

# Study finds support for second look sentencing

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Washington, D.C., has recently implemented second look sentencing,

giving incarcerated individuals who committed their crime while young the opportunity to petition a judge to take a second look and consider releasing them from prison. Legislators in about half of U.S. states have recently introduced second look bills, and federal efforts to allow resentencing for youth crimes have bipartisan support.

A new study examined local and global support for second look sentencing. The study found that most respondents backed this approach, regardless of the incarcerated individual's age. In addition, support was likely to rise when petitioners signaled their intent to reform (e.g., by completing a rehabilitation program or obtaining a recommendation from the warden) and had the support of the victim or their family.

The study was conducted by researchers at the University of Cincinnati, Georgia Southern University, Xavier University, University at Albany State University of New York, Arizona State University, and the University of South Florida. It appears in *Criminology & Public Policy*.

In the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, one of the main characters is an inmate who committed a crime as a youth and is granted release when he tells the parole board he regrets the crime. The story reveals an issue in long-term incarceration: People who commit serious crimes as juveniles or in early adulthood may not be the same 15, 20, or 30 years later. In addition, because the continued incarceration of reformed individuals is costly and does not enhance [public safety](#), considerations of utility argue for releasing prisoners who have been incarcerated for decades.

In the last five years, elected officials in Washington, D.C., have implemented two laws that allow offenders convicted of serious offenses as youth to petition a judge to take a second look at their sentence after they have served a minimum of 15 years. In this study, researchers assessed [public support](#) for second look sentencing, exploring opinions

from two national samples.

"Our goal was to examine whether public opinion is favorable to reducing lengthy sentences for violent crimes committed while young and, if so, whether certain factors shape preferences for who should be prioritized for release," explains Amanda Graham, assistant professor of criminal justice and criminology at Georgia Southern University, who co-authored the study. "In short, we wanted to know if there could be a Shawshank Redemption effect."

Data for the study came from two national-level experimental surveys. The main survey, conducted in September 2021, used Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), a crowdsourcing marketplace, to garner responses from more than 1,000 U.S. residents 18 years and older. Most respondents were White, male, married, and had a bachelor's degree or higher. The average age of the respondents was 38 and the median income was \$60,000 to \$99,999.

Researchers also embedded some of the same questions into a YouGov survey conducted in June 2022 to explore the generalizability of their results. YouGov samples are matched and weighted to approximate the adult U.S. population on age, gender, race, education, region, and voting behavior. More than 1,000 respondents completed the YouGov survey.

The first experiment, which was conducted in both the MTurk and the YouGov surveys, assessed respondents' global support for second look sentencing depending on the applicant's age at the time they committed the crime (either under 18 or under 25). In the MTurk sample, researchers included a second experiment to assess whether support for second look sentencing was conditioned by characteristics of the particular case; respondents were given three profiles of petitioners, each of which differed in terms of the individual, the offense, and relevant statements made by interested parties (e.g., warden, victim, victim's

family).

Globally, respondents supported second look sentencing, the study found. In the first experiment, 75% of the MTurk respondents favored the policy, with more than 25% of them indicating strong support. In the YouGov sample, more than 50% expressed support, with about 20% supporting the proposal strongly. In both experiments, support was virtually equal regardless of the age cutoff. Opposition to second look sentencing was very low in both samples: 10% for MTurk respondents and 16% for YouGov respondents. In addition:

- Support was significantly higher for petitioners who were younger at the time of their crime and older at the time of their petition, and thus had served longer sentences.
- While racial resentment was significantly associated with more punitive attitudes (i.e., less support for release), the race of the petitioner did not significantly affect respondents' attitudes about second look sentencing.
- Completing an in-prison [rehabilitation program](#) and having a favorable statement from the warden attesting to the petitioner's good behavior boosted respondents' support for inmates' release.
- Having a statement from the victim of the [crime](#) that supported release exerted sizable and significant effects on respondents' [support](#) for early release.

These findings suggest that openness to second look sentencing is not particular to Washington, D.C., but is likely to exist across the country. The endorsement of this reform is consistent with other studies that show that Americans believe people with criminal convictions can change.

"Evidence is growing that declining public punitiveness in the United States is associated with the adoption of a more progressive approach to

sanctioning, which is reflected in the decreasing rate of executions and the shrinking prison population," notes Graham.

"Our findings suggest that many members of the public believe in a Shawshank Redemption effect—that individuals who committed serious crimes as teenagers or [young adults](#) can mature into different people and warrant a second look, with the possibility of early release if they have earned it."

**More information:** Kellie R. Hannan et al, Public support for second look sentencing: Is there a Shawshank redemption effect?, *Criminology & Public Policy* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/1745-9133.12616](https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9133.12616)

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