

A First Step, a Second Chance: Public Support for Restoring Rights of Individuals with Prior Convictions

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Abstract

Recent federal and state-level justice reforms have centered on “legal reintegration” (e.g., permitting expungement for a greater range of crimes and rights restoration). While scholarship has tapped public opinion of this approach, much of it predates recent reentry efforts. We see an opportunity to extend this literature by focusing on a contemporary sample ($N = 374$) of residents living in Virginia, a state that recently considered such reforms. Results suggest most of the public supports expungement reform, but less than 40% support rights restoration generally, with approval levels dependent on specific type of restoration. Divides are explained by socio-demographic factors, particularly political ideology and race, as well as crime-related views. Implications are discussed.

Keywords

reentry, enfranchisement, invisible punishment, public perceptions, collateral consequences, stigma

Introduction

Over the last decade, efforts to reintegrate those returning to communities after serving time in prison have occurred under both a Democratic and a Republican presidency. The Second Chance Act, signed into law under the Obama administration in 2007 and the Formerly Incarcerated Reenterer Society Transformed Safely

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Transitioning Every Person (FIRST STEP) Act advocated by President Trump both emphasize the restoration of legal rights to those previously incarcerated (U.S. Bureau of Prisons, 2020). Some states have embraced this federal shift, restoring previously denied rights of individuals through the enactment of “ban the box” laws and other reforms (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2019).

Advocates of this approach argue that restoration generates improved economic conditions in communities by equipping individuals with employment opportunities (Western & Sirois, 2019). The application of evermore “invisible” sanctions (Travis, 2005, p. 64) is particularly detrimental for individuals returning to minority and underserved communities (Western & Sirois, 2019). Importantly, because racial and ethnic minorities, particularly Blacks, have been and continue to be disproportionately affected by mass incarceration and “over-policing” (Percival, 2009; Wildeman & Wang, 2017), the push to reintegrate individuals may assist with efforts to reduce racial bias in justice system processing.

To be sure, these new reforms do not negate the existence of punitive measures. Additionally, they may not achieve presumed goals, particularly when restoration reforms ignore the detrimental effects of “intersectional oppression”—namely, racial prejudice and discrimination—experienced by groups who have disproportionate contact with the justice system, such as Black males (Williams et al., 2019, p. 452). However, the recent momentum toward reentry does signal greater optimism, at least legislatively, toward the *possibility* that reintegrative measures can exist alongside punitive justice.

The public can directly influence restoration legislation (Wong, 2019). In 2018, a majority of Floridians backed a law that would enfranchise those with felony records, effectively restoring voting rights to 1.4 million people (Robles, 2018). With an increasing focus on reentry at the federal and state-level, it is important to understand public views toward “legal reintegration” such as enfranchisement and broader restoration efforts.

While such actions have garnered favor, divergences in public opinion exist. Prior research shows divides across political orientation and race (Pinaire et al., 2003). Views about criminal justice processing and other public safety perceptions may also influence attitudes (Dawson-Edwards & Higgins, 2013). It is notable however, that much of this extant scholarship predates recent federal legislation.

For these reasons, the current study examines three interrelated questions drawing on data from a recent statewide poll ($N = 374$) of residents living in Virginia, in which the General Assembly has considered such legislation. First, do most Virginians favor legislation that would encourage legal reintegration—expungement, automatic restoration of rights, enfranchisement, and firearm rights? Second, what social and demographic factors predict approval for each reintegrative effort? Third, what effect do public safety concerns have on approval for each initiative?

Reintegration and Reentry

The transition to the community post-incarceration is difficult, with ex-offenders reporting challenges finding employment, navigating relationships, and coping with

stigma (Durnescu, 2019; Lynch, 2006; Payne & Gainey, 1998; Petersilia, 2003; Robbers, 2009). The contemporary reintegration movement, a departure from the “tough on crime” era of earlier decades, harkens back to the principle of the “rehabilitative ideal,” which guided the U.S. correctional system throughout much of the 1900s. It stresses that the utility of reform in societies—“improv[ing], invest[ing] in, and otherwise help[ing] the wayward” could result in significant crime-reduction benefits (Cullen & Gendreau, 2000, p. 114). Both the Second Chance Act and FIRST STEP Act, though spearheaded by different administrations, have some commonalities related to this perspective. Both laws provide justice-involved persons with rehabilitative services, opportunities for expungement, and post-release support (e.g., educational opportunities and job training; Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2020). This perspective is in stark contrast to the “get tough” justice eras of the 1980s and 1990s, which resulted in not simply mass incarceration, but also an array of “invisible punishments” (Travis, 2005).

