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The Effect of Reading Prisoner Poetry on Stigma and Public Attitudes: Results from a Multigroup Survey Experiment

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Abstract

We examine how public attitudes toward currently/formerly incarcerated people and their reentry into society are affected by consuming information about imprisoned people. Over 1,500 respondents from a national online survey were randomly assigned one of five sources of written information about currently and formerly incarcerated people (CFIP) (three informative pieces and two sets of incarceree poetry). They then reported their views toward them and support for reentry policies. While no differences in support for reentry initiatives across conditions were uncovered, those reading poetry with a humanizing theme applied the least amount of stigma toward currently/formerly incarcerated people.

Keywords

reentry, public opinion, prison, stigma, narrative humanization

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Introduction

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, at the end of 2019, there were over 1.4 million people in America's prisons (Carson, 2020). In 2019, 608,026 people were released from state and federal prison systems (Carson, 2020). Because over 90% of incarcerated individuals will be released from prison (Petersilia, 2005), prisoner reentry policy is of key importance.

Unfortunately, three-quarters of formerly incarcerated people (FIP) are re-arrested within five years of release (Durose et al., 2014), related to the fact that preventing recidivism requires success in many areas (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2015). One significant barrier to successful reentry is the stigma applied to currently and formerly incarcerated people (CFIP).

An often cited conceptualization of stigma comes from Erving Goffman, who describes stigma as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting" (1963, p. 3). Thus, a criminal conviction becomes a deeply discrediting attribute that can negatively impact future life chances (Link & Phelan, 2001). The feeling of stigma that members of the public have of FIP can determine their ability to find jobs (Pager, 2003), to secure housing (Israelsen-Hartley, 2008), to return to imprisonment (Stolzenberg et al., 2020), and to engage in social networks (Hirschfield & Piquero, 2010), all of which are important aspects of reentry.

In order to understand the stigma of imprisonment, research indicates that familiarity with a particular group can affect feelings towards that group (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Rade et al., 2016). Specifically, interpersonal contact with members of a stigmatized group may decrease the stigma applied to them (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Further, there is limited research suggesting that stigma also applies to those with criminal histories (Hirschfield & Piquero, 2010; Rade et al., 2016). Yet, facilitating wide scale personal contact between the public and CFIP is not an easy task. Alternatives to interpersonal contact may increase the public's familiarity with these groups. For instance, sharing information through forms of media may provide this proxy for interpersonal contact. To date, little research has explored this issue.

This study examines how exposure to information about people with incarceration histories can reduce public stigma directed toward them, as well as increase support for reentry policies. Using data from a national online panel survey, we conducted an experiment that randomly presented one of five types of information about CFIP to respondents. Feelings of stigma and levels of policy support were then compared across groups. In the next

sections, we review public opinion research on incarceration and reentry and discuss the study's data, methods, and results. The article ends with a discussion of implications for policy and attitudinal change.

Theoretical and Empirical Background

Stigma Toward Currently and Formerly Incarcerated People and Reentry

The stigma of incarceration often leads to disdain and distrust by members of the public (Leverentz, 2011; Young, 1999). Stigma fuels one of the most common attitudes toward FIP: a not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY) mentality. This rejection is seen in many contexts (Garland et al., 2017) and perhaps most intensely when it involves those with sex offense convictions (Socia et al., 2019; Williams, 2018). NIMBY can, in turn, lead to housing instability for those attempting to reenter communities (Metraux & Culhane, 2004).

Stigma affects the reentry experience in other domains critical to reentry success. Employers are reluctant to hire individuals with incarceration histories, and this is amplified for minority group applicants (Pager, 2003; Stoll & Bushway, 2008). While prosocial networks are important to the reentry process (Hirschi, 1969; Sampson & Laub, 1993), public perceptions broadcast a preference to maintain social distance from FIP (Hirschfield & Piquero, 2010; Zevitz & Farkas, 2000). Additionally, police are more likely to decide to arrest an individual who has a previous arrest record (Stolzenberg et al., 2020). Finally, the stigma of incarceration can influence whether the public supports public policy initiatives that help facilitate reentry (Dum et al., 2017).

