



# Criminal Justice Professionals' Attitudes Towards Offenders: Assessing the Link between Global Orientations and Specific Attributions

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## 1. Project Description

In 2009, the Bureau of Justice Statistics awarded the New Mexico Statistical Analysis Center funds to assess the factors that shape criminal justice professionals' perceptions and attitudes towards offenders. The current report details the results of the first stage of this research, which examined the factors that shape correctional employees' perceptions and attitudes toward offenders. The second half of this project, which is currently under way, follows a similar methodological and analytical protocol with a sample of probation and parole employees.

The literature suggests two models through which criminal justice professionals' perceptions of and attitudes toward offenders are generated. The importation model suggests that the individual characteristics of criminal justice workers are the primary force responsible for shaping their attitudes toward offenders. The institutional model suggests that job characteristics and organizational contexts have a stronger influence on workers' attitudes than individual characteristics. A third possibility is that the characteristics of offenders and their offenses shape workers' perceptions of offenders. The current research attempts to evaluate each of these possibilities.

The current study collected data on corrections workers' attitudes utilizing a factorial survey (Rossi and Nock, 1982).<sup>1</sup> This survey instrument asked respondents to read three fictional, randomly constructed descriptions of offenders under correctional supervision and to evaluate these offenders on a number of domains, including their likelihood of recidivism, rehabilitation, and employability. The key offender characteristics that were presented and randomized in the vignettes were the offender's age, gender, race, education history, marital status, whether or not the offender had children, unemployment history, job type history, social support, arrest history, level of supervision, infractions while incarcerated, substance abuse history, most recent criminal offense, and incarceration history.

The survey also collected information regarding the respondents' perceptions and attitudes toward offenders like those presented in the vignettes. In addition to the experimentally controlled vignette dimensions, we also collected information on respondent demographic and attitudinal characteristics that may influence judgments of offenders. Variables representing the importation model include respondent age, sex, race/ethnicity, marital status, education level, reasons for taking their job within the corrections system, political views, correctional orientation, and perceptions of their professional role. Variables representing the institutional model variables include the type of job, years of experience, age at first employ, the level of security classification of either the facility they work in (for in-house correctional staff) or of the clients they work with (for probation/parole), frequency of contact with offenders, and job satisfaction. The current report presents descriptive information on the survey respondents and

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<sup>1</sup> Rossi, P. and S. Nock. 1982. *Measuring Social Judgments*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

a preliminary analysis of the factors related to criminal justice professionals attitudes towards offenders.

## 2. Descriptive Statistics

This survey was sent out to all ten correctional facilities in New Mexico. We received a total of 407 survey responses from all 9 of the male correctional facilities for an overall response rate of 16.2%. The female correctional facility is privately run and management opted not to have their staff participate in this study. The specific breakdown of respondents by facility is displayed in table 1. We received no survey responses from the Grants Women’s Correctional Facility.

**Table 1. Respondents by Correctional Facility**

Location	Respondents	Response Rate (%)
Los Lunas	30	5.98
Santa Fe	57	12.58
Las Cruces	56	16.91
Springer	18	17.14
Hobbs*	46	16.72
Santa Rosa*	85	50.00
Clayton*	51	26.00
Roswell	18	17.14
Grants	45	17.92
Grants Women*	0	0

\* indicates privately run facility, all others are operated by the State

The average age of respondents was 42.5 years. Respondents were fairly evenly split on gender (52.6% male) and marital status (55% married), with a large proportion of respondents being either Latino/Hispanic (47.2%) or Caucasian (43.2). Respondents were, on average, highly educated (81.5% of respondents had an education level of some college or more) and generally described their political views as moderate (44.7%) to conservative (34.9%).

Table 2 presents a variety of information regarding respondents’ jobs and job experience. While respondents represented a variety of jobs in corrections, the largest group of respondents self-identified as correctional officers (security). While the majority of respondents have worked in corrections for fewer than 10 years, a sizable proportion of respondents have worked in corrections for substantially longer.