As Uggen et al. (2006, p. 296, citations omitted) explain, these collateral consequences “operate as an interconnected system of disadvantage that amplifies disparities in economic and social well-being . . . [as] former felons must fulfill the *duties* of citizenship, [while being denied] . . . their *rights* to participate in social life” (emphasis in original). Following Braithwaite’s (1989) shaming framework, disenfranchisement is a form of “stigmatizing” shame, as such efforts “denunciate the offender, not the offense,” isolating and punishing individuals who have committed prior offenses (Hamilton-Smith & Vogel, 2012, p. 414). In contrast, a “reintegrative” approach emphasizes restoring one’s civil liberties after correctional control, preventing such “civic death” (Miller & Spillane, 2012, p. 402).

Civic death is especially pronounced for select demographic groups who are disproportionately targeted by the justice system (Frazier, 2014). Black men, while making up 6% of the total U.S. population (United States Census Bureau, 2020), accounted for over 30% of inmates serving time in state and federal prisons in 2018 (Carson, 2020). Compared to Whites, Blacks tend to serve longer periods of incarceration, even when controlling for the severity of the offense (Alexander, 2012; United States Sentencing Commission, 2010). This level of disparity, as Williams et al. (2019) explain in a recent ethnographic study examining reentry in New Jersey, imparts profound “knifing off” effects: “Particular to Black communities, over-policing of Black males, failing educational systems, and the breakup of Black families because of the removal of Black fathers have contributed to a crisis in these communities. . . in turn [destroying] the psyches of Black formerly incarcerated males while significantly limiting their employability” (p. 439).

Reintegration reform is viewed as a way to ameliorate these adverse outcomes (Frazier, 2014). Even so, such efforts may not be unilaterally supported. For example, some lawmakers have criticized the reintegration movement arguing it threatens public safety by encouraging future offending (Cotton, 2018). Additionally, there is substantial state-level variation across the extent of reintegration legislation, with some states enacting a variety of initiatives and others maintaining a restrictive stance (NCSL, 2019; Wong, 2019).

Previous Research on Attitudes Toward Restoration

We first acknowledge a wider reentry literature (e.g., Garland et al., 2016; Hirschfield & Piquero, 2010) examining public perceptions about specific reentry initiatives and experiences. Because we focus on *legal* restoration of individuals (expungement, voting, firearm ownership), we center on reviewing studies specifically gauging these views.

One theme here is that the public tends to oppose the permanent revocation of civil liberties, especially concerning voting rights. Pinaire et al. (2003) found that the public held negative views toward rescinding the right to vote of individuals with prior records, as only 15% were supportive of permanent disenfranchisement. This pattern is evident across other populations, such as college students (Dawson-Edwards & Higgins, 2013).

Another trend is that while opposition to permanent revocation of voting rights exists, restoration perceptions are contingent on the nature of the prior offense and the procedure. In a national study examining public approval for enfranchising a variety of individuals (Manza et al., 2004), enfranchising “violent offenders” received the greatest levels of support (66%), followed by “white-collar offenders” (63%), and “sex offenders” (52%), which received the lowest level of support.

Public discord is also evident regarding the *nature* of the restoration process. Although Pinaire et al. (2003, p. 1534) found disapproval toward permanent revocation, almost half of the sample disagreed with an automatic model. Another analysis, albeit limited to White Americans found much less support for such an initiative, as only 4% of Whites favored automatically permitting ex-offenders to run for office (Wilson et al., 2015). Instead, a greater proportion of respondents favored a process that would require a waiting period. This range of support indicates public attitudes toward enfranchisement are nuanced, dependent on the prior criminal conviction history of individuals (Manza et al., 2004) and features of the restoration process (Wilson et al., 2015).

Other Restorative Reforms

Public views concerning restoration beyond voting and holding office are less explored. One exception is the Manza et al. (2004) investigation that examined public attitudes toward restoring First Amendment rights among “ex-felons.” Here, 82% of the public agreed that the First Amendment right to free speech extends to those with prior criminal convictions. Dependent on the state, individuals may lose a variety of rights so this was a notable advance in understanding public attitudes.

A focus group of students and employees examined attitudes toward another “invisible punishment,” permanent licensure prohibitions (Heumann et al., 2005). Suggesting again that the public draws distinctions based on prior criminal history, most participants felt it was appropriate to bar doctors and attorneys with records from re-entering their professions under the logic that higher standards apply to those professions. Yet, few saw the utility in barring individuals from other positions that also required licensure (e.g., cosmetologists).

