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What's in a Name? The Impact of Labels on Attitudes Toward Exonerees

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Article abstract

As exonerations have increased, so too has research into post-release challenges for wrongfully convicted individuals, including stigma, discrimination, mental illness, and inadequate support. In so doing, researchers and advocates have described this population in varied ways, which may elicit differing attitudes. To explore that possibility, 188 citizens read a tweet in which we varied the label ascribed to a newly released male prisoner (i.e., wrongly convicted, exonerated, innocent, or released/control), then reported their attitudes toward him. Contrary to expectations from the stereotype activation and labelling literature, different labels did not produce different judgements of the man's character, criminality, or deservingness of support. Instead, perceptions were consistently more favourable for wrongfully convicted individuals (regardless of label) than other formerly incarcerated people (control). Troublingly however, the labels wrongly convicted, exonerated, and innocent still elicited some belief that the man was somehow involved in—or had committed—the crime for which he was erroneously convicted, that he may have committed other crimes in the past, and that he might commit crimes in the future. Implications are discussed in terms of stigma theory, growing media attention to wrongful convictions, and the disconnect between public and government support for post-exoneration services.

What's in a Name? The Impact of Labels on Attitudes Toward Exonerees

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As exonerations have increased, so too has research into post-release challenges for wrongfully convicted individuals, including stigma, discrimination, mental illness, and inadequate support. In so doing, researchers and advocates have described this population in varied ways, which may elicit differing attitudes. To explore that possibility, 188 citizens read a tweet in which we varied the label ascribed to a newly released male prisoner (i.e., wrongly convicted, exonerated, innocent, or released/control), then reported their attitudes toward him. Contrary to expectations from the stereotype activation and labelling literature, different labels did not produce different judgements of the man's character, criminality, or deservingness of support. Instead, perceptions were consistently more favourable for wrongfully convicted individuals (regardless of label) than other formerly incarcerated people (control). Troublingly however, the labels wrongly convicted, exonerated, and innocent still elicited some belief that the man was somehow involved in—or had committed—the crime for which he was erroneously convicted, that he may have committed other crimes in the past, and that he might commit crimes in the future. Implications are discussed in terms of stigma theory, growing media attention to wrongful convictions, and the disconnect between public and government support for post-exoneration services.

I   Introduction

The National Registry of Exonerations (2024) has catalogued more than 3,600 exonerations (i.e., cases in which a person was wrongly convicted of a criminal offense and later acquitted, pardoned, and/or deemed factually innocent) in the United States since 1989. These individuals collectively spent over 32,000 years imprisoned for crimes that they did not commit. Wrongful convictions are costly to taxpayers, who shoulder the financial costs associated with these miscarriages of justice (Legislative Analyst's Office, 2022), and to public safety, insofar as the actual perpetrators remain free to victimize others (Baumgartner et al., 2018; Norris et al., 2020; Pozzulo et al., 2017). To illustrate, the Innocence Project (2022) found that while their first 239 innocent clients were wrongfully imprisoned, the true perpetrators of those crimes committed an additional 99 violent crimes (that we know of), including 54 sexual assaults and 22 murders—crimes that may have been prevented if these wrongful convictions had not occurred.

But above all, wrongful convictions are devastating to the individuals personally affected, who bear the burden of incarceration-related stress coupled with the frustrating self-awareness of their innocence. For that reason, it is perhaps unsurprising that wrongful incarceration is devastating to mental health (Kukucka et al., 2022), with exonerees reporting rates of trauma exposure and symptoms of mental illness comparable to those of torture victims and combat veterans (Campbell & Denov, 2004; Grounds, 2004; Weigand, 2009). Wrongful convictions also carry myriad social, financial, and other consequences, such as broken relationships and missing milestone life events (Boudin, 2011; Siennick et al., 2014), poor physical health (Brooks & Greenberg, 2021), and loss of income leading to poverty and homelessness (Canterbury Law Group, 2022; Christian et al., 2006), among others (for reviews, see Brooks & Greenberg, 2021; Kirshenbaum et al., 2020).