**Table 2. Job characteristics of survey respondents**

Current Job	Frequency	%
Education	53	13.0
Classification	40	9.8
Security	180	44.2
Social Services	32	7.9
Other	89	21.9
Missing	13	3.2

  

Years working in corrections	Frequency	%
0-4 years	145	35.6
5-10 years	125	30.7
11-15 years	68	16.7
16-39 years	63	15.5
Missing	6	1.5

We asked respondents to indicate on a Likert scale from 1 (not at all likely) to 6 (very likely) how likely they thought each hypothetical offender would be to recidivate, rehabilitate, find a job, and find stable employment. Responses to these survey items are displayed in Table 3. Note that the sample sizes for this table are larger than the number of respondents as each respondent evaluated three randomly constructed offenders.

**Table 3. Respondent perceptions of hypothetical offenders**

	Recidivate		Rehabilitate		Find a Job		Find Steady Employment	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
1 (not at all likely)	49	4.0	116	9.5	65	5.3	97	8.0
2	148	12.2	261	21.4	166	13.6	216	17.7
3	222	18.2	337	27.7	264	21.7	283	23.2
4	261	21.4	256	21.0	336	27.6	304	25.0
5	291	23.9	168	13.8	260	21.3	208	17.7
6 (very likely)	226	18.6	49	4.0	101	8.3	84	6.9
Missing	21	1.7	31	2.5	26	2.1	26	2.1

Respondent perceptions toward the future criminal activities of hypothetical offenders presented in the vignettes varied considerably, with a slight tendency for hypothetical offenders to be viewed as likely to recidivate and not likely to rehabilitate. Respondent perceptions regarding the ability of these hypothetical offenders to find jobs also varied considerably, with respondents slightly more likely to believe that the hypothetical offenders would be able to find a job than to find steady employment.

### 3. Multivariate Analysis

In order to assess the factors that shape criminal justice professionals perceptions and attitudes towards offenders, we constructed a number of ordinal logistic regressions. Specifically, we estimated four models (one using offender characteristics as predictors, one using importation variables, one using institutional variables, and one using all of the variables) for four dependent variables (respondent perceptions of the likelihood that the hypothetical offender would recidivate, rehabilitate, find any jobs, and find steady employment). For presentation purposes, only the statistically significant results of these analyses are displayed in tables 4 through 7.

Table 4 presents the regression results for attitudes toward recidivism. Hypothetical male offenders were viewed as more likely to recidivate than female offenders. Offenders who had finished some college were viewed as less likely to recidivate than offenders who had not finished high school. Interestingly, offenders who finished college completely were viewed as no more likely to recidivate as offenders who had not finished high school. This result may suggest that respondents did not view the hypothetical profiles with college degrees as plausible. And finally, offenders with three or more prior arrests for violent crimes and those with multiple or major infractions while incarcerated were viewed as more likely to recidivate than those with no prior arrests and those with no disciplinary issues in prison.

Only two of the importation variables significantly predicted attitudes towards recidivism. Respondents with Master's degrees believed that offenders were more likely to recidivate than respondents with less than a HS degree. This may suggest that highly educated respondents have a more realistic view of offender reentry chances than other respondents. Liberal respondents believed that offenders were, on average, less likely to recidivate than moderate respondents. Interestingly, there were no significant differences between moderate and conservative respondents. Only a single institutional variable predicted attitudes towards recidivism. Respondents who believed that the offenders that they worked with were very dangerous were more likely to believe that offenders would recidivate.

The full model generally confirms the results of the offender characteristics, importation, and institutional models. Here, we only note the differences in the full model. In terms of offender characteristics, the full model indicates that offenders who have contact with their children were viewed as less likely to recidivate than offenders that did not have children, and that offenders whose most recent offense was a property crime were viewed as less likely to recidivate than those with violent offenses. In terms of importation variables, respondents who did not answer the political ideology question were more likely to believe that offenders would recidivate. In terms of the institutional variables, respondents that reported more work stress were more likely to believe that the offenders would recidivate.

