some small structural aspect of their probation or parole terms, especially during intensive supervision (Hyatt & Barnes 2016).

Another structural hardship faced by ex-offenders is disenfranchisement. All states practice this limitation differently, but essentially offenders with a felony on their

record are not allowed to vote in elections. Some states allow offenders to apply to regain their voting rights, but it is a painstaking process that not many of them pass. Miller and Spillane (2012) in examining the “civil death” of ex-felons found that the majority of their sample found that voting rights were important to social reintegration, but many of the participants varied in the level of importance they attributed to voting in relation to their ability not to recidivate. Voting is something that many citizens take for granted, but it is one of our rights that we feel as if can never be taken away; however, we see that this is not the case. In addition to feelings of alienation, it is important to note how many potential voters are disenfranchised because of this harsh practice. Miller and Spillane (2012) conducted their study in Florida and reported that somewhere between 600,000 and 1.2 million ex-felons were disenfranchised. This is a substantial number that will continue to grow in years to come. Not only are ex-felons alienated socially, but from the American political system as well.

### **Current Study**

Given that over two million individuals are currently incarcerated in the United States, it makes sense that a large number of people in society have been in contact with the criminal justice system at some point (Wagner & Sawyer, 2018). There are many studies that clearly identify the negative effects of incarceration; however, there is little research specifically assesses public perceptions of previously incarcerated individuals in connection with their understanding of the purpose of incarceration. It is important to study peoples’ perceptions of formerly incarcerated individuals because it allows us to see different viewpoints on why and what kinds of people should be incarcerated for their crimes. Public opinion matters because it is the basis of social movement and

subsequently affects legislation. Being able to gauge how individuals perceive previously incarcerated individuals provides insight into their beliefs of what the criminal justice system is supposed to do.

### **Methods**

In this study, a mixed-methods approach with quantitative and qualitative components was implemented. Survey data was collected from 125 Texas State University students. Analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between their questions regarding offender reintegration. For the qualitative portion of this study, five in-depth interviews of Texas State University students who volunteered were conducted.

#### **Mixed-Methods Approach Part 1: Quantitative**

For the quantitative portion of this study, a survey was constructed and data were collected from 125 Texas State University students during the spring 2017 semester. This was part of a research project in a Criminal Justice research methods course. A convenience sample was utilized, where each student in the class administered five surveys each to Texas State students of their choice. Although a total of 31 questions were included in the survey, only three questions regarding offender reintegration were assessed and are reported here. Demographics and several background questions were also included. The questions regarding offender reintegration addressed topics such as comfortability working with an ex-offender, felony reporting on job applications, and restoring a felon's ability to vote upon sentence completion. Additionally, participants were asked if the criminal justice system is lacking in their efforts to formally reintegrate ex-offenders and if formerly incarcerated individuals should be able to receive public services upon sentence completion. The questions are listed below:

- I would be comfortable working with someone who had committed a felony.
  - Strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree
- The U.S. criminal justice system generally treats people fairly and equitably.
  - Strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree
- Should those who have committed a felony should be required to report that on their application when they apply for a job?
  - Yes or no
- Should ex-offenders (committed a felony) who have successfully completed their sentence should be able to vote?
  - Yes or no
- There is a lack of formal efforts in the United States to reintegrate formerly incarcerated individuals into society after they have been released from prison.
  - Strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree
- Ex-offenders who have successfully completed their sentence should be able to receive public services when they qualify otherwise (e.g., live in public housing, receive public assistance, etc.).
  - Strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree

### **Mixed-Methods Approach Part 2: Qualitative**

Five interviews were conducted with a convenience sample of Texas State University students. This means students were chosen merely due to proximity and convenience. This sampling technique does not allow for a representative sample; however, it enables me to assess more in-depth information from the participants. The

interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview sheet, which includes initial broad questions, and further probing questions to elicit more details from the participant.

The first research question assessed was: “What are the perceptions of a select group of students at Texas State University with regard to the overall purpose of prison?”

To measure this several interview questions were asked:

- In regard to incarceration, what do you believe is the main purpose?
  - Why do you believe this?
- How much do you know about the four main purposes of incarceration (retribution, deterrence, rehabilitation, and incapacitation)? How much should these concepts be emphasized? Can you rank them in order of most to least important?
- Should the criminal justice system put more or less effort into reintegrating previously incarcerated individuals back into society?
  - Why or why not?

