Third-party Views of Incarceration: Justice, Desistance, and Offender Reintegration

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One potential reason for punishing criminal offenders is so that third parties will become willing to socially reintegrate the offenders after their punishments have been completed. Another reason is simply to satisfy third-party desires that appropriate punishments be issued. In an experimental study, conducted with undergraduate students in South Africa, it was found that increasing the length of incarceration had a causal effect on increasing both reintegration willingness and punishment appropriateness, but the effect on reintegration willingness was substantially smaller. Also, two intermediary punishment goals were tested as mediators: the perceived likelihood of criminal desistance, and the perceived attainment of punitive justice. For the relationship between length of incarceration and reintegration willingness, desistance acted as a mediator but punitive justice did not. The findings indicate that, in order to increase reintegration willingness, policies need to increase the perceived likelihood of desistance rather than the perceived attainment of punitive justice.

Keywords: criminal justice, incarceration, offender reintegration, desistance, public opinion.

Crimes that occur within a society may not only harm individual victims but can also affect the surrounding social group. For instance, crimes can undermine important normative values and have a negative impact upon the overarching social order of the group (Rucker, Polifroni, Tetlock, & Scott, 2004; Vidmar, 2000). As such, third parties can support the idea of punishing offenders, even when they were not directly affected by the crimes themselves (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004; Vidmar & Miller, 1980). While a number of studies have looked at why third parties support the use of punishment (e.g. Darley, Carlsmith, & Robinson, 2000; Gerber & Jackson, 2013), less research has been done on third-party views regarding the outcomes of

punishment. In other words, what do completed punishments accomplish, from the perspective of third parties?

One type of punishment that offenders can receive is a term of incarceration. In 2015, the United States had almost 1.5 million people serving a prison sentence at the state and federal levels (Carson & Anderson, 2016). In the same year, the number of people serving a term of incarceration in South Africa was over 100,000 (Department of Correctional Services, 2016). With a significant policy reliance on the use of incarceration, it is worthwhile to investigate, specifically, whether the length of incarceration affects certain punishment outcomes.

One important outcome is whether third parties would be more willing to reintegrate

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offenders socially after they have completed, or 'served', their terms of incarceration. The social reintegration of an offender can include being willing to live and work in close proximity to an offender, and its relationship to incarceration has some theoretical backing. For example, it has been argued that the use of punishment receives third-party support because of the lay belief that punishment will reform the offender's behaviour, thereby reducing the likelihood that the offender will commit another crime in the future (Carlsmith, 2006; Okimoto & Wenzel, 2009). As such, it is possible that an increase in the length of incarceration might increase the willingness of third parties to reintegrate the offender socially after being released. However, this effect has not been tested until now.

Another important outcome is whether third parties perceive a certain length of incarceration to be the appropriate amount of punishment. Prior research has found that the amount of punishment considered to be the appropriate amount is related to the seriousness of the crime (Carlsmith, 2008; Gerber & Jackson, 2013). When a punishment falls below the seriousness of the crime, it can be viewed as too lenient. If the amount of punishment increases, it can then be seen as a more appropriate punishment, up to the point where it matches the seriousness of the crime (Gromet & Darley, 2006). This relationship, between the amount of punishment and the appropriateness of the punishment, has already been demonstrated in prior research (e.g. McFatter, 1982). However, the present study included this relationship so that it could be contrasted with the relationship involving the willingness to reintegrate the offender.

Whether third parties view a punishment as appropriate, and whether they are willing to reintegrate offenders after completing a punishment, are important goals for policy-makers and criminal justice systems to pursue. Regarding the appropriateness of punishment, should large discrepancies exist between what third parties view as appropriate and what the

justice system issues as punishment, then public mistrust and even contempt can increase for criminal justice authorities and institutions (Nadler, 2005; Robinson & Darley, 1995). Regarding reintegration willingness, should offenders experience a lack of job opportunities, or a reduced sense of social support and belonging after release, then their chances for recidivism may increase (Astone, 1982; Davis, Bahr, & Ward, 2012; Fischer, Shinn, Shrout, & Tsemberis, 2008).