**Table 4. Regression results for recidivate**

Variable	Offender Characteristics	Importation	Institutional	Full Model
<b><i>Offender Characteristic Variables</i></b>				
Offender Male	0.282** (0.104)	-	-	0.269* (0.120)
Offender Some College (vs. did not finish high school)	-0.414* (0.170)	-	-	-0.568** (0.192)
Offender Has Contact with Children (vs. no children)				-0.319* (0.148)
Offender Three Prior Violent Arrests	0.556** (0.174)	-	-	0.593** (0.201)
Offender Current Offense Property (vs. violent)				-0.314* (0.149)
Multiple or Major infractions (vs. none)	0.369** (0.128)		-	0.311* (0.145)
<b><i>Importation Variables</i></b>				
Respondent Native American (vs. Caucasian)	-	-	-	-0.880* (0.346)
Respondent Master's (vs. less than HS)	-	0.510* (0.218)	-	0.645* (0.288)
Respondent Liberal (vs. moderate)	-	-0.376* (0.163)	-	-0.443* (0.195)
Respondent Political Ideology Missing (vs. Moderate)	-	-	-	0.741* (0.344)
<b><i>Institutional Variables</i></b>				
Perceptions of Dangerousness of Offenders	-	-	0.089* (0.045)	0.114* (0.048)
Respondent Work Stress	-	-	-	0.169* (0.068)

Table 5 presents the regression results for attitudes towards rehabilitation. Hypothetical offenders who had completed some college were viewed as more likely to successfully rehabilitate than offenders who did not finish high school. Again, no significant differences were found between offenders who had completed college and those who had not finished high

school. Offenders with three prior violent arrests were viewed as less likely to successfully rehabilitate than offenders with no prior arrests. Native American respondents and respondents who did not report their race believed that offenders were more likely to be successfully rehabilitated than white respondents, though this result may be driven more by sample size issues than by any actual differences in perceptions. Respondents who view their role as punitive believed that offenders were less likely to rehabilitate.

**Table 5. Regression results for rehabilitate.**

Variable	Offender Characteristics	Importation	Institutional	Full Model
<b>Offender Characteristic Variables</b>				
Offender Some College (vs. did not finish high school)	0.413* (0.170)	-	-	0.486* (0.192)
Offender in Relationship but not married (versus single)	-	-	-	-0.310* (0.147)
Offender Three Prior Violent Arrests	-0.579** (0.175)	-	-	
<b>Importation Variables</b>				
Respondent Native American (vs. Caucasian)	-	0.783* (0.313)	-	1.336** (0.351)
Respondent Other Race (vs. Caucasian)	-	-	-	0.790* (0.375)
Respondent Race Missing (vs. Caucasian)	-	2.817** (0.840)	-	3.206** (0.870)
Respondent Political Ideology Missing (vs. Moderate)	-	-	-	-0.828* (0.344)
<b>Institutional Variables</b>				
Punitiveness	-	-	-0.143* (0.071)	-0.182* (0.079)

The full model again generally confirms the results of the offender characteristics, importation, and institutional models. The only substantial differences in offender characteristics are that the offenders arrest history is not significant in the full model and that offenders that are in relationships are viewed as less likely to rehabilitate. For importation variables, respondents of some other race (as compared to those that self-identified as Caucasian) were more likely to believe that the offender would successfully rehabilitate, while those that did not answer the question regarding political ideology were less likely to believe that the offender would successfully rehabilitate. There were not meaningful differences in institutional variables between the institutional and full models.

Table 6 presents the regression results for perceptions of offenders' ability to find any job. Hypothetical offenders with a stable job history were viewed as more likely to find a job than offenders with unstable job histories. Liberal respondents believed that offenders were more likely to find any job than moderate respondents (again though, there was no significant difference between moderate and conservative respondents). Respondents with more work stress and those that view their role as punitive believed that offenders were less likely to find a job.

