

Forgive and Forget?:

Religiosity and Perceptions of Ex-Offenders

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Abstract

Survey results from 218 students currently enrolled at Saint Mary's College, a Roman Catholic institution, provide quantitative data in order to examine the factors shaping young Catholics' perceptions of ex-offenders. Participants responded to questions relating to demographic characteristics, religiosity, familiarity with Catholic Social Thought, and their opinions and perceptions of ex-offenders. This study finds that regardless of religiosity or knowledge of Catholic Social Thought, young Catholic students at Saint Mary's College tend to possess similar opinions and perceptions of ex-offenders in comparison to non-Catholic students at Saint Mary's College.

According to the Legal Action Center (2004), state and federal prisons release more than 630,000 ex-offenders into society every year, in addition to the thousands released from local institutions. With these numbers, it is no surprise that the issue of ex-offender reintegration has been the topic of numerous literatures and political debates. Ex-offenders must confront and tackle the challenges of reintegration on a daily basis. They not only struggle with the challenges posed by the loss of voting rights, rights to employment, and rights to public housing post-incarceration, but also the difficulties that arise with the label of “ex-offender.” The negative connotations and stigmas attached to the term “ex-offender” can be hard enough to deal with on a daily basis, but when the stigma is combined with the challenges of minimized rights, it is difficult for ex-offenders to successfully reintegrate into society.

While a large volume of literature relating to ex-offenders and the various policies that have been imposed on ex-offenders exists, minimal research has been conducted on individual attitudes toward ex-offenders. Furthermore, there has been little research conducted gauging the perceptions of ex-offenders and their rights from a Catholic standpoint. As with any religious organization, there are varying degrees of religiosity and differing opinions within the Catholic faith. An individual’s level of religiosity will likely affect his or her opinions and perceptions of ex-offenders and their rights. In addition to religiosity, the level awareness and knowledge of Catholic Social Thought will likely affect the ways that members of the Catholic tradition perceive ex-offenders, as well as various issues relating to ex-offenders’ post-incarceration rights.

This study examines the factors that shape young Catholics' perceptions of ex-offenders. Specifically, the research addresses two major areas: (1) How does the degree of religiosity affect young Catholics' perceptions of ex-offenders? and (2) How does knowledge of Catholic Social Thought affect young Catholics' perceptions of ex-offenders? The findings illustrate that regardless of religiosity or knowledge of Catholic Social Thought, young Catholic students at Saint Mary's College tend to possess similar opinions and perceptions of ex-offenders in comparison to non-Catholic students at Saint Mary's College.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rights of Ex-Offenders

Ex-offenders face multiple obstacles when it comes to the process of reintegration into society. One challenge, and one of the most important factors in an ex-offender's process of reintegration, is securing employment (Freeman 2003; Travis et al. 2001; Wodahl 2006). Multiple legal barriers exist which make it difficult for ex-offenders to secure employment. Freeman (2003), Thompson (2004), and Travis et al. (2001) report that federal and state laws restrict post-incarcerated individuals from obtaining work in certain fields of employment. Even if ex-prisoners are able to secure stable and adequate employment, they still face challenges. Freeman (2003) and Travis et al. (2001) found that ex-prisoners not only have lower rates of employment, but also earn less than individuals with comparable demographic characteristics who do not have criminal histories.

Another challenge faced by ex-offenders during reentry is locating and securing suitable housing. Bradley et al. (2001) argue that housing is the key to holding the reintegration process together, and often times the ability of ex-offenders to secure employment depends on fixed living arrangements. In terms of housing, the first option for many individuals is often family—yet family members may view the individual as a threat and thus the ex-offender may not be welcome into the family space. A second option is public housing; however, this choice can pose even more obstacles. Bradley et al. (2001) state that federal law denies subsidized housing not only to individuals convicted of drug-related activities, but also families with any member that is subject to a lifetime registration requirement under a state sex offender registration program. Furthermore, the Legal Action Center's (2004) report on the legal barriers of reentry stated that federal laws and regulations give the public housing authority the right to ban any individual with a criminal record from public housing. A third option is the private housing market, but Bradley et al. (2001) explain that while private housing should provide the most opportunities, low employment skills and opportunities combined with the stigma of a criminal record often make this option unattainable. Additionally, Travis et al. (2001) report that ex-offenders seldom have the financial means to compete in the private housing market.