It is hypothesized that that incarceration is in place to provide a deterrent effect. Most people I have come into contact with, have stated that prisons are used to prevent further crime by either scaring those outside of prison out of committing a crime, or decreasing recidivism rates of those who are incarcerated and released. Through my own conversations with friends and family, deterrence is most likely to be the main reason for incarceration cited by my interviewees.

The next research questions assessed was, “What are the perceptions of a select group of students at Texas State University with regard to obstacles ex-offenders face on an institutional/governmental level?” To measure this, several interview questions were asked:

- Should ex-offenders be required to report a felony on a job application?
  - Why or why not?
  - For some types offenders rather than others? If so, what kind of offenders?
  - Only for certain types of jobs? If so, what types?
- Should an ex-offender be disqualified from living in public housing?
- Should an ex-offender be disqualified from receiving aid from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP; i.e., food stamps)?
- Should an ex-offender be disqualified from receiving Medicaid, which provides free/low-cost health benefits?
- Should an ex-offender be disqualified from receiving federal loans to attend a higher education institution?
- Should an ex-offender be disqualified from voting?

It is hypothesized that most of participants will feel that ex-offenders should not experience difficult obstacles upon their reentry back into the community. It is likely that participants will not initially be fully aware of the countless obstacles previously incarcerated individuals face upon reintegration and might change their minds upon this realization.

The final research question assessed was “What are the perceptions of a select group of students at Texas State University with regard to personal perceptions of previously incarcerated individuals?” To measure this, several questions were asked:

- How comfortable would you feel about an ex-offender living in an apartment, near the industrial park in your hometown, but fairly distant from your home?
- What if they lived in your apartment complex?

- What if they lived next to you?
- What if your employer hired them and they worked in close physical proximity?
- Why or why not would this make you more or less uncomfortable?
- If a family member announced an engagement to an ex-prisoner, how would you feel and why?

It is hypothesized that participants will feel anxious about interacting with ex-offenders in their day-to-day lives, but after allowing them to talk freely and give open-ended responses, their view might change throughout the interview.

After asking participants the above semi-structured questions, a content analysis was performed with the information from each interview. In this content analysis, underlying themes were identified between interviewees' responses and hypocritical answers among individual respondents' were flagged. Participants' responses were analyzed to determine if there was any overlap between responses from different sections of the semi-structured interviews.

## **Results**

### **Part I. Quantitative Survey Results**

The sample relied upon to conduct this study consisted of 125 current Texas State University students. The majority of the sample was male (66%;  $n = 83$ ). Also, the majority of participants identified as a minority (59%;  $n = 74$ ). Most of the students who completed the survey were between the ages of 21 and 24 (54%;  $n = 68$ ), while the remainder were between 18 and 20 (34%;  $n = 43$ ) or 25 years or older (12%;  $n = 14$ ). The surveys were administered by students obtaining a criminal justice degree, but most of

the participants (74%;  $n = 93$ ) were not criminal justice majors. Most of the individuals in the sample were juniors or seniors (72%;  $n = 90$ ).

The majority of those surveyed (77%;  $n = 96$ ) indicated they were *not* fearful of violent crime victimization (see Table 1). The majority of participants (84%;  $n=105$ ) indicated that ex-offenders *should* be able to vote upon completion of their sentence (see Table 2). The majority of those surveyed (80%;  $n = 100$ ) specified that previously incarcerated individuals who have successfully completed their sentence *should* receive public services when they otherwise qualify (see Table 3). The majority of participants (81%;  $n = 101$ ) indicated that those that have committed a felony *should* have to report that information on a job application (see Table 4).

**Table 1. Are you generally fearful of violent crime victimization?**

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
No	96	76.8
Yes	28	22.4
Missing	1	.8
Total	125	100.0

**Table 2. Should ex-offenders (committed a felony) who have successfully completed their sentence should be able to vote?**

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
No	18	14.4
Yes	105	84.0
Missing	2	1.6
Total	125	100.0

**Table 3. Should ex-offenders who have successfully completed their sentence should be able to receive public services public services when they qualify otherwise (e.g., live in public housing, receive public assistance, etc.)?**

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
No	24	19.2
Yes	100	80.0
Missing	1	.8
Total	125	100.0

**Table 4. Should those who have committed a felony should be required to report that on their application when they apply for a job?**

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
No	23	18.4
Yes	101	80.8
System	1	.8
Total	125	100.0

The majority of those surveyed (82%; n = 102) indicated that there *are* a lack of formal efforts to reintegrate formerly incarcerated individuals into society in the United States upon release from prison (see Table 5). The majority of participants (58%; n = 7) stated that they *would* be comfortable working with someone who had committed a felony (see Table 6). The majority of those surveyed (78%; n = 98) indicated that the U.S. criminal justice system does *not* treat people fairly and equitably (see Table 7).