**Table 6. Regression results for find any job.**

Variable	Offender Characteristics	Importation	Institutional	Full Model
<b><i>Offender Characteristic Variables</i></b>				
Offender Job Stability (vs. unstable job history)	0.311** (0.105)	-	-	0.296* 90.119)
<b><i>Importation Variables</i></b>				
Respondent Liberal (vs. moderate)	-	0.430** (0.165)	-	-
<b><i>Institutional Variables</i></b>				
Reason Missing for Taking Job	-	-	-0.490* (0.208)	-0.553* (0.221)
Punitiveness	-	-	-0.293** (0.071)	-0.316** (0.079)
Respondent Work Stress	-	-	-0.125* (0.063)	-



The full model generally confirmed the results of the prior offender characteristics, importation, and institutional models. The only differences is that respondent work stress was not a significant predictor of whether or not a respondent believed that an offender would find any job in the full model.

**Table 7. Regression results for find steady employment.**

Variable	Offender Characteristics	Importation	Institutional	Full Model
<b><i>Offender Characteristic Variables</i></b>				
Offender Job Stability (vs. unstable job history)	0.451** (0.105)	-	-	0.486** (0.120)
Offender Social Support (vs. no support)	0.203* (0.104)	-	-	
<b><i>Importation Variables</i></b>				
Respondent Latino (vs. Caucasian)	-	-	-	0.372** (0.144)
Respondent College Educated (vs. HS or less)	-	-	-	0.472* (0.223)
Respondent Liberal (vs. moderate)	-	0.434** (0.164)	-	0.463* (0.196)
<b><i>Institutional Variables</i></b>				
Reason Missing for Taking Job			-0.505* (0.208)	-0.558* (0.221)
Respondent Job Social Services	-	-	-	-0.699* (0.298)
Respondent Punitive			-0.260** (0.071)	-0.273** (0.078)

Table 7 presents the regression results for perceptions of offenders' ability to find steady employment. In general, the results of these regression models are very similar to regression models predicting perceptions of offenders' ability to find any job. Hypothetical offenders with a stable job history were viewed as more likely to find steady employment than offenders with

unstable job histories. Offenders with social support were also viewed as more likely to find steady employment than offenders without social support. Liberal respondents believed that offenders were more likely to find steady employment than moderate respondents (again though, there was no significant difference between moderate and conservative respondents). Respondents with more work stress and those that view their role as punitive believed that offenders were less likely to find steady employment.

In the full model, there was only one difference in offender characteristics variables. Specifically, offender social support was not a significant predictor of how likely a respondent was to believe that the offender would find steady employment. Two additional importation variables were significant in the full model that were not significant in the importation model. Latino respondents and respondents with college educations were more likely to believe that offenders would find steady employment. One additional variable (a dummy variable indicating that the respondent worked in social services) negatively predicted perceptions of finding steady employment in the full model, indicating that those that worked in social services were less likely than those working in security to believe that offenders would find steady employment after release.

#### **4. Conclusions**

This report assesses factors that potentially shape and influence criminal justice professionals' perceptions of and attitudes towards offenders. Previous research and literature suggests that the importation and institutional models explain some of the variation in criminal justice professionals' perceptions of offenders. Here we assess these processes as well as the potential influence of individual offender characteristics on corrections employees' perceptions of offenders. The hypotheses regarding the role of importation processes, institutional culture, and offender characteristics are evaluated both separately and jointly against four dependent variables: recidivate, rehabilitate, find any job and find steady employment. Our results suggest that while importation and institutional dynamics are relevant, offender characteristics are also central to the evaluations that professionals make of offenders.