Other scholarship has examined perceptions toward “ban the box” reforms. A national analysis demonstrated that Americans view such reforms skeptically as most were supportive of allowing an employer to deny an individual a job based on a past record (Lehmann et al., 2019). Public willingness to permit prior record consideration among employers varies based on the type of prior offense, duration of release from custody, and type of profession (Denver et al., 2017). The public is most in favor of using prior record to deny employment in cases where applicants have violent offense histories, were just released, and were applying for healthcare positions (50%).

In contrast, much of the firearm rights restoration scholarship consists of polls related to support for “universal background checks” to prevent “felons” and the “mentally ill” from owning guns (Quinnipiac University Poll, 2019). This double-barreled operationalization is problematic as it conflates opposition for “felon” ownership with that of “mentally ill” ownership. Even so, most Americans are supportive of the bans (Smith, 2002). Another national investigation of individuals licensed to sell firearms (pawnbrokers and gun dealers), found majority support for restricting guns to those with a prior record (Wintemute, 2017).

No study that we could identify examined perceptions toward juvenile/youthful adult expungement procedures. Generally, the public is supportive of reintegration efforts for minors, with majorities favoring retaining the juvenile court (Applegate et al., 2009), offering treatment (Cullen et al., 2007), and implementing restorative policies (Moon et al., 2000). Such views, widely endorsed among the public, may indicate willingness to support expungement for youthful populations.

Predictors of Attitudes

Divides in opinion about restoration reform are evident. Disenfranchisement approval is higher among those with a conservative political ideology (Pinaire et al., 2003; Wilson et al., 2015). Conservatives may oppose reintegration because they view it as an attempt to circumvent one’s “just deserts.” From a conservative prism, reintegration efforts “excuse a lack of self-discipline or immoral behavior and ignore moral justice” (Wilson et al., 2015, p. 78).

Relative to Whites, African-Americans and Latinos are more likely to endorse reintegration (Pinaire et al., 2003). Individuals from minority communities may be sensitized to the stigma, oppression, and discrimination African American and other individuals of diverse backgrounds experience. In addition, as Bobo and Johnson (2004) contend, Blacks, significantly more so than Whites, tend to be skeptical of the justice system. Not least, among some Whites the conflation of race and crime may drive less enthusiasm for policies that would reduce racial bias (Wilson et al., 2015).

Views concerning the justice system may also shape attitudes. Dawson-Edwards and Higgins (2013) found among a sample of college students that viewing rehabilitation as an important purpose of the justice system increased support for restoration. Similarly, approval for employment restoration strategies (e.g., “ban the box”) was more pronounced among those predisposed to believe in rehabilitation (Lehmann et al., 2019; also Denver et al., 2017).

Overall, few Americans support allowing individuals with prior convictions to own guns (Smith, 2002); even so, some divergences in opinion exist. For example, in the Wintemute (2017) study, respondents who believed “it is too easy for criminals to get guns” were significantly more likely to favor efforts to prohibit gun ownership to those with prior crimes.

Because views toward juvenile record expungement practices are unknown, we can turn to scholarship examining support for similar initiatives. “Child-saving” attitudes are evident among the more highly educated (Baker et al., 2016), women (Piquero et al., 2010), non-Whites (Pickett & Chiricos, 2012), and those with a politically liberal orientation (Nagin et al., 2006). Separately, parental status tempers punitive attitudes (Welch, 2011) and is associated with greater approval for juvenile initiatives aligned with reintegration (Mears et al., 2007). Moreover, crime-related perceptions influence attitudes toward juveniles. Higher levels of concern about crime leads to reduced willingness to fund prevention reforms (Cohen et al., 2006) and greater support for “get tough” laws (Baker et al., 2016). In contrast, holding a rehabilitative philosophy toward even minors who have committed violent offenses amplifies approval for child-saving efforts, such as retaining the juvenile court (Mears et al., 2007).

Restoration in Virginia: A State Contradiction

Virginia is a state of contrasts when it comes to restoration. Its restorative procedures are limited. It is one of three states that does not automatically restore the rights (e.g., the right to run for office and vote) of those with prior convictions (Timm, 2019). At the same time, racial disparities exist in the state correctional system. For example, while African Americans comprise 19% of the general population, 58% of individuals serving time are Black. Nationally, Virginia is one of only 12 states where the prison population exceeds 50% Black (Nellis, 2016).

Indicating a change toward reintegration, in 2016 former governor McAuliffe restored the rights of nearly 200,000 residents with prior convictions through an executive order. Although the Virginia State Supreme Court later overturned this action (Nirappil & Portnoy, 2016), the order was symbolic of efforts to reintegrate those with prior offenses.

