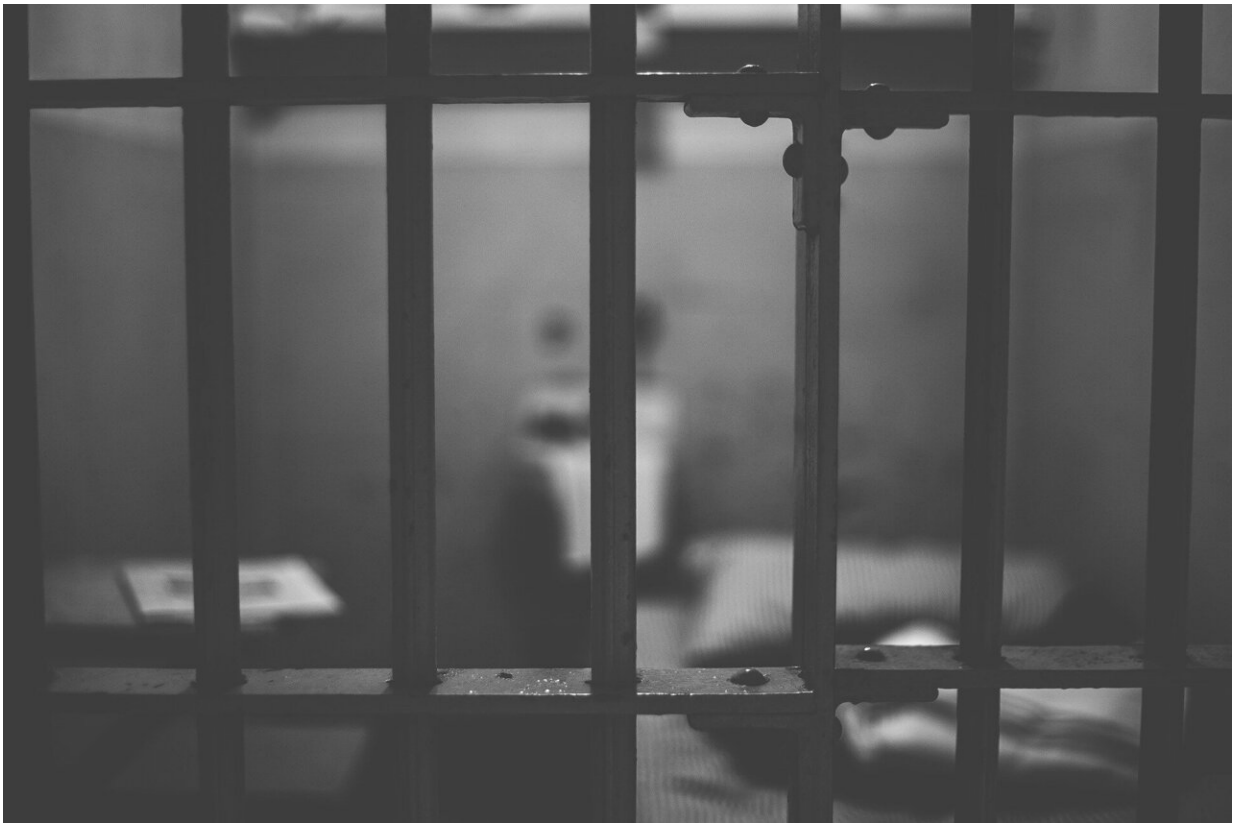


Study shows having a criminal record does not mean a person is intrinsically immoral

May 3 2023



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Assuming that people with a criminal record are inherently more inclined to break the rules is wrong, according to a paper published in the *Journal of Experimental Criminology* by Joachim Vosgerau (Bocconi)

and Sarah Kuehn (Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania, U.S.). The authors wanted to test both the actual propensity to cheat of former inmates compared with people who had never been charged, and whether the general public has a bias against former convicts.

The authors ran an experiment in the U.S. in the form of a game deliberately designed to allow a margin for cheating, which could result in a [financial gain](#) at the expense of a fellow player. This game was played by two otherwise similar groups of participants, one half former prison inmates on parole and the other half people without a criminal record. Cheating at this game, the authors infer, is a proxy for [immoral behavior](#) in any context.

The experiment showed that neither group was more likely to cheat than the other: participants on parole, that is, played just as honestly as people with no criminal record. After the game ended, the authors set up a survey in which a nationally representative sample of over 2,400 respondents were first instructed on how the game worked, and subsequently asked to predict the prevalence of deceitful behavior for each group of players.

Respondents overestimated the extent of deceitful behavior for all participants in the game, but this effect was stronger when predicting how often players on parole had cheated. Respondents who agreed the most with the statement "Once a criminal, always a criminal," included in the survey, were also the ones who gave the highest overestimates of cheating by players on parole.

"The results of our two studies show that people incorrectly believe people on parole as more likely to be deceitful than participants without a [criminal record](#), suggesting that the public in general underestimates redeemability and overestimates the stability of immorality in real life, across domains and over time," says Professor Vosgerau.

"The overestimation of the persistence of other people's immorality can have detrimental consequences, as it contributes to an overreliance on incarceration as a response to crime as well as other punitive and stigmatizing attitudes and criminal justice policies."

More information: Sarah Kuehn et al, The public's overestimation of immorality of formerly incarcerated people, *Journal of Experimental Criminology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1007/s11292-022-09534-w](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11292-022-09534-w)

Provided by Bocconi University

Citation: Study shows having a criminal record does not mean a person is intrinsically immoral (2023, May 3) retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-05-criminal-person-intrinsically-immoral.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.