Although both goals are important, it was anticipated that an increase in the length of incarceration would have a greater effect on increasing the perceived appropriateness of the punishment than on increasing the willingness of third parties to reintegrate the offender socially. Such a difference in effect sizes would suggest that increasing the length of incarceration is more adept at satisfying third-party concerns regarding appropriate punishments than in affecting the willingness of third parties to reintegrate released offenders socially. Including both goals in a single study would allow a direct comparison of how well incarceration achieves each of them.

Another aim of the study was to test whether two intermediary punishment goals would act as mediators. The two intermediary goals were (a) whether third parties thought the offender was less likely to commit a crime again, thereby increasing the offender's likelihood of desistance, and (b) whether third parties thought the offender suffered sufficiently, thereby achieving a type of punitive justice (see Figure 1).

Desistance refers to the process of abstaining from criminal activity. A number of factors have been identified in the research literature as increasing the likelihood of desistance. For example, desistance is more likely when released offenders have meaningful social ties, whether they come through relationships, parenthood or employment (Sampson & Laub, 1993; Savolainen, 2009). However, the present article looks at whether length of incarceration would increase the likelihood of desistance

Figure 1. Proposed path model. The coefficients of all paths were expected to be positive. A colour version of this figure can be found online at www.tandfonline.com/tppl

from the perspective of third parties. The potential relationship between incarceration and desistance could be based on lay views that, while in prison, offenders would come to understand the wrongfulness of their crimes and to respect the values of society. These views reflect, at least superficially, the transformation narratives that are sometimes provided by ex-offenders who have desisted from crime. Specifically, ex-offenders sometimes describe themselves as having a different identity compared to when the crime occurred, an identity that supports conventional moral values and is inconsistent with criminality (Liem & Richardson, 2014; Marsh, 2011). Considering this aspect of desistance, it is possible that third parties may believe that incarceration would provide a mechanism by which offenders would experience a change in outlook, one that supports societal values and refutes criminality. Another way in which third parties might believe that incarceration would increase the likelihood of desistance is through deterrence. In this regard, third parties might believe that incarceration could instil a fear of punishment into offenders that would then decrease the likelihood for future criminal activity (Carlsmith, 2006). It was predicted that an increase in the length of incarceration would lead to an increase in the perceived likelihood of desistance (i.e. the offender affirms law-abiding behaviour and also desires to avoid punishment).

Regarding the punitive justice mediator, one rationale for issuing punishments is to inflict suffering on an offender for the sake of justice (Gerber & Jackson, 2013). The suffering that should be experienced by an offender does not necessarily need to be physical, however, but could be psychological in nature. A term of incarceration could be seen as inflicting psychological suffering on an offender in a variety of ways. For example, a term of incarceration could show the offender that he or she is now held in less regard by the surrounding social group (Janoff-Bulman & Werther, 2008; Okimoto & Wenzel, 2009). Similarly, incarceration could be seen as a way of inflicting humiliation or shame on the offender, the experience of which can be distressing (Haidt, 2003). Similar to the prediction regarding desistance, it was anticipated that an increase in the length of incarceration would cause an increase in the perceived attainment of punitive justice.

Prior research as already shown that the amount of punishment that is completed by an offender is related to both mediators: More punishment is perceived as being more likely to deter the offender from committing additional crimes in the future (McFatter, 1982); and more punishment is perceived as inflicting greater suffering on the offender and as lowering the offender's status (Gerber & Jackson, 2013). Prior research has also shown that the perceived likelihood of desistance is related to

the perceived appropriateness of the punishment (Okimoto & Wenzel, 2009).

Whether the two mediators are related to the willingness of third parties to socially reintegrate released offenders has not yet been tested. In addition, regarding punishment appropriateness, although some of the direct paths leading to and stemming from the mediators have been found in prior research, tests of the full mediation effects have not yet been conducted.