A third barrier that ex-offenders face is disenfranchisement. Disenfranchisement is the suppression of the voting rights of individuals who have been convicted of crimes or felonies (Kleinig and Murtagh 2005). Manza et al. (2004) report that the United States is the only nation that currently disenfranchises ex-felons, including those who have

completed their sentences. In their study on the public attitudes toward disenfranchisement in the United States, Manza et al. (2004) found evidence that Americans are willing to extend civil liberties—including the right to vote—to ex-offenders. Kleinig and Murtagh (2005) argue that while disenfranchisement does not eliminate political power, it fails to recognize the practical and symbolic significance of an individual's voting rights.

Social Stigmas and Attitudes Toward Ex-Offenders

Not only do ex-offenders face legal barriers, but they also encounter social barriers. “Ex-offenders occupy one of the most marginalized positions in America” (Geiger 2006). In addition, research suggests that the label of “ex-offender” carries a negative stigma. One of the most prevalent areas of study on the stigmas and attitudes toward ex-offenders relates to employment. In their study, Homant and Kennedy (1982) evaluate the extent to which ex-offenders are stigmatized by assessing attitudes toward ex-offenders in an employment situation. With the exception of attitudes from individuals in the criminal justice vocation, they found that ex-offenders are not viewed more negatively than other groups (Homant and Kennedy 1982). Travis et al. (2003) also examined the stigmas of ex-offenders in relation to employment and found that the stigma attached to incarceration causes employers to demonstrate reluctance to hire ex-offenders because the criminal background implies the potential for the individual to be untrustworthy. In another study, Owens (2009) found that while the social stigmas attached to the label “ex-offender” are generally negative, education has the ability to lessen the negativity of the stigma.

While many studies focus on stigmas and employment, Hirschfield and Piquero (2010) attempt to assess the overall attitudes of the public toward ex-offenders.

Hirschfield and Piquero (2010) argue that successful reintegration of an ex-offender may depend on the attitudes and reactions that he or she encounters once released. In their study, Hirschfield and Piquero (2010) found that personal familiarity with the ex-offender results in more positive attitudes toward the individual, while confidence in the criminal justice system indicates negative attitudes. Hirschfield and Piquero (2010) also found that whites and conservative individuals possess more negative attitudes toward ex-offenders.

Religion and Crime

According to David Garland (1990:203), “religion has been a major force in shaping the ways in which offenders are dealt with.” In terms of religion and correctional attitudes, existing research reveals that fundamentalists tend to be more punitive than non-fundamentalists (Applegate et al. 2000). Applegate et al. (2000) argue, however, that the conceptualization of religion and correctional attitudes in these studies are limited. Through the exploration of religious forgiveness and fundamentalism, Applegate et al. (2000) intended to broaden the understanding of the connection between religion and correctional attitudes; they found that compassionate and fundamentalist religious orientations influence correctional attitudes. They claim that respondents who were more forgiving were less likely to support the death penalty, were less punitive in general, and were more supportive of rehabilitation (Applegate et al. 2000). Their study shows that

the belief in forgiveness, in addition to fundamentalism, has the ability to shape how Americans think about crime and criminal justice policies (Applegate et al. 2000).

Catholic Social Thought and Crime

For Catholics in particular, the concept of Catholic Social Thought may influence their perceptions of crime and ex-offenders. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2003) defines Catholic Social Thought as the teachings of the Catholic Church on social justice issues. Two of the key themes of Catholic Social Thought are human dignity and rights. Human dignity lays the groundwork for a moral society, and every individual is equal in dignity and should have equal rights. Accordingly, the ways in which society is organized affects human dignity and the ability of members to grow and flourish. Individuals have both a right and duty to participate in seeking the common good and well-being for all members of society. Thus, human rights must be protected and responsibilities must be met in order to protect human dignity and attain a healthy society.

