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# Never too late

## Public optimism about juvenile rehabilitation

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### Abstract

Policy decisions with respect to juvenile offenders oscillate between rehabilitation and punishment, and the effectiveness of these two approaches, including which one for which type of offender, has yet to be realized. Less studied is the extent to which the public favors one approach or the other generally, and whether the public believes that there is an age at which it may be too late to help a juvenile offender turn away from a life of crime. In this study, we explore whether optimism about juvenile rehabilitation is a near universal, shared belief, or whether there exist important variations across socio-demographic groups about whether juveniles can be rehabilitated (and if so at what age). Studying this issue is important because public attitudes have the potential to shape policy. In the domain of juvenile justice, the challenge is whether public opinion will breed unfettered punitiveness or, as we anticipate, will serve as an impetus for a richer and more progressive response to juvenile offenders. Using data from a random sample of Pennsylvania residents, our results point not toward a division over the beliefs about 'saving children,' but instead demonstrate a consensus – that optimism about juvenile rehabilitation is not something citizens argue over. Implications for public policies regarding juvenile offenders are addressed.

### Key Words

juveniles • public attitudes • punishment • rehabilitation

In his 1995 publication in the *Weekly Standard*, John DiIulio warned of 'the coming of the super-predators'. Raised in 'moral poverty', there was a new breed of delinquents – 'ever-growing numbers of hardened, remorseless juveniles' (1995: 23). These super-predators are beyond redemption. 'They fear neither the stigma of arrest nor the pain of imprisonment', DiIulio (1995: 26) observed.

They live by the meanest code of the meanest streets, a code that reinforces rather than restrains their violent, hair-trigger mentality . . . So long as their youthful energies hold out, they will do what comes 'naturally': murder, rape, rob, assault, burglarize, deal deadly drugs, and get high. (DiIulio, 1995: 26)

These youths were part of a lost generation; all that was left was to restrain them in secure facilities so they could not ply their natural wayward inclinations (e.g. Bennett et al., 1996).

DiIulio's disquieting depiction of juvenile offenders assumed an aura of legitimacy because it was voiced in the midst of a dramatic rise in youthful violence (Zimring, 2005; for an alternative view on offenders, see Howell, 2003). It reflected and reinforced a broader set of punitive policy changes that were under way (Feld, 1999; Cullen and Wright, 2002; Howell, 2003). As Bishop (2000) points out, a more general harsh justice movement, which was in progress for some time, escalated in the 1990s. During this period, states increasingly implemented provisions that mandated severe punishments for youthful offenders. Particularly, important efforts were made to make it easier to transfer youths to adult court for an increasing array of offenses and at younger ages (Bishop, 2000; Snyder et al., 2000). Some states even altered the expressed purpose of the juvenile justice system to deemphasize rehabilitation and to elevate the priority given to public safety (Torbet and Szymanski, 1998). Again, Bishop (2000: 84) links these get tough policies to the trumpeting of images of delinquents as 'vicious and savvy' and as 'adult-like, incipient career criminals'. These conceptions 'challenged the more benign images of the past' (2000: 84), especially the notion that youths were more 'malleable' and thus amenable to rehabilitation programs that would seek to reform them in 'positive ways' (2000: 83).

Although not proffering the idea of inherent youthful incorrigibility, liberals joined in doubting that the offenders would be saved by the juvenile justice system (Cullen and Gilbert, 1982; Feld, 1999). In their view, the original progressive design of individualized justice accorded state officials unfettered discretionary powers that were abused, especially in the secrecy afforded by closed judicial hearings and by the high walls of institutional settings. The conscience of the rehabilitative ideas was attractive, but it was corrupted by the pursuit of convenience in the everyday workings of the justice system (Platt, 1969; Rothman, 1980). The result was a system that existed outside the rule of law and in which custody trumped treatment. Not surprisingly, liberals called for the extension of due process rights and even for the abolition of the juvenile justice system (Feld, 1999). They asserted that this system lacked the capacity to serve as a social welfare agency that would effectively treat its charges. Thus, even if youths were not personally beyond redemption, they would rarely be rehabilitated by the existing juvenile justice system. 'The theoretical possibility of effective treatment for some youths does not justify the punitive reality of most delinquents', observes Feld (1999: 282-3). 'If correctional administrators do not provide effective services in responsive environments, then do any practical differences exist between treatment and punishment?' (1999: 283).

This pessimism, however, has not gone unchallenged. Inspired by the findings of corrections research highlighting the deleterious effects of imprisonment (Liebling and Maruna, 2005) and findings of life-course criminology that the roots of crime extend

to the earliest moments of human development (Piquero et al., 2003), there is a vigorous movement showing that early interventions can knife off potential criminal careers at their preliminary stages (Farrington and Welsh, 2007). Nurse-home visitation programs, functional family therapy, and multisystemic therapy are just a few of the interventions that have been shown empirically to be effective in diminishing future delinquent involvement among children and young adolescents (Alexander et al., 1998; Henggeler, 1998; Farrington and Coid, 2003; Farrington and Welsh, 2003; Curtis et al., 2004; Greenwood, 2006; Olds, 2007; Piquero et al., 2009). As Farrington and Welsh (2007: 159) note, it is 'never too early' to intervene systematically to prevent criminal involvement.