Still, current law bars automatic restoration, mandating instead a relatively complicated clemency process (see, Secretary of the Commonwealth, 2020). For this reason, greater legislative attention has been directed at reform; thus far, those efforts have been unsuccessful. Virginia remains, along with Kentucky and Iowa, one of the few states that does not automatically restore the rights of those with felony records no longer under correctional control (Timm, 2019) and it is one of a handful of states that does not have an automatic expungement procedure (Ress, 2019). However, recently proposed legislation would permit individuals to petition the court for expungement of first-time misdemeanor offenses (Jaeger, 2020).

The Current Study

For these reasons, we examine policy preferences toward recently proposed legislation in Virginia. The current investigation examines three research questions concerning restoration, examining both views about restoring civil rights and one's record (via expungement) among Virginians. First, do most Virginians favor legislation that would encourage restoration, specifically expungement, automatic rights restoration, enfranchisement, and firearm rights? Second, what social and demographic factors predict approval for various reintegrative efforts? Third, what effect, if any, do public safety concerns have on approval?

Data and Methods

Sample

Data for this study derive from a statewide poll ($N = 374$) of Virginia residents conducted by the Center for Public Policy (CPP) in the Wilder School at Virginia Commonwealth University in December 2017 entitled, "2017-18 Winter Public Policy Poll." Given the McAuliffe executive order and the subsequent Virginia State Supreme Court ruling that invalidated the order, as well as the emergence of proposals to reduce the burdens of restoration (Smith, 2017), this was an opportune time to analyze public opinion. The poll measured public opinion on a variety of topics, including public opinion toward reentry and restoration. It also included a variety of items measuring crime and justice-related views, and social and demographic characteristics. The data were weighted using an iterative raking technique in WinCross that uses iterative proportional fitting techniques. This method prevents negative weights. Respondents were weighted on several demographic characteristics (e.g., age, sex, race/ethnicity, educational level) to match 2010 U.S. Census data (<https://www.census.gov/quick-facts/VA>). The survey's margin of error was estimated to be ± 3.49 percentage points.

Measures

Expungement of records. Recently, Virginia legislators have introduced legislation that would make expungement automatic (Fain, 2015). The survey item used to capture support for expungement was modeled from this legislation: "Currently convictions for young people remain permanently on a person's record. The state legislature is considering a proposal to allow convictions of persons under the age of 21 for marijuana possession, underage alcohol possession, and using a false ID to obtain alcohol to be wiped from their record 5 years after they serve all assigned prison or probation time and pay all fines and restitution. Do you support or oppose this proposed change?" We coded this variable as "1 = favor" and "0 = oppose."

Restoration of rights. Virginia, relative to other states, has a complicated restoration process. It is not automatic but requires that individuals (after serving a prison

sentence and no longer on community control) first petition the Office of the Virginia Governor for restoration consideration. From there, petitioners submit paperwork and documents. The Office of the Virginia Governor then reviews each case and issues a decision. This process and determinants of who is eligible for restoration varies by the current gubernatorial administration (Secretary of the Commonwealth, 2020). There have been proposals to standardize and streamline the process to encourage a more accessible system (Smith, 2017). To capture levels of public approval for automatic restoration, respondents were asked: “Policymakers have recently considered creating an individually reviewed process for the automatic restoration of certain rights for felons, including those convicted of violent crimes. Do you support or oppose the automatic restoration of felons’ rights?” Response choices were dichotomous (“1 = support,” “0 = oppose”).

Restoration of “violent felon” rights—voting and firearms. Perhaps in line with prior scholarship (Denver et al., 2017; Heumann et al., 2005; Lehmann et al., 2019), a “threshold effect” exists, as the residents in our study may draw distinctions between those “deserving” of restoration and those who are not. Moreover, support may be contingent on the type of right. The poll included additional measures of restoration views by posing two separate questions to the sub-sample of initial supporters. First, they were asked: “If the right to vote and run for office were restored, including for violent felons, would you still support, or would you now oppose?” and “If the right to possess a firearm were restored, including for violent felons, would you still support, or would you now oppose?” Response choices for both questions were “1 = still support” and “0 = now oppose.”

Predictors

Prior scholarship indicates divergences in reintegration views across socio-demographic lines. Additionally, beliefs about crime and the justice system influence opinions about reintegration (Baker et al., 2016; Lehmann et al., 2019; Piquero et al., 2010). For these reasons, we control for age, sex, race, ethnicity, political ideology, educational level, and parental status, and then measure the influence of public-safety related predictors. We present a brief justification for the inclusion of each variable as well as their coding below.

Age has mixed effects on reentry views. Some research shows it predicts support for permanently banning those with criminal records from voting (Chiricos et al., 2012). Other studies indicate that while older individuals are less likely to be “unsure” about the appropriateness of voting reforms, age is not typically correlated with a definitive opinion toward enfranchisement either way (Wilson et al., 2015). Age was measured in years (range 18 to 97 or older).