On top of these struggles, exonerees also face stigma and discrimination after leaving prison (e.g., Clow, 2017; Kukucka et al., 2020; 2021; Zannella et al., 2020), such that the public tends to perceive and treat exonerees similarly to other formerly incarcerated people despite their innocence. While the public generally believes that their government should provide financial support and other services aimed at restituting wrongly incarcerated individuals and facilitating their post-release transition (Angus Reid, 1995; Blandisi et al., 2015; Clow, Blandisi, et al., 2012), people appear less willing to personally support exonerees, as evidenced by studies of hiring (Clow, 2017; Kukucka et al., 2020) and housing (Kukucka et al., 2021; Hamovitch et al., 2022; Zannella et al., 2020) discrimination. For instance, a field experiment by Zannella et al. (2020) found that landlords were less likely to respond to inquiries about apartment rentals from people who they believed had previously been incarcerated, even if the inquirer explained that they had been wrongfully convicted and exonerated by DNA evidence. Further, when landlords did respond to their inquiries, they were more likely to say that the unit was no longer available (Zannella et al., 2020). Similarly, Kukucka et al. (2020) found that hiring professionals tended to rate an exoneree job applicant less favorably, and offered them a lower wage, compared to a non-exoneree applicant with identical credentials. Possibly these findings are due to some small percentage of the population believing that exonerees are guilty rather than innocent (Howard, 2019), concerns that time in prison has negatively impacted exonerees in some way (Clow, Ricciardelli, & Cain, 2012), or intersecting biases impacting certain exonerees more than others (Clow, Ricciardelli, & Cain, 2012; Howard, 2019; Scherr, Normile, & Sarmiento, 2018).

Over the past decade, research on exoneree stigma and discrimination has proliferated and shed light on the many challenges that characterize re-entry and beyond. However, this growing body of research has varied in terms of the language used to describe exonerees: Prior studies have described members of this population as "wrongfully convicted" (e.g., Clow & Leach, 2015a; 2015b; Steinback, 2007), "wrongly convicted" (e.g., Norris, 2012; Ricciardelli & Clow, 2012; Westervelt & Humphrey, 2001), "exonerated" (e.g., Kukucka et al., 2020; Kukucka & Evelo, 2019), or "innocent" (Norris & Mullinix, 2020), or they have used more than one of these terms (e.g., Howard, 2019; Karaffa et al., 2017; Scherr, Normile, & Putney, 2018; Scherr, Normile, & Sarmiento, 2018; Zalman et al., 2012). Innocence organizations and popular media have likewise used mixed language: The mission statement for the National Registry of Exonerations focuses on "innocent criminal defendants," while trailers for popular *Netflix* series such as *The Innocence Files* and *When They See Us* describe their subjects as "wrongly convicted" and "exonerated" respectively, and the Innocence Project's website has used all of these terms to refer to their clients.

Although advocates and academics tend to use these terms interchangeably, one could argue (see Hamer, 2023; Leo, 2016) that these concepts—while often overlapping—hold slightly different connotations. For instance, "wrongful conviction" is often equated with factual innocence, implying that someone was convicted for a crime they did not commit or indeed a crime that never occurred (Kennedy, 2004; Weintraub, 2022), whereas the label "exoneree" arguably goes one step further by implying an official acknowledgement and/or legal reversal of this error (Baduria, 2022). In contrast, one could be "innocent" without any formal acknowledgement of that fact. It is unclear whether non-experts view these terms as synonymous or ascribe different meanings to them, which might in turn predict differences in stigmatization.

Consistent with *labeling theory* (Blumer, 1986), research on other stigmatized populations has shown that different verbal labels can evoke differing attitudes toward the same

group. For example, studies have found that describing individuals as "fat" versus "overweight" (Brochu & Esses, 2011), "Native" versus "Aboriginal" (Donakowski & Esses, 1996), "sex offenders" versus "people who have committed crimes of a sexual nature" (Harris & Socia, 2016; Lowe & Willis, 2019), "migrants" versus "refugees" (Graf et al., 2023), and "depressed" versus "mentally ill" (Szeto et al., 2013) affects people's attitudes toward, as well as their willingness to support, those individuals. Because group labels are sufficient for eliciting stereotypes (Donakowski & Esses, 1996; Kocsor et al., 2022), different labels can cue different stereotypes, and in turn, elicit different emotional reactions and expectations (Donakowski & Esses, 1996; Graf et al., 2023; Kocsor et al., 2022) and negatively impact behaviour (Frasca et al., 2022; Lowe & Willis, 2020). For instance, Frasca et al. (2022) found that simply calling a woman (versus a man) "emotional" during a disagreement was enough to activate negative gender stereotypes and significantly decrease the perceived legitimacy of her (but not his) arguments.

Returning to wrongful convictions, in October 2016, the Association in Defence of the Wrongly Convicted (AIDWYC)—a Canadian non-profit organization that works to prevent and overturn wrongful convictions—rebranded itself as Innocence Canada (Andrew-Gee, 2016). This may reflect a belief that this new label (i.e., using the term 'innocence' rather than 'wrongly convicted') would be more obvious to the public, viewed more positively, and/or better connected to other organizations that people may already be familiar with, to perhaps increase public support for their cause.

To date, only one study to our knowledge has tested the potential effect of varying how wrongly incarcerated people are described: In an audit study of housing discrimination, Kukucka et al. (2021) sent e-mail inquiries about apartment listings, some of which ostensibly came from an exoneree who self-described as either "wrongly convicted," "exonerated," or "innocent." Compared to inquiries from a person who had never been incarcerated, inquiries from wrongly incarcerated people were more often ignored regardless of how they self-described. These findings might indicate that the public views these labels as synonymous— or that the different labels evoked qualitatively different but similarly negative reactions across conditions. As audit studies are typically limited to measuring behaviour rather than understanding its causes (i.e., the attitudes or other factors driving that behaviour), and the Kukucka et al. (2021) study is no exception, it remains unclear whether and how different ways of characterizing exonerees might affect public attitudes toward exonerees, including willingness to support them.

To address this gap, we aimed to design a simple and ecologically plausible experiment to test how different labels might influence public perceptions of wrongfully convicted individuals. According to a recent survey, 55% of Americans get their news from social media websites either "often" or "sometimes," and 22% of American adults use Twitter (now formally rebranded as "X;" Pew Research Center, 2019). With this in mind, we created four realistic but fake "tweets" from a local television station that previewed a news story about a man's release from prison, which were identical apart from how they described the man (i.e., a "wrongly convicted" man released from prison, an "exonerated" man released from prison, an "innocent" man released from prison, or simply a "man" released from prison [control]). Then, we showed one of these tweets to each participant and asked them to report their impressions of the man described therein, including their beliefs about his character, criminality (past, present, and future), and deservingness of government support.

Inspired by labeling theory (Blumer, 1986) and the aforementioned stereotype literature (Graf et al., 2023; Frasca et al., 2022; Kocsor et al., 2022), we expected that the label "wrongly convicted" would evoke less favorable perceptions than the presumably less equivocal (but yet untested) label of "innocent." As for the "wrongful conviction" label, Clow (2017) argued that the negative term 'conviction' might overshadow the exculpatory term 'wrongful' insofar as negative information tends to have a stronger impact on judgments than positive information (i.e., *negativity bias*; Baumeister et al., 2001; Cialdini et al., 2006). Moreover, research has found that many incarcerated individuals consider the term "wrongful conviction" to include miscarriages of justice unrelated to factual innocence, such as not receiving a fair trial or perceived injustice in sentencing (Clow & Ricciardelli, 2022; Loeffler et al., 2018). Members of the public may likewise assume that "wrongful conviction" encompasses both guilty and innocent individuals and thus judge that label less favorably than the label "innocent" alone. We therefore hypothesized that participants would rate a releasee described as "wrongly convicted" less positively (in terms of character, criminality, and deservingness of support) than a releasee described as "innocent."

Our other two conditions (exonerated and control) were more exploratory. If participants interpret the label "exonerated" as requiring a legal reversal or some other formal acknowledgement that the original conviction was unsound (Baduira, 2022; NRE, n.d.), then a person labeled as "exonerated" might be viewed more positively than one described as "wrongly convicted." Alternatively, given that many academics appear to use these terms interchangeably (for a critique, see Leo, 2016), if participants likewise interpret "exonerated" as synonymous with "wrongly convicted," then the conditions should not differ.

In our control condition, participants read about a man released from prison without any mention (i.e., label) of the conviction being in error, such that his conviction was implied (but not explicitly stated) to be rightful. Some prior research has found that participants react to wrongfully and rightfully convicted individuals in similar ways (Clow & Leach, 2015a; Kukucka et al., 2021), whereas other research has found more positive reactions to wrongfully than rightfully convicted individuals (Thompson et al., 2012; Tudor-Owen et al., 2019). Given these mixed findings, we had no *a priori* hypotheses for our control condition but rather sought to explore whether participants would respond differently to individuals who were wrongfully versus (ostensibly) rightfully convicted.

II   Method

A. Participants and Design

An *a priori* power analysis using G*Power (Faul et al., 2009) indicated that $N = 180$ would yield 80% power to detect medium effects ($f = 0.25$) at the standard alpha cut-off (.05) in a one-way four-group design. To achieve this sample size, we recruited 278 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk (mTurk) in August 2019, anticipating that some data would need to be discarded due to failed comprehension checks and/or multiple submissions from the same individuals. Each participant was randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a one-way design and completed the study online in exchange for a $1.00 credit to their mTurk account. We later identified eight individuals (2.9%) who completed the study twice (as evidenced by identical IP addresses and demographic information) and we excluded these

individuals' second responses (per an electronic timestamp). We also excluded data from 82 individuals (29.5%) who failed a comprehension test (see Materials section)[1].

After these exclusions, our final sample included 188 U.S.-based mTurk users who ranged in age from 21 to 68 ($M = 35.92$, $SD = 10.42$) and were primarily male (60.6%) and college-educated (52.2%). In terms of race, our sample was predominantly White (76.6%), with fewer participants self-identifying as Black (8.0%), Asian (6.9%), Hispanic (4.8%), or multiracial (3.7%). Most participants (93.1%) self-reported being eligible to serve on a jury in the United States, and about a third (33.5%) had previously been called for jury duty. Most participants self-identified as Democrats (51.6%), with fewer identifying as Independents (28.7%), Republicans (14.9%), other (2.7%), or unaffiliated (2.1%). The distributions of these participant demographics did not significantly differ across conditions, ps > .05, and the sample included at least one resident from 37 of the 50 U.S. states. The Research Ethics Board at the last author's university approved this study (REB # 15394).

B. Materials

Each participant saw one of four ostensibly authentic tweets (see Figure 1), each of which included a preview of a news article about a man who was just released from prison. No actual news article was provided, and the tweet did not specify the crime for which the man was incarcerated. In designing the tweets, we used data from the National Registry of Exonerations (2023) to ensure that the subject of the news article—a man named Michael Williams—was representative of a typical exoneree. First, the names "Michael" and "Williams" are among the most common first and last names of exonerees in the Registry, and the names appear among multiple races. Second, Michael was said to have been incarcerated in Illinois, which has the most exonerations per capita of any U.S. state, and so the tweet seemingly came from the Twitter account of a local Illinois news station. Third, Michael was said to have served nine years in prison, which was the mean length of incarceration among exonerees at the time we designed the study. Fourth, Michael was described as 38 years-old, which we calculated by adding exonerees' mean length of incarceration (nine years) to their mean age at conviction (29). Finally, each tweet included a greyscale (i.e., black and white) photo of a bald man in poor lighting looking away from the camera through prison bars. We included this same photo in all four conditions to make the tweet appear authentic while also keeping Michael's race and individualized features ambiguous.

1. Label Manipulation

The four tweets were identical apart from the label (or lack thereof) used to describe Michael. By random assignment, some participants saw a tweet that described Michael as either *wrongly convicted*, *exonerated*, or *innocent*. In these conditions, the relevant label appeared twice (i.e., in the text of the tweet above the photo, and in the headline of the article below the photo), and in both places it appeared immediately before the word "Illinois." Other participants saw a *control* tweet, which was otherwise identical but did not include any of these labels; it simply described Michael as an "Illinois man released" from prison.

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[1] Excluding these individuals did not change the findings but ensured that included participants had paid sufficient attention to our stimuli.

C. Measures

1. Perceived Character and Feelings

Below the tweet, participants answered 24 items that gauged their opinions of Michael Williams. The first eight items assessed perceptions of Michael's character: Using a 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*) scale, participants rated the degree to which they expected Michael to be aggressive, competent, conscientious, emotionally stable, friendly, intelligent, trustworthy, and violent. Then, informed by the Stereotype Content Model (Fiske et al., 2002) and prior work on perceptions of exonerees (Clow & Leach, 2015b), we reduced these eight items to three dimensions: Competence (i.e., competent, conscientious, and intelligent; α = .84), Warmth (i.e., emotionally stable, friendly, and trustworthy; α = .85), and Aggression (i.e., aggressive and violent; α = .84). We then reverse-scored the Aggression dimension, to create a Nonaggressive variable, so that higher scores reflected more favorable perceptions of Michael's character for all three dimensions (Competence, Warmth, Nonaggressive).

The next five items assessed participants' feelings toward Michael. Using the same five-point scale, participants reported the degree to which they felt anger, fear, happiness, liking, and pity toward Michael. Similar to above, we then reverse-scored the anger and fear items so that higher scores on these items consistently indicated more favorable perceptions.

2. Perceived Criminality

Five items gauged participants' beliefs about Michael's past, present, and future criminality. Using a scale from 0% (*definitely no*) to 100% (*definitely yes*), these items asked participants to estimate the likelihood that Michael: "being in prison was his own fault," "was somehow involved in this crime," "actually committed this crime," "committed other crimes in the past (i.e., before he went to prison for this crime)," and "will commit a crime in the future (i.e., now that he is out of prison)."

3. Deservingness of Support

Six items asked participants about Michael's deservingness of post-release support. Using a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), participants separately rated their belief that Michael should receive free housing, job training, health care, public college education, and financial compensation. Participants also reported how much financial compensation they felt Michael should receive via one item with 11 response options (see Greene et al., 2016): 0 = *$0*; 1 = *less than $12,000*; 2 = *$12,000 – $25,000*; 3 = *$25,000 – $50,000*; 4 = *$50,000 – $100,000*; 5 = *$100,000 – $250,000*; 6 = *$250,000 – $500,000*; 7 = *$500,000 – $1 million*; 8 = *$1 million – $2 million*; 9 = *$2 million – $4 million*; 10 = *more than $4 million*.

4. Exploratory Measures

After providing the aforementioned ratings of Michael specifically, each participant (regardless of condition) answered four parallel items in which they separately estimated the likelihood (0-100%) that people (in general) who are described as "exonerated," "wrongly convicted," "innocent," and "released from prison" actually committed the crime for which they were convicted. Each participant also answered two multiple-choice questions which asked them to guess Michael's race (White, Black, Hispanic, or Asian) and the crime for which

he was incarcerated (assault, murder, child sex abuse, robbery, drug possession or sale, or sexual assault), neither of which was actually mentioned in our materials.

5. Data Checks

Participants answered three multiