

Abstract

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, one out of every 34 American adult residents is under the supervision of the correctional system annually (Glaze & Parks, 2012) and almost two-thirds of a million people were released from state and federal prisons in 2011 alone (Carson & Sabol, 2012). Unfortunately, adults who reenter the community after incarceration face many barriers to successful reintegration including negative attitudes from the public, consisting of stigma, punitiveness, desired social distance, and general negative attitudes. The present study uses a meta-analytic approach to summarize the extant research on the correlates of public attitudes toward ex-offenders and the moderating effects of contact and criminal history. A systematic review of the literature produced 14 studies meeting inclusion criteria, consisting of 54 unique effect sizes and 6,483 total participants. Results of the meta-analysis revealed small weighted mean correlations for public demographic characteristics. Specifically, females, members of the racial/ethnic majority, people with less education, those who identify as politically conservative, and those who have no previous contact with an ex-offender tended to report more negative attitudes. Moderation analyses were limited by available data; however, subgroup analyses of attitudes toward sex offenders demonstrated support for moderation as more data become available. Findings revealed that members of the general public are more similar than different in their attitudes toward ex-offenders. These results suggest the need for additional research regarding public attitudes toward ex-offenders and continued investigation of moderating variables. Additionally, findings may provide direction for planning and implementing anti-stigma interventions to reduce barriers upon reentry.

Introduction

Adults who reenter the community after incarceration face many barriers to successful reintegration including negative public attitudes, consisting of stigma, punitiveness, desired social distance, and general negative attitudes (e.g., Clear et al., 2001). Stigma and prejudice theories provide a framework for understanding of the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of ingroup members toward ex-offender members (Allport, 1954; Goffman, 1963). Consistent with intergroup contact theory (e.g., Pettigrew & Troop, 2006), research demonstrates that contact with someone who has been involved with the criminal justice system is associated with less negative attitudes towards ex-offenders (e.g., Hirschfield & Piquero, 2010). Additionally, public attitudes toward ex-offenders may depend on criminal history. For example, research demonstrates that people report more punitive attitudes toward sex offenders compared to non-sexual offenders (Rogers & Ferguson, 2011). However, a comprehensive analysis of the correlates and moderators of these public attitudes has yet to be conducted.

The Present Study

The present study uses a meta-analytic approach to summarize the extant research on the correlates of public attitudes toward ex-offenders and the moderating effects of contact and criminal history.

Methods

Literature Search

A systematic review of the published and unpublished contemporary literature was conducted using four online databases—PsycINFO, Web of Science, NCJRS, and ProQuest Dissertations & Theses—and communication with prominent researchers in the field. Initial literature searches based on 77 combinations of keywords revealed 58,897 records that were evaluated against inclusion criteria (see Figure 1).

Inclusion Criteria

- 1) Outcome variable assessing attitudes toward ex-offenders (including stigma, punitiveness, social distance, and general attitudes);
- 2) Population consisting of members of the general public, excluding participants who work in the criminal justice system;
- 3) Data necessary to calculate effect sizes reported or obtained from authors for at least one correlate variable; and
- 4) Published between 1/1/1990 and 9/30/2013.

Procedures

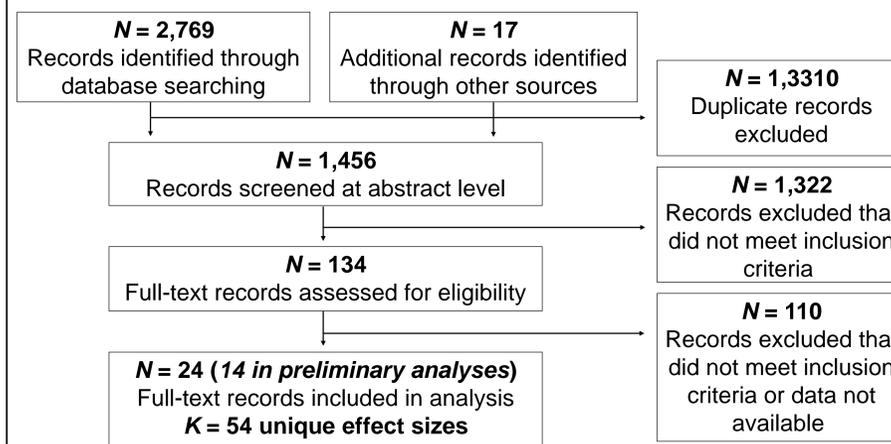
All records were coded from the reported data or additional analyses provided by study authors. All studies were coded by the first author in consultation with advisors. Analyses were conducted according to the Hunter and Schmidt (2004) random effects model of meta-analysis. Moderating effects of *contact* (present/not present) and *offense history* (sex offense/nonsexual offense) were assessed with a subset approach.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Fourteen studies, consisting of 54 unique effect sizes, were included in the preliminary analyses on a total of 6,483 participants. A majority of included studies were conducted in the United States (70%). About half of included studies assessed attitudes toward sex offenders (54%) among members of the general public (57%) (see Table 1).

