The American public is often portrayed as vengeful and uniformly punitive toward lawbreakers. Although citizens do harbor “get tough” views, their corrections-related attitudes are flexible and complex. Thus, the public supports a range of community alternatives to prison, especially for nonviolent offenders. Most notably, by a substantial majority, Americans continue to believe that rehabilitation is an important goal of corrections. They are most strongly supportive of efforts to reform youthful offenders.
and they endorse a range of early intervention programs. In the end, Americans are not rigidly punitive, but rather endorse a correctional policy agenda that is reasonable and balanced—that is, an agenda that seeks to correct justice, promote society, and rehabilitate offenders.

When commentators attack offender treatment, they confidently, if not smugly, make two assertions: rehabilitation does not work, and the public does not advocate it anyway. Taken together, these two criticisms seem to deal a fatal blow to rehabilitative efforts as a guiding principle for what to do with lawbreakers. After all, why pursue a policy that not only is ineffective but also violates the "public will" in a democracy? The problem is, however, that both of these criticisms turn out to be misleading, if not false.

Challenging the "Nothing Works" Doctrine

The idea that "nothing works" to change offenders can be traced back to the classic 1974 article by Robert Martinson. Based on a larger report (Lipton, Martinson, and Wilks, 1975) which ran more than 700 pages and was both more complex and judicious in its conclusions, Martinson distilled this message: "With few and isolated exceptions, the rehabilitative efforts that have been reported thus far have no appreciable effect on recidivism" (1974, p. 22). This boldy pessimistic view appeared inconvertible. It was based on a systematic analysis of 231 studies published between 1945 and 1967. Who, in the end, could argue with the data?

As it turns out, Martinson's results were not as solid as he imagined. Even so, many scholars embraced his study's conclusions without the level of skepticism that they are trained to bring to research findings, especially those voiced so emphatically. But by the time Martinson was writing, many people—including criminologists—had come to mistrust rehabilitation, which, from the early part of the century until the late 1960s, had been the dominant correctional ideology (Rothman, 1980).

Liberals, with visions of One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest fresh in their minds, doubted rehabilitation because they believed it was a benevolent idea that had been corrupted to mask the coercive mistreatment of offenders in prison. Conservatives blamed rehabilitation for being too lenient toward offenders—teaching them that crime pays—and thus increasing their willingness and ability to prey on the public. Already harboring such antireform sentiments, those on the left and right—normally strange bedfellows—both jumped on Martinson's "nothing works" bandwagon (Allen, 1981; Cullen and Gilbert, 1982).

A few scholars, however, took issue with Martinson's ideas, although their protests were faintly heard amidst the cacophony of cheers accorded the "nothing works" doctrine. Ted Palmer (1975), for example, pointed out that almost half of the studies reviewed by Martinson showed a positive treatment effect on recidivism. Gendreau and Ross (1979) offered "bibliotherapy for cynics" by reviewing study after study finding that rehabilitation interventions could diminish the propensity of offenders to return to crime. A closer look at Martinson's own study reveals more reason for doubt. Of the 231 studies reviewed, only 138 contained outcomes that measured recidivism. Of these, fewer than 80 measured actual treatment programs (the others measured sanctions, such as whether an offender was placed on probation). Further, with only three behavior-modification programs in the data set, Martinson's review contained no treatment category for cognitive-behavioral programs (Cullen and Gendreau, 2000). This omission is noteworthy because research has shown that it is precisely these programs that are most effective in reducing recidivism (Andrews and Bonta, 1998; Gendreau, 1996).

In the quarter century following Martinson's classic work, the research has become even more convincing that rehabilitation does work. Perhaps the most compelling evidence has come from the technique of meta-analysis. Typically, scholars had summarized studies and counted how many did or did not reduce recidivism; this "vote-counting" method was the strategy used by Martinson. A meta-analysis, however, computes things differently: across a sample of evaluation studies, it measures the average size of treatment's effect on recidivism (much like taking a player's batting average across all games in which he or she participates). Using this statistical approach, recent studies generally find that correctional rehabilitation programs decrease recidivism an average of 10 percent (Loess, 1995; Redondo, Sanchez-Meca, and Garrido, 1999).

Most significantly, there is considerable variation in the "effect size" of programs. Those interventions that conform to certain "principles of effective treatment" (Gendreau, 1996), such as using cognitive-behavioral programs and focusing on high-risk offenders, achieve reductions of recidivism in excess of 25 percent (Andrews and Bonta, 1998; Cullen and Gendreau, 2000). Correctional programs that emphasize punishing and/or closely supervising offenders have been found to have no effect on—or even to increase—recidivism (for example, Cullen, Wright, and Applegate, 1996; Gendreau, Cullen, and Bonta, 1994; Lipsey and Wilson, 1998; Petersilia and Turner, 1993).
The claim is false, then, that rehabilitation does not work. This does not mean, of course, that all programs reduce recidivism or that imple-
menting effective interventions is an easy task. Still, two conclusions are 
manifest, if not incontrovertible. First, compared with punitive correc-
tional programs, treatment interventions consistently achieve greater 
savings in crime, thus serving to protect society in important ways. 
Second, knowledge and technology now exist to make offenders less 
criminogenic, including serious, violent lawbreakers (Cullen and 
Gendreau, 2000; Lipsey and Wilson, 1998). Not to use this knowledge in 
the service of society is inexcusable.

This brings us to the main focus of this paper: the claim that even if 
rehabilitation "works," the public—wishing to "get tough" with offend-
ers—will not support it. This assertion, however, is misleading. It is based 
on misunderstandings of how to measure public opinion and on a selec-
tive reading of the existing data. When appropriate methodological 
techniques are used and the full array of studies are considered, we find 
that the American public's view toward corrections is far more complex 
and balanced than is typically characterized. Most notably, people 
want offenders punished and rehabilitated. Below, these issues will be 
explained in more detail, starting with a brief section on the methodology 
of assessing public opinion, which will set the stage for a more detailed 
discussion of what the people in the United States really think should be 
done with offenders.

Why Opinion Polls Overestimate the Public's Punitiveness

It perhaps is not an exaggeration to say that we have now entered an 
era of instant, or near instant, public opinion polls. When a newsworthy 
issue arises—maybe a political controversy or a debate over crime-related 
policies such as "three-strikes-and-you're-out" laws—a major polling orga-
nization, usually working on behalf of a television network or national 
newspaper, rushs out, conducts a survey, and reports "what the citizens 
think" about the issue at hand. These polls are useful, as far as they go, but 
because they are initiated with short notice, they tend to ask respondents 
only one or two questions about the policy issue in question. In fact, even when these surveys are done with more careful planning, they still tend to 
try to assess people's attitudes through a restricted number of questions.

As a result, this is because asking a lengthy roster of complicated questions 
in a telephone poll would be inordinately expensive.
assess the other side of the coin: what people think about rehabilitation and about less punitive policies such as community corrections. To portray public opinion about corrections accurately, it is necessary to move beyond the kinds of polls publicized in the media. Instead, we need to consider research that assesses citizens' attitudes through surveys that: 1) use multiple questions, including carefully constructed scales capable of measuring complex opinions; 2) give respondents multiple sentencing or policy options when they are queried about how they would like to penalize lawbreakers; and 3) ask questions that cover the full range of possible views on corrections, including both punishment and rehabilitation. When research meeting these standards is examined, we arrive at a more balanced portrait of what Americans wish the correctional system to accomplish (for example, Cullen, Fisher, and Applegate, 2000; Flanagan and Longmire, 1996; Roberts and Stalans, 1997; Sundt, 1999).

Five Conclusions about Public Opinion on Corrections

In recent years, research on public opinion about punishment and correctional policies has grown considerably (for summaries, see Cullen et al., 2000; Roberts and Stalans, 1997; Sundt, 1999). Although many questions remain to be answered, it is now possible to paint a reasonably clear portrait of what Americans think should be done with lawbreakers. The existing research can be organized around five main conclusions.

1. The American Public is Punitive Toward Crime

Numerous investigations reveal that in the United States, there is a large reservoir of punitive sentiments toward offenders (Scheingold, 1984). Polls on capital punishment, for example, show that throughout the 1990s, between 70 and 80 percent of Americans favored the death penalty for convicted murderers (Cullen et al., 2000; Moore, 1995). Similarly, when asked if they believe that courts in their community "deal harshly enough with criminals," about 80 percent of respondents in polls after poll answered "not harshly enough" (Maguire and Pastore, 1998; Smith, 1998).

Most instructive, it appears—as Warr (1995, p. 23) notes—that "Americans overwhelmingly regard imprisonment as the appropriate form of punishment for most crimes." The 1987 National Punishment Study lends support to this conclusion. Respondents were given vignettes describing an offender, victim, and the nature of the crime committed. They were then asked what sentence they would like to prescribe—much as a judge would do in a courtroom. There were 24 crimes rated, which were presented in nearly 10,000 different vignettes (each vignette was different because it reflected unique combinations of offender, victim, and crime characteristics). Across the vignettes rated, the respondents favored a prison or jail sentence in 71 percent of the cases, with an average sentence of eleven years (Jacoby and Cullen, 1998; Jacoby and Dunn, 1987). A more recent national study employing the vignette methodology reports similar conclusions, with the public "quick to sentence the defendants to prison" (Rossi, Berk, and Campbell, 1997, p. 277; Rossi and Berk, 1997).

2. Public Punitiveness toward Crime is "Mushy"

Additional polls could have been cited above to substantiate the point that Americans believe that lawbreakers should be subjected to harsh punishment. These sentiments are real and likely influence the willingness of citizens to vote for initiatives—such as "three-strikes-and-you're-out" laws—in referendums. Few politicians, it seems, lose elections by promising to "get tough on crime," and there is no mass movement among the public to curtail the coerciveness and inhumanity of the prison system.

These observations are important because at times critics make the mistake of trying to suggest that because polls do not capture the "real" opinion of the public, again, we have been critical of the conclusion that the public is exclusively punitive in their crime-related sentiments, arguing—like other critics—that faulty methodology obscures the true complexity of what the public thinks should be done with offenders. Still, the surveys that uncover harsh views and support for locking up criminals are not spurious but are measuring beliefs that people harbor. The key issue, however, is that these beliefs are not fixed or rigid but flexible or "mushy" (Durham, 1993).

By "mushy" we mean that public opinion is best viewed as not being locked on a fixed value but rather as operating within a range of attitudes. The views that people express thus may vary depending on what factors they are asked to consider and what choices they are given through which to express their opinion. As noted above in the section on methodological considerations, oftentimes the views Americans express become less punitive when they are asked not to answer simple questions but to deliberate about questions that are constructed to approximate real-life policy decisions.
This point—and the ‘mushiness’ of public opinion—can be illustrated through three examples that relate to current policy issues. First, consider the finding that more than seven in ten Americans support the death penalty. This figure is so high and stable (not having changed much in about two decades) that it seems to suggest that the public is not firmly behind the execution of murderers. Even here, however, the support for this punishment option is ‘mushy’ or contingent on what choices people are given. Research is now fairly convincing in showing that when people are given a range of options they may support the death penalty, but whether they support executing offenders versus giving them life in prison without parole, support for capital punishment falls to about half of those surveyed. When the option is life without parole plus having the offender work to pay restitution to the victim’s family, more people select this option than favor the death penalty (Bowers, Vanden, and Dugan, 1994; McCarey and Sandys, 1996; Moon, Wright, Cullen, and Pealer, 1999).

A second example comes from research on ‘three-strikes’ laws that mandate life in prison for offenders convicted of a third felony. Polls find more than 70 percent of the public favors this policy when asked if they support ‘life sentences without parole for criminals with three violent crimes’ (‘Dick Tracy Wins.’, 1994, p. A14; Cullen et al., 2000). But do such ‘global’ or first-impression views hold up when people are asked what sentences they wish to hand out in real-life cases that involve real-life people?

To test this issue, Applegate, Cullen, Turner, and Sundt (1996) asked a 1995 sample of Cincinnati residents if they supported passing a ‘three-strikes’ law in Ohio; 88 percent stated they either ‘strongly’ or ‘somewhat’ endorsed this policy. The same sample members, however, were also asked what sentence they would give to an offender described in a vignette who would qualify for a life sentence under the ‘three-strikes’ law being considered in Ohio. Notably, across the vignettes, only 16.9 percent of the sample assigned these ‘three-strikes’ eligible offenders a life sentence. These findings suggest that the public may support a ‘three-strikes’ law in the abstract—perhaps reflecting an underlying view that repeat offenders should not cavalierly be placed on the streets—but that their global views do not translate into the belief that specific offenders should actually be locked away forever.

Third, on the surface, it seems indisputable that Americans want offenders sent to prison. But, again, how firm is that support? Some shakiness in support for the policy of imprisonment may come from the public’s belief that prisons are ‘schools of crime.’ In an Iowa survey, for example, 60 percent of the respondents stated that the ‘majority of inmates’ would be ‘more dangerous’ when they were released from prison; less than one in ten said ‘less dangerous,’ with the remaining sample members answering ‘don’t know’ (Dobel Research Associates, 1997). Most instructive, however, is research on ‘intermediate sanctions’ and, more generally, on community alternatives to prison. To be sure, citizens do not favor the use of ‘regular probation,’ perhaps because they see it as a penalty that is overly lenient and exposes the public to the risk of victimization. They also are reluctant to use community corrections as an option for violent criminals. Nonetheless, there is a growing body of research that shows Americans endorse punishing a range of offenders with intermediate sanctions such as restitution programs, community service, boot camps, intensive supervision probation, and home confinement/electronic monitoring (for a summary, see Cullen et al., 2000). Furthermore, there is evidence that although Americans often prefer prison as a penalty, they will ‘accept’ community corrections as an alternative—again, so long as it is not simply a sentence of probation (Turner, Cullen, Sundt, and Applegate, 1997). Finally, there is evidence that citizens also support the concept of ‘restorative justice’ in which offenders would remain in the community and work to repair the harm they have done to victims and to the larger community (Dobel Research Associates, 1994; Cullen et al., 2000).

3. Public Support for Rehabilitation Is Strong

A number of commentators have observed that Americans harbor punitive attitudes toward offenders and that recent crime policy in the United States is consistent with these views (for example, prison and jail populations approaching two million, calls to make prison life more painful, the reintroduction of chain gangs, and more attempts to control and closely watch offenders in the community). One writer in The Wall Street Journal asserts that ‘public opinion, in its attitude toward crime, is overwhelmingly repressive; ordinary people do not want to reform offenders but instead want them punished, as severely and cheaply as possible. They favor punishment that is deterrent and retributive’ (Johnson, 1994, p. A10).

As noted, however, this conclusion is misleading. There is now a large body of research revealing that although citizens may be punitive, they also want the correctional system to rehabilitate offenders (for example, Cullen et al., 2000; McCordie, 1993; Sundt, 1999; Thompson and Ragone, 1987).
Rehabilitating Public Support for Correctional Reform

We can point to three types of surveys that confirm this conclusion.

1. FC believes that the public is more likely to support rehabilitation over punishment when asked what they believe should be the main purposes of prisons. In a 1996 national survey of adults, only 47 percent of respondents said that rehabilitation was the main purpose of prisons, compared to 53 percent who believed that punishment was the main purpose. FC believes that this is because the focus on rehabilitation has shifted from a concern about the treatment of prisoners to a concern about the needs of the public. The public is more accepting of rehabilitation when they believe that it is effective in achieving its goals.

2. In a 1997 survey of adults, only 42 percent of respondents said that they believed that rehabilitation was effective in achieving its goals, compared to 58 percent who believed that punishment was effective. FC believes that this is because the public is more accepting of rehabilitation when they believe that it is effective in achieving its goals.

3. In a 1998 survey of adults, only 41 percent of respondents said that they believed that rehabilitation was important in achieving its goals, compared to 59 percent who believed that punishment was important. FC believes that this is because the public is more accepting of rehabilitation when they believe that it is important in achieving its goals.

In summary, the research suggests that regardless of the purpose of corrections, the public is more likely to support rehabilitation when they believe that it is effective and important in achieving its goals. This is because the public is more accepting of rehabilitation when they believe that it is effective and important in achieving its goals.
Preparing this question requires some degree of research, because a truly definitive answer to the question of who is responsible for the 1995-96 riots remains to be undertaken. Still, by weaving together various strands of information drawn from an array of sources, we are able to convey some general conclusions about the systemic failures and individual mistakes that led to the riots.

The riots were a result of a complex web of factors, including economic inequality, political neglect, and social dislocation. The systemic failures that allowed these conditions to flourish have been well documented in various reports and studies. However, pinpointing the exact role of each individual or institution is challenging.

Several social scientists and researchers have suggested that the conditions leading to the riots were not unique to Los Angeles. Similar patterns of economic disparity, political neglect, and social dislocation can be found in many other cities across the United States and around the world. These patterns are often rooted in systemic failures that allow these conditions to persist and grow.

The riots highlighted the need for systemic change and the importance of addressing the underlying issues that contribute to such events. It is essential to continue researching and analyzing these issues to understand how they can be addressed and prevented in the future.

As we move forward, it is crucial to recognize the systemic failures that allowed these conditions to flourish and the role that each individual or institution might have played in these events. This understanding is necessary to prevent similar events from occurring in the future.

The next page continues the discussion on the systemic failures that led to the riots and the importance of addressing these issues. It includes references to various sources and studies that provide further insights into the events and the systemic failures that contributed to them.
Reaffirming Rehabilitation: Public Support for Correctional Treatment

Fifth and finally, it is time to realize that the public has high expectations for the correctional system. Citizens want corrections to accomplish multiple goals. Their collective "will" might be summarized in this way: Offenders harm others—hurt them, take their property, and so on—and thus deserve to be punished. These offenders also may pose an immediate threat to their fellow citizens and thus need to be controlled, either in prison or by strict measures in the community. But offenders also have a life ahead of them in which they can continue to be a burden on society or, alternatively, contribute to the commonwealth of society. Rehabilitation offers the prospect of returning offenders to their communities as less criminogenic and perhaps even as good citizens. Thus, to not undertake treatment of offenders is a risky, if not unreasonable, policy.

Reaffirming Rehabilitation

Initially, this essay noted two objections to retaining rehabilitation as an integral goal of corrections: It does not work, and the public will not support it. As we have endeavored to document, both of these objections are questionable, if not incorrect. Research has shown that the level of training necessary to substantially reduce recidivism, especially among high-risk, serious offenders. They also have shown that allocating resources to deterrence or punishment-oriented correctional programs is ill-advised if one's goal is to reduce crime. Further, as we have reviewed, the public is in no way opposed to concerted efforts to involve offenders in treatment programs. Polls which suggest that Americans are exclusively punitive are mistaken. The public is too reasonable to hold such a narrow view. They recognize that by reaffirming rehabilitation, the correctional system has the potential to improve the lives of offenders and to make society safer.

Again, much work needs to be done to make rehabilitation an effective correctional policy. As noted, research does not state that all treatment interventions are equally effective. There is now an increasing body of knowledge identifying the principles of effective intervention (Andrews and Bonta, 1998; Gendreau, 1996). To build public trust and to deepen support for rehabilitation, it will be incumbent on correctional policymakers and practitioners to use the existing knowledge to develop and sustain the most effective interventions possible. If this challenge is taken seriously, then a new era of corrections is not beyond reach—an era in which the limits of punishment will be more clearly appreciated and the possibilities of rehabilitation more clearly realized.

References


RISK REDUCTION INTERVENTIONS FOR SPECIAL NEEDS OFFenders