**Table 5. There is a lack of formal efforts in the United States to reintegrate formerly incarcerated individuals into society after they have been released from prison.**

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Strongly Disagree	1	.8
Disagree	20	16.0
Agree	55	44.0
Strongly Agree	47	37.6
Missing	2	1.6
Total	125	100.0

**Table 6. I would be comfortable working with someone who had committed a felony.**

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Strongly Disagree	12	9.6
Disagree	38	30.4
Agree	65	52.0
Strongly Agree	8	6.4
Missing	2	1.6
Total	125	100.0

**Table 7. The U.S. criminal justice system generally treats people fairly and equitably.**

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Strongly Disagree	44	35.2
Disagree	54	43.2
Agree	24	19.2
Strongly Agree	3	2.4
Total	125	100.0

In addition to the above frequencies, crosstabs were conducted that compared relationships between participants' responses to specific questions. For each crosstab, a phi coefficient was relied upon, which is a measure of the extent that two variables are correlated and ranges from values of -1 to 1, where values closer to 0 indicate no relationship and 1 (and -1) indicate the two variables are perfectly (either positively or negatively) correlated. Of particular interest was how one's level of fear of violent crime victimization affected the participants' responses to the survey questions: (1) whether participants were comfortable working with someone who had committed a felony, (2) whether the U.S. justice system treats people fairly and equitably, (3) whether those with a felony conviction should be required to report their felony on a job application, (4) whether there are a lack of formal reintegration efforts for formerly incarcerated individuals upon release in the United States, (5) whether es-offenders should be able to

receive public services upon completion of their sentence if they qualify otherwise, and (6) whether ex-offenders should be able to vote on completion of their sentence.

Of the 125 students surveyed, the majority of those who were *not* fearful of violent crime victimization (78%;  $n = 95$ ; missing = 3) agreed that they *were* comfortable working with someone who had committed a felony (63%;  $n = 60$ ). According to the phi value (.14), the strength of the relationship between the participants' fear of victimization and comfortability working with someone with a felony charge was weak. The majority of those who were not fearful of violent crime victimization (77%;  $n = 96$ ; missing = 1) did *not* agree that the U.S. criminal justice system treats people fairly (77%;  $n = 74$ ). The phi value (.10) showed that the strength of the relationship between participants' fear of victimization and belief regarding fairness of the criminal justice system was weak. The majority of those who were not fearful of violent crime victimization (78%;  $n = 95$ ; missing = 2) indicated that those with a felony charge *should* be required to report that information on a job application (86%;  $n = 82$ ). According to the phi value (-0.24), the strength of the relationship between participants' fear of victimization and their opinion on reporting felonies on job applications was minute.

The majority of those who were not fearful of violent crime victimization (77%;  $n = 94$ ; missing = 3) *agreed* that there are a lack of reintegration efforts in the United States for previously incarcerated individuals reentering society (81%;  $n = 76$ ). The phi value (.21) indicates that the strength of the relationship between participants' fear of victimization and their opinion on reintegration efforts in the United States is weak. The majority of those who were not fearful of violent crime victimization (77%;  $n = 96$ ; missing = 2) stated that ex-offenders *should* be able to receive public services upon

completion of their sentence (77%;  $n = 74$ ). According to the phi value (.16) the strength of the relationship between participants' fear of victimization and their opinion on ex-offenders' access to public services is weak. The majority of those who were not fearful of violent crime victimization (77%;  $n = 94$ ; missing = 3) agreed that ex-offenders *should* be able to vote upon release (86%;  $n = 81$ ). The phi value (-.05) indicates that the strength of the relationship between participants' fear of victimization and whether ex-offenders should be able to vote is extremely weak.

Another point of interest was how participants' perception of the fairness of the U.S. criminal justice system impacted their responses to the following survey questions: (1) whether participants were comfortable working with someone who had committed a felony, (2) whether those with a felony conviction should be required to report their felony on a job application, (3) whether there are a lack of formal reintegration efforts for formerly incarcerated individuals upon release in the United States, (4) whether ex-offenders should be able to receive public services upon completion of their sentence if they qualify otherwise, and (5) whether ex-offenders should be able to vote on completion of their sentence.

