**Willingness to change and coming home from prison** (Times New Roman Bold 12, Capitalize Each Word)

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**ABSTRACT:**

This study's purpose is to explore the factors which maximize willingness to change within people as they are released from prison. Using data from a panel of men in the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI) study and a hybrid item response theory approach, a modified graded response model is used to estimate people's overall willingness to change. That estimate serves as the dependent variable in a series of regression models which examine which factors relate to a person's willingness to change. Results demonstrate that a variety of experiences prior to incarceration (e.g., prior employment, criminally-inclined peers) and during incarceration (e.g., religious support, family conflict) significantly relate to a person's willingness to change. Understanding the pre- and during-incarceration experiences of individuals can help inform policy and reentry programs tailored to increase the positive attitude of being willing to change and desist from crime (Less than 300 words)

**KEYWORDS:** Willingness to change ,Identity transformations, Desistance from crime Incarceration, Reentry (Times New Roman 9) (3 – 10 keywords)

# 1. INTRODUCTION (Times New Roman 10 Bold)

The time period when someone is first released from prison is an exciting, but nonetheless stressful (Western et al., 2015) experience for those who are reentering the community. With the aid of several key pieces of research (e.g., Bahr et al., 2010; Grieb et al., 2014; Travis, 2005; Western et al., 2015), scholars have embraced an expanding foundation of knowledge about the dramatic and rapid change which occurs in the lives of people who are reentering society and returning home from incarceration. Over the last two decades, new models have been proposed (e.g., risk-need-responsivity [RNR], Good Lives Model, Multifactor Offender Readiness Model [MORM]), the utility of theories in explaining reentry outcomes have been realized (e.g., Colvin et al., 2002; see Mowen et al., 2018a), and new concepts have emerged (e.g., Chamberlain et al., 2018; Mowen & Visher, 2015; Western et al., 2015). While certainly relevant to both reentry-based models such as the RNR model and MORM (e.g., Andrews & Bonta, 2006; Ward et al., 2004) and theories such as differential coercion and social support (e.g., Colvin et al., 2002), this study's central focus is on the role of one concept during reentry that has been introduced in the last twenty years: Willingness to change. Willingness to change is a versatile concept which can stand alone to examine offending outcomes or can contribute uniquely by being integrated into existing theoretical and applied models that focus on reducing recidivism for those reentering society or more generally, criminal desistance. Willingness to change is a concept that was foundationally introduced to the sociological lexicon by the work of Giordano et al. (2002). Focusing on the developmental process of desistance (when someone ceases to commit crime), Giordano and colleagues argue that cognitive transformations can occur in the lives of offenders in a way that results in desistance. Resulting from opportunities provided to the person by the environment called ‘hooks for change,’ the authors propose four different ways through which cognitive transformations can occur, including 1) being exposed to hooks for change, 2) envisioning a replacement self, 3) changing views on crime, and 4) becoming more willing to change. This study hones in on the latter of these four cognitive transformations. (Times New Roman 10)

# 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Data

Data for this project come from the SVORI project. SVORI was a federally funded multisite evaluation study aimed at assessing the extent to which enhanced reentry programming related to five major outcomes in the areas of housing, employment, education, criminal justice, and health. Enhanced reentry programming referred to a wide range of courses and treatment programs for incarcerated individuals including, but not limited to, receiving a needs assessment, meeting with a case manager, receiving mental health and/or drug treatment, and participating in educational programming among others (for an overview, see Visher et al., 2017, pp. 146–147). Overall, data from 1697 men at the first wave were collected from 12 different states across the United States. As an evaluation study, approximately half of the 1697 male respondents received enhanced SVORI programming. SVORI, a panel dataset, includes a total of four waves of data. Wave one was collected from respondents about 30 days prior to their scheduled date of release via pre-release interviews in 2004 and 2005 from over 150 prisons (Lattimore & Steffey, 2009). Respondents were asked a wide range of questions about pre-incarceration experiences such as substance use, offending, treatment, programming, family, and demographic information. Wave two data were collected about 3 months later, after the individual had been released. Again, a wide range of data were collected encompassing post-release experiences.

2.2. Dependent measure The dependent measure in the current study is willingness to change. To create this variable, we draw data from four questions at wave two which were assessed along a four-point, Likert-type scale (4 = strongly agree, 3 = agree, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree). Specifically, these questions asked the respondent how much they agreed or disagreed with the following: 1) I am tired of the problems caused by crimes I committed; 2) I want to get my life straightened out; 3) I will give up friends that get me in trouble; and 4) I think I will be able to stop committing crimes when I am released. These items share similarities or reflect internal factors that have been previously used when examining desistance or readiness in offenders (Ward et al., 2004). For example, the items focused on wanting to straighten out their life and disassociating with problematic peers can be conceptualized as goals for the individual. Furthermore, the item which focuses on being tired of the problems caused by crime is measuring an individual's awareness that their behaviours are problematic. Finally, the item that focuses on being able to stop criminal behaviour could be considered self-efficacy towards desistance or a belief that the individual can refrain from offending.

**3. RESULTS**

Table. 1 displays *z*-scores assessing the bivariate relationship between willingness to change (as an independent measure across time) and a variety of post-release outcomes (dependent measures following release from incarceration) from a series of mixed-effects models.2 Mixed- effects models were utilized to examine within-person changes and between-person differences of willingness to change and its relationship with the post release outcomes. Due to a bulk of prior literature which finds that willingness to change is related to positive post-release out- comes coming from qualitative methods, the bivariate models are intended to demonstrate that the quantitative willingness to change measure is reliable in its relationship with post-release outcomes included in the SVORI data. We believe this adds to the theoretical and programmatic validity of the measure when it serves as a dependent variable in the main analysis. As demonstrated by this figure, willing- ness to change is significantly associated with increased levels of family interactional support, instrumental support, emotional support, and religious support, all of which have been marked by prior literature as being immensely important during the reentry process (Mowen et al., 2019; Stansfield et al., 2017). Further, higher levels of willingness to change are positively and significantly related to employment, peer support, stable housing, participation in substance abuse treatment, higher levels of parole officer support, and being in a steady romantic relationship. Although we find that willingness to change is not signif- icantly associated with depression or criminal peers, it is significantly related to reduced levels of criminal offending, substance use, inter- personal violence, arrest, and family conflict following release from prison.

**Table.1.** Modified Graded Response Model Assessing Willingness to Change (*n* = 1248)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Items** | **Bi** |
| Item discrimination parameter | 1.236 |
| Categorical difficulty parameters  Strongly agree (reference category) | **-** |
| Agree | -3.279 |
| Disagree | -2.072 |
| Strongly disagree | 0.186 |

# 4. DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to examine how a variety of characteristics and experiences before and during incarceration related to willingness to change among a sample of men preparing to undergo the process of reentry from prison. Using a latent measure of willingness to change, we first established that willingness to change was significantly related to a host of post-release criminogenic (e.g., reoffending and substance use) and non-criminogenic (e.g., family support, stable housing, and employment) experiences. Second, we addressed the primary aim of the study by exploring how demographic/background characteristics, ex- periences prior to incarceration, and experiences during incarceration related to willingness to change. Several significant relationships were identified which carry implications for how we understand willingness to change in the context of contemporary research.

Regarding the demographic and background factors, this analysis demonstrated that length of incarceration and arrest history were both significantly associated with higher willingness to change. Placing these findings in the context of prior research, MacKenzie and Goodstein (1985) found that individuals who serve lengthy prison sentences develop methods of coping with prison life. Coupled with this study, perhaps one potential method of coping for those about to be released from prison is to shift their identity by developing a stronger willingness to change.

# 5. CONCLUSION

While it may seem like a greater history of arrest should be exem- plified by individuals with lower – not greater – willingness to change, our results demonstrate the opposite. Prior research perhaps indicates the reason for this finding. Shover (1983) found that individuals who had consistent contact with the criminal justice system grew tired of the problems their offending caused (this is similar to item #1 in our latent measure of willingness to change). As one respondent interviewed by Shover (p. 213) noted: “I needed a change in my life, and I was tired of going to jail”. Thus, it could be that people with more extensive arrest histories are simply more ready and willing to experience a change to- wards a prosocial identity.

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