Studies indicate that certain demographic factors may influence public opinion toward those involved in the criminal justice system. Some research shows that women hold more punitive attitudes than men (Leverentz, 2011; Pickett et al., 2013), with exceptions noted in one investigation (Socia et al., 2019). In terms of race, findings suggest that compared to non-Hispanic Whites, Hispanics, and non-Hispanic Blacks are more accepting of incarceration histories (Hirschfield & Piquero, 2010), while others report that Asians and Hispanics are more punitive (Socia et al., 2019). Those with more conservative beliefs consistently hold more negative views towards CFIP (Denver et al., 2018; Rade et al., 2016). Higher levels of education are associated with increased support for rehabilitation (Baker et al., 2015; Baker et al., 2016), but this, too, is not always the case (Hirschfield & Piquero, 2010).

While much prior research has examined the correlates and consequences of incarceration stigma, less research has explored ways to mitigate public attitudes. In discussing community opposition to reentry housing, Garland and Wodahl (2017, p. 880) note "[a]n important and unanswered question still looms conspicuously large: What can be done about this?" In the next section, we explore a possible route to reducing the public stigma applied to FIP.

Changing Public Opinion

If the goal is to reduce public stigma of incarceration, previous research provides a potential answer. One of the most consistent predictors of attitudes toward CFIP is interpersonal contact (Hirschfield & Piquero, 2010; Rade et al., 2016). Interpersonal contact theory posits that increased contact with a stigmatized group may increase empathy (Batson et al., 1997), thus decreasing negative feelings toward that group (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). A large body of research illustrates that interpersonal contact decreases racial prejudice (Brophy, 1946; Kephart, 1957). Notably, more recent studies document that interpersonal contact can change public opinion about criminal justice issues (Calaway et al., 2016).

Because it is not feasible to facilitate mass face-to-face interactions between the public and CFIP, it is important to explore other strategies to increase familiarity (Dear, 1992). Indermaur and Hough (2002) argue that in order to change public opinion, we must improve knowledge about criminal justice issues. Criminologists have found this effect in college student samples (Bohm & Vogel, 1991; Sandys, 1995). More broadly, a promising avenue for increasing public knowledge is through the use of media depictions that influence understandings of criminal justice issues and persons with incarceration histories.

We conceptualize "media" across a variety of forms of mass communication (e.g. radio, television, news, podcasts, and websites). Different forms of media can carry diverse messages that may or may not affect the public's stigmatization of CFIP. For example, television and news programs disproportionately focus on violent crime (Grabe et al., 2001) and on White women as victims (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2015). Further, local and national news are associated with fears about crime, particularly for those living in high crime areas or with victimization experiences (Chiricos et al., 2000). Unfortunately, research is inconsistent on whether media featuring expert criminal justice practitioners and/or scholarly research can soften punitive public opinion (c.f., Malinen et al., 2014; Rydberg et al., 2018).

Yet, today's vast range of media allows for alternative narrative presentations of stigmatized individuals. One such process is "narrative humanization" (Harper et al. (2016). Since stigma is fueled by dehumanizing another individual (Harper et al., 2016), presenting humanized depictions of stigmatized groups through media may increase empathy and acceptance. Research in numerous disciplines establishes that humanizing contact can also take place through written and video communication (Clement et al., 2012; Harper et al., 2016). Further, evidence suggests that benefits of interpersonal contact may *also* be achievable through one-way communication with members of a stigmatized group. For instance, both Harper et al. (2016) and Jahnke et al. (2015) find that stigmatization decreased after reading first-person narratives written by individuals with sexual interests in children. Miner-Romanoff reports that videos of juveniles speaking about incarceration increase support for alternatives to incarceration among college students (2014), and that art by incarcerated juveniles can increase positive attitudes among the public (2016). Given these possibilities, we explore whether narrative humanization in various written media about incarceration affects public attitudes regarding stigmatization and reentry.

Current Study

The current study employs an experimental survey design to examine how one-way engagement with different types of written information can affect public opinion regarding stigmatization and reentry support. The types of information we use are news stories about recidivism, research summaries, public interest news stories, and CIP-authored first-person narrative writing/poetry focusing on either humanizing experiences or incarceration. The goal is to identify policy-relevant methods that can facilitate large-scale attitudinal changes at little cost.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

We examine three main research questions, each with a related hypothesis based on the existing literature:

Research Question 1. Is there a relationship between stigmatization and support for reentry policies?

Hypothesis 1. Stigmatization will be negatively related to support for reentry policies.

Research Question 2. Does the stigmatization of CFIP vary based on the type of information individuals receive about this population?

Hypothesis 2. Stigmatization will vary by the type of information presented, with the least stigmatization of CFIP associated with individuals exposed to 'narrative humanization' poetry.

Research Question 3. Does support for reentry policy vary based on the type of information individuals receive about this population?

Hypothesis 3. Support for reentry policy will vary by the type of information presented, with the highest support among individuals exposed to 'narrative humanization' poetry.

Method

Online Survey Methodology

Utilizing a 2018 online panel survey drawn from a non-probability sample of U.S. adults 18 years and older, respondents were recruited from an online panel provided by Survey Sampling International (SSI). Dum et al. (2017) present a detailed discussion of the recruitment and vetting practices for SSI's panel surveys. The resulting survey sample of 1,800 respondents consisted of 450 respondents from each of four different racial/ethnic groups: non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic Black, non-Hispanic Asian, and Hispanic.

Survey Design

Survey respondents considered a rating task featuring one of five randomly assigned selections of written information concerning CFIP: 1) a CBS News Story, 2) an NIJ Research Brief, 3) a Huffington Post Story, 4) a set of two short poems about incarceration written by a member of a prison writing group and, 5) a set of two short 'humanizing' poems written by a member of a prison writing group.[2]

Each selection presents a unique media message about CFIP that one might encounter in daily life. The CBS News Story represents a negative news story on high recidivism rates among FIP. This is used as the comparison piece of writing, as it is most representative of fear-based news coverage and expected to elicit the most stigma against CFIP and the least support for reentry. The NIJ Research Brief represents a neutral, fact-based source of information that discusses the reentry needs of FIP, and is similar to what

one might encounter in a college course. The Huffington Post Story represents a human-interest story about FIP assisting other FIP during reentry. The last two selections are sets of poems written by CIP that focus on either incarceration or general 'humanizing' issues. Because the first three selections were quite lengthy, respondents were given summaries of about three paragraphs, with the option to read the full selection. Therefore, the poems were selected to be of similar length to the summaries.

Prior to the rating task, respondents answered questions used for basic screening decisions, as well as questions about their views towards the police, courts, and prisons. They were then presented with the randomly assigned written selection, followed by answering a series of questions about their views and experiences concerning 'offenders' and 'prisoners,' as well as crime victimization experiences.[3] Afterwards, they provided demographic information.

Dependent Variables

Stigmatization. Stigmatization was measured as the average response to four questions from prior research (Hirschfield & Piquero, 2010): *1) Most people who have been incarcerated are dangerous. 2) Most people who have been incarcerated are dishonest. 3) I would avoid associating with anyone who has recently been incarcerated. 4) It would be a big deal if one of my neighbors was incarcerated.*

Respondents rated each question using a six-point Likert-item, ranging from Strongly Disagree (0) to Strongly Agree (5). Responses were averaged across each respondent to produce an overall measure of stigmatization, with a higher score representing more stigma. The Cronbach's alpha for the combined measure was .82, indicating good internal consistency.

Reentry Support. Reentry support was measured as the average response to five questions concerning reentry views, again from prior research (see, Garland et al., 2013): *1) It is a good idea to help people who are coming out of prison readjust to life in society. 2) Communities should have programs and services in place to help ex-prisoners. 3) People coming home from prison can benefit from well-run services and programs in their community. 4) We should raise state taxes if necessary to improve services for ex-prisoners returning home. 5) People who have been recently released from prison deserve as much help from society as people who need help but have never been incarcerated.*

Respondents rated each question using a six-point Likert-item, ranging from Oppose Strongly (1) to Favor Strongly (6). Responses were averaged to produce an overall measure of reentry views, with a higher score yielding

more favorable views. The Cronbach's alpha for the combined measure was .84, indicating good internal consistency.

Independent Variables

Type of information. The independent variable of interest was the written selection that respondents considered in the rating task.

Race/Ethnicity. Respondent race/ethnicity was measured with a set of four indicators: non-Hispanic White (the comparison group), non-Hispanic Black, non-Hispanic Asian, and Hispanic/Latino.

Gender. Respondent gender was measured as male, female, or non-binary/other (NB/O). Five cases had missing responses, which we imputed as either male or female.[4]

Age. Age was measured in years.

Income. Income was measured as a 13-level ordinal scale ranging from (1) Less than $9,999 to (13) Above $75,000. This measure is treated as continuous in the models.

College graduate. Education was measured dichotomously as either having a college degree (1) or not (0).

Community. The type of community in which respondents lived was measured by asking them to self-report whether their neighborhood was rural (the comparison), suburban, or urban.

Children in home. This was measured: whether respondents had individuals under the age of 18 living in their household (1), or not (0).

Views of police. Respondents' views towards the police were measured using the average response across four questions: *1) I have a great deal of respect for the police. 2) Overall, the police are honest. 3) I feel proud of the police. 4) I feel people should support the police.* Respondents rated each question using a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). A higher score on the combined *Views of police* measure meant more positive views towards the police. The combined measure had a Cronbach's alpha score of .93, indicating excellent internal consistency.

Views of courts. Respondents' views towards the court system were measured using the average response across four questions: *1) The courts generally guarantee everyone a fair hearing/trial. 2) The basic rights of citizens are protected in the courts. 3) Overall, judges in the courts are honest. 4) Court decisions here are almost always fair.* Respondents rated each question using a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). A higher score on the combined

Views of courts measure meant more positive views towards the courts. The combined measure had a Cronbach's alpha score of .91, indicating excellent internal consistency.

Know Incarcerated Person. Respondents' exposure, either personally or professionally, to CFIP were measured by if a respondent could identify how many people they knew who had been or were incarcerated as either *None, A few, Several, or Many*. We recoded these responses into a dichotomous variable measuring whether the respondent knew *anyone* who had been incarcerated (1), or not (0).

Violent Crime Victim. This was measured whether the respondent had ever been a victim of a violent crime (1), or not (0).

Non-violent Crime Victim. This was measured whether the respondent had ever been a victim of a non-violent crime (1), or not (0).

Post-Stratification Survey Weights

The original survey used a non-probability online panel of respondents. Therefore, we utilized post-stratification survey weights to better reflect the demographic distribution of United States adults. Similar to prior research using SSI samples (Dum et al., 2017), we based weights on the joint distribution of age, (binary) sex, and race/ethnicity in the 2018 Population Estimates Program.[5]

Multiple Imputation

Out of 1,800 cases, approximately 271 (15.1%) were missing data on one or more of the independent variables. These included 5 missing gender (.3%), 119 (6.6%) missing income, 8 (.4%) missing education, 16 (.9%) missing children at home status, 41 (2.8%) missing knowing a CFIP, 127 (7.1%) missing political views, 28 (1.6%) missing violent victimization status, and 34 (1.9%) missing non-violent victimization status.

To address these missing data, we used a multiple imputation procedure based on 10 imputed datasets using sequential multivariate regression with chained equations. We present results using the imputed and weighted data, although we also checked results using non-imputed data to ensure substantive conclusions remained the same.

Analytical Models

Given there are two dependent variables predicted by the same experimental manipulation, we used Roodman's (2011) *cmp* package with the weighted

and imputed data to consider both models simultaneously. Our first analysis predicts reentry and stigmatization views based on the randomly assigned written information presented. We then consider the influence of respondent characteristics on these views, controlling for the experimental manipulation.

Validation of Randomization Procedure

We determined whether the randomization procedure resulted in equivalent groups by examining the differences in respondent demographics. Chi-Square and ANOVA tests on each of the categorical and continuous variables, respectively, indicated no significant differences between groups for any variable. This suggests that the groups had similar stigmatization and reentry views prior to the influence of the experiment.

Results

Table 1 presents weighted and unweighted descriptive statistics for the sample following imputation. Our first analysis determines whether stigmatization and reentry support are related. We then examine whether either of these outcomes are influenced by the type of information presented to respondents (Table 2). The combined model was significant ($p < .05$).

The Relationship Between Stigmatization and Reentry Support

To answer the first research question, we examined the correlation between respondents' stigmatization of FIP and their support for reentry policies, using the weighted data. The correlation between stigma and reentry support was negative and significant ($-.22$; $p < .001$). Specifically, about 5 percent of the variation in respondents' reentry support is explained by their stigmatization of FIP. This supports the first hypothesis and indicates that stigmatization of FIP is negatively related to support for reentry.

Experimental Effects

The next analysis explored whether exposure to different types of information about CFIP influenced respondents' stigmatization of FIP or their support for reentry policies.

Stigmatization across Information Types. Compared to exposure to the CBS News Story, exposure to the NIJ Research Brief, the Huffington Post Story, or the incarceration poems yielded slightly lower feelings of stigmatization, but all differences were non-significant ($p > .05$). However, exposure

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics.

Variable	Unweighted		Weighted		Imputed (%)
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Stigma	2.93	.92	2.92	.87	0.0
Reentry	4.39	1.02	4.39	1.08	0.0
Media Type					0.0
CBS Story	.20	.40	.21	.41	
NIJ Brief	.20	.40	.20	.40	
Huffington Post Story	.20	.40	.22	.41	
Incarceration Poems	.20	.40	.19	.39	
Humanizing Poems	.20	.40	.18	.39	
Race/Ethnicity					0.0
White	.25	.43	.64	.48	
Black	.25	.43	.13	.33	
Asian	.25	.43	.06	.25	
Hispanic	.25	.43	.16	.37	
Gender					.3
Female	.68	.47	.51	.50	
Male	.32	.47	.49	.50	
Non-Binary/Other[a]	<.01	.07	<.01	.05	
Age	37.21	14.49	46.29	16.63	0.0
Income	8.25	4.17	8.53	4.05	6.6
College Degree	.46	.50	.45	.50	.4
Community					0.0
Rural	.18	.38	.24	.43	
Suburban	.45	.50	.49	.50	
Urban	.37	.48	.27	.44	
Children at Home	.45	.50	.33	.47	.9
Views about Police	3.60	1.05	3.76	1.08	0.0
Views about Courts	3.30	1.03	3.37	1.04	0.0
Know CFIP	.69	.46	.73	.44	2.8
Political Views					7.1
Conservative/Very Conservative	.30	.46	.38	.48	
Neither Liberal nor Conservative	.33	.47	.29	.45	
Liberal/Very Liberal	.37	.48	.34	.47	
Violent Crime Victimization	.14	.35	.14	.34	1.6
Nonviolent Crime Victimization	.35	.48	.42	.49	1.9
N	**1,800**		**1,802**		

Note: Presents imputed estimates using 10 imputations. Standard deviations reported from a randomly selected imputation run.

[a]Weights incorporate a dichotomous measure of gender based on imputing both missing and non-binary/other responses as either male or female.

Table 2. Influence of Media Type on Stigma and Reentry Support.