More specifically, our results suggest several important conclusions about the attitudes of correctional employees towards the offenders under their supervision. To begin, respondents are pessimistic about the likelihood that offenders will "go straight" on release as they are more likely to predict that offenders will recidivate than desist. Respondents have slightly more positive outlooks on an offender's ability to find any job; approximately 57% of respondents believe that offenders are likely to find any job after release. However, for the dependent variable "find steady employment," respondents are almost evenly split in their perceptions of an offender's ability to find steady employment. Approximately 49.6% of respondents believe that an offender will be likely to find steady employment while 48.9% of respondents believe that an offender will not be likely to find steady employment after release. Overall, respondents are lukewarm about offenders' chances for desistance on release.

Our regression models suggest that much of what drives this lukewarm attitude are the characteristics of offenders rather than the beliefs employees bring to the job or the culture of the work environment. In terms of our regression analysis, there were more statistically significant variables in the offender characteristic model than the importation or institutional models. Our regression results for recidivism indicate that respondents believe male offenders will be more likely to recidivate than females. The results also suggest that respondents believe that an offender will be more likely to recidivate and less likely to rehabilitate if the offender has three or more prior violent arrests or multiple/major infractions while in prison. Respondents believe that offenders with some college education are more likely to recidivate than those offenders who did not finish high school. Additionally, respondents view a history of offender job stability as a characteristic that could lead an offender to be more likely to find any job and more likely to maintain steady employment after release. Lastly, if an offender has social support, respondents are inclined to believe that the offender is likely to find steady employment. These results indicate that criminal justice attitudes on offender reentry chances are influenced, in large part, by the characteristics of offenders. Moreover, their assessments of the individual factors that decrease the odds of desistance are consistent with the desistance literature.

While individual offender characteristics matter, we also find that respondent and institutional characteristics come into play. Specifically, education level and political ideology are significant predictors of perceptions of offenders in the importation model. Respondents with Master's degrees are more likely than respondents with a high school education to believe that offenders will recidivate after release. Moderate respondents are also more likely to believe that offenders will recidivate after release than are liberal respondents. Additionally, moderate respondents are less likely than liberal respondents to believe that an offender will be able to find any job or to find steady employment. Interestingly, there are no statistically significant differences between the ways conservative and moderate respondents evaluate offenders' chances of post-release success.

For the institutional variables, we find that there is a tendency for criminal justice professionals who perceive offenders as more dangerous to believe that they will be more likely to recidivate. Additionally, corrections employees who view their job role as punitive are less likely to believe that offenders are capable of rehabilitating, finding any job, or finding steady employment. We also find that high respondent work stress predicts perceptions of and attitudes towards offenders. Those respondents who reported high work stress are less likely to believe that an offender will find any job after release. These preliminary results suggest that those with high work stress, high perceptions of dangerousness of offenders and those respondents who view their job role as purely punitive tend to perceive the potential for inmate success as lower, in terms of the four dependent variables.

In summary, we find that variables from all four (offender characteristics, importation, institutional, and one using all variables) models predict attitudes toward offenders. In future research we will examine the relationship between the variables representing each of these models and construct regression models that both test these models against each other and evaluate any potential interactions.

The results of this report have several policy implications. First, criminal justice workers' views and attitudes toward offenders are affected by a number of factors, including the characteristics of the offenders themselves. While their assessments of the individuals most and least likely to recidivate are consistent with the general literature on desistance (particularly the role of gender and social capital), it is important to note that these characteristics are not deterministic. Training that improves criminal justice workers' attitudes towards offenders and their understanding of the factors that promote change regardless of individual characteristics may have a positive influence on offender outcomes. Motivational interviewing training (MI) may be of specific importance here, as MI encourages criminal justice workers to view all offenders as having the potential to change. Second, to the degree that criminal justice workers' perceptions of offenders are predictive of reentry success, our results indicate that programming focused on education, job training, and improving social support for offenders may improve the reentry chances of offenders. Finally, organizational culture may also impact offender success. Offenders may be more likely to experience success when they are released from facilities where the staff perceive their work environment to be relatively low stress and safe, and one in which the general culture endorses a social service model as opposed to a punitive one.