

**Perceptions of discrimination and likely coping strategies upon release among an adult offender population**

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by

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Perceptions of discrimination and likely coping strategies upon release among an adult offender population**

Sociologists have long been intrigued by the study of deviant behavior. At one time, sociologists greatly benefited from conducting research in the prisons by testing old theories of deviance and formulating new ones. The purpose of this research is to follow that tradition by examining an adult offender population, focusing on inmate perceptions of discrimination and potential coping strategies to combat the label “ex-con” when released. Labeling theory posits that before a person goes to prison, the person has conceptions of what society thinks about prisoners. When an inmate is sentenced to prison, these beliefs become relevant and lower self-esteem and fear of rejection by others are possible outcomes of the beliefs. These outcomes, in turn, can lead to the inmate choosing to adopt secrecy as a coping strategy to combat the label. We constructed a 55-item questionnaire that measured demographic characteristics and used scales measuring inmates’ perception of discrimination and likely coping strategies adopted from Link et al’s (1987) research on mental patients. The results of this research show that minority inmates perceive less discrimination than whites, and as a result are less likely to adopt secrecy as a coping strategy. Furthermore, those inmates with more social support are also less likely to adopt secrecy. This demonstrates that if a formally labeled inmate already has one label, adding another does not have a significant detrimental effect.

## **Perceptions of discrimination and likely coping strategies upon release among an adult offender population**

Prison populations have long been used for research purposes. At one time pharmaceutical companies and biomedical research relied heavily on prisoners as volunteer subjects in experiments. Throughout the seventies and the eighties, sociologists and criminologists conducted research in the prisons yielding a solid foundation of empirical data. Studies found behavioral differences between older and younger prisoners (Sinclair and Chapman 1973; Jensen 1977; Teller and Howell 1981) and common background characteristics of male prisoners (Griffiths and Rundle 1976). Others examined inmate perspectives on effective rehabilitation (Waldo, Chiricos and Dorbin 1973; Erez 1987), post-release expectations (Zingraff 1975), and what causes crime (Mathis and Rayman 1972). Additionally, researchers critically examined the prison system as a whole (Steele and Jacobs 1975) and the impact of imprisonment (Thomas 1977).

During this boom in prison research, sociologists were trying to obtain empirical evidence for old theories of deviance and formulate new ones. Anthony Harris (1975) found that labeling had an effect on the value of criminal choice. Harris examined the effect prison had on the way youthful offenders evaluated the payoff values in “going straight” or “going crooked.” According to his findings, there was an initial decrease in the value of criminal choice after point-of-entry into prison; however, as prison sentence continues this effect was reversed and the relative expected value of criminal choice increased. William Minor (1980) questioned whether Skye’s and Matza’s theory that techniques of neutralization are determined by offense were empirically supported. Skye

and Matza theorized that different types of offenders would neutralize their crimes in different ways. Murderers, for example, may tend toward the denial of responsibility or denial of the victim. Minor's data did not support their hypothesis. Rather, his findings indicated that the hypothesis was overly simplistic and the nature of crime and delinquency was more complex than indicated by their theory. Diane Scully and Joseph Morolla (1984) interviewed convicted rapists and found that based on cultural views of women, the men were able to justify their crimes to the extent that they did not view themselves as rapists.

After the mid-eighties, however, most of the research being done in the prisons came to an abrupt halt and the empirical data began to dry up. The drought could not have come at a worse moment. During this time period the prison system in the United States began its unprecedented expansion into mass incarceration, despite the fact that crime rates remained relatively unchanged over the years. Since then, the U.S. Department of Justice has continued to provide census data of federal, state, and jail inmates, but the data lack depth and comprehensiveness. The last study of state inmates was conducted in 1990 and only offered demographic information and offense history.

In an essay recently published in a special prison issue of the journal *Ethnography*, Loic Waquant (2002) outlined a number of contributing factors to the disappearance of prison research. These factors include the lack of access, the organization of academic research, and the general disliking of the prison population. Rehabilitation is no longer the primary goal of corrections; rather, there has been a greater emphasis placed on retribution. Consequently, prisons have become more difficult for researchers to penetrate and administrators no longer see the benefit of

scientific inquiry. Additionally, Human Subjects Review boards can cause complications due to time consumption. Funding for research from governmental and private agencies is also limited. Lastly, as prisoners are believed to be unrehabilitatable, they are viewed as dangerous and less attractive participants to researchers.