Of the 125 students surveyed, the majority of the participants who *do not* believe the U.S. criminal justice system treats people fairly (77%;  $n = 96$ ; missing = 2) *would* be comfortable working with someone who had committed a felony (63%;  $n = 60$ ). The phi value (.27) indicates a weak relationship between belief in the fairness of the criminal justice system and comfortability working with a felon. The majority of those surveyed who *do not* believe the U.S. criminal justice system treats people fairly (77%;  $n = 96$ ; missing = 1) indicated those who have committed a felony *should* report that information

on a job application (79%;  $n = 77$ ). According to the phi value (.12), the relationship between the belief in the fairness of the criminal justice system and if felonies should be reported on a job application is weak.

The majority of those surveyed who *do not* believe the U.S. criminal justice system treats people fairly (77%;  $n = 97$ ; missing = 2) agreed that ex-offenders *should* have the ability and right to vote (89%;  $n = 85$ ). The phi Value (.27) indicates a weak relationship between belief in the fairness of the criminal justice system and whether ex-offenders should have the right to vote. The majority of those surveyed who *do not* believe the U.S. criminal justice system treats people fairly (77%;  $n = 97$ ; missing = 1) stated that ex-offenders *should* have access to public services upon completion of their sentence (81%;  $n = 79$ ). According to the phi value (.24), the relationship between the belief in the fairness of the criminal justice system and offenders' access to public services is weak. The majority of those surveyed who *do not* believe the U.S. criminal justice system treats people fairly (77%;  $n = 97$ ; missing = 2) agree that there *are* a lack of formal reintegration efforts for previously incarcerated individuals (89%;  $n = 96$ ). The phi value (.45) indicates a strong association between belief in the unfairness of the criminal justice system and the lack of reintegration efforts for previously incarcerated individuals in the U.S.

The last crosstab analysis conducted examined if participants' opinion on whether ex-offenders should report a felony on a job application impacted if they would be comfortable working with someone who previously committed a felony. Out of the 125 students surveyed, the majority of the participants who thought that felonies *should* be reported on job applications (81%;  $n = 99$ ; missing = 3) *would* be comfortable working

with someone who had committed a felony, but only slightly more than those who *would not* (53%;  $n = 53$ ). According to the phi value (.24), the relationship between requiring felonies to be reported on job applications and comfortability working with an ex-offender is weak.

## **Part II. Qualitative Interview Results**

**Participant 1.** In the first portion of the interview, questions that related to purposes of incarceration were asked. Participant 1 stated that people are incarcerated as a result of involvement in an illegal activity, so the purpose of incarceration is to limit them from taking part in that illegal act again (i.e., deterrence through incapacitation). This person stated that society has set laws, and if someone breaks them, incarceration is bound to occur. The participant was not aware of the four main purposes of incarceration (retribution, deterrence, rehabilitation, and incapacitation). Upon further explanation of these purposes, the participant ranked them in an order of most to least importance based on how the criminal justice system should use these purposes, starting with rehabilitation, then deterrence, retribution, and last, incapacitation. Participant 1 was not aware of what efforts are currently being made by the criminal justice system to reintegrate previously incarcerated individuals, but agreed that these efforts should be made if they are not currently being made. This person stated the belief that if ex-offenders are being placed back into society, the criminal justice system should take the time to make them a productive citizen, rather than placing them back into society without any preparation or support system.

The next portion of the interview focused on obstacles ex-offenders face. Participant 1 took a long pause to weigh the pros and cons of requiring felonies to be

reported on a job application. This participant was conflicted because they have a family member who was previously incarcerated. The participant perceived their family member is a good person and does not think someone should be denied a job for a mistake he made a long time ago. On the other hand, the participant would want to know if a potential employee had a felony charge if she owned her own business. The participant agreed that felonies should be reported on job applications, but recognized that not all employers would have the same attitude as Participant 1, in that this person would be able to see through the felony charge and see that the convicted person has changed (or not) and served their time.

When asked follow-up questions, the participant agreed that certain jobs should require the reporting of felonies and certain offenses on job applications if what the offender did specifically related to the job (i.e., if they committed theft/robbery and the job involves working with expensive items unsupervised). The participant stated a minimum-wage job that does not require many qualifications should not require reporting of a felony charge. The participant stated that an ex-offender should *not* be disqualified from receiving public housing, food stamps, Medicaid, federal loans to attend a higher education institution, or from voting.