There is growing evidence, including meta-analyses of hundreds of treatment studies, showing that interventions reduce recidivism for juvenile and adult offenders (Lipsey and Wilson, 1998; Maguire, 2002; Howell, 2003; Andrews and Bonta, 2006; MacKenzie, 2006; Lipsey and Cullen, 2007; Lipsey, 2009). Savings in crime are pronounced when programs are well designed and follow the principles of effective intervention (Andrews and Bonta, 2006; Gendreau et al., 2006). There is some evidence that these programs are especially effective for high-risk juveniles, disputing the claim that serious, violent offenders are beyond redemption (Andrews and Bonta, 2006; Smith et al., 2009). Moreover, these efforts – as well as early intervention programs – have been found to be cost effective, a consideration that increases their appeal as a policy option (Welsh et al., 2001; Welsh, 2003; Greenwood, 2006; Farrington and Welsh, 2007; Drake et al., 2009). Taken together, these considerations have prompted Losel (2007: 6) to conclude that, when developing 'an intervention policy that is both evidence-led and human', it is not only 'never too early' but also 'never too late'.

In this context, the issue of public opinion about juvenile rehabilitation takes on special salience.<sup>1</sup> The connection between citizens' attitudes and policy-makers' actions is often tenuous, reciprocal, and clouded with misconception (Riley and Rose, 1980; Page and Shapiro, 1992; Beckett, 1997; Kinder, 1998). Still, mapping the contours of opinion is important because how the public thinks creates boundaries and opportunities regarding what policies might be implemented (Scott and Steinberg, 2008; Useem and Piehl, 2008). In our case, if the public holds a pessimistic view of the malleability of juveniles and of the capacity of the justice system to affect their reform, policies favoring harsh justice will find little resistance and are likely to persist into the foreseeable future. By contrast, an optimistic view about offenders and their treatment will create ideological space for policy initiatives that are more progressive and rehabilitation-oriented. The public may agree, in short, that it is never too early or too late to try save offenders from a life in crime (Mears et al., 2007).

Thus far, the extant research suggests that the American public supports rehabilitation as an integral purpose of the correctional enterprise. This is a 'remarkable fact' (Cullen, 2006: 665), given that for three decades, the United States has been in a well-documented era of punitive crime control (Clear, 1994; Currie, 1998; Gottschalk, 2006; Simon, 2007). This area has been permeated by a 'culture of control' (Garland, 2001) and by a 'sensibility' or 'thinking about crime' favorable to stringent sanctions (Tonry, 2004). To be sure, there is little doubt that the American public harbors punitive views and is not outraged by many of the get-tough policies now in place. Nonetheless, polls conducted for a quarter century show clearly that strong majorities of the

public continue to embrace correctional rehabilitation (Cullen et al., 2000, 2007; Cullen and Moon, 2002).

Notably, support for 'child saving' is particularly pronounced, so much so that Cullen et al. (2007: 117) have termed it a 'habit of the heart' – that is, a belief fundamental to American culture that remains firm across time and space (Bellah et al., 1985). Four types of evidence lend credence to this claim (Cullen et al., 2000, 2007). First, studies of early intervention programs reveal that respondents see the wisdom in supporting a range of programs and, by a wide margin, prefer that public monies be spent on preventing crime as opposed to expanding imprisonment (Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin & Associates, 1997; Cullen et al., 1998, 2007; Schiraldi and Soler, 1998; Moon et al., 2003). Second, when asked in a forced-choice question what should be the main goal of juvenile prisons, rehabilitation is typically chosen over punishment as the preferred option. Further, when asked if treatment should be one of the goals to pursue in juvenile prisons, over eight in 10 agree that it should be (Steinhart, 1988; Schwartz, 1992; Moon et al., 2000a; Applegate et al., 2009). Third, when instructed to use a Likert scale to rate statements on various aspects of treatment, support for child saving remains high. For example, in a 2001 national survey, 98 percent of the respondents agreed that 'it is important to try to rehabilitate juveniles who have committed crimes and are now in the correctional system' (Cullen et al., 1983, 2002). Fourth, studies have examined whether citizens are willing to pay for treatment services. Using the contingent valuation methodology, Nagin et al. (2006) found that Pennsylvania residents were more willing to raise taxes to give serious juvenile offenders more rehabilitation than they were to provide an extra year of imprisonment for these offenders (e.g. Cohen et al., 2006). Support for paying for early intervention (i.e. nurse visitation programs) was even more pronounced. These findings have been replicated in a more recent study using samples drawn from four states (Piquero and Steinberg, 2009).