Figure 1. Results of Systematic Literature Search



Correlate Analyses

Results revealed small weighted mean correlations for all public demographic characteristics (see Table 2). Most notably, people with less education ($\bar{r}_w = -.12$), who identify as politically conservative or Republican ($\bar{r}_w = -.11$), and who have not had contact with someone who has been incarcerated ($\bar{r}_w = -.10$) report more negative attitudes toward ex-offenders. In contrast, analyses revealed little difference in attitudes toward ex-offenders as a function of participant age groups.

Homogeneity Analyses

Results revealed wide credibility intervals, sampling error accounting for less than 75% of the variance, and many significant chi-square tests of homogeneity (see Table 2), suggesting heterogeneous samples. Therefore, we tested for moderation due to the presence of subpopulations.

Correlates and Moderators of Public Attitudes toward Ex-Offenders: A Meta-Analysis

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Results

Moderation Analyses

Results of sex offense history subgroup analyses revealed support for moderation (see Table 2). For example, females report more negative attitudes towards ex-offenders in general and sex-offenders specifically ($\bar{r}_w = .07$) compared to males, with the subgroup accounting for more variance and revealing a smaller credibility interval.

Table 2. Weighted Mean Effect Sizes of Negative Attitudes toward Ex-Offenders

Correlates	k	n	\bar{r}_w (σ_p)	PVA (%)	95% CI _w	80% Cred.	$\chi^2_{(k-1)}$
Sex	12	5,088	.07 (.08)	26.97	.00, .13	-.04, .17	44.60***
Sex Offenders	9	3,942	.07 (.07)	41.79	.02, .12	.00, .14	21.59*
Race/Ethnicity	6	3,251	-.08 (.04)	55.23	-.15, -.04	-.13, -.03	10.88
Sex Offenders	3	2,119	-.05 (.03)	70.05	.02, -.10	-.08, -.02	4.29
Education	6	3,299	-.12 (.06)	33.08	-.16, -.05	-.18, -.03	18.17**
Sex Offenders	5	2,905	-.10 (.06)	32.19	-.15, -.04	-.17, -.02	15.56**
Political Affiliation	4	2,362	-.11 (.08)	19.88	-.18, -.04	-.21, .00	20.16***
Age	6	2,754	-.01 (.10)	18.79	-.09, .07	-.14, .12	32.00***
Sex Offenders	4	2,251	-.03 (.10)	15.25	-.02, .06	-.15, .10	26.28***
Income	5	2,298	.03 (.05)	45.29	-.03, .08	-.04, .09	11.07
Sex Offenders	3	1,795	-.01 (.00)	100	-.05, .03	-.01, -.01	0.31
Contact	4	1,764	-.10 (.04)	61.08	-.15, -.05	-.15, -.05	6.56
Sex Offenders	2	774	-.04 (.00)	100	-.10, .02	-.04, -.04	0.00

Notes. Male (0); Majority race/ethnicity (0); Conservative/Republican (0); No Contact (0); k= number of effect sizes; n= total number of participants; \bar{r}_w = weighted mean effect size; σ_p = standard deviation of sampling error; PVA= proportion of variance accounted for by sampling error; 95% CI_w= confidence interval of weighted mean effect size; 80% Cred= credibility interval of corrected standard error; $\chi^2_{(k-1)}$ = homogeneity test; *p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Category	n (%)
Record Type	
Thesis/Dissertation	15 (28)
Published Journal Article	39 (72)
Study Location	
United States	38 (70)
European Country	6 (11)
Australia/New Zealand	8 (15)
Population Type	
General Public	31 (57)
Students	12 (22)
Employers	3 (6)
Mixed Populations	8 (15)
Offense History	
Violent Offense	4 (7)
Sexual Offense	29 (54)
Felony Offense	16 (30)
Outcome Measure Type	
Negative Attitudes	19 (35)
Punitiveness	7 (13)
Social Distance	28 (52)

Discussion

This study represents the first meta-analysis of the correlates of public attitudes toward ex-offenders and the moderating effect of sexual offense history. Findings show small correlations between participant characteristics and attitudes, suggesting that members of the general public are more similar than different in their reported attitudes. Subsequent analyses will be conducted to explore other possible moderating effects and to correct for study artifacts. Results also revealed limited investigation of community-level correlates, such as community size or crime rates, that may influence public attitudes toward ex-offenders, which represents an important direction for future research. Finally, results may also provide direction for anti-stigma research, policy, and intervention to decrease reentry barriers by suggesting that anti-stigma efforts should not necessarily target public demographic characteristics, but rather emphasize ways to reduce stigma based on differences in attitudes as a function of criminal histories.

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