In 2000, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a statement detailing a Catholic perspective of crime and the criminal justice system. The argument is that human dignity for the victim of the crime as well as the individual who committed the crime should be protected. Moreover, ex-offenders should have respect for their rights and the right to things that make them uniquely human, including food, shelter, and employment. They also contend that society's preference for punishment and retribution indicates a failure to recognize ex-offenders as human beings. Lastly, there is the

assertion that all humans are born with free will that must be nurtured by various aspects of social life.

From the preceding discussion, it is clear that current literature and research relating to religiosity and attitudes toward ex-offenders focus mainly on religiosity. There is limited research that exists on the overall public attitudes toward ex-offenders. Furthermore, there is no current literature or research examining the religiosity of young Catholics in particular and their attitudes toward ex-offenders. Thus, as mentioned, this study examines the factors that shape the perceptions young Catholics have of ex-offenders by specifically addressing two key areas: (1) How does the degree of religiosity affect young Catholics' perceptions of ex-offenders? and (2) How does knowledge of Catholic Social Thought affect young Catholics' perceptions of ex-offenders?

THEORY

For Swidler (1986), culture is a combination of “symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems” (Swidler 1986:273). Culture is “more like a style or a set of skills and habits” (Swidler 1986:275). Swidler (1986:277) argues that culture is “like a ‘tool kit’ or repertoire from which actors select differing pieces for constructing lines [or strategies] of action.” There are a variety of elements that make up an individual's cultural tool kit, including religion, personal and professional relationships, language, government system, economic system, technology, socioeconomic status, and education among others.

Although people will share similar ambitions and cultural experiences, no two people will have the exact same set of skills or tools in their individual cultural tool kits.

Because people possess differing cultural tool kits, the construction of strategies of action and the strategies themselves will also differ. Constructing a strategy, according to Swidler (1986:281), consists of “selecting certain cultural elements and investing them with particular meanings in concrete life circumstance.” The availability and access to particular resources and elements within a culture will affect the ways in which individuals construct their personal strategies of action. In short, because strategies of action “depend on the available set of cultural resources” strategies will differ because each individual’s set of resources differs (Swidler 1986:281). While people may share similar experiences, ambitions, and cultural aspects, the entire culture of one individual will not be exactly the same as the entire culture of another individual. Thus, the tool kits from which individuals select skills in order to construct strategies vary. For example, the cultural tool kit of a child raised in the inner-city in an urban setting will be different in comparison to the cultural tool kit of a child who was raised on a farm in a rural setting. Therefore, these two individuals’ differing skills will cause them to have unique strategies for dealing with similar situations.

In order to understand Swidler’s (1986) concept of “culture as a ‘tool kit’ for constructing ‘strategies of action,’” it is important to understand some of the ideas that help construct the concept of the cultural tool kit, such as ‘value’ and ‘strategy’. Culture not only includes the “symbolic vehicles of meaning,” but also embraces one’s values (Swidler 1986:273). Swidler (1986:274) draws upon Parsons’ idea of values by stating that a value is “an element of a shared symbolic system which serves as a criterion or standard for selection among the alternatives of orientation which are intrinsically open in

a situation.” Since one of the functions of religion is to provide guidelines and values to followers, as well as multiple other aspects of daily life, it is clear that religion can be included in the composition of culture.

For this research on ex-offenders, religion is an important tool within an individual’s cultural tool kit. Religion is a central factor in the lives of many Americans. Despite the variety and variation of religious traditions, religion in general serves a specific purpose. According to Clifford Geertz (1966:16), religion is “a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence...” Those symbols which establish moods and motivations are the tools used to construct one’s culture. Thus, those symbols become part of an individual’s cultural tool kit and are drawn upon to influence the actions and thoughts of the religious individual. Culture is defined as the “symbolic vehicles of meaning, including beliefs, ritual practices, art forms, and ceremonies, as well as informal cultural practices such as language, gossip, stories, and rituals of daily life” (Swidler 1986:273); from this, it is clear that religion is one of the facets that constructs an individual’s culture.

In sum, the differences in the set of resources that make up an individual’s cultural tool kit affect one’s ability to strategize and take action. Using the cultural resource of religion, it can be argued that individuals from one particular faith will likely strategize and act in ways that are different from individuals who stem from another faith. Specifically, individuals from the Catholic tradition will have a unique set of skills and resources originating from their Catholic faith in their cultural tool kit from which they

will reference when strategizing and acting in particular situations. Based on Swidler's (1986) concept of the cultural tool kit, it is expected that the Catholic faith as a component of a young Catholic's cultural tool kit will influence the ways in which the individual will approach issues and perceptions of ex-offenders in society.