The relationship between sex and restoration attitudes is also not consistent. For instance, women, compared to men, are more willing to support efforts to reintegrate juveniles (Piquero et al., 2010). However, other work shows no significant effect of sex on disenfranchisement views toward adults with prior offenses (Chiricos et al.,

2012; Pinaire et al., 2003). To explore further the influence of sex, we included it in multivariate analysis. Sex was recorded by the interviewer ("1 = male," "0 = female").

Beyond sex, race and ethnicity may shape opinions toward restoration. Compared to Whites, African-Americans and Latinos/Latinx express greater support for reintegrative efforts (Bobo & Johnson, 2004; Chiricos et al., 2012). In the survey, race was determined by asking, "Are you White, Black, Asian, or of some other racial background?" Race was coded dichotomously ("1 = White," "0 = Non-White"). Ethnicity was measured by asking, "Are you of Hispanic or Spanish origin?" We coded it as: "1 = Latino/Latinx," "0 = non-Latino/Latinx."

Educational attainment may influence public attitudes toward reintegration as other work indicates that those with higher levels of education favor enfranchisement for those with prior records (Chiricos et al., 2012), express child-saving attitudes toward juvenile initiatives (Baker et al., 2016; Piquero et al., 2010), and oppose punitive reforms for juveniles (Pickett & Chiricos, 2012, p. 684). We include it given this influence. Respondents were asked, "What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?" Education was coded as: "1 = less than a H.S. degree," "2 = H.S. degree," "3 = some college," "4 = college degree," and "5 = post-graduate degree or experience."

Public opinion toward rights restoration varies by political affiliation and ideology (Chiricos et al., 2012). Republicans and conservatives tend to endorse greater support for disenfranchisement (Pinaire et al., 2003) and are more cynical toward juvenile justice reintegration compared to other groups (Pickett & Chiricos, 2012). In the poll, we asked, "Do you normally consider yourself a Democrat, a Republican or an Independent?" To capture conservative ideology, we coded the variable as "Conservatism" ("1 = Republican," "0 = Democrat or Independent").

Parental status may also shape attitudes, particularly involving reintegration of minors. Parents are less likely to hold stigmatizing attitudes toward children (Welch, 2011) and are supportive of rehabilitation (Mears et al., 2007). We expect that parents will be more approving of reintegrative efforts, especially expungement. In the survey, two questions were combined to create parental status: "Do you have any children under the age of 18?" and "Do you have any children age 18 and older?" Because we were interested in the overall experience of being a parent and in line with prior research (e.g., Mears et al., 2007), we coded those who responded affirmatively to either question as "1 = parent," and "0 = non-parent."

Beyond these correlates, it may be that specific views held about public safety and justice system functioning affect attitudes (Lehmann et al., 2019). For example, crime-concerned individuals may view reintegration as risky for public safety or not likely to reduce recidivism, and so may express tempered support for reintegrative initiatives. For this reason, we include a proxy of concern: "Which of the following was the most important to your vote choice for Governor?" Those who reported "public safety," were coded as "1 = public safety concern" and all others (e.g., "education," "health care") were coded as "0 = other."

Separately, views about the *functioning* of the justice system is associated with reintegration beliefs (e.g., Dawson-Edwards & Higgins, 2013; Pinaire et al., 2003).

Virginians who endorse the view that the justice system works efficiently might be more inclined to support reintegration due to their greater confidence in the system. In the survey, respondents were asked, “Do you think the use of taxpayer funds in this state program [public safety] is very efficient, efficient, not very efficient, or not at all efficient?” Responses were coded so that higher levels corresponded to higher levels of efficiency (“1 = not at all efficient,” “2 = not very efficient,” “3 = efficient,” and “4 = very efficient”).

The survey also included a question that asked about one’s willingness to pay (WTP) more in taxes to keep social programs (e.g., public safety) headed within the present direction. This is a largely understudied correlate of legal restoration attitudes. We include it in our multivariate analyses given prior work demonstrating its importance in the context of reintegrative views, particularly concerning juveniles (Baker et al., 2016; Cohen et al., 2006; Nagin et al., 2006). The poll asked: “Please tell me if you would be willing or not willing to pay more in taxes in order to keep the [public safety] program going at its current level?” Response choices for this variable (“public safety—pay more”) were “1 = yes,” and “0 = no.”

