

In the US, public support for redeemability of Black offenders is widespread

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In criminal justice, public belief in redeemability reduces punitiveness and increases support for policy measures like rehabilitation, expungement, and housing and employment opportunities. In a new

study, researchers examined the effects of racial attitudes on redeemability—the belief that offenders can change and go on to lead law-abiding lives. Belief in redeemability was high for offenders in general as well as for Black offenders, but White nationalism reduced White people's beliefs in the redeemability of Black offenders.

The study was conducted by Leah C. Butler, incoming assistant professor of criminal justice at the University of Cincinnati (UC), Francis Cullen, professor emeritus of criminal justice at UC, and Velmer S. Burton, of the Center for Justice and Communities at UC. It appears in the journal *Criminology*.

"Racial attitudes influence a range of criminal justice policy opinions, with racial animus playing a role in virtually all [criminal justice](#) policy preferences," explains Butler, who led the study. "But the effects of these attitudes on individuals' beliefs about redeemability and condemnation have not been fully explored, especially in the context of Black people who have committed crimes."

In their study, researchers sought to determine whether offenders' race influences the degree to which members of a community believe offenders can earn or deserve redemption.

Using data from a 2019 YouGov survey of a national sample of more than 750 White adults in the United States, the researchers estimated the effects of racial resentment, racial sympathy, and White nationalism on three measures of belief in redeemability: a race-neutral measure, a measure of belief in the redeemability of Black offenders, and a measure of condemnation of Black offenders.

The study also considered respondents' demographics (age, gender, education, employment, [marital status](#), and geographic region), [political affiliation](#), cultural beliefs (religious affiliation, religiosity,

egalitarianism), and the salience of crime and threat in individuals' lives.

Belief in redeemability was high, for offenders in general and for Black offenders, with 70 to 80 percent of respondents agreeing that [offender reform](#) is possible and should be valued.

Researchers then used data from a 2022 YouGov survey of approximately 1,500 White adults in the United States, finding similar results. Racial sympathy and White nationalism had significant effects across all three outcomes, with the effect of White nationalism on condemnation of Black offenders being the largest across the three models.

"Our findings suggest that although most White people in the United States agree that formerly incarcerated individuals are redeemable, [racial attitudes](#) influence these beliefs, especially for Black offenders," notes Butler

The findings have implications for policy, the authors suggest. Redemption-based policies (e.g., hiring people with felony convictions, removing voting rights restrictions) require [public support](#), so the effects of racial sympathy and White nationalism on belief in redeemability can inform how policymakers and reformers frame policies to maximize public support.

"Our work highlights that race and its effects in the United States are dynamic, not static," says Butler. "That is why we moved beyond the concept of racial resentment to conceptualize and measure distinct racial attitudes that may contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how adults in the United States think and feel about race."

More information: Leah C. Butler et al, Racial attitudes and belief in redeemability: Most Whites believe justice-involved Black people can

change, *Criminology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/1745-9125.12331](https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.12331)

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