METHODOLOGY

Procedure

For this research, a quantitative method was used to collect the data. Surveys were conducted in order to examine the perceptions young Catholics have of ex-offenders. Each survey consisted of both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The survey was distributed online via SurveyMonkey, an online survey engine. An electronic message containing the information relating to the study, a copy of the informed consent, and the web link was sent to the targeted population. On the webpage, the participants acknowledged that they read the informed consent and agreed to participate in the study by clicking to begin the survey.

Target Population

As the goal of this research was to examine the factors that influence young Catholics' perceptions of ex-offenders, the target population for this research consisted of students currently enrolled at Saint Mary's College, a Roman Catholic institution founded and guided by the principles of the Catholic tradition. While the majority of the students currently enrolled at Saint Mary's College are Catholic, non-Catholic students were also included. Those who did not identify as Catholic were equally important in this study because they served as a comparison group.

Sampling Technique

For this research, a population study of students currently enrolled at Saint Mary's College was conducted. The goal was to include the entire population of students at Saint Mary's College. This yielded a non-representative sample of 218 students for a response rate of 14.4 percent. This technique allowed data to be collected in relation to religiosity and knowledge of Catholic Social Thought for individuals within the Catholic tradition as well as those outside of the Catholic faith. Those who did not identify as Catholic served as a comparison group.

Measurement

Demographic information was collected through questions relating to demographic characteristics such as the student's graduation year, current age, major, family's social class, and level of education of parents or guardians. Whether the student identified as Catholic was also included in the demographics section. In order to measure religiosity, questions relating to the importance of religion in the student's life, frequency of church attendance, frequency of prayer, and frequency of reading or studying the Bible were asked. Questions regarding attendance at Catholic schools, the student's identity as a Catholic, the importance of Catholic values, and the student's familiarity with Catholic Social Thought were asked to provide a basis of measurement for the student's knowledge of Catholic Social Thought. Questions relating to an ex-offender's right to vote, work as a public employee, and denial of federal housing assistance were asked in order to measure opinions of ex-offenders. Additional questions measured opinions concerning whether ex-offenders were perceived as a threat, if the student would employ

an ex-offender, and the level of concern the student would feel if an ex-offender was to move next door to the participant.

In order to tabulate the results, the responses were collapsed. For the question assessing the level of concern if an ex-offender moved next door, participants were asked to provide a response on a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being “not concerned” and 10 being “extremely concerned.” The responses were recoded into three categories: not concerned (1-3), somewhat concerned (4-6), and very concerned (7-10). For the questions on the importance of living according to Catholic values, the importance of a Catholic identity, and the importance of religion in the person’s life, participants were asked to provide a response on a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being “not important” and 10 being “extremely important.” The responses were recoded into three categories: not important (1-3), somewhat important (4-6), and very important (7-10). For the question on the familiarity with the concept of Catholic Social Thought, participants were asked to provide a response on a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being “not familiar” and 10 being “extremely familiar.” The responses were recoded into three categories: not familiar (1-3), somewhat familiar (4-6), and very familiar (7-10). For the questions in which the response options included strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree, the results were recoded into three categories: disagree, neutral, and agree. Participants who responded with strongly disagree or disagree were placed in the “disagree” category. Participants who responded with neutral were placed in the “neutral” category. Participants who responded with strongly agree or agree were placed in the “agree” category.

FINDINGS

The average age of participants was 19.78 years and the mode was 20 years. All of the academic majors offered at Saint Mary's College, including Self-Designed Majors, were represented. Additionally, each graduating class was represented, as shown in Table 1. There was a slight underrepresentation of the Class of 2014.