In the realm of personal opinions on ex-offenders, the participant stated that their level of comfortability in living next to an ex-offender completely depends on the offense. For example, the participant would not feel comfortable living next to someone with a child sexual offense, no matter the specific proximity. The same principal applied to working with an ex-offender in close physical proximity. The person stated if the offense was a long time ago and perceived that their coworker is a good person, they

would not mind working alongside them, as long as they acted in a professional manner. The participant also stated she would not feel uncomfortable if a family member became engaged to an ex-offender.

**Participant 2.** Regarding purposes of incarceration, Participant 2 stated that society leads people to believe that incarceration is in place to “keep the good guys from the bad guys,” but in reality, making arrests and locking people up is more about meeting quotas. Participant 2 thought that prison overcrowding is representative of law enforcement trying to meet mandates and quotas. Through reading articles and credible sources, Participant 2 has reached this conclusion regarding the purposes of incarceration. Participant 2, in regard to the four main purposes of incarceration (retribution, deterrence, rehabilitation, and incapacitation) stated that assigning these terms to incarceration is dehumanizing in itself. Participant 2 recalled watching videos about scientific studies where people were incapacitated for a short amount of time and recollects that the mental toll was substantial. Participant 2 stated that by enforcing these purposes of incarceration in our prison system, we are as bad as the institutions we demonize in our current day society. Participant 2 stated retribution is an important aspect of incarceration because people need to pay tribute to the wrongs they have committed to society, and not just in the aspect of incarceration, but in general morality.

Regarding deterrence, Participant 2 wondered where the line is drawn in a humane way to deter people wherein humans are not treated as animals. In regard to rehabilitation, Participant 2 stated that if someone does not have a desire to rehabilitate themselves, he will not do so, so it is detrimental to enforce that on someone. Participant 2 stated that in terms of most to least importance of which concepts should be used in our

current criminal justice system, the order should be: retribution, deterrence, rehabilitation, then incapacitation. When the participant discussed reintegration efforts, Participant 2 stated this should be catered to the class of offender. This participant liked the idea of creating a small town for released offenders to live and thrive so that we are not upsetting the balance by reintegrating offenders into communities that will not treat them as an equal member of society. Being able to have like-minded people with generally the same experiences, in this participant's opinion, would be easier on both parties (offenders and members of society) due to the labeling stigma that often occurs after an incarcerated individual's release. Participant 2 agreed that the criminal justice system should spend more effort reintegrating previously incarcerated individuals back into society.

The next part of the interview focused on obstacles ex-offenders face upon release from prison. Participant 2 stated that the reporting of a felony on a job application depends on the job and the offense. According to Participant 2, there are certain offenses that should be known by your employer, but we need to work on redefining what "convict" and "ex-offender" mean so it is not so stigmatizing that these people are unable to find employment. Some offenses are no longer relevant, so it is not fair to require the reporting of these offenses when finding employment. In regard to public housing, the same concept applies. Participant 2 stated that non-violent offenses should not be regarded on housing applications, but if it were an offense such as tax evasion, that would be necessary to know in a housing complex. Participant 2 realized that our lives now are significantly different than they were a hundred years ago, and our laws need to change to reflect that paradigm shift. Participant 2 proposed that a misdemeanor should be synonymous with nonviolent offenses and we need to completely reevaluate what crime

is. Participant 2 does not agree that an ex-offender should be disqualified from receiving food stamps/aid, Medicaid, federal loans to attend a higher education institution (unless they have committed some sort of fraud), or voting because they deem this counterproductive to reintegration. Prohibiting a previously incarcerated person from obtaining these services essentially blacklists them, and they are people who need the most help.

When ex-offenders living in different proximities to Participant 2 was discussed, the participant indicated no problem with a previously incarcerated person living around the corner because they knew that he would essentially be out of harms way. However, if the person lived right next to them, it would be an issue if there was constant illegal activity and violence occurring in that person's home/apartment. If the ex-offender is trying to live in peace and get their life together, that is not a problem for Participant 2. Participant 2 already works in close proximity with ex-offenders, so this was not an issue for them. When Participant 2 was asked if he would be comfortable if a family member became engaged to an ex-offender, the participant indicated that his mother had actually dated a person who was in jail and it was "definitely strange." As long as both parties are "treating each other right," Participant 2 did not have a problem with the engagement.