In short, studies using diverse methodologies arrive at the same conclusion: on a general level, the American public endorses efforts to save children and teens from a life of crime. Despite these global attitudes, however, it is possible that public support for juvenile rehabilitation might diminish markedly when more specific questions are asked about policies or certain types of offenders. That is, global and specific attitudes may be consistent or inconsistent (Applegate et al., 1996). Two recent studies are noteworthy and provide a context for the current project.

First, based on a 2006 telephone survey of 1308 Floridians ages 18 and over, Mears et al. (2007) explored whether the public favored abolishing the juvenile justice system. Such a position would suggest that citizens have little faith either that the system can reform youths and/or protect the public from the serious 'super-predators' under its supervision. Notably, eight in 10 respondents disapproved of eliminating the system, with nearly four in 10 expressing strong disapproval. Equally revealing, Mears et al. (2007: 242) report that nearly two-thirds of the sample agreed that even 'violent offenders can be rehabilitated'. There was some variation by political orientation, with highest levels of faith in juvenile treatment manifested by liberals (70 percent) and moderates (66 percent). But 'optimistic views' were also expressed by 'a majority of conservatives (57 percent)' (2007: 242–3).

Second, in another Florida study conducted in 2002, Applegate et al. (2009) explored similar issues. Consistent with Mears et al. (2007), 78.7 percent of the respondents

agreed (32.7 percent agreeing strongly) that 'having a separate court system to handle juvenile cases makes good sense' (Applegate et al., 2009: 12). Even so, in line with previous research (Mears, 2001), there was support for transferring serious juvenile offenders to adult court, with 73.1 percent concurring that 'juveniles who commit violent crimes should be tried as adults'. But this position was not taken because the Floridians were prepared to warehouse these youths as irredeemable. Exacting just deserts was a strong predictor of support for transfer, indicating that punitive sentiments helped to bolster a willingness to transfer youths. However, bivariate analyses found that transferring violent juveniles was more likely to be supported by those who believed the adult court would allow the youths to 'receive effective rehabilitative treatment', 'get attention for their individual needs', and 'become productive law-abiding citizens' (Applegate et al., 2009: 14–15). In multivariate analyses, transfer was less favored if the respondents believed that the adult system would 'be made worse by being exposed to hardened adult criminals' (Applegate et al., 2009: 14, 18). Further, in a separate analysis employing a factorial design, support for transfer diminished slightly for offenders depicted in vignettes as committing a homicide (67 percent) and markedly for those said to have committed a felony (40 percent) (Stalans and Henry, 1994). Taken together, these results led Applegate et al. to conclude that transfer was a policy that citizens wished to be used selectively for the most serious offenders, with many citizens also favoring efforts to rehabilitate these youths even after they entered the adult system.

## CURRENT FOCUS

Continuing this line of inquiry, the current study employs a random sample survey of Pennsylvania residents to assess whether the public believes that it is, indeed, 'never too late' to reform a youthful offender. The research strategy involves three stages. First, we present data on global questions that measure overall support for juvenile rehabilitation. Second, and most important, we examine whether the respondents believed that there is an age 'at which it is too late to help a young person who has gotten involved in crime change and become a law-abiding person'. For those answering 'yes', we explore the age at which a juvenile's reform is no longer deemed possible. This analysis is intended to illuminate whether members of the public see rehabilitation as effective with only younger adolescents or as a worthwhile strategy for older offenders as well. As such, strong optimism about juvenile rehabilitation would be revealed if most of the respondents stated that it was 'never too late' to 'help' youth to reform (Sundt et al., 1998). Finally, we explore whether belief in the reform of juvenile offenders is near universal across socio-demographic groups or is concentrated in certain social domains. Of particular interest are two potential divides: racial and political. If there is a wide cleavage in opinion by race and political ideology – not simply by degree but qualitatively – then the policy ramifications could be potentially significant, with groups conflicting over whether to invest public monies to reform wayward youths. But if optimism about child saving transcends social boundaries, then conflict over efforts to implement treatment programs is likely to earn widespread support or, in the least, little public opposition.

Race is a critical consideration for three reasons. First, even if not intended by its inventor, the very notion of gun-toting, hardened, inner-city 'super-predators' conjures