The government does, however, provide codebooks and data sets on a number of topics related to corrections and makes them available in a number of formats. They allow one to track prevalence of imprisonment by race, gender, and type of offense, as well as recidivism rates. One can also learn of the prevalence of drug and alcohol abuse, mental and emotional problems, and the availability of treatment for these conditions.

While these data are useful in certain situations, their lack of depth prevents one from studying larger issues like the difficulties of adjusting to life outside prison, finding adequate employment, and staying out of trouble. More specifically, what are the consequences of the label “ex-con”? Does it affect some inmates more than others? What coping strategies will be adopted to combat the label of “ex-con”?

In this paper I will report the results of a survey conducted in a medium security prison located in a small midwestern city. Scales for discrimination and coping strategies were adopted from Link et al’s (1989) work on mental patients. Link found that perceptions of discrimination had an impact on the behaviors of ex-mental patients such as withdrawal from society. I hypothesize that inmates do perceive discrimination, and that perception leads them to adopting secrecy as a coping strategy. Items in the secrecy scale asked inmates to predict their post-release behaviors in specific situations. Some of the items referred to behaviors tied to gaining employment (ie: hiding criminal history from employer). Others probed what respondents would disclose about their past in social

situations (ie: not telling people about being incarcerated when meeting for the first time). Furthermore, I use a regression analysis to examine which variables predict secrecy as a coping strategy.

## **Theory**

Labeling theory is one of sociology's oldest and most well-known theories of deviance, as well as one of its most pervasive and influential. Frank Tannenbaum (1938) first noted the social audience's role in defining and shaping deviance through a process he called "tagging." For example, he argued that when the courts make criminals conscious of their behavior, it becomes a way to actually evoke the traits that are complained of. This observation has been further developed and polished by a number of sociologists (Becker 1963; Goffman 1963; Lemert 1951). Labeling theorists argue that social groups define what is deviant, deviant acts result in labeling, and in some cases labeling can lead to a deviant career. In contrast, opponents of labeling theory (Gove 1970) are critical of the tendency to underestimate acts of primary deviance while placing too much emphasis on the effect of formal social control. Gove saw the role of the social audience less important than the actual deviant behavior itself. He argued that labeling theorists were not explaining why people initially commit deviant acts, instead focusing on secondary processes that may not be as important. Link et al (1989) offered a modification to the theory which mitigates the role of societal reaction. In their study of those labeled mental patients, they found that the label does not predispose the individual to increased symptoms, but it does impact ex-patients' knowledge of how they are perceived in the

community. The knowledge of devaluation can lead to withdrawal and isolation from social interaction which can intensify symptoms.

Labeling theory has been applied to a number of areas of deviance in the past including mental illness (Rosenfield 1997; Scheff 1966), juvenile delinquency (Chambliss 1973; Downs 1997), and treatment of people with disabilities (Li & Moore 2001); however, surprisingly, there have been few studies conducted on adult offender populations. Harris' (1975) study of black and white youth offenders found that labeling did have an effect on the inmates, but it was dependent upon sentence length. Those offenders who recently entered the prison showed a decrease in the expected value of criminal choice; however, as imprisonment continued the value of criminal choice increased due to minimal life chances upon release.

To date, research on the effects of labeling on adult offender populations has been nonexistent despite the fact that labeling has more and more been used as a justified form of social control (i.e., community notification laws for sex offenders). Furthermore, as a result of the incarceration surge of the late eighties and early nineties, more prisoners are being released now than ever (Petersilia 2003). Many will find the transition from prison back into the community difficult and complicated due to societal beliefs about ex-cons. This research intends to show the effects labeling can have on an inmate being released back into the community. Due to perceived discrimination, inmates are likely to adopt secrecy as a coping strategy to manage the label "ex-con." In the following section I will discuss the concept of coping strategies inmates may use to manage the label ex-con upon release from prison.

## **Coping Strategies**

In Link's (1989) research on mental patients, he hypothesized that mental patients would be affected by the stigma attached to mental illness. In order to manage the stigma, he predicted patients would choose from a range of coping strategies such as secrecy, withdrawal, and education of others. For example, a patient recovering from a mental illness may choose to hide his or her stigma from others, or may choose to educate others about mental illness in order to offer more information. On the other hand, the stigma may have a more serious effect that causes the patient to completely withdraw from society.

Similar coping strategies for managing the label "ex-con" are available to inmates after they are released from prison. When applying for employment, for example, an inmate may choose to hide his criminal history from a potential employer or he may choose to be upfront about his past. Another inmate may opt to educate a potential employer about what it is like to be an ex-con. Withdrawal, however, is an unlikely option for inmates. One of the main reasons inmates end up back in prison is due to reverting back to crime for financial support. Without a job or a social support network in place, recidivism is much more likely. For this reason, secrecy is the most logical choice an inmate could make to manage the label "ex-con" upon release. Given society's negative attitudes towards ex-cons it is imperative an inmate must hide his past in order to stay out of prison.



## **Method**

Research was conducted in a medium-minimum security correctional institution in a small midwestern city. Questionnaires were mailed to the institution and distributed to the entire inmate population (N=2200). Approval was obtained through the Internal Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects from both The Ohio State University and the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction. With help from the institution, subjects were recruited by placing an announcement on the prison's closed-circuit television system, which was shown approximately a week before the questionnaires were mailed.

The following week 2,300 (100 more than needed) questionnaires were delivered to the institution for dispersal to the inmates. None of the envelopes were addressed. Each envelope contained a cover letter on OSU letterhead explaining the study, a two page questionnaire, a postage-paid envelope for returning the questionnaire, and a reply card to be filled out and returned in a second postage-paid envelope inviting the inmate to participate in the second phase of the research, which would consist of face-to-face interviews at a later time. Institutional staff members were responsible for dividing and dispersing the questionnaires by housing unit. While it was not our intent to have staff collect the questionnaires (for fear that inmates may be reluctant to give them to staff), they did collect them in a few of the housing units. These, along with the extras, were picked up from the institution and the rest of the questionnaires were received by mail. The data was entered into the computer and analyzed using the SPSS-12 software.

## Questionnaire

Data consist of 2 page 55-item questionnaires voluntarily completed by 450 inmates of a medium-minimum security correctional institution in a small Midwestern city. The questionnaires were constructed by my advisor, Jerry Gray (another undergraduate student), and myself. Questionnaires contained 12 items addressing demographic characteristics including age, ethnicity, education, employment, income, and legal employment. Additionally, respondents were asked two open-ended questions about gaining employment after release (what job they *hoped* to get and what job they *expected* to get). Answers on those items were coded using the occupational prestige scores developed by Hodge, Siegal and Rossi (Babbie and Halley 1998). Inmates were asked if they were in a “meaningful romantic relationship” before coming to prison, and if that relationship was still intact. Inmates were also asked whether they had attended church/temple/mosque before prison and if they planned to upon release. Inmates were asked to indicate current and prior offenses, as well as if they had to undergo any forms of post-release control. Inmates were also asked if they had any family members who had previous experience with incarceration.

Another 29 items with Likert-type response categories asked inmates to evaluate the likelihood that “most people” would accept an ex-con in a community role (i.e, public school teacher), and the chances of adopting coping strategies such as withdrawal, secrecy, and the willingness to educate others. Inmates were also asked to evaluate the amount of stigma “most people” attached to the label “ex-con” and how they would best combat that label upon release. Items were adapted from Link et al’s (1989) research on the mentally ill, with the wording changed to refer to ex-convicts instead of former

mental patients. Items were scored using a 6-point Likert-type scale on a continuum of “Strong Agreement” to “Strong Disagreement” for questions asking what “most people” think and “Very Likely” to “Very Unlikely” for questions asking inmates to predict their post-release behaviors. Additionally, on the back page of the questionnaire was an optional, open-ended question encouraging the inmates to voice their thoughts on any issues not covered in the questionnaire.

## **Sample**

450 inmates (approximately 20.5 percent) voluntarily completed the questionnaire and comprise the sample. While the response was smaller than hoped for, it was comparable to the 25 percent response rate in Scully and Marolla’s (1984) research with rapists after one follow-up mailing<sup>1</sup>. The age of inmates who responded ranged from 18 to 69; however, the bulk of them (67.1 percent) were under the age of 40 with the mean age of the sample being 34.81 years. White inmates made up 47.3 percent of the sample, black inmates made up 42.9 percent, and inmates of other ethnicities comprised 9.8 percent of the sample<sup>2</sup>. 71.5 percent of the inmates reported being legally employed before coming to prison. Nearly half the sample (46.6 percent) had a yearly income below \$20,000 before coming to prison, and only 11 percent of the sample made more than \$50,000 a year. The majority of inmates reported high school as their highest level of education

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<sup>1</sup> We chose not to do a follow-up mailing. Noteworthy, however, was that of those responding, the volunteer rate for interviews was quite high, with 340 (75.6 percent) of those returning the questionnaires indicating willingness to be interviewed.