**Participant 3.** Participant 3 indicated that that the main purpose of incarceration is to punish those who have done wrong to others. Participant 3 was always taught that "you receive punishment when you do something bad" and has always associated that logic to incarceration. The participant gave examples from their childhood to highlight the seemingly simple cause-and-effect relationship between negative actions to negative consequences. Upon mentioning the four main purposes of punishment (rehabilitation,

incapacitation, rehabilitation, and deterrence), Participant 3 had not previously heard of any of the purposes other than rehabilitation. Upon explanations, Participant 3 stated that rehabilitation should be the most emphasized concept in the current criminal justice system. The participant indicated that someone who has committed crime, should not be “wiped out from society” and, therefore, rejected the concept of incapacitation.

Participant 3 explained that the government should have the sole power to decide what constitutes a greater offense than others. In order from what should be the most to least emphasized in the criminal justice system, Participant 3 chose rehabilitation, deterrence, retribution, then incapacitation.

Participant 3 also proposed that the criminal justice system needs to place much more effort on reintegration of previously incarcerated individuals than what currently occurs. The participant stated that it can be mentally abusive to incarcerate individuals in solitary confinement and isolation. Participant 3 added that throwing them out into the world, regardless of the presence of solitary, is detrimental to their psyche. Participant 3 suggested that previously incarcerated people need a crash course of current events and information before their release. The participant suggested that no one is going to “magically be okay after incarceration” and the criminal justice system should be doing a better job to make sure these people have the help that they need.

When asked if previous offenders should be required to report a felony on a job application, Participant 3 took a lengthy pause to collect her thoughts. Participant 3 stated that this was an issue wherein she could see both sides of the argument. On one hand, she stated that the decision of what is a felony and what is a misdemeanor is not concrete, so it is not fair to let this determine whether someone puts this on a job application. On the

other hand, Participant 3 indicated she realized the gravity of some offenses (i.e., sex trafficking, sexual abuse, etc.) being an issue that need to be addressed. Participant 3 stated that specific jobs should definitely require reporting a felony on the job application, such as offenses that work with delicate populations (children, elderly, those with illnesses, etc.). Someone's offense shouldn't "follow them like a dark shadow", but in some instances certain detrimental offenses need to be noted. Participant 3 indicated that she does not believe an ex-offender should be disqualified from public housing, Medicaid, receiving food stamps/SNAP, federal loans to attend a higher education institution, or voting. Participant 3 was very adamant about allowing previously incarcerated individuals access to these services because they need it more than most of the population in many instances. Participant 3 also indicated that an ex-offender living next or working with her would not be an issue. Participant 3 also would not care if a family member was engage to an ex-offender as long as both parties were happy and healthy.

**Participant 4.** Participant 4 stated that, from a societal standpoint, the purpose of incarceration is to "teach them a lesson." He stated that the main idea is to provide a decentive to do bad things, but he does not know what the "real" purpose of incarceration is. Participant 4 relayed that he does not often think about incarceration and feels relatively uninformed on the matter. The underlying reason why Participant 4 had these beliefs about the purpose of incarceration is the general idea that has been engrained since childhood: you do something bad, you will get punished. Participant 4 had no prior knowledge of the four main purposes of incarceration (retribution, deterrence, rehabilitation, and incapacitation) other than the definitions of deterrence and

rehabilitation. Participant 4 stated that retribution should be incorporated in our current system, but not to the extent it is used now in relation to the death penalty. Participant 4 specified that deterrence should also play a role in our current system, but again, not to the extent it is used today. Participant 4 stated that prison should not be the “absolute hell” it is today and people should not be terrified of what might happen to them inside. Participant 4 stated rehabilitation should be the most prominent purpose for incarceration today. Participant 4 stated that lawmakers tend to push for the harshest penalties for crime. This participant was unable to list any sort of working rehabilitative program in prisons, and he relayed that needs to change. Incapacitation made Participant 4 think of concentration camps, in the way where the undesirable members of society are exiled and mistreated. According to Participant 4, exiling people psychologically and physically creates an in-group and out-group. In order from what should be the most to least emphasized in the criminal justice system, Participant 4 ranked the purposes of incarceration rehabilitation, deterrence, retribution, then incapacitation. Participant 4 stated that the criminal justice system should put more effort into reintegrating ex-offenders. He expressed that society deems prisoners as bad people, but it is not a black and white issue. From having friends that have been involved in the system, Participant 4 has been able to see the cycle of criminalization that occurs from contact with the criminal justice system.