	Stigma					Reentry Support				
				95% CI					95% CI	
	b		se	*LL*	*UL*	b		se	*LL*	*UL*
Media Type										
NIJ Brief	−.08		.10	−.29	.12	.05		.16	−.26	.36
Huffington Post Story	−.08		.13	−.33	.17	.09		.17	−.25	.43
Incarceration Poems	−.14		.12	−.37	.09	.09		.18	−.26	.45
Humanizing Poems	−.22	*	.11	−.42	−.01	.19		.15	−.10	.48
Constant	3.02	***	.08	2.86	3.18	4.31	***	.13	4.07	4.56
N (Weighted N)	1,800 (1,802)					1,800 (1,802)				

Note: Presented weighted and imputed results. Comparison for Media Type is to CBS Story.
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

to the humanizing poems yielded significantly less stigmatization (−.22; [95% CI: −.42 −−.01]; $p < .05$). Thus, despite consistent results, we find only partial support for our second hypothesis when considering statistical significance.

Support for Reentry across Information Types. Compared to exposure to the CBS News Story, exposure to any of the other written selections yielded slightly more support for reentry, but all differences were non-significant ($p > .05$). Despite this consistency, we do not find support for our third hypothesis when considering statistical significance.

The Role of Respondent Characteristics

Table 3 presents results on how respondent characteristics influence stigmatization and support for reentry policies, controlling for the experimental effects of information exposure.

Stigmatization. Stigmatization of CFIP depended on a respondent's race/ethnicity, education, political views, views towards police, and familiarity with CFIP. Compared to White (non-Hispanic) respondents, Asians (.21; $p < .01$) and Hispanics (.14; $p < .05$) applied more stigma. Respondents with a college degree applied more stigma than those without (.19; $p < .05$). Respondents with more positive views towards police applied more stigma (.12; $p < .05$), and those who knew a CFIP applied less stigma than those who did not (−.30; $p < .001$). Compared to conservatives, centrists (−.26; $p < .01$) and liberals (−.29; $p < .001$) applied less stigma.

Table 3. Influence of Media Type on Stigma and Reentry Support.

	Stigma				Reentry Support			
			95% CI				95% CI	
	b	se	*LL*	*UL*	b	se	*LL*	*UL*
Media Type								
NIJ Brief	−.10	.09	−.28	.08	.09	.14	−.19	.37
Huffington Post Story	−.06	.12	−.29	.17	.03	.17	−.29	.36
Incarceration Poems	−.15	.10	−.33	.04	.13	.17	−.21	.47
Humanizing Poems	−.16	.09	−.35	.02	.18	.14	−.10	.46
Race/Ethnicity								
Black Non-Hispanic	−.02	.08	−.17	.13	.15	.10	−.06	.35
Asian Non-Hispanic	.21**	.08	.05	.36	−.09	.09	−.27	.09
Hispanic	.14*	.07	.00	.28	−.20*	.10	−.39	−.01
Gender								
Male	.12	.07	−.01	.26	−.15	.09	−.33	.03
Non-Binary/Other[a]	−.32	.26	−.84	.19	.30	.47	−.62	1.22
Age	>−.01	<.01	−.01	.00	<.01	<.01	>−.01	.01
Income	>−.01	.01	−.02	.02	<.01	.01	−.02	.03
College Degree	.19*	.08	.04	.34	.04	.11	−.17	.25
Community								
Suburban	.09	.08	−.08	.25	−.01	.13	−.27	.24
Urban	.02	.09	−.15	.20	.09	.14	−.18	.36
Children at Home	.02	.07	−.11	.15	.05	.08	−.10	.21
Views about Police	.12*	.05	.02	.22	<.01	.08	−.16	.16
Views about Courts	.04	.06	−.06	.15	.16*	.07	.03	.30
Know CFIP	−.30***	.09	−.47	−.13	.14	.11	−.09	.36
Political Views								
Neither Liberal nor Conservative	−.26**	.09	−.44	−.08	−.05	.13	−.30	.20
Liberal/Very Liberal	−.29***	.08	−.45	−.14	.44***	.13	.19	.69
Violent Crime Victimization	−.08	.10	−.27	.11	.19	.14	−.09	.47
Nonviolent Crime Victimization	.08	.07	−.06	.23	.06	.11	−.16	.28
Constant	2.71***	.24	2.24	3.18	3.34***	.35	2.66	4.02
N (Weighted N)	1,800 (1,802)				1,800 (1,802)			

Note: Presented weighted and imputed results. The comparison category for: Media Type is CBS Story; for Race/Ethnicity is White Non-Hispanic; for Gender is Female; for Community is Rural; and for Political Views is Conservative/Very Conservative.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Support for Reentry. Support for reentry depended on a respondent's ethnicity, views about the court system, and political views. Specifically, compared to White (non-Hispanic) respondents, Hispanics were less supportive of reentry (−.20; $p < .05$). Respondents with more positive views towards the courts were more supportive of reentry (.16; $p < .05$). Compared to conservatives, liberals were more supportive of reentry (.44; $p < .001$).

Discussion

The study's findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating that scholarly evidence may do little to sway public opinion (Malinen et al., 2014; Rydberg et al., 2018). Furthermore, a humanizing news story that discussed the prosocial actions of FIP elicited the same response as a news story highlighting recidivism. Given that the public is likely to encounter these types of information, it is important (if not somewhat disconcerting) that there were no differences in attitudes between these conditions.

However, respondents who read poetry about the childhoods of CIP expressed the least stigma towards FIP, and this was significantly different from respondents who read the recidivism story. To explain this, we return to dehumanization and narrative humanization (Harper et al., 2016). One way that individuals rationalize punitive attitudes is through dehumanization, "whereby targets of punitive attitudes are linguistically and euphemistically stripped of their personhood" (Harper et al., 2016, p. 3). Narrative humanization acts as a counterforce to dehumanization by creating an empathetic picture of an individual.

Therefore, the poem about childhood may engage as a form of narrative humanization for several reasons. First, the public supports rehabilitation for juveniles, so poems about childhood may activate "child saving" attitudes that translate into less stigma toward CFIPs in general (Moon et al., 2000). Second, viewing creative work (such as art) by CFIP reminds viewers that the artist is a person and increases compassion (Miner-Romanoff, 2016). Third, readers may identify the writer as a "poet," which is a prosocial identity and positive credential (Denver, 2020). This may help explain why poems about incarceration did not have the same effect. Poems about prison do not require the reader to identify the writer in a new light, and may actually increase readers' concerns about victimization and recidivism risk (see Mears et al., 2013).

While the focus of our study was on the effects of each type of media, we also examined whether the personal characteristics of respondents influenced their attitudes. Perhaps most importantly, we found that knowing someone who had been incarcerated was associated with lower feelings of stigma

towards FIP, supporting the contact hypothesis. Our findings also align with previous research by Hirschfield and Piquero (2010) that shows Hispanics stigmatize CFIP more than Whites. While few studies examine Asian attitudes toward criminal justice issues, our investigation finds that Asians also stigmatized CFIP more than Whites. As discussed in Socia et al. (2019), some Asian groups reject American life as immoral, and therefore may attempt to distance themselves from CFIP whom they view as an American problem (Espiritu, 2001).

Our results have important implications for criminal justice policy. Respondents who expressed less stigma towards FIP also had more support for reentry policies, suggesting these attitudes are intertwined. Stigmatization is clearly a key part of the reentry equation. Consequently, policymakers should consider methods that reduce stigma toward FIP *as part of reentry programming*.

As this and other studies have shown, interpersonal contact with CFIP is a key predictor of reduced stigma. Thus, this contact should be encouraged whenever possible. Facilitators of interpersonal contact should also take note of Lageson et al. (2019) who show that it is not quantity, but quality of contact that must be considered.

Finally, this reseaarch offers an efficient and feasible approach to reduce stigmatization through narrative humanization. Accordingly, we suggest several courses of action. First, prisons should encourage programs that allow CIP to express themselves through narrative humanization. This could take the form of writing groups, art groups, theater, and music. Research shows that these types of programs also increase well-being among participants (Kyprianides & Easterbrook, 2020). Second, the products from these programs should be shared with the public. Websites and/or social media are cost-effective and highly accessible ways to engage the public. Finally, when individuals are released from prison, they should stay involved with communities that allow them to continue to create and share works of narrative humanization to further reduce stigma. Those connections can also provide important social networks and support for those who have been released.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The current study has several limitations. First, the characteristics of the sample limit its generalizability to the larger U.S. population. Respondents were sampled from an opt-in online panel that oversampled based on race. While weights were applied to help generalizability concerns, future research should replicate this study with samples that can be more easily generalized to the population of adults in the United States.