<sup>2</sup> The institution’s website provided racial demographic information. According to the site at the time the survey was distributed, the racial breakdown of the prison was 38.7 percent white, 58.4 percent black, and 2.9 percent other ethnicities and zero percent Hispanic. A handful of respondents, however, identified themselves as Hispanic. For comparison purposes, race was divided into white vs. minority in analysis.

attained (73.1 percent); however, 27.1 percent reported receiving at least some college education.

Respondents were incarcerated for a wide variety of offenses. 18.3 percent of the respondents were incarcerated for a drug offense, 17.6 percent for a sex offense, 15.6 percent for assault, 12.8 percent for murder, 12.4 percent for robbery, 7.3 percent for burglary, 1.8 percent for auto theft, 1.8 percent for larceny, 1.4 percent for arson, and 11 percent were serving time for another offense. The sample was evenly divided with regard to first offense. Exactly half the sample reported being a first time offender while the other half reported previous incarceration. Length of time spent in prison ranged widely from 3 months to 32 years, but approximately half of those who responded (51 percent) reported being in prison for at least 3 years. 73.1 percent of the inmates had a release date of 2007 or sooner, however, responses ranged all the way up to 2028 by one individual. Additionally, 69.2 percent of the inmates indicated they would be subjected to additional post-release control after prison. A small percentage (10.8 percent) of the respondents reported they would be subjected to community notification upon release.

Perceived diminished job chances upon release were reflected in the scores on the job aspiration (“job I hope to get”) and job expectation (“job I expect to get”) items. The scores from the prestige scale assigned jobs a score between 9-82. Means for both items were relatively low. The mean for job aspirations was 34.7, (SD = 14.0). Typical jobs assigned that score include occupations like repairs, sales, and factory work. The mean for job expectations was 26.8, (SD = 12.9). Typical jobs assigned that score include various kinds of trades and skilled laborers. The most common response given to the job expectations item was construction worker, which has a prestige score of 17.

## Measures

Table 1 lists the sources and descriptive statistics of the variables used in the linear regression analysis. The dependent variable for the analysis is secrecy as a coping strategy. A number of variables were included in each of the models as controls since likelihood of endorsing secrecy can be due to a variety of confounding factors. Age, race, type of offense, discrimination, and if the inmate was sentenced under the “old law<sup>3</sup>” guidelines were all controlled for. Only the independent variables that had significant relationships to the dependent variable were included in the analysis.

In addition to the control variables, other independent variables were constructed using two types of models measuring *job* and *social support*. Job variables focused on perceptions of difficulty gaining employment upon release. The job hypothesis suggests that those who perceive difficulties in obtaining employment will more likely endorse secrecy. Thus, the “getting a job will be” variable was used in the analysis to test this hypothesis.<sup>4</sup>

The social support hypothesis suggests that those with more social support resources will be less likely to adopt secrecy as a coping strategy. Accordingly, likelihood to attend church after release, still having an intact romantic relationship after

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<sup>3</sup> Old Law inmates are those who were sentenced before 1997. After 1997, the Ohio Department of Rehabilitations and Corrections changed to “truth-in-sentencing” laws. Under these new sentencing guidelines, inmates were given a definite sentence with a definite release date. Inmates sentenced under the old law guidelines, however, did not have a definite release date. Instead, they have dates to meet with the parole board. In the regression analysis, old law was used as a control for the tendency for inmates to answer in a socially acceptable way. For example, an old law inmate may think that the parole board would have knowledge of how he answered the questions, so he may lie and answer the way he perceives the way the parole board would want him to.

<sup>4</sup> Other variables related to job (income, job want to get, job expect to get, legally employed before prison) were tested; however, the findings did not change without them included. In fact, due to a large amount of missing cases for some of the variables (primarily income), the sample for the regression was greatly reduced.

coming to prison, and having family members previously incarcerated are the variables used in this model.<sup>5</sup>

## **Estimation**

All models were estimated using the linear regression function in SPSS 13. The *base model* (Model 1) begins the analysis by predicting the effects of age, race, type of offense, and discrimination (as control variables) on the likelihood of inmates adopting secrecy as a coping strategy. The *job* and *social support models* (Models 2 and 3) include the control variables as well as the aforementioned relevant variables in each model. The *full model* (Model 4) combines the significant predictors from each of the models and tests the effects of all the factors on the decision to use secrecy as a coping strategy.