up racial stereotypes. If this imagery shapes the consciousness of white Americans, then they may harbor less optimistic views about juvenile offenders. There is a growing literature that documents the existence of such 'racial typifications' and their connection to heightened levels of punitiveness (Chiricos et al., 2004; Unnever et al., 2008b). As Clear (2007: 8–9) argues, the 'social concept of the "dangerous young black man," so deeply ingrained in our nation's consciousness, continues to fuel punitive politics'. Second, there is evidence that minority youths are disproportionately arrested and pulled into the justice system, for reasons that may be due to differential participation and differential enforcement (Piquero, 2008). To cite one alarming figure, 'one-fourth of all black youngsters (ages 15–17) living in the country had been arrested during the last four months of 1991 alone' (Miller, 1996: 48). These trends persist; although approximately 12 percent of the population, African Americans account for 50 percent of youth arrests for FBI Crime Index violent offenses (Sampson and Lauritsen, 1997). Further, 2005 case processing data collected by the National Center for Juvenile Justice show that the minority youth arrest rate was about 70 percent greater than the white arrest rate and was even greater when comparing black youth to white youth (Puzzanchera and Adams, 2008). Third, although not characterizing all types of opinions (e.g. ratings of crime seriousness), research shows that race intimately shapes crime-related attitudes. In particular, a deep divide exists between African Americans and Whites in support for capital punishment (Blacks oppose, Whites favor) and whether the legal system is permeated with injustice (Blacks yes, Whites no) (Hagan et al., 2005; Cochran and Chamlin, 2006; Unnever and Cullen, 2007; Johnson, 2008; Unnever et al., 2008b).

Political orientation is relevant because it tends to be a statistically significant predictor of punitiveness across studies. Scholars consistently find that the more strongly people identify themselves as being politically conservative, the more likely they are to embrace punitive attitudes (Borg, 1997; Applegate et al., 2000; Unnever and Cullen, 2007). For example, political conservatives – individuals who define their political orientation as being conservative or report that they are 'on the right' – are more likely to support capital punishment for both adults and juveniles (Moon et al., 2000b; Vogel and Vogel, 2003).

Researchers argue that this political divide primarily results from conservatives and liberals endorsing different attribution styles. Scholars suggest that conservatives are more likely to embrace a dispositional attribution style (Graham et al., 1997; Cochran et al., 2006). Jacobs and Carmichael (2002: 113) contend that conservatives believe that criminals are 'autonomous, rational, unfettered individuals who are responsible for their acts and therefore deserve punishment'. Thus, conservatives believe that criminals should be harshly punished because they intentionally chose to break the law ignoring the harmful consequences of their offending behavior (Young, 1991; Woolfolk et al., 2006). Conversely, scholars argue that liberals are more likely to endorse a situational attribution. People who endorse a situational attribution style tend to believe that crime originates from concentrated disadvantages such as few job opportunities and bad schools and that because criminals have 'volitional outcome control' they can be rehabilitated (Young, 1991; Jacobs and Carmichael, 2002, 2004; Woolfolk et al., 2006). Scholars contend that people who endorse a situational attribution style tend to support rehabilitative programs and policies that reduce structural inequities rather than punitive policies that target the individual offender (Cochran et al., 2006).

In short, this study attempts to describe the general predictors associated with attitudes toward juvenile punishment and rehabilitation. The goal is to explore in different ways whether optimism about juvenile rehabilitation reflects persistent racial and political divides or whether a more optimistic 'habit of the heart' means that race and political variables are not important in predicting optimism about juvenile rehabilitation thereby supporting a more universal embrace of treatment for wayward adolescents. Persistent cultural beliefs are important because they tend to survive even dramatic changes in the social landscape, including fluctuating crime rates, shifts in the political order, and rapid transformations of the economy. Such beliefs have the potential to shape policy because, even if they recede to a more latent state, they can be called upon to question initiatives that seem to violate cherished sensibilities of what the American experience entails. In the domain of juvenile justice, the challenge is whether public opinion will breed unfettered punitiveness or, as anticipated, will serve as an impetus for a richer and more progressive response to juvenile offenders.

## METHODS

### Sample and survey

A survey was developed to examine respondents' perceptions of – and public policy preferences associated with – juvenile crime (see Nagin et al., 2006). After an extensive design process that included pre-testing among young adults, telephone interviews were conducted with a random sample of Pennsylvania households (adults over the age of 18) between March 2005 and August 2005. Individuals, in either English or Spanish, were selected as respondents within each household according to a formatted script based on the random sample selection procedure.

A random digit dial was conducted with an original sample of 7570 telephone numbers. Of these, 4231 were ineligible (business/government, fax, etc.,  $n = 3390$ ; language or mental inability,  $n = 84$ ; answering machine,  $n = 748$ ; and respondent never available,  $n = 9$ ), leaving an eligible sample of 3339. Of these eligible numbers, 1837 refused, leaving a completed sample of 1502. Thus, the response rate of 44.9 percent is comparable to that reported in other similar contingent valuation studies (Cohen et al., 2004). The average time to complete the survey was just under nine minutes.

With respect to race and sex, the sample closely mirrored the state's population. Specifically, 86.7 percent of the sample was White, and 59.7 percent of the sample was female; according to 2000 Census data, 85.4 percent of the state's population is White and 51.7 percent female. Fifty percent of the study sample reported an income over \$50,000, and 50 percent reported at least some college experience, again comparable to the state as a whole. The average age of the respondents was 50.2 (range 18–94, median = 50).