Findings

We start with our first research question that centered on understanding the extent to which Virginians favored legislation that would encourage legal reintegration. Consistent with juvenile justice scholarship suggesting broad support for child-saving (Applegate et al., 2009; Mears et al., 2007), as examination of Table 1 indicates, most (80%) Virginians are in favor of expunging the criminal records of people under the age of 21. Interestingly, that level of support does not extend to the general restoration process. Only 4 in 10 Virginians support a process that would automatically restore the rights of adults with prior criminal convictions. While lower than the percentage reported in earlier studies, particularly concerning enfranchisement (Manza et al., 2004; Pinaire et al., 2003), this result is not entirely unexpected. Prior scholarship has demonstrated that the public tends to favor policies that take into account certain features of the individual (e.g., currently incarcerated, just released), process, and offense (Denver et al., 2017; Heumann et al., 2005). Our measure is distinct as it asked about rights in general as opposed to specific initiatives (e.g., voting rights) and specified an “automatic” process for “felons.” It was modeled in that fashion to mirror recent legislative proposals (Smith, 2017; Timm, 2019). Not least, many prior estimates (Manza et al., 2004; Pinaire et al., 2003) applied to the national population. The lower percentage we uncover could be due to our restoration measure and/or the attention to Virginia.

Continuing with the focus on the extent of approval, among supporters, the public strongly approves of reforms to restore voting rights and the right to run for office (74%). In contrast, only a minority of the public believes in the utility of restoring firearm rights (22%) for those with violent felonies on their records. This level of opposition toward firearm rights accords with prior studies (Smith, 2002; Wintemute, 2017).

We now move to discussing our multivariate analysis. For each reform, we focus on our first research question concerning socio-demographic effects and then move toward our third research question, how crime and justice perceptions mediate those impacts. Starting first with expungement support, the baseline model (Table 2, model 1) indicates younger individuals, non-Whites, those holding a non-conservative political orientation, and parents have significantly higher odds of supporting expungement processes for minors.

Indicating mediating effects, model 2 shows that some of these initial effects are attenuated with the inclusion of crime-related views. Only parental status, once again amplifying support, and political conservatism, reducing support, has direct effects, suggesting their independent influence in shaping juvenile justice/youthful restoration attitudes; here again, these results are consistent with prior scholarship (Mears et al., 2007; Welch, 2011). Along with political conservatism, reduced optimism for expungement is evident across Virginians who are concerned about crime. This relationship is not unexpected as “crime salience,” particularly fear of crime, has been linked to opposition toward child-saving efforts (Baker et al., 2016).

What about automatic restoration policies (Table 3)? In the first model that estimates the effects of socio-demographic correlates, younger individuals, sex (being male), non-Whites, and those without a politically conservative ideology had higher odds of support. Speaking to our third research question, with the addition of public-safety factors, some initial socio-demographic influences, such as younger age, are no longer statistically significant. Those who believe the criminal justice system operates effectively were significantly more likely to approve of automatic restoration. This finding lends some support to the earlier hypothesis that judging the justice system as capable in ensuring public safety may indicate greater confidence in its ability to both punish and *reform*. In line with previous studies (Chiricos et al., 2012; Pinaire et al., 2003; Wilson et al., 2015), the effects of race and political ideology remain significant and in the expected direction, suggesting their salience in shaping reintegration attitudes, above and beyond, perceptions about the justice system in Virginia.

Among supporters, what factors predict approval for restoring *specific* rights to those with a history of committing violent offenses? There are differences, relative to the earlier two outcomes. Initially (Table 4, model 1), speaking to our second research question, we see not unlike prior analyses (e.g., Chiricos et al., 2012; Pinaire et al., 2003; Wilson et al., 2015), that conservatives were significantly less likely to support voting rights. The public safety factors (model 2) can speak to any possible mediating effects (our third research emphasis). We see, for instance, with the inclusion of those variables, that conservative ideology is no longer significant. This finding suggests that conservatives’ opposition to voting restoration stems from underlying beliefs about public safety (see also, Wilson et al., 2015). We observe the opposite effect, one of suppression, concerning parental status. In the full model, with the addition of justice system views, parental status emerges as a significant predictor of greater approval among supporters, suggesting that those with children are significantly more willing to approve of enfranchisement even when the effects of public safety perceptions are also considered.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics.