Table 1: Graduation Year

Graduation Year	Frequency (Percent)
2012	60 (27.9%)
2013	58 (27.0%)
2014	37 (17.2%)
2015	60 (27.9%)
Total	215 (100.0%)

As shown in Table 2, 65.7 percent of participants considered themselves religious, while 11.7 percent did not and 22.6 percent were neutral. Additionally, 71.6 percent of all respondents stated that religion was very important and 74.7 percent agreed that religion should influence the way they live their lives. In relation to the importance of social justice, 87.9 percent of all participants felt that social justice is very important and only 0.5 percent (one participant) felt that social justice was not important. The mean response to the question regarding the importance of social justice was 8.35 on a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being "not important" and 10 being "extremely important."

Table 2: Participant Responses

Question	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Total
Would you describe yourself as a religious individual?	140 (65.7%)	48 (22.6%)	25 (11.7%)	213 (100.0%)
Do you believe that religion should influence the way you live your life?	159 (74.7%)	42 (19.7%)	12 (5.6%)	213 (100.0%)
Question	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important	Total
How important is religion in your life?	151 (71.6%)	41 (19.4%)	19 (9.0%)	211 (100.0%)
How important is social justice to you?	181 (87.9%)	24 (11.6%)	1 (0.5%)	206 (100.0%)

In addition, religious influence was cross-tabulated with willingness to hire an ex-offender. Table 3 shows that those who agreed that religion influenced their lives were less likely to hire an ex-offender (54.2 percent) while those who felt that religion was not an influence were more likely to hire an ex-offender (75.0 percent).

Table 3: Opinion of Religion Influencing Life and Hiring an Ex-Offender

Would you hire an ex-offender?	Agree that Religion Influences Life	Neutral that Religion Influences Life	Disagree that Religion Influences Life	Total
Yes	71 (45.8%)	24 (58.5%)	9 (75.0%)	104 (100.0%)
No	84 (54.2%)	17 (41.5%)	3 (25.0%)	104 (100.0%)
Total	155 (100.0%)	41 (100.0%)	12 (100.0%)	208 (100.0%)

All participants were also asked whether they describe themselves as religious. The responses to this question were cross-referenced with the responses to the question regarding the level of concern participants would feel if an ex-offender was to move next door. This revealed that those who described themselves as religious would be much more concerned than those who described themselves as less religious. Seventy percent

of very religious participants responded that they would be concerned if an ex-offender was to move next door, as compared to 63.6 percent who were neutral about their religiosity and 59.1 percent of those who were not religious. These responses are illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4: Religious Individual and Concern if Ex-Offender Moved Next Door

Concern if an Ex-Offender Moved Next Door	Very Religious	Somewhat Religious	Not Religious	Total
Very Concerned	77 (70.0%)	49 (63.6%)	13 (59.1%)	139 (100.0%)
Somewhat Concerned	24 (21.8%)	18 (23.4%)	3 (13.6%)	45 (100.0%)
Not Concerned	9 (8.2%)	10 (13.0%)	6 (27.3%)	25 (100.0%)
Total	110 (100.0%)	77 (100.0%)	22 (100.0%)	209 (100.0%)

The majority of participants (55.7 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that ex-offenders should be allowed to vote. Only 6.6 percent strongly disagreed or disagreed that ex-offenders should be allowed to vote. Moreover, the majority of participants (55.1 percent) strongly agreed or agreed that ex-offenders should be allowed to work as public employees, while 17.0 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed with this idea. There were mixed feelings as to whether ex-offenders should be allowed to become police officers: 49.0 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed, 25.0 percent were neutral, and 26.0 percent agreed or strongly agreed with this idea. There were also mixed feelings concerning the idea of felony convictions restricting ex-offenders from obtaining federal housing assistance: 46.0 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed, 30.5 percent were neutral, and 23.5 percent agreed or strongly agreed. Lastly, opinions were divided regarding whether ex-offenders were viewed as a threat to society: 26.9 percent disagreed or strongly

disagreed, 47.1 percent were neutral, and 26.0 percent agreed or strongly agreed. The results of these questions are displayed in Table 5 and Table 6.