For the relationship between the length of incarceration and reintegration willingness, it was predicted that desistance would act as a mediator but that punitive justice would not. Specifically, an increase in incarceration would cause an increase in the likelihood of desistance, and, with an increase in desistance, third parties would be more willing to live and work in close proximity to the offender. On the other hand, it was expected that the infliction of psychological suffering on the offender would not be related to reintegration willingness and would therefore not act as a mediator between the length of incarceration and willingness to reintegrate the offender. If these hypotheses are supported by the study, it would indicate that the effect of incarceration on reintegration willingness is due to the likelihood of desistance rather than the achievement of punitive justice. Regarding the relationship between the length of incarceration and the appropriateness of the punishment, it was anticipated that desistance and punitive justice would both act as mediators.

Overview of the present research

Participants were presented with scenarios that depicted an offender who had committed a crime and had completed a certain length of incarceration. They then reported the degree to which they thought desistance had occurred, the degree to which they thought punitive justice was achieved, the degree to which they were willing to reintegrate the offender

socially and the degree to which they thought the punishment was appropriate.

Each participant read one scenario of an offender who had completed a certain length of incarceration. The length of incarceration that was reported in each scenario, however, varied across participants. For example, some participants read that the offender served one day in prison while some read that the offender served one year in prison. The length of incarceration was manipulated in order to test, experimentally, the effects that the length of incarceration might have on the mediator and outcome variables.

The study also tested whether the results would generalize across different types of criminal activity. To this end, three different types of crime were used in the study: assault, burglary and drug dealing. All three types of crime were included in each punishment condition. For example, in the '1 day in prison' condition, a third of the participants read about an offender who committed an assault crime and served 1 day in prison, a third read about an offender who committed burglary and served 1 day in prison and a third read about an offender who sold drugs and served 1 day in prison.

The same assault crime, the same burglary crime and the same drug dealing crime were used in each punishment condition. It was anticipated that the length of incarceration would have an effect on the mediator and outcome variables but that the type of crime would not. Analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted first as a test of the causal effects. Afterwards, structural equation modelling was conducted to test the full path model and the mediation effects.

Before conducting the study, it was necessary to develop the assault, burglary and drug dealing crimes. Further, each crime needed to be equal in terms of how much incarceration was considered to be the appropriate amount. Should the crimes differ significantly in that regard, then such a difference could be a confound when testing whether the proposed

relationships varied across crime type. A pilot study was therefore conducted to develop the crime scenarios.

Pilot study

Method

Participants and procedure

Approval for the study was granted by a university institutional review board. Participants were undergraduates at a university in South Africa who volunteered to participate in the online study. Each participant was presented with three scenarios: one assault scenario, one burglary scenario and one drug dealing scenario (unlike in the main study where each participant was presented with only one crime scenario). For each participant, the three scenarios were presented in random order.

For each scenario, participants were asked to indicate the length of incarceration that the offender should receive for the crime that was committed. The aim was to develop an assault, a burglary and a drug dealing scenario for which the appropriate length of incarceration was one year in prison. The one-year-in-prison level was chosen because it represented a term of incarceration of moderate severity and would therefore not result in ceiling effects for the variables measured in the main study.

In addition, it was anticipated that the length of incarceration considered to be the appropriate amount would be higher in the main study than in the pilot study. The reason was that the participants in the two studies were asked to respond to the crimes in two different ways. In the pilot study, participants were asked to assign a punishment to an offender, whereas in the main study, participants were asked to evaluate a punishment that had already been assigned. Punishing offenders involves the infliction of harm and therefore involves a moral deliberation. Prior research on moral deliberations has found that when participants are personally involved in the process of inflicting harm, such as when assigning a punishment, they can be more

reluctant than when they are not personally involved, such as when evaluating a punishment that has already been assigned by someone else (Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001). Therefore, while the plan for the pilot study was to focus on the one-year-in-prison term of incarceration, the plan for the main study was to include an additional term of incarceration that was longer than one year, in case the longer term would be perceived as the appropriate amount when in the process of evaluating the punishment.

The crime scenarios were rewritten and adjusted over six iterations of the pilot study. The sixth iteration included 51 participants. The sample was 63% female and 37% male, and ranged in age from 25 years old to 53 years old ($M = 35.75$, $SD = 6.98$).