In regard to reporting felonies on job applications, Participant 4 said the majority of crimes should not be required to be listed on a job application, but there are a few crimes that should be known to employers. Ex-offenders have already payed time for their crime, so forcing people to report their felony convictions is taking an important

part of their life away yet again, according to Participant 4. Participant 4 stated that many felonies are not serious enough to report on an application. Participant 4 agreed that felonies that play a direct role in a job an offender is applying for should be reported, even though that would be a rare occurrence. Participant 4 does not agree that an ex-offender should be disqualified from public housing, food stamps/SNAP, Medicaid, receiving federal loans to attend a higher education institution, or voting. Participant 4 would not feel uncomfortable if an ex-offender lived in or near his apartment complex because ex-offenders have already done their time and should not be ostracized from the community. Participant 4 also would not mind working with an ex-offender or if a family member became engaged to a previously incarcerated individual.

**Participant 5.** Participant 5 stated that the main purpose of punishment is to remove dangerous individuals from society. Participant 5 came to this belief from the information she has gathered over time. This included studies at Texas State, especially in criminology, news, and media. These sources have led Participant 5 to believe over time that incapacitation is the current underlying reason for incarceration. Regarding the purposes of incarceration, Participant 5 was vaguely aware of rehabilitation, deterrence, and incapacitation, but not in relation to incarceration. Participant 5 had never heard of retribution. In order of what should have the most to least emphasis in the criminal justice system, Participant 5 listed rehabilitation, deterrence, incapacitation, and last, retribution. Participant 5 expressed that the criminal justice system needs to put in much more effort to reintegrate previously incarcerated individuals. Participant 5 stated that removing someone from their community, family, and society affects their mentality and ex-offenders should not be expected to assume their same roles after their experience in

prison. There is usually a lack of stability after someone is released from prison, so Participant 5 stated if ex-offenders were going to be removed from society, the criminal justice system should play a role in reintegrating them back into the community.

When asked if people should be required to report felonies on job applications, Participant 5 had trouble deciding on a definite answer. Participant 5 initially decided that people should report their felonies on applications, but agreed that the stigma behind a conviction is discriminatory. If there was a way to obtain some context when reporting crimes on an application, that would be more effective. Participant 5 agreed that it is better to know than not to know, but that makes it difficult not to discriminate against an applicant. When asked follow-up questions, Participant 5 specified that repeat offenders and those that have committed violent crimes should report those charges on a job application. She stated that lower level jobs should not require reporting of a felony conviction.

Participant 5 expressed that she would not deny an ex-offender access to public housing, food stamps/SNAP, Medicaid, loans to attend a higher education institution, or the right to vote. Participant 5 stated that ex-offenders are still humans and citizens and deserve every one of these rights. Participant 5 would not be uncomfortable living next to or with someone who had previously committed a crime. If the person living next to them was a previous sex offender, Participant 5 would be slightly uncomfortable, but as long as nothing strange or offensive was occurring it would not be a problem. Participant 5 also expressed she would not be uncomfortable if a family member became engaged to an ex-offender.

## **Discussion**

The results of this study indicated that among a small group of surveyed and interviewed students at Texas State University, their attitudes towards offender reintegration are based on circumstantial thought processes. The data collected are not generalizable to the entire student body due to the small sample size. In the quantitative portion, answers to the survey questions provided limited options for answers, yet in the qualitative portion, the allowance for open conversation revealed that the issue is not as black and white. In this section, reoccurring themes found in both the quantitative and qualitative studies are discussed; these themes include the societal beliefs versus personal values of the purposes of incarceration, the not in my backyard phenomenon, and reporting felonies on job applications.

### **Purposes of Incarceration: Societal Beliefs vs. Personal Values**

When discussing the purposes of incarceration with participants, the variance between why the participants thought society utilizes prisons (their perception of what current purposes are being used) and their personal beliefs regarding incarceration (their perception of what purposes should be used) were starkly different. In the qualitative interviews, when asked, “What do you believe to be the main purpose of incarceration?” the most common response relied upon the concept that if a person does something bad (e.g., commits a crime), their must be a reciprocal punishment. This idea continued to reappear on the basis that the participants grew up being told that actions have consequences and this lesson was tied to the rationale for incarceration. When thinking about the four main purposes of incarceration (retribution, incapacitation, rehabilitation, and deterrence) this line of thinking falls most closely into retribution.