## **Results**

### **Discrimination Scale**

Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations for each of the items in the discrimination scale for white inmates, minority inmates, and both groups combined. For ease in comprehension, half of the items were reversed scored so higher scores indicate higher discrimination. Hypothesis tests that item and scale means were not different from 3.5 (the midpoint of the continuum) revealed all items except for #11 (“Most people will not take an ex-con’s opinion seriously”) are significant. Interestingly, only one of the items (#10: “Most women would not date a man who has been to prison”) was below the midpoint of the scale representing significant *disagreement* with the item. Scores on the

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<sup>5</sup> Other social support variables (relationship before prison, attending church before prison) were tested but left out of the analysis because not including them did not change the outcome of the analysis.

other ten items of the scale were above the midpoint indicating inmates' agreement that they perceived discrimination. The highest scores, as one would suspect, are found on items that place an ex-convict in a situation where he would be responsible for children; however, on items related to employment, discrimination was also anticipated. Furthermore, inmates perceived discrimination from "most people" with regard to trust, intelligence, and friendship. They felt people in the community would treat them differently, and that most employers prefer to not hire ex-convicts, even if they are qualified for the job.

Additionally, racial differences on the scale and items are noteworthy. Whites scored higher than minorities on every item in the scale, including on the scale as a whole. Items referring to discrimination among social support groups (#9: Most people in my community would treat an ex-con like anyone else, #7: Most people think less of a person who has been to prison, #10: Most women would not date a man who has been to prison) had the largest racial differences. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, both whites and non-whites disagreed that women would not date a man who has been to prison; however, non-whites disagreed significantly more than whites on the item ( $t = 3.87, p < .001$ ). There were significant racial differences on the scale as a whole ( $t = 5.56, p < .001$ ).

### **Regression Analysis**

The regression analysis allows one to examine multiple effects that can influence an inmate's likelihood to endorse secrecy. This analysis investigates how job perceptions

and social support, together and separately, influence an inmate's choice to endorse secrecy. Table 3 presents the results in four models.

Model 1, the *base model*, considers the effects of age, race, offense, and discrimination on adopting secrecy. In this model both age and discrimination are significantly related to secrecy<sup>6</sup>. This means that older inmates are more likely to be secretive. It also shows that the more discrimination an inmate perceives, the more likely he is to adopt secrecy. Being white was only marginally but positively significant in this model, indicating minority resistance to secrecy as a coping strategy. Not surprisingly, sex offenders, arguably the group with the most motive to be secretive, are marginally significant. The other sentences, however, do not predict secrecy possibly because they are far less heinous in nature. Simply put, a drug offender or someone convicted of larceny would not see the need to be secretive upon release. When murders were included in the model they were negatively associated with secrecy and none of the offenses were significant; however, when they were used as the reference group, sex offenders emerged as the only significant offense group, suggesting the overwhelming tendency for sex offenders to be secret outweighs the motive for murderers to accommodate the parole board. This also shows how different sex offenders and murderers are from any other offense group. Additionally, old law inmates were marginally significant and negatively correlated. Thus, inmates sentenced under the old law (75 percent of murders and 30 percent of sex offenders) are less likely to endorse secrecy. This may be accounted for by pressure to please the parole board and lack of an

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<sup>6</sup> When age was not included as a control in the model, old law and race lost significance while sex offenders became more significant. This implies that, when included, age isn't accounting for the influence of old law but is for race.



actual release date. While the other offense variables do not appear to have an influence on secrecy, they are included in all subsequent models as a control.

Model 2, the *social support* model, tests the amount of influence social support networks (relationship after coming to prison, ex-convict family members, and attending church after prison) have on secrecy as a coping strategy while controlling for age, race, offense, and discrimination. As demonstrated in the results shown in Table 3, age and discrimination remain highly significant. Again sex offenders account for offense influences on secrecy. Attending church after prison was highly significant in this model and each negatively correlated, implying that inmates would use the church as a social support resource and making secrecy less likely. Religiosity is becoming increasing popular within the prisons, especially among minority groups. T-tests show minority inmates were much more likely to report attending church after release than white inmates ( $t = 6.51, p < .001$ ). Having ex-convict family members was marginally significant in the model and also negatively correlated. Those inmates with family members who had been to prison are much more likely to reject secrecy. Being sentenced under the old law has an even stronger negative effect when support is taken into account.