Materials

To measure the appropriate term of incarceration an offender should receive, participants were asked the following question: 'The person in the description was arrested and was found guilty of a crime. What do you think is an appropriate punishment for this offender?' Responses were provided on an 11-point scale, which was adapted from a 13-point version developed by Robinson and Darley (1995; see Figure 2). The scale has been used in a number of previous studies (Carlsmith, Darley, & Robinson, 2002; Darley et al., 2000; Weiner, Graham, & Reyna, 1997). Also, while successive terms of incarceration portray substantially longer periods of time, the increases in prison time are perceived, psychologically, as representing approximately equal increases in punishment severity (Erikson & Gibbs, 1979; Gescheider, Catlin, & Fontana, 1982).

Results

The pilot study produced an assault scenario, a burglary scenario and a drug dealing scenario that each had a mean incarceration score close to one year in prison (assault, $M = 6.47$, $SD = 1.50$; burglary, $M = 6.45$, $SD = 1.10$;

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
No punishment	1 day in prison	2 weeks in prison	2 months in prison	6 months in prison	1 year in prison	3 years in prison	7 years in prison	15 years in prison	30 years in prison	Life in prison

Figure 2. Incarceration scale. A colour version of this figure can be found online at www.tandfonline.com/tpp1

drug dealing, $M = 5.98$, $SD = 1.92$). Further, a repeated measures ANOVA showed that the incarceration means for the three scenarios were not significantly different, $F(2, 49) = 1.69$, $p = .195$.

The final assault scenario was: 'A person was accidentally bumped into by another individual on the sidewalk. The person who was bumped into then grabbed a metal pipe and began hitting the other individual, with the pipe, for a number of minutes. During the attack, the victim simply laid on the ground covering his face. As a result of the attack, the victim received a broken arm and a number of cuts and bruises.' The burglary scenario was: 'A person broke into a home and stole a cell-phone and a TV. The value of the items that were taken was a few thousand rands [in South African currency; a few hundred euros].' Finally, the drug dealing scenario was: 'A person sold dagga (i.e. marijuana, cannabis) for a few weeks. The individual made a few thousand rands [in South African currency; a few hundred euros] by selling the drug.'

Main study

Method

Participants

Undergraduate students at a university in South Africa participated in the study on a voluntary basis. The study was online, and 541 students read a description of the study. Of those who became informed of the study, 353 completed the survey and formed the sample. Participants were 59% female and 41% male, and ranged in age from 19 years old to 65 years old ($M = 32.99$, $SD = 8.81$).

Materials

Crime-punishment scenarios. The three crime scenarios (assault, burglary and drug dealing) were each combined with four different lengths of incarceration to create crime-punishment scenarios. The lengths of incarceration were one day in prison, two months in prison, one year in prison and seven years in prison.

To illustrate, the crime-punishment scenarios for the assault crime were: 'A person was accidentally bumped into by another individual on the sidewalk. The person who was bumped into then grabbed a metal pipe and began hitting the other individual, with the pipe, for a number of minutes. During the attack, the victim simply laid on the ground covering his face. As a result of the attack, the victim received a broken arm and a number of cuts and bruises. The individual was convicted and sentenced to a prison term of [1 day, 2 months, 1 year, 7 years]. The individual has now served the complete sentence. That is, he has spent a full [day, 2 months, year, 7 years] in a prison facility and has now been released.'

Desistance through punishment. The perceived likelihood of desistance was measured with six items. The items were developed for the purposes of this study and were based on prior research (Carlsmith, 2006; de Keijser et al., 2002; Gerber & Jackson, 2013; Janoff-Bulman & Werther, 2008; Vidmar & Miller, 1980). The items were 'Because of the punishment, the offender has learned to respect the values that he violated during the crime', 'Because of the punishment, the offender has learned to respect the laws of society', 'Because of the punishment, the offender now understands that what he did was wrong', 'The

punishment has shown the offender that he will be severely punished if he commits the same crime again', 'The punishment has demonstrated to the offender that he will be worse off if he commits another crime' and 'Because of the punishment, the offender has learned that there are consequences for this type of crime'. Responses were provided on a 5-point scale with labels ranging from 'Not at all' to 'To an extreme degree'. Cronbach's alpha for the scale was .95.