Outcome variables	N = 374		N = 143	
	Overall sample		Sub-sample of restoration supporters	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Expunge criminal convictions (0 = oppose, 1 = support)	0.87	0.34	—	—
Restoration of rights (0 = oppose, 1 = support)	0.40	0.49	—	—
Right to vote—Violent felons (0 = now oppose, 1 = still support)	—	—	0.74	0.44
Right to own firearm—Violent felons (0 = now oppose, 1 = still support)	—	—	0.22	0.41
Predictors—Socio-demographic				
Age (in years)	47.62	17.89	42.39	17.26
Male (1 = male, 0 = female)	0.49	0.50	0.51	0.50
Race (1 = White, 0 = non-White)	0.70	0.46	0.51	0.50
Latino/Latinx (1 = Latino/Latinx, 0 = non-Latino/Latinx)	0.06	0.24	0.07	0.26
Education (1 = Less than H.S. Degree, . . . , 5 = post-graduate experience)	3.05	1.15	3.04	1.15
Conservatism (1 = conservative, 0 = not conservative)	0.31	0.46	0.19	0.40
Parental status (1 = yes, 0 = no)	0.49	0.50	0.45	0.50
Predictors—Public safety views				
Public safety—Concern (1 = public safety concern, 0 = other)	0.07	0.26	0.05	0.21
Public safety—Efficacy (0 = no, 1 = yes)	2.50	0.79	2.75	0.67
Public safety—Pay more (0 = no, 1 = yes)	0.68	0.47	0.73	0.44

Table 2. Logistic Regressions Predicting Public Support for Expunging Records (N=374).

Variables	Model 1: Baseline model (odds ratio)	Model 2: Full model (odds ratio)
Socio-demo. factors		
Age	0.974**	0.979
Male	1.274	1.407
Race	0.343**	0.391*
Latino/Latinx	1.726	1.062
Education	0.991	0.911
Conservatism	0.402**	0.307**
Parental status	2.031*	2.569*
Public safety views		
Public safety—Concern	—	0.271*
Public safety—Efficacy	—	1.190
Public safety—Pay more	—	1.039
Pseudo R-squared	0.124	0.146

Note. Socio-demo. = socio-demographic.

* $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$ (two-tailed).

Table 3. Logistic Regressions Predicting Approval for Ex-Offender Restoration Among the Total Sample (N=374).

Variables	Model 1: Baseline model (odds ratio)	Model 2: Full model (odds ratio)
Socio-demo. factors		
Age	0.976***	0.997
Male	1.519*	1.542
Race	0.226***	0.144***
Latino/Latinx	0.886	1.806
Education	0.979	1.193
Conservatism	0.367**	0.334***
Parental status	1.140	0.774
Public safety views		
Public safety—Concern	—	0.511
Public safety—Efficacy	—	2.214***
Public safety—Pay more	—	1.703
Pseudo R-squared	0.237	0.370

Note. Socio-demo. = socio-demographic.

* $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$ (two-tailed).

The last set of analyses (Table 5) examining firearm rights restoration policies suggests more consensus (that is, fewer divides) among the public; this likely reflects that there is wide support for restricting gun ownership among those with felony

Table 4. Logistic Regressions Predicting Approval for the Restoration of Violent Ex-Offender Voting Rights Among a Sub-Sample of Initial Supporters (N = 143).

Variables	Model 1: Baseline model (odds ratio)	Model 2: Full model (odds ratio)
Socio-demo. factors		
Age	0.985	0.971
Male	0.657	0.564
Race	0.785	0.693
Latino/Latinx	1.622	1.607
Education	1.094	1.259
Conservatism	0.348**	0.508
Parental status	1.435	3.468*
Public safety views		
Public safety—Concern	—	5.100
Public safety—Efficacy	—	0.881
Public safety—Pay more	—	2.264
Pseudo R-squared	0.087	0.173

Note. Socio-demo. = socio-demographic.
 * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$ (two-tailed).

Table 5. Logistic Regressions Predicting Approval for the Restoration of Violent Ex-Offender Firearm Rights Among a Sub-Sample of Initial Supporters (N = 143).

Variables	Model 1: Baseline model (odds ratio)	Model 2: Full model (odds ratio)
Socio-demo. factors		
Age	1.007	0.966*
Male	1.377	1.415
Race	0.647	1.211
Latino/Latinx	6.857**	2.605
Education	0.647*	0.438**
Conservatism	0.740	0.507
Parental status	0.649	1.285
Public safety views		
Public safety—Concern	—	3.814
Public safety—Efficacy	—	0.542
Public safety—Pay more	—	2.451
Pseudo R-squared	0.129	0.322

Note. Socio-demo. = socio-demographic.
 * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$ (two-tailed).

convictions (for a review, Smith, 2002; also, Quinnipiac University Poll, 2019; Wintemute, 2017). In the baseline model concerning socio-demographic effects, the focus of our second research question, having greater educational attainment is associated with reduced odds of support. However, speaking to our third research emphasis, model 2 shows that the only significant effect in the positive direction—reporting Latinx/Latino heritage—dissipates with the addition of crime-related views. In this model, higher educational attainment is still significant in reducing the odds of support as is older age. Contextualizing these effects is difficult given the dearth of research examining attitudes toward firearm rights restoration. Indeed, what these findings do underscore is the need for examination of public attitudes concerning a range of “invisible punishments” (Travis, 2005).