Model 3, the *job* model, examines the role job perceptions play in adopting secrecy while controlling for age, race, offense, and discrimination. Again, age and discrimination are highly significant in this model, and being white becomes important. Being sentenced under the old law remains marginally significant and negatively correlated. Also highly significant in this model is the “getting a job will be” variable, which asks respondents to rate how difficult they perceive obtaining employment will be

upon release. This suggests that the more difficult an inmate perceives obtaining employment, the more likely to use secrecy, even when other factors are taken into account.

Finally, in model 4, the *full model*, all significant variables from the job and secrecy models are combined, and also controls for race, old law, and discrimination. As the fifth column in Table 3 shows, being white loses significance when predictors for social support and job perceptions are combined and taken into account. As one would expect, discrimination remains highly significant in the final model. Surprisingly, old law becomes more significant in the final model than in any other of the models, as well as negatively associated with secrecy. Since old law inmates do not have an official release date and a motive to tell the parole board what it wants to hear, the jump in not endorsing secrecy might be a tendency to answer the questions in a socially acceptable manner. Social support variables remain significant and negatively associated when combined with job perceptions; however, both social support and job perceptions lose some weight when taken into account together. This supports the idea that minorities, whom have worse job perceptions and more social support when released than whites, are less likely to be secretive about their past.

Age dynamics, perceived discrimination, and type of sentence all have an effect on the way inmates respond to secrecy. Surprisingly, when all the significant variables are in a model together, race and sex offenders are no longer significant. Thus, social support and job perceptions account for the variance attributed to race and offense in other models. As expected, old law inmates and social support variables are negatively associated with secrecy, although old law inmates may have other reasons to shy away

from secrecy. Minority inmates are consistently negatively associated with secrecy, largely due to their social support networks which may decrease their perception of discrimination.

## **Discussion**

Prisoners are considered many things, among them a political hot potato, huge moneymakers, and media ratings boosters. In social science research they are all but forgotten as a result of bureaucratic hurdles and disinterest in the group as subjects for research in general. Consequently, social scientists lack data on attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of inmates and must rely on outdated research. The main outlet for public information on prisoners and the criminal justice system is the media—both print and television. Media’s reporting of crime provides the public with a biased, inaccurate portrayal of crime promoting cultural myths and fear (Warr 1980). This paper offers empirical evidence that can better begin to explain and understand this population.

The sample in this research was a little whiter, slightly more educated, and more likely to have been legally employed before prison than that of a typical prison population in the United States. Additionally, typical of a U.S. prison population, the majority of the sample had relatives who had also been to prison.

The inmates also offered information regarding their personal lives. The majority of the inmates reported the difficulty of sustaining meaningful relationships upon incarceration. For many, it seems this loss of social support was coupled with the gain of another—religiosity. Religion is quite popular among inmates, especially minority inmates. Even though minority inmates reported more religiosity (81.5 percent of

minority inmates and only 52.8 percent of white inmates), the majority of all inmates indicated their willingness to attend church upon release (68.7 percent of all inmates). Their perceived employment chances, on the other hand, were surprisingly low. Not only did they expect to be employed in low prestige occupations, but their responses for which job they wanted upon release were rather modest, regardless of race.

As anticipated, the inmates perceived discrimination upon return to society in a variety of arenas including employment and public roles. They also indicated that they are viewed as lacking intelligence, dishonest, and deserve differential treatment. Furthermore, most people are not willing to accept them as a close friend. Surprisingly, discrimination and devaluation scores were consistently and significantly higher among white inmates than minority inmates. This finding suggests that discrimination might not necessarily increase for those whom are already stigmatized. Thus, minority inmates, whom are already discriminated against because of race, are not harmed by the additional stigma of ex-con. Since minority ex-convicts far outnumber whites, the whites (the minority in prison populations) are more impacted by the label ex-con.