Punitive justice. The perceived attainment of punitive justice was measured with four items. The items were developed using the same resource materials as those that were used for the desistance items. The items were 'The punishment made the offender suffer', 'The punishment has lowered the status of the offender', 'The social standing of the offender has been lowered by the punishment', 'The punishment humiliated the offender'. Responses to each item were provided on a 5-point scale with labels ranging from 'Not at all' to 'To an extreme degree'. Cronbach's alpha for the scale was .83.

Reintegration willingness. Reintegration willingness was measured with four items about being willing to live close to the offender and to work with the offender. The items were 'It would be OK with me if this person lived close to my home', 'It would bother me if this person started living in my community' (reverse scored), 'If I owned a business, I would be willing to hire this person' and 'I think this person could be trusted as an employee of a company'. Responses were provided on a 7-point scale ranging from 'Strongly disagree' to 'Strongly agree'. Cronbach's alpha for the scale was .84.

Punishment appropriateness. The appropriateness of the punishment was measured using two items. The first item was: 'How appropriate do you think the punishment was, considering the crime that was committed?' Responses

were given on a 7-point scale with the following labels: 'Much too lenient/too mild', 'Too lenient/too mild', 'A little too lenient/too mild', 'Appropriate', 'A little too severe/too harsh', 'Too severe/too harsh' and 'Much too severe/too harsh'. The second item was: 'What do you think about the amount of time that the offender spent in prison for the crime that was committed?' Responses were given on a 7-point scale with the following labels: 'Much too short', 'Too short', 'A little too short', 'The right amount of time', 'A little too long', 'Too long' and 'Much too long'. Cronbach's alpha for the scale was .94.

Procedure

Participants were randomly presented with one of the crime–punishment scenarios. The four scales were then presented in random order, and the items of each scale were randomized. Approval for the study was issued by a university institutional review board.

Data analysis

For each mediator and outcome variable, a two-way ANOVA was conducted with the length of incarceration and the type of crime as the independent variables. The main reason for conducting the ANOVAs was to determine whether the length of incarceration had a causal effect on the mediator and outcome variables. However, the ANOVAs also tested whether the type of crime had an effect and whether there were any interaction effects. Following the ANOVAs, structural equation modelling was conducted to test the proposed path model. For all of the analyses, the length of incarceration was coded in the following manner: '1 day in prison' was coded as 1, '2 months in prison' was coded as 2, '1 year in prison' was coded as 3 and '7 years in prison' was coded as 4.

Results

Two-way ANOVAs were conducted to test whether the length of incarceration and the

type of crime had significant effects on the mediator and outcome variables. In each case, the length of incarceration had a significant main effect [desistance, $F(3, 341) = 67.32$, $p < .001$; punitive justice, $F(3, 341) = 38.85$, $p < .001$; reintegration willingness, $F(3, 341) = 3.66$, $p = .013$; appropriateness of the punishment, $F(3, 341) = 127.11$, $p < .001$]. Tukey post hoc tests were then conducted to investigate the changes in the mediator and outcome variables across the lengths of incarceration (see Table 1). The results show that each mediator and outcome variable increased as the length of incarceration increased.

The manner in which punishment appropriateness increased requires some additional discussion. In the pilot study, the appropriate length of incarceration that participants assigned to the three crime scenarios was one year in prison. However, it was anticipated that the appropriate length of incarceration would be longer when participants were evaluating punishments that they did not have to assign themselves, which was the design of the main study. This was in fact the case. For the measurement of appropriateness, a score of 4 on the 7-point scale indicated an appropriate punishment had been assigned to the offender. The one-year-in-prison condition received a mean score below 4 ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 1.21$) while the seven-years-in-prison condition

received a mean score above 4 ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 1.04$). Therefore, as can be seen in Table 1, the four lengths of incarceration represented increases in appropriateness from too lenient to roughly appropriate.

The type of crime that was presented in the scenarios did not have a significant main effect on desistance, $F(2, 341) = 1.50$, $p = .224$, on punitive justice, $F(2, 341) = 1.38$, $p = .254$, or on punishment appropriateness, $F(2, 341) = 1.90$, $p = .151$. The type of crime did have a main effect, however, on reintegration willingness, $F(2, 341) = 3.82$, $p = .023$. Post hoc tests showed that the mean reintegration score for burglary ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.40$) was significantly lower than the mean scores for assault ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.42$) and for drug dealing ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 1.47$), both $ps < .05$. There was not a significant difference between assault and drug dealing.