There are three design-related limitations that should also be noted. First, we did not employ a pre/post-test design to establish a baseline on the dependent variables for respondents before they were exposed to the different types of information. We made the decision due to concerns about priming effects, and, instead, assume that the randomization procedure created groups that were roughly equivalent in their pre-test levels of stigmatization and reentry support. While we found no significant demographic differences between the groups, future researchers may wish to consider ways to pre-test such opinions that would not bias the sample.

Second, while the first experimental condition (detailing high recidivism rates) is intended to emphasize the *dangers* posed by recidivism, as well as the typical sensationalized media account regarding the FIP population, some respondents may have interpreted that as a need for additional reentry support to mitigate these dangers. Therefore, a replication of this study should include a more neutral control group that receives no information related to prison and the justice system. However, even if all conditions were effective in reducing stigma, our results indicate that the humanizing childhood poetry condition was by far the *most effective* source of information.

Third, we do not attempt to explore lasting effects of the treatments due to the logistics of following up with anonymous online survey respondents. Future investigations should attempt to follow up with respondents at various time intervals to assess the stability of changes.

In a final limitation, the wording of the poetry conditions stated explicitly that the poems were written "by inmates in a male prison as part of a prison writing group." It is possible that the label of "inmate" could influence opinion in this instance, as could identifying the gender of the writers. Therefore, future work should attempt to discern whether the effects of writing/poetry differ if more neutral language, such as "individuals in prison" were used. Our research was limited by logistics and cost, but it would also be useful to present poems with content variety by writers of different races and genders, and with different convictions, to determine if there are particular characteristic combinations that hinder or promote change in public opinion.

Conclusion

Our study offers insight into what strategies are useful to change public opinion about criminal justice issues. We find that stigma can be reduced through relatively simple and cost-effective methods involving information exposure. These findings illustrate that something as simple as reading two

short humanizing poems written by a member of a stigmatized group can effectively change public opinion and stigmatization, at least in the short term.

From a criminal justice standpoint, this is an important discovery with clear policy implications. First, prisons should encourage and support programming that allows CFIP to create artistic and creative works that provide narrative humanization. Second, communities, scholars, and activists should seek innovative ways to share these works with the public, such as holding public readings, distributing work via print and the Internet, and collaborating with educational institutions. Current projects such as the Wyoming Pathways from Prison and the Oakdale Choir have successfully employed this type of innovative programming (Cohen, 2019; Dewey et al., 2019). These examples demonstrate that it is possible to use arts and narrative humanization in cost-effective ways to increase the chances of successful reentry and change the way communities view the issue of incarceration.

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Notes

1. should be a space between the word in parentheses (FIP) and the next word
2. The full text for each piece of information can be viewed by clicking this link.
3. We used non-first-person labels to elicit typical 'knee jerk' reactions because such labels result in more stereotypical and fear-based beliefs (Denver et al., 2017; Harris & Socia, 2014). Thus, while person-first wording is preferred, we are measuring the most common wording the public would encounter (and be most familiar with) in everyday life.
4. While we include the eight NB/O cases in our models, for the purposes of calculating weights, they were imputed as either male or female to match American Community Survey estimates. Results were similar between models that dropped missing cases, models that dropped missing and NB/O cases, and models that imputed missing and NB/O cases as either male or female.
5. As noted earlier, sex was measured as reported gender (male, female, non-binary/other). Five cases were missing responses, while 8 more had 'non-binary/other' responses. Given the population characteristics used to calculate weights did

not include non-binary/other gender distributions, and the small percentage of cases with non-binary/other responses, we imputed missing *and* non-binary/other cases as either male or female for identifying the appropriate weight. After weights were identified for each case, the true missing cases kept the imputed 'gender' measure, while non-binary/other cases were kept as their own category.

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