Table 5: Ex-Offenders as a Threat to Society

Strongly Agree/Agree	Neutral	Strongly Disagree/Disagree	Total
54 (26.0%)	98 (47.1%)	56 (26.9%)	208 (100.0%)

Table 6: Opinions and Perceptions of Ex-Offenders

Question	Mean (1-5)	Strongly Agree/Agree	Neutral	Strongly Disagree/Disagree	Total
Should ex-offenders be allowed to vote?	2.10	162 (76.4%)	36 (17.0%)	14 (6.6%)	212 (100.0%)
Should ex-offenders be allowed to work as public employees?	2.53	117 (55.1%)	59 (27.8%)	36 (17.0%)	212 (100.0%)
Should ex-offenders be allowed to become police officers?	3.33	55 (26.0%)	53 (25.0%)	104 (49.0%)	212 (100.0%)
Should felony convictions restrict ex-offenders from obtaining federal housing assistance?	3.26	50 (23.5%)	65 (30.5%)	98 (46.0%)	213 (100.0%)

Participants were split with regard to whether they would hire an ex-offender. Specifically, 104 participants (50 percent) said yes and 104 participants (50 percent) said no, as shown in Table 7. In addition, Table 8 shows that 10.5 percent of participants were not concerned about the idea of an ex-offender moving next door, while 36.9 percent were somewhat concerned and 52.6 percent were very concerned.

Table 7: Would You Hire an Ex-Offender?

Would you hire an ex-offender?	Frequency (Percent)
Yes	104 (50.0%)
No	104 (50.0%)
Total	208 (100.0%)

Table 8: Concern if an Ex-offender Moved Next Door

Question	Very Concerned	Somewhat Concerned	Not Concerned	Total
How concerned would you be if an ex-offender moved next door to you?	110 (52.6%)	77 (36.9%)	22 (10.5%)	209 (100.0%)

Opinions and Perceptions of Catholics

The analysis will now focus on the 171 participants (79.5 percent) who self-identified as Catholic. For Catholic respondents, 73.3 percent felt that their Catholic identity was very important to them. In addition, 73.4 percent of Catholics felt that it was very important to live according to their Catholic values, and 54.9 percent claimed that they were very familiar with the concept of Catholic Social Thought.

Cross-tabulations revealed that those who felt Catholic values were not important were much more likely to hire an ex-offender (96.6 percent), as compared to only 7.2 percent who felt their Catholic values were very important. These results are shown in Table 9.

Table 9: Importance of Catholic Values for Catholics and Hiring an Ex-Offender

Would you hire an ex-offender?	Catholic Values Very Important	Catholic Values Somewhat Important	Catholic Values Not Important	Total
Yes	5 (7.2%)	22 (59.5%)	56 (96.6%)	83 (100.0%)
No	69 (92.8%)	15 (40.5%)	2 (3.4%)	86 (100.0%)
Total	74 (100.0%)	37 (100.0%)	58 (100.0%)	169 (100.0%)

Additionally, participants who indicated they were Catholic were asked to gauge their familiarity of the concept of Catholic Social Thought. Table 10 shows the cross-tabulation of the responses to this question with whether participants felt that ex-

offenders are a threat to society. Results show that those who were very familiar with Catholic Social Thought were most likely to feel that ex-offenders were a threat to society: 29.8 percent of those who were very familiar with Catholic Social Thought agreed, while 18.2 percent of those who were somewhat familiar with Catholic Social Thought and 16.7 percent of those who were not familiar with Catholic Social Thought agreed.

Table 10: Familiarity with Catholic Social Thought and Ex-Offender Threat to Society

Do you feel that ex-offenders are a threat to society?	Very Familiar with Catholic Social Thought	Somewhat Familiar with Catholic Social Thought	Not Familiar with Catholic Social Thought	Total
Agree	28 (29.8%)	8 (18.2%)	5 (16.7%)	41 (100.0%)
Neutral	47 (50.0%)	17 (38.6%)	18 (60.0%)	82 (100.0%)
Disagree	19 (20.2%)	19 (43.2%)	7 (23.3%)	45 (100.0%)
Total	94 (100.0%)	44 (100.0%)	30 (100.0%)	168 (100.0%)

Catholics versus Non-Catholics

The responses of Catholics were also compared to the responses of non-Catholics. The responses were fairly similar regardless of the participant's Catholic identity in relation to public employment. Fifty-five point nine percent of Catholics and 52.3 percent of non-Catholics agreed that ex-offenders should be allowed to work as public employees. The same is true for whether ex-offenders should be allowed to become police officers, as 27.4 percent of Catholics and 20.5 percent of non-Catholics agreed. These responses are illustrated in Table 11. Furthermore, there were similarities in the mean responses of Catholics and non-Catholics in relation to the importance of social justice. The mean response for Catholics was 8.65 with a standard deviation of 1.526 and

the mean response for non-Catholics was 8.28 with a standard deviation of 1.529 indicating that both Catholics and non-Catholics felt that social justice was important.