### Dependent variables

The primary interest is the respondent's perceptions of juvenile rehabilitation; as such, two main outcome variables are examined. The first is a 'belief in a juvenile rehabilitation' scale that is summed from the responses to three separate true–false statements: (1) 'Juvenile offenders should get more lenient treatment than adults'; (2) 'Juvenile offenders can benefit from rehabilitative treatment more than adult offenders'; and



(3) 'Juvenile offenders are more likely to become adult criminals if they are sent to jail than if they get rehabilitation in juvenile facilities.' Response options for all three items were: True (1) or False (2). Lower values are indicative of an affirmative belief in 'saving kids'. As expected, all three items were positive and significantly correlated with one another, with correlations in the  $r = .25$  to  $r = .27$  range. Factor analysis indicated the presence of a single, underlying factor (with the first factor accounting for 51.54 percent of the variance and all factor loadings above .7).

The second outcome variable was comprised of a single item posed to respondents: 'Do you think there is an age at which it is too late to help a young person who has gotten involved in crime change and become a law-abiding person?' Response options were Yes (1) or No (2). For the 28.82 percent of the respondents who indicated 'Yes' to the previous question, a follow-up question was posed asking them to provide the age that they believed was too late to help a young person (mean = 17.91, SD = 5.32, mode = 18 (22.03%); range 1–40).

### Independent variables

Following much of the public perception research on crime/punishment generally and juvenile crime/punishment in particular, several socio-demographic and attitudinal variables were used. Respondents provided information on their race (White = 86.69%), political philosophy (conservative = 29.37%), sex (female = 59.75%), age (mean 50.17, SD = 16.74, range 18–94), educational attainment (none, elementary, high school, college, some graduate school, and graduate/professional degree; modal is high school completion, about 52 percent have some college experience and beyond), residential location (urban/city = 19.06 percent), whether they had ever been the victim of a crime (yes = 45.27%), whether the respondent is currently a parent (yes = 75.87%), and whether the respondent had ever been stopped by the police (yes = 68.62%). Information was also collected on perceptions regarding issues dealing with crime/safety, as well as taxes. A two-item perception of crime/safety scale was created by summing together the responses to: (1) 'Where you live, how often are young kids "up to no good"?'; and (2) 'Where you live, how often do crimes happen?' Response options for both items were: (1) a lot, (2) sometimes, (3) rarely, and (4) never, with higher values on the scale corresponding to a perception that there are less crime problems in the respondent's residential area. The average for the scale was 4.85 (SD = 1.53, range = 2–8), and the scale had a good reliability ( $\alpha = .77$ ). A three-item belief in social welfare scale was created by summing together the responses to: (1) 'Do you think that the Government spends your tax dollars appropriately with regard to schools?'; (2) 'Do you think that the Government spends your tax dollars appropriately with regard to highways?'; and (3) 'Do you think that the Government spends your tax dollars appropriately with regard to healthcare?' Response options for all three items were: (1) yes and (2) no, with higher values on the scale corresponding to a perception that the Government does not spend enough on basic, social services. The average for the scale was 5.17 (SD = 0.93, range = 3–6). A final item asked respondents if they believed that 'taxes, in general, are: too low, too high, about right?' and was recoded so that the 'too high' responses (1; 64.46%) were compared to the 'too low/about right' (0) responses.<sup>2</sup>

## Analytic plan

We begin with a brief overview of the descriptive statistics for the key outcome variables, and then stratified by certain socio-demographic characteristics. This provides important information about the overall level of support for juvenile rehabilitation and optimism about youths' reformability and whether there are any divides across socio-demographic groups. Then, attention is turned to several multivariate regression models that are estimated in two stages: socio-demographics and other variables. To the extent that we do not find any initial socio-demographic effects, we will focus our attention on a single equation; on the other hand, if we do find initial socio-demographic effects, we will want to see if they are explained away by the other included variables.

## RESULTS

### Levels of support

Table 1 reports the degree to which the respondents supported juvenile intervention and expressed optimism about the reformability of youths. Consistent with previous research (Cullen et al., 2000, 2007), it is clear that Pennsylvanians favored intervention. Even when asked the potentially loaded question of whether juvenile offenders should be treated more 'leniently' than adults, nearly six in 10 respondents agreed that they should be. Approximately three-fourths of the sample also agreed that juveniles are more malleable – open to reform – than adults. A similar percentage were wary about

**TABLE 1 Supportive orientation for juvenile offenders**

ITEM	PERCENT YES OR PERCENT TRUE
<i>Juvenile intervention</i> (Range 3–6)	3.903 (0.970)
Juvenile offenders should get more lenient treatment than adults. Would you say True (1) or False (2)?	57.08% (T)
Juvenile offenders can benefit more from rehabilitative treatment than adult offenders. Would you say True (1) or False (2)?	77.21% (T)
Juvenile offenders are more likely to become adult criminals if they are sent to jail than if they get rehabilitation in juvenile facilities. Would you say True (1) or False (2)?	74.17% (T)
<i>Optimistic view of juvenile offenders</i>	
Do you think that there is an age at which it is too late to help a young person who has gotten involved in crime change and become a law-abiding person? (1 = Yes, 2 = No)	28.82% (No)
<i>Age too late</i>	
If yes, at what age? (Range 1–40)	17.918 (5.320)

sending juveniles to jail as opposed to keeping them in a juvenile facility, fearing that they might be more likely to become adult criminals if sent to an adult institution.

Most important, we then probed whether the respondents held an optimistic view about the reformability of juvenile offenders. Nearly three in 10 sample members expressed the belief that there was 'no age at which it is too late to help a young' person in trouble with the law. For those who did believe that there was a limit to when a youth might be saved, they still manifested optimism that most youths could be rehabilitated. Thus, when asked what age a young person might be too old to be reformed, the mean age for the sample was nearly 18 (17.9 years) – that is, the point at which youths would legally become an adult and an age older than many states define as the line between the juvenile and adult systems for many crimes.

### **Variation in support**

There appears to be widespread support among Pennsylvanians that youths should not be treated simply as adults and a belief that, at least through most of their juvenile years, they are candidates for reform. Still, a question remains: Are these universal beliefs or are there salient cleavages that the overall results mask but that, upon further analysis, might be revealed? If so, then optimistic views about saving juvenile offenders might inspire opposition.

As noted, the main source of interest in this regard is whether there are divides by race and political ideology. As can be seen in Table 2, neither race nor political ideology exerts any significant impacts on our dependent variables. When we examined descriptive data broken down by racial and political categories, the results were within a few percentage points across these subgroups. Unlike other social policies, it appears that race and politics do not divide the sample on views toward child saving.

Specifically, with respect to the first outcome variable, juvenile intervention, five variables are significant: female; age; education; safety; and taxes too high. Females, older individuals, those with more education, and those perceiving that there are few crime problems in their neighborhoods are more likely to hold beliefs in child saving, while those who perceive taxes to be too high are less likely to hold beliefs in support of child saving. When respondents' perceptions about whether there is an age at which it is too late to help a juvenile were examined, results showed that females, parents, and those who perceived few crime problems in their neighborhoods were significantly more likely to not believe that there was an age at which it was 'too late' to help turn a juvenile's life away from crime, and instead perceived that juveniles can be helped. Lastly, among those individuals who believed that there was an age at which it was too late to help a juvenile, two variables emerged as significant predictors: education and safety (the effect of age approached significance). Individuals with more education were likely to respond with an earlier age, while those perceiving that crime is not a big problem in their neighborhoods were more likely to respond with a later age for rehabilitation.

It is worth noting that across other independent variables, some significant effects were uncovered, but three observations are salient. First, even with a variety of predictors in the model, the amount of explained variation is minimal, perhaps suggesting that the broad finding from the multivariate analysis is that there is substantial consensus, not divisions, on people's views of the reformability of juveniles. Second, the effects for individual variables are not especially strong, and may be significant

**TABLE 2 Multivariate regression analyses predicting attitudes toward juveniles**

	JUVENILE INTERVENTION <sup>a</sup>			OPTIMISTIC VIEW OF JUVENILE OFFENDERS <sup>b</sup>			AGE TOO LATE <sup>a</sup>		
	B	SE	T	B	SE	WALD	B	SE	T
White	0.023	0.097	0.24	-0.251	0.223	-1.12	-1.346	1.017	-1.32
Conservative	-0.017	0.065	-0.27	0.064	0.149	0.43	-0.004	0.689	-0.01
Female	-0.145	0.062	-2.32*	0.252	0.142	1.77*	-0.609	0.653	-0.93
Age	-0.006	0.001	-3.19*	-0.005	0.004	-1.34	0.031	0.019	1.63
Education	-0.063	0.011	-5.45*	-0.012	0.026	-0.48	-0.227	0.121	-1.88*
City/urban resident	0.117	0.080	1.46	0.076	0.182	0.42	-0.227	0.829	-0.27
Parent	-0.015	0.072	-0.21	-0.376	0.158	-2.38*	0.471	0.698	0.67
Victim of crime	0.031	0.061	0.52	-0.033	0.138	-0.24	-0.641	0.631	-1.02
Safety	-0.045	0.020	2.21*	0.107	0.046	2.31*	0.363	0.214	1.69*
Stopped by police	0.048	0.068	0.71	-0.233	0.155	-1.50	-0.328	0.695	-0.47
Taxes high	0.113	0.063	1.81*	-0.156	0.144	-1.08	0.082	0.662	0.12
Social welfare	0.040	0.032	1.24	-0.09	0.074	-1.21	0.332	0.339	0.98
Constant	5.117	0.339	15.06	2.019	0.776	2.60	19.284	3.460	5.57
R-square	0.0632			0.014			0.04		