Finally, there were no significant interaction effects between the length of incarceration and the type of crime [desistance, $F(6, 341) = 0.94$, $p = .470$; punitive justice, $F(6, 341) = 0.52$, $p = .792$; reintegration willingness, $F(6, 341) = 1.00$, $p = .428$; punishment appropriateness, $F(6, 341) = 1.47$, $p = .187$].

Regarding the main effect that the type of crime had on reintegration willingness, with burglary receiving a lower mean score, it

Table 1. Mean comparisons across length of incarceration.

Variable	Length of incarceration			
	1 day <i>M (SD)</i>	2 months <i>M (SD)</i>	1 year <i>M (SD)</i>	7 years <i>M (SD)</i>
Desistance through punishment	1.65 (0.77)	2.55 ^a (0.95)	2.74 ^a (1.01)	3.55 (0.81)
Punitive justice	1.59 (0.59)	2.28 ^a (0.84)	2.23 ^a (0.79)	2.84 (0.84)
Reintegration willingness	3.22 ^a (1.38)	3.50 ^a (1.41)	3.54 ^{a,b} (1.52)	3.93 ^b (1.41)
Appropriateness	1.56 (0.72)	2.36 (1.18)	3.29 (1.21)	4.49 (1.04)

Note. Means sharing the same superscript are not significantly different from each other, $p < .05$. For example, the amount of desistance was not significantly different between 2 months and 1 year.

should be noted that there was no interaction effect between type of crime and length of incarceration on reintegration willingness. This suggests that the increase in reintegration willingness, as length of incarceration increased, applied to all of the types of crime and in a similar manner.

Structural equation model

Structural equation modelling was conducted to determine whether the likelihood of desistance and punitive justice acted as mediators. As was the case for the ANOVAs, length of incarceration was coded as 1 for one day in prison, as 2 for two months in prison, and so on. Maximum likelihood estimation was used along with a bias-corrected bootstrapping procedure (1000 bootstrap samples). The analysis showed that the proposed model had adequate fit with the data, $\chi^2(111) = 336.35$, $p < .001$, comparative fit index (CFI) = .95, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .07, standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = .06 (see Figure 3). For clarity, the measurement part of the model is not presented in the figure. However, all of the unstandardized path coefficients between the survey items and their latent constructs were significant, $ps < .001$, and greater than .75.

The total effects that length of incarceration had on the two outcome variables, reintegration willingness and punishment appropriateness, were both significant, both $ps < .01$. However, as expected, the unstandardized total effect on reintegration willingness (.18) was substantially lower than the unstandardized total effect on punishment appropriateness (.89).

Considering direct and indirect effects, length of incarceration did not have a significant direct effect on reintegration willingness. However, there was a significant indirect effect involving desistance (see Table 2). An increase in the length of incarceration was associated with an increase in desistance, and an increase in desistance was associated with an increase in reintegration willingness. On the other hand, while length of incarceration also increased the attainment of punitive justice, the increase in punitive justice did not increase the willingness of third parties to reintegrate the offender.

Regarding the appropriateness of the punishment, length of incarceration had a significant direct effect on this outcome variable. In addition, both mediators produced significant indirect effects: An increase in each mediator was associated with an increase in the perceived appropriateness of the punishment.

Figure 3. Results of structural equation modelling. Solid lines represent significant paths, $p < .05$. Path coefficients are unstandardized. Values in square brackets are 95% confidence intervals. For clarity, the measurement model is not presented. A colour version of this figure can be found online at

Table 2. Indirect and total effects of incarceration on dependent variables.

Variable	Reintegration willingness			Punishment appropriateness		
	Indirect effects			Indirect effects		
	Desistance through punishment	Punitive justice	Total effect	Desistance through punishment	Punitive justice	Total effect
Length of Incarceration	.34* [.18, .50]	.02 [-.14, .17]	.18* [.02, .31] $R^2 = .14$	.20* [.08, .32]	.13* [.01, .26]	.89* [.79, .99] $R^2 = .59$

Note. Effects are unstandardized. Values in square brackets are 95% confidence intervals. R^2 is the percent of variance explained.