Table 11: Catholics versus Non-Catholics on Opinions and Perceptions of Ex-Offenders

	Catholics	Non-Catholics
Agree that ex-offenders should be allowed to work as public employees	55.9% (94)	52.3% (23)
Agree that ex-offenders should be allowed to become police officers	27.4% (46)	20.5% (9)
Agree that ex-offenders should be allowed to vote	79.1% (133)	65.9% (29)
Would hire an ex-offender	49.1% (82)	53.7% (22)

In contrast, Catholics and non-Catholics responded differently in relation to ex-offenders' voting rights. Although both groups agreed that ex-offenders should be allowed to vote, 79.1 percent of Catholics agreed, while only 65.9 percent of non-Catholics agreed as illustrated in Table 11. There were also minor discrepancies based upon Catholic identity in relation to whether the participant would hire an ex-offender. Only 49.1 percent of Catholics would hire an ex-offender, while the majority of non-Catholics (53.7 percent) would hire an ex-offender.

Furthermore, there were differences in the responses regarding the level of concern if an ex-offender were to move next door to the participant. While overall participants seemed very concerned with this notion, the percentage of Catholics who were very concerned was higher at 55.5 percent than the percentage of non-Catholics at 41.9 percent, as shown in Table 12. Although it is less than 10 percent, there was also a slight difference regarding feeling that ex-offenders are a threat to society: 24.1 percent of Catholics agreed, while only 33.4 percent of non-Catholics agreed.

Table 12: Catholics versus Non-Catholics on Concern if Ex-Offender Moved Next Door

	Catholics	Non-Catholics
Very Concerned	55.5% (92)	41.9% (18)
Agree that ex-offenders are a threat to society	24.1% (40)	33.4% (14)

DISCUSSION

Strengths and Weaknesses

As with any research, weaknesses exist with this study. The main disadvantage of this research project is that the students at Saint Mary's College who responded to the survey yielded a non-representative sample. Using a representative sample of Catholic and non-Catholic students would yield better results and provide a more accurate portrayal of young Catholics' opinions and perceptions of ex-offenders. In addition, participants were not required to provide answers to every survey question. Thus, some of the questions were skipped. If every participant had answered every question on the survey, the results would have been even stronger.

Despite the disadvantages of this method, there are advantages as well. One advantage of surveys is that the identities of the participants were kept anonymous and confidential at all times throughout the process. This allowed participants the opportunity to express their true opinions on issues relating to ex-offenders. Another advantage is that the population survey allowed for a large sample—218 individuals agreed to participate. Furthermore, this particular survey was distributed via an online survey tool which not only provided participants with direct and easy access to the

survey, but it also reduced the amount of time it took participants to complete the survey because it was completed electronically.

Analysis

Overall, participants agreed that ex-offenders should not only be allowed to vote, but also to work as public employees. These results are consistent with the previous literature from Manza et al. (2004), who found evidence that Americans are willing to extend the right to vote to ex-offenders. Despite the majority opinion, the United States remains the only nation that currently restricts ex-offenders from exercising the right to vote (Manza et al. 2004).

The right to vote and the right to work as public employees, however, were the only liberties in which the majority of participants agreed upon extending to ex-offenders. Results relating to other rights, such as the right to obtain federal housing assistance, showed that the majority of participants were uncertain about extending the privilege of federal housing to ex-offenders. Additionally, participants were split regarding willingness to hire an ex-offender—half were willing to extend employment to an ex-offender, while the other half were not.

As Geiger (2006) states, ex-offenders are one of the most marginalized groups in America. Likewise, the label of “ex-offender” carries a negative stigma. The marginalization and stigmatization of ex-offenders is clear given the responses to issues relating to the level of concern participants felt if an ex-offender were to move next door. The majority of participants indicated they would be very concerned if an ex-offender were to move next door to them. It is clear that the negative stigma attached to the label

of “ex-offender” still exists. Even a comparison of the level of concern of Catholics versus non-Catholics supports the claim that the marginalization and stigmatization of ex-offenders still exist as the majority (55.5 percent) of Catholics and a significant percentage (41.9 percent) of non-Catholics would be concerned if an ex-offender was to move next door.

The willingness to hire an ex-offender presents interesting differences based upon the participants’ identities as Catholic or non-Catholic. The majority of Catholics would not hire an ex-offender, while the majority of non-Catholics would hire an ex-offender. Furthermore, although the majority of both Catholics and non-Catholics agreed that ex-offenders should be allowed to vote, there was still a large discrepancy in the percent of Catholics (79.1 percent) who agreed compared to the percent of non-Catholics (65.9 percent) who agreed. This 13.5 percent difference is consistent with the concept that the resources and tools within a Catholic individual’s cultural tool kit differs from a non-Catholic individual’s cultural tool kit, and that the Catholic and non-Catholic participants utilized the different tools to respond to this particular question.

The variations in the results relating to the attitudes toward ex-offenders, perceptions of ex-offenders, and rights of ex-offenders suggest that participants are drawing from a variety of different resources and experiences in order to draw opinions and thoughts on these issues. Thus, it seems that the variation in opinions is the result of the differences in the composition of each participant’s cultural tool kit. From this difference, it is clear that the sources within the cultural tool kit that participants employed to respond to questions are, in fact, different for Catholics and non-Catholics.

Future research will need to examine these sources, other than religion, which lead to the variations and differences within individuals' cultural tool kits.

While there are prominent differences in the views of Catholics and non-Catholics in relation to opinions and perceptions of ex-offenders, similarities also exist suggesting that the composition of an individual's cultural tool kit is extremely complex. Although there are differences in the tools and resources within a Catholic individual's cultural tool kit in comparison to a non-Catholic individual's cultural tool kit, it seems that these differing tool kits must also contain similar tools and resources in order for similar responses to arise. For example, in terms of whether ex-offenders should be allowed to work as public employees, 55.9 percent of Catholics and 52.3 percent of non-Catholics agreed. This is only a 3.6 percent difference. Likewise, similarities arose regarding the importance of social justice. For Catholics, the mean response for the importance of social justice was 8.65 with a standard deviation of 1.526 and the mean response for non-Catholics was 8.28 with a standard deviation of 1.529 indicating the importance of social justice for both groups. Thus, it is clear that similar aspects must exist within each participant's cultural tool kit which produced the similarities in opinions and thoughts on issues concerning ex-offenders.

What, then, is the common tool within the participants' cultural tool kits? One possibility is the concept of religion in general. The notion of religion may be recurrent throughout one's life, making this a possible common tool within respondents' cultural tool kits. However, this seems unlikely given that some of the participants claimed no religious affiliation. Another possibility is the requirement that all Saint Mary's College

students take two religious studies courses; however, this is also unlikely given that each student may not have fulfilled this requirement yet. A third, more likely possibility, relates to an identity trait which every participant in this study shares—the identity as a student at Saint Mary’s College. It is possible that the community and environment at Saint Mary’s College, and the participants’ identities as students there, is the common resource from which participants’ are drawing in order to respond to questions. Further research will need to address the likelihood that this shared identity as a Saint Mary’s College student leads to similarities relating to opinions and perceptions of ex-offenders.

These findings illustrate that students at Saint Mary’s College, regardless of religious affiliation, tend to possess similar opinions and perceptions of ex-offenders. These similarities suggest that there is a commonality in the composition of these students’ cultural tool kits. While religion is one of the resources within an individual’s cultural tool kit, these findings suggest that religion is not the common factor among students at Saint Mary’s College; rather it is the attendance at Saint Mary’s College that yields a common tool for these students’ cultural tool kits. Despite the array of diverse students at Saint Mary’s College, it seems that attending Saint Mary’s College provides students with a common resource for their respective cultural tool kits, which leads to similar strategies of action and thus results in similarities in opinions and perceptions of ex-offenders.

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