As a result of this perceived discrimination, it can be expected that secrecy would be adopted by inmates as a coping strategy. The results of the regression analysis support this idea, and discrimination was consistently significant and positively associated with secrecy in every model. Simply put, inmates perceiving more discrimination are more likely to be secretive. In this case secrecy corresponds to the level of perceived discrimination. Additionally, likelihood of secrecy can be explained largely by the law under which the inmate was sentenced. Old law inmates, those who were sentenced before 1997, differ from new law inmates in the fact that they do not have a determinate

sentence. Instead, inmates sentenced under the old law system have opportunities for getting out on parole. New law inmates are given a flat sentence and must serve the entire sentence, but they know the exact date they are going home. Old law inmates, on the other hand, are at the mercy of a parole board and must prove to them they are rehabilitated and worthy of release. Assuming the inmate wants to be released, he might be more likely to say what he perceives the parole board wants to hear. Given this motive to lie, it is possible that this explains the negative association old law inmates have with secrecy. Offense differences also support this idea. Murderers, the reference group for offense in all the models, were consistently *negatively* associated with secrecy; however, when they are left out they are significantly different from the other offense groups. Murderers also comprise three fourths of the old law population, which was also negatively associated with secrecy. Not surprisingly, sex offenders were positively associated with secrecy. Arguably the *most* discriminated against offense group, even within the inmate hierarchy itself; sex offenders have the most reasons to be secretive. Unlike other inmates, sex offenders are subject to community notification laws upon release and their personal information is made readily available for public information on the internet, and they are widely scrutinized in the media.

In addition to discrimination and offense, social support groups were also a good predictor of secrecy. As expected, social support variables were negatively associated with secrecy. The relationship to the religious community is a crucial component of an inmate's social support network. In minorities, where the transition from prison back into the religious community is perceived to be embraced with open arms, secrecy is less likely. Those inmates with family members who had been to prison were also less likely

to endorse secrecy. Difficulty in obtaining employment was also a good predictor of secrecy. The harder an inmate thought it would be to get a job, the more likely to endorse secrecy. These inmates are willing to do things like lie about criminal background in order to obtain employment. In the harsh world of reality, where unemployment is a huge predictor for recidivism, the ends apparently justify the means. Employment is vital to staying out of prison.

When all factors were taken into account, race no longer was a good predictor of secrecy. However, that's not to say there aren't racial differences in secrecy or that there may not be racial differences in terms of support. Race was consistently positively associated with secrecy supporting the idea that white inmates were more willing to be secretive than blacks, whether as a result of more perceived discrimination by whites or more rejection of secrecy from minorities. Still, social support variables and discrimination were the better predictors of secrecy. Whites were more likely to perceive more discrimination and minorities were more likely to have large social support groups available upon release, providing additional evidence for the racial differences in likelihood to adopt secrecy.

In sum, it is becoming increasingly rare for social scientists to be granted access into the prisons to conduct research. Hopefully, the research presented in this paper will be a catalyst for subsequent research. The findings from this research have broad implications. Most noteworthy, the idea that stigmatization is not a cumulative process. Minority inmates, already stigmatized, do not perceive discrimination the same way that white inmates do. Being an ex-convict has a different connotation in the minority community than it does among whites. Also, the willingness to adopt secrecy is best

predicted by discrimination and social support networks. Inmates perceiving high degrees of discrimination will be more likely to adopt secrecy and having social support networks in place reduces secrecy. Perceptions of obtaining employment also seem to be indicators of secrecy. As these results show, prison research can still yield significant findings about incarcerated individuals. This research only begins to scratch the surface of inmate attitudes and perceptions. Certainly, further investigation would be greatly beneficial to social scientists, especially as prisons are becoming another powerful means of social control.

**Table 1: Names, Descriptions, Sources, Means, and Standard Deviations of Variables Used in Secrecy Regression Analysis**

<i>Variable Name</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Source</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>
<b>Age</b>	# of age in years	Inmate Sample	34.81	10.65
<b>White</b>	White inmates	Inmate Sample	.47	.50
<b>Sex Offense</b>	Inmates convicted of sex offense	Inmate Sample	.17	.38
<b>Drug Offense</b>	Inmates convicted of drug offense	Inmate Sample	.18	.39
<b>Other Offense</b>	Inmates convicted of something other than murder, drug, or sex offense	Inmate Sample	.51	.50
<b>Old Law</b>	Inmates sentenced under old law guidelines	Inmate Sample	.26	.44
<b>Discrimination Scale</b>	Amount of discrimination perceived	Inmate Sample	4.15	.84
<b>Relationship after coming to prison</b>	Inmates having a relationship after coming to prison	Inmate Sample	.28	.45
<b>Church after release</b>	Inmates planning to attend church after release	Inmate Sample	.69	.46
<b>Ex-convict family members</b>	Inmates with family members who have been to prison	Inmate Sample	.59	.49
<b>Getting a job will be</b>	Inmate perception of how hard it will be to gain employment (1 = very easy, 4 = very hard)	Inmate Sample	2.60	1.00