Notes: <sup>a</sup> = OLS; <sup>b</sup> = Logistic.  
\**p* < .05 (1-tail).

because of the relatively large sample size. Third, even when significant differences are detected, they do not imply cleavages in views. Rather, the differences are more in degree than of kind; that is, virtually all groups in the study are optimistic about juvenile offenders being candidates for reform; it is just that some hold these beliefs more strongly, while some hold them less strongly. For example, when we found that women were more likely to hold beliefs in favor of child-saving than were men, the average values on the measure were 3.96 and 3.86 for males and females, respectively. Similarly, with respect to perceptions associated with whether there was an age that was perceived to be too late to rehabilitate a juvenile, once again we observed a sex effect, but the average values across gender were not dramatically different (male average = 1.69, female average = 1.72). Thus, the groups involved have similar attitudes (varying only by a few percentage points), and thus point to differences in degree and *not kind*. That is, although there were some significant differences, they do not appear to be substantively different as there is more or less support of rehabilitation and not opposition toward it.

## DISCUSSION

The results reveal a broad consensus in support of juvenile rehabilitation and an abiding optimism that youthful offenders can be reformed deep into the teenage years if not well beyond. There is some variation in these beliefs across certain characteristics, but these factors exert only a minor influence; the differences that exist are more a matter of degree than of kind. Although a national survey was not employed, Pennsylvania is socially diverse and a state that represents the tenor of national sentiments. In this context, the findings we report thus reinforce Cullen et al.'s (2007) contention that the embrace of child saving is not an ephemeral by-product of the progressive era or of the 1960s but a 'habit of the heart' – a worldview or sensibility that endures across time and space (Tonry, 2004).

Given the nature of crime policy – including attacks on juvenile justice – over the past three decades, this finding is salient. During this period, there has been a concerted effort to use crime as a conduit for political advantage (Beckett, 1997). Simon (2007) has referred to this strategy as 'governing through crime' in hopes of creating a 'culture of fear'. In Garland's (2001) terms, political, economic, and social events have conspired to create conditions nurturing of a culture of control. As noted, policies in juvenile justice have tended to tilt in a punitive direction (Feld, 1999). Still, in this context, one might have anticipated that the public would have forsaken notions of child saving and adopted views of juveniles as a dangerous class of super-predators that common sense demands should be locked away. This does not seem to be the case. Although Americans want reasonable protection from predatory youths – including sending the worse cases to adult court – they retain a belief that most youths are not beyond redemption.

The racial aspect of American criminal and juvenile justice cannot be ignored (Feld, 1999; Wacquant, 2001; Leiber, 2003). There is a growing literature documenting the tendency for the public to possess typifications of crime in which offenders are initially, if not reflexively, seen as urban and African American (Unnever et al., 2008b). This undoubtedly reflects the disproportionate involvement of African Americans in the criminal justice system – whether due to behavior responses to racial inequality or due

to differential processing by criminal justice officials (Piquero and Brame, 2008). Regardless, beyond these considerations, these typifications also are socially constructed and encouraged by political elites trying to capture White, conservative voters by portraying crime as a Black problem spurred by the weak social welfare policies of 1960s liberals (Beckett, 1997; Wacquant, 2001). It is instructive, therefore, that our data revealed no racial or political split when it came to optimism about the reformability of wayward youth. Whether White or not, whether political conservative or not, the respondents concurred that juvenile offenders should, and could, be saved.

Three important insights follow from these observations. First, the attack on juvenile treatment – and correctional rehabilitation more broadly – has been portrayed as part of a broader rejection of the welfare state, a paradigm forged in the New Deal and hegemonic into the latter part of the 1960s. As part of a broader rejection of a social welfare approach to social problems, conservative politics gained momentum and spurred a range of punitive social policies (Garland, 2001). Although manifestations of this movement are clearly apparent – rising prison populations the most obvious – it is not clear that Americans ever fully rejected social welfare ideas or, in particular, that the Government should pursue social welfare goals in certain circumstances (Beckett, 2001). There is evidence that the public holds a complex view of crime causation and, in turn, favors not only restrictive policies but also efforts to attack the root causes of crime (Unnever et al., 2008a).

The significant point is that there is little support for stripping away a social welfare purpose from the juvenile justice system. Again, this does not mean that for some heinous offenders, the public will blindly support unlimited attempts to save the youth; for some kids, they may well be willing to throw away the key. But on a global level, their initial preference is not to warehouse juvenile offenders; rather, they retain the notion that the social purpose of juvenile justice should entail efforts to save youth from a dismal life in crime (Allen, 1981).

On a larger policy point, there is little support for abolishing the juvenile court and for moving to an integrated juvenile–adult system stripped of its rehabilitative function (Feld, 1999; Scott and Steinberg, 2008). Put differently, the notion of corrections is not seen as a mask for inflicting pain; Americans believe that a correctional system – whether for juveniles or adults – ought to involve correcting its charges as one of its integral functions (Cullen et al., 2000). Whether rooted in religious conviction, in liberal secular humanism, or some combination thereof – there is a hope that our justice system can serve a higher purpose (Allen, 1981). There may also be an instrumental rationality to this perspective: to give up on youths early in life is to consign that individual to a life in crime and the public to an enduring threat for many years to come.