Summary and conclusion

We see three important contributions of the current study. First, we show across a contemporary sample of Virginians that views concerning the utility of “legal reintegration” are complex. On the one hand, the public overwhelmingly approves of expungement for minor offenses involving youth. On the other hand, less than half agree with an automatic restoration process for ex-offenders. This discrepancy of support across specific proposals is consistent with research showing the public tends to view the prospect of youthful reform with greater optimism (Welch, 2011). Relatedly, analyses indicate cleavages across public opinion. With few exceptions, in line with extant scholarship (Mears et al., 2007; Pinaire et al., 2003; Wilson et al., 2015) political ideology, race, and parental status were consistent predictors of attitudes toward restorative efforts, with those not politically conservative, non-Whites, and parents more willing to favor them. Concerning our third research question, public-safety perceptions influenced views as well, although in different directions. Crime concern was associated with a reduced likelihood of perceiving expungement positively, whereas believing in the efficacy of the justice system was associated with an increased likelihood of approval for automatic restoration.

The potential research and policy implications of these results need to be considered in light of study limitations. First, analysis was limited to Virginians. Although this focus was intentional given recent proposals, findings would likely not generalize to other states. Second, while multivariate models evaluated the effects of a number of theoretically relevant socio-demographic predictors and justice-system perceptions on restoration approval, it omitted others. For example, while we find, consistent with other scholarship, direct divides across race (Bobo & Johnson, 2004), Whites who hold racial resentment are theorized to have the most negative views of reintegration because they conflate race and crime, and thus view reentry reform as unfairly offering an advantage to Blacks (Wilson et al., 2015). We lacked a set of indicators that could tap these effects across Whites. Moreover, while our study is unique for controlling for perceptions related to criminal justice functioning on restorative attitudes, recent studies have identified other important correlates, that we lack, such as the level of contact

one has with the justice system (Lehmann et al., 2019). Third, while the study is notable for analyzing views about restoration beyond enfranchisement (e.g., expungement, firearm rights), it cannot speak to attitudes toward other popular reforms, such as laws prohibiting employment discrimination of ex-offenders (Denver et al., 2017; Lehmann et al., 2019) and the removal of licensure prohibitions (Heumann et al., 2005). If our initial findings are any indication, it is likely that public opinion toward such reforms vary based on each measure's goal, outlined procedure, and target group (Manza et al., 2004). These shortcomings present opportunities for new research.

Recent vignette scholarship concerning employment decision-making perceptions serves as a model for future work. Notably, Denver et al. (2017) and Lehmann et al. (2019) developed realistic scenarios to tap public views about hypothetical initiatives aligned with “ban the box” reforms. This focus could be expanded to measure attitudes regarding other reforms, such as additional workplace initiatives (e.g., permitting licensure) and the restoration of other civil liberties (e.g., purchase and own firearms, apply for financial aid). Ideally, these scenarios would manipulate various conditions of restoration and account for factors shown to be influential in shaping reintegrative attitudes, such as racial threat (Chiricos et al., 2012; Pickett & Chiricos, 2012), knowledge of and prior experiences with the justice system (Lehmann et al., 2019), and contact experiences (Hirschfield & Piquero, 2010; Rose & Clear, 2004).

At the same time, future analyses should draw on state-level samples. While national analysis is typically the “gold standard” in measuring public attitudes, state-level surveys, like the current study, have appeal given the variability across jurisdictions in reentry (NCSL, 2019). As state-specific legislation continues to emphasize reintegration, there is a corresponding need to examine public support, and the sources of that support, for these new reforms.

Our findings can also inform policy goals. Some efforts to reintegrate individuals with prior records have been the result of “direct democracy” (Wong, 2019). Collective citizen action shapes the direction of public policy, such as the recent case of a Florida enfranchisement referendum that restored voting rights to over one million people. Given this connection, and that reentry interventions proffer benefits—the reduction of future crimes (Lattimore et al., 2010) and the potential to address racial disparities (Frazier, 2014)—policymakers might consider measuring the extent of public approval for reintegration. In our study, those who held positive impressions of the justice system in Virginia were more likely to support restoration efforts. Thus, increasing “consumer confidence” in the public safety system, while no easy task, is critical. Ideally, this approach would be multifaceted, accomplished through designing educational campaigns that dispel “myths” about crime and policy, spotlighting examples of the positive impact of reform (e.g., cost-savings), and, conducting evaluations of reentry initiatives, as well as public perceptions toward them.

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