Interestingly, when I asked the participants about the four main purposes of incarceration and gave them definitions, the majority chose rehabilitation to serve as the principal that should be guiding the American criminal justice system. Many of the participants denied retribution as a humane or viable way to justify incarceration. It seemed as if the participants' initial answer to the question was an automatic response from socialization surrounding the purpose of prison, but when explored further, participants did not personally align with this purpose. Even within the survey results, the majority of participants were in favor of more reintegration efforts to help ex-offenders receive public services that they need. Even though the "actions have consequences" mentality came through strongly at the beginning of the interviews, by the end it was more like "*some* actions have consequences" and no one should have the right to determine what consequences those may be.

### **Not in My Backyard**

One of the main themes in the quantitative data had to do with the "not in my backyard" concept. For example, many participants answered answered the survey questions in favor of more reintegration effort in the criminal justice system and access to public services for ex-offenders. The majority of the participants that agreed the current criminal justice system does not treat people fairly, agreed that people with a felony charge should be required to report that on a job application. This could be because the participants are not aware of the implication of reporting a felony on a job application, or it could be that they are unaware of their own biases. Participants want ex-offenders to be able to find employment, but it is difficult to do so when an ex-offender has to report a felony charge on every application the person completes.

This theme also occurred in the qualitative interviews. Most participants were fine with working or living alongside a previously incarcerated individual, but when violent and especially sexual offenses were specified, their level of comfortability decreased. This is where specific circumstances came into play again. Participants responded they would not mind if an ex-offender lived near them, but a few were uncomfortable with them living in their apartment complex or as a roommate, depending on the offense. Even though all of the interviewees were in favor of allowing ex-offenders access to public services, specifying certain, more serious offenses, changed their view on public areas (work or home) that directly affected the participant.

### **Felonies on Job Applications**

A reoccurring theme in this study was student attitudes regarding reporting felonies on job applications. In the survey data, the majority of students agreed that felonies should be reported on a job application. This was interesting given that the majority of students also believed that ex-offenders should have access to public services upon reentry and that the criminal justice system needs to put more effort into offender reintegration. During the qualitative interviews, the portion about reporting felonies on job applications elicited a substantial amount of confusion. Participants were unsure if felonies should be reported on job applications in almost all of the interviews. When asked follow up questions, all of the participants agreed that felonies should be reported for violent offenses or for offenses that would directly relate to the job an ex-offender is applying to. Most of the interviewees recognized the bias that a felony conviction carries on a job application, so the majority felt guilty for requiring felonies to be reported under any circumstances. This discussion depended on specific conditions wherein a person

might report a felony on a job application. All of the participants agreed that drug felonies and non-violent felonies should not be required to be reported on job applications. In addition to this, participants stated that only for specific jobs should felonies be reported. The interviews allowed for explanations that were not possible in the survey data. If there were more follow-up questions in the survey about this question, the responses would likely be different.

### **Conclusion**

This study was exploratory in nature and assessed college students' attitudes regarding offender reintegration. In the quantitative portion, the absence of follow-up questions simplified the responses of the participants. In the qualitative portion, participants were able to divulge into topics that cannot always be conveyed in survey responses. This results reveal that criminal justice issues, especially sensitive ones such as offender reintegration, cannot be talked about in a unidimensional manner; they are complex issues that are not yes or no questions. Participants were able to express multiple sides of the issues, which made it difficult to give a definite answer. Reporting felonies on job application, the purposes of incarceration, and living/working next to an ex-offender were a few of the issues that elicited deep conversation. Opinions regarding these issues are difficult to study, but it is important to gauge opinions regarding offender reintegration to improve our criminal justice system in the future.

Similar to all research, this study had limitations that should be acknowledged. The survey data encompassed an unrepresentative sample of 125 Texas State University students. The students were not identified based on a way that would be representative of the population; they were a convenience sample. There were only five in-depth

interviews wherein these participants were not hand picked either. Additionally to this, there were no questions asked in the surveys about the purposes of incarceration, so it was difficult to draw inferences from the survey data to complement interview responses regarding the purposes of incarceration. Future research efforts could expand upon this research by increasing the sample size, making it more representative, and adding questions about the purposes of incarceration in the surveys.

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