**Table 2: Means and Standard Deviations of Items Indicating White, Black, and Total Inmates' Perception of Discrimination of Ex-Convicts (six-point "Strongly disagree=1" to "Strongly agree"=6); \* indicates reverse scoring; Standard Deviations in Parentheses.**

	<i>Item</i>	<i>Total Inmates</i>	<i>White Inmates</i>	<i>Minority Inmates</i>
1	Most people would accept an ex-con as a close friend.*	3.81*** (1.45)	3.97*** (1.44)	3.66 (1.43)
2	Most people believe that an ex-con is just as smart as the average person.*	3.86*** (1.54)	4.05*** (1.46)	3.69 (1.61)
3	Most people believe that an ex-con is just as trustworthy as the average person.*	4.72*** (1.39)	5.00*** (1.21)	4.45*** (1.51)
4	Most people would let a fully rehabilitated ex-con take care of their children.*	4.70*** (1.44)	4.93*** (1.33)	4.51*** (1.54)
5	Most people feel that going to prison is a sign of personal failure.	4.24*** (1.51)	4.47*** (1.39)	4.01*** (1.60)
6	Most people would not accept an ex-con as a teacher in the public schools.	4.83*** (1.53)	5.09*** (1.31)	4.57*** (1.69)
7	Most people think less of a person who has been to prison.	4.62*** (1.38)	4.94*** (1.11)	4.29*** (1.55)
8	Most employers will hire an ex-con if he is qualified for the job.*	3.97*** (1.36)	3.99*** (1.34)	3.96*** (1.40)
9	Most people in my community would treat an ex-con like anyone else.*	3.78*** (1.55)	4.15*** (1.44)	3.39 (1.58)
10	Most women would not date a man who has been to prison.	3.01*** (1.44)	3.29*** (1.44)	2.75*** (1.43)
11	Most people will not take an ex-con's opinions seriously.	3.61 (1.39)	3.80*** (1.37)	3.43 (1.42)
12	Most employers prefer not to hire ex-cons.	4.63*** (1.33)	4.79*** (1.19)	4.48*** (1.45)
	Summary of item scale, <i>N</i> = 440; <i>N</i> =202; <i>N</i> =218	4.15*** (.84)	4.37*** (.83)	3.93*** (.80)

Note: \*\*\* Mean significantly different from 3.5 midpoint at  $p < .001$ .

**Table 3: Regression Analysis of Select Variables on the Likelihood Inmates Will Choose Secrecy as a Coping Strategy to Manage the Label “Ex-Con” Upon Release (standard errors in parentheses)**

<b>Independent Variable</b>	<b>Model 1 Base Model</b>	<b>Model 2 Social Support Model</b>	<b>Model 3 Job Model</b>	<b>Model 4 Full Model</b>
<b>Age</b>	.021*** (.005)	.019*** (.005)	.021*** (.005)	.019*** (.005)
<b>White</b>	.234* (.094)	.080 (.102)	.257** (.095)	.151 (.100)
<b>Sex Offense</b>	.335* (.171)	.346* (.173)	.259 (.173)	.064 (.122)
<b>Drug Offense</b>	.289 (.181)	.244 (.189)	.310 (.182)	
<b>Other Offense</b>	.247 (.154)	.187 (.158)	.292 (.155)	
<b>Old Law</b>	-.316* (.126)	-.355** (.128)	-.284* (.126)	-.410*** (.113)
<b>Discrimination Scale</b>	.312*** (.056)	.323*** (.057)	.233*** (.060)	.222*** (.060)
<b>Relationship After Coming to Prison</b>		.124 (.100)		
<b>Church After Release</b>		-.370*** (.101)		-.300** (.099)
<b>Ex-Convict Family Members</b>		-.194* (.096)		-.209* (.094)
<b>Getting A Job Will Be</b>			.180*** (.050)	.168** (.049)
<b>Constant</b>	.500 (.315)	.968 (.342)	.364 (.318)	1.14 (.293)
<b>F-ratio</b>	12.58	10.51	11.60	12.83
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	.186	.228	.200	.224
<b>N</b>	391	365	380	363

Note: p<.05\* p<.01\*\* p<.001\*\*\*

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