* $p < .05$.

Discussion

The present study tested the effect that the length of incarceration would have on the willingness of third parties to reintegrate an offender socially as well as the effect it would have on the perceived appropriateness of the punishment. The study also tested whether the perceived likelihood of desistance and punitive justice acted as mediators.

Both outcomes – reintegration willingness and punishment appropriateness – are important public issues for legislatures and justice systems to address. First, imposing punishments that are perceived to be appropriate by the public can help in maintaining the public's trust in criminal justice institutions (Nadler, 2005; Robinson & Darley, 1995). Second, increasing the public's willingness to socially reintegrate released offenders can improve the offender's functioning and reduce recidivism rates (Hamilton-Smith & Vogel, 2012; Ramutloa, 2014). On the other hand, reintegration restrictions, such as difficulties attaining employment and housing, can lead to financial difficulties and a sense of disempowerment, which can also affect the families and even the communities of ex-offenders (Ispa-Landa & Loeffler, 2016; Kaiser, 2016).

The results from the study show that the length of incarceration that was completed by an offender had a greater total effect on the perceived appropriateness of the punishment than it did on the willingness of third parties to reintegrate the offender socially. Further, considering the mediators in the study, the degree of suffering that was inflicted on the offender, for the purpose of punitive justice, had no effect on the reintegration willingness of third parties. In other words, the degree to which an offender 'paid off a debt' for committing a crime, through suffering, was unrelated to whether third parties were willing to socially reintegrate the offender. On the other hand, the relationship between length of incarceration and reintegration willingness was fully mediated by the perceived likelihood of criminal desistance.

The study shows that the connection between incarceration and reintegration willingness rests on third-party views regarding desistance. This finding may suggest that reintegration willingness could be increased further by incorporating additional methods for increasing desistance into prison sentences. Alternative sentencing options, such as rehabilitation, might be effective in this regard. Rehabilitation programmes such as therapy, education and job training could be seen by third parties as additional ways of improving an offender's behaviour and therefore as ways to increase the likelihood of desistance (Edwards & Mottarella, 2015; Graffam, Shinkfield, & Lavelle, 2014). Previous research has found that third parties do in fact support the use of alternative sentencing options (Gromet & Darley, 2009), and that incorporating them into prison sentences can even reduce the length of incarceration that is needed for a punishment to be seen as appropriate (Gromet & Darley, 2006).

Future research could explore the effects that different types of rehabilitation programmes might have on the willingness of third parties to live and work in close proximity to released offenders. Another area for future research would be to further explore the relationship between length of incarceration and punishment appropriateness. The study found that while criminal desistance and punitive justice both acted as mediators, much of the relationship between length of incarceration and appropriateness was unexplained by the mediators. Another mediator that might account for additional variance in punishment appropriateness is whether the punishment is perceived as reaffirming the social values of the group, not only to the offender but to society at large (Vidmar & Miller, 1980).

A final area for future research would be to test the path model using crimes of different severity levels. One limitation of the present study is that the crimes were moderate in severity. Although three

different types of crime were used, they were all of the same severity level. This was done in the present study to determine whether the results would generalize across crime type, but the study did not test whether the results would generalize across crime severity. Future research could determine whether the results that were found in the present study would also occur for crimes that are more minor and more severe.

Conclusion

Increasing the lengths of incarceration that offenders serve may be effective in satisfying third-party desires that appropriate punishments be issued. However, increasing the lengths of incarceration has less effect on the willingness of third parties to socially reintegrate offenders once they have completed their punishments. Part of the concern regarding released offenders may be based on the possibility that the offenders will commit additional crimes. Developing a better understanding of how the justice system might address this concern could improve the willingness of third parties to socially reintegrate offenders after they have served their sentences.

Ethical standards

Declaration of conflicts of interest

Michael Brubacher has declared no conflicts of interest

Ethical approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee (University of South Africa) and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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