Second, the existence of optimism about the reformability of youthful offenders means that ideological space still exists to turn criminal justice policy in a new direction. Although it would be premature to claim that the punitive paradigm that has shaped justice policy for three decades has collapsed, especially because there still exists public concern about – and media attention given to – issues of crime and violence, there is evidence that this paradigm is exhausting itself (Listwan et al., 2008). One challenge is financial – the inability of states to pay for their mounting punitive excesses, especially in stagnant economic times. But there also has been a steady flow of evidence from criminologists that has proven difficult to ignore – revealing that a range of

punitive programs, from boot camps to scared straight to very lengthy incarcerations, are ineffective in reducing juvenile recidivism (MacKenzie, 2006; Lipsey, 2009). The legitimacy of 'doing what doesn't work' is difficult to sustain. Notably, a number of states are now revisiting these failed programs and are moving in the direction of implementing evidence-based treatment programs (Listwan et al., 2008).

Although slow in developing and not always in a form in which it can be easily disseminated and implemented, the infusion of multi-government and multi-agency financial investments has led, in part, to an evolving knowledge base on how to intervene effectively with troubled youths. There is now a considerable amount of information, much of it derived from experimental studies, on effective early intervention programs that range from the prenatal to the teenage years (Farrington and Welsh, 2007). There is also the possibility to pursue evidence-based interventions in the juvenile justice system that have shown the ability to achieve meaningful reductions in recidivism (Gendreau et al., 2006; MacKenzie, 2006), which make these interventions cost effective and thus worthy of governmental support (Drake et al., 2009).

Third, as stated, the conclusion drawn from the literature is that support for a social welfare-oriented juvenile justice system is widespread, persistent, and deeply entrenched. Yet, despite this unwavering public opinion, punitive policies continue to be enacted. Indeed, some states have recently passed laws allowing very young juveniles to be tried as adults and some of these to receive sentences of life in prison without the possibility of parole (Feld, 2008). Thus, the pressing issue confronting progressives – whether they are politicians, practitioners, or academics – is how to more effectively represent the empirical reality of American public opinion and, in so doing, stem the tide toward a more punitive juvenile justice system.

It is clear that despite strong support for a more compassionate individualized juvenile justice system, politicians are able to pass get tough legislation targeting the wayward juvenile. This discrepancy indicates opportunistic politicians, perhaps fueled by particularly anomalous egregious cases, are able to pass legislation that has little public support. It is likely that this process is enabled by well positioned right-wing pundits whose shrill commentaries give legitimacy to opportunistic politicians. Certainly, conservative-minded politicians have learned that Americans are unlikely to massively mobilize in order to defend people charged with crimes.

In sum, opportunistic politicians in concert with right-wing pundits and enabled by a silent majority are a formidable force. Consequently, it appears that progressives will have to assertively mobilize on multiple fronts in order to ensure the will of the people is represented. We suggest that this includes making politicians more aware of evidence-based programs and progressive scholars marshalling the evidence of public opinion in support of their efforts to humanize the juvenile justice system, show how punitive policies undermine the will of the people, are not evidence-based, are inspired by anomalous egregious cases, and, in some instances, do more harm than good.

This is not a time for hubris; the history of correctional reform is replete with failure (Rothman, 1980). But neither is it a time for hopelessness in which those committed to a more human and effective juvenile justice system – including many criminologists – throw their hands up in despair and say that nothing works and nothing is possible. We have an emergent scientific knowledge base that can provide guidance on how to intervene in the lives of juveniles in effective ways. Fortunately, it appears that the public

remains optimistic about our collective chances to do good and, if we read their sentiments correctly, would encourage saving youths from lives in crime.

## Notes

- 1 To be clear, rehabilitation refers to planned interventions that target for change – that is, ‘treat’ – factors hypothesized to cause an offender’s recidivism. These factors might be psychological (e.g. thinking errors) or social (e.g. lack of education, unemployment). The intervention might be carried out by and within correctional agencies or by service vendors, typically from the non-profit sectors. The treatment modalities can vary widely, including, for example, individual or group counseling, family interventions, skill building through education or employment programs, or multi-modal approaches. Rehabilitation is distinguished from punishment interventions in that the former seeks to build human and social capital as opposed to securing conformity through surveillance and the threat and or application of punitive sanctions (Cullen, 2002; Howell, 2003; Lipsey, 2009).
- 2 Although several of the items/scales used were originally developed for this study, they appear to have both face and construct validity. The items/scales correlate as expected (sign, significance, strength) with known demographic variables and other attitudes toward crime (analyses not shown). Findings from future research using these measures will be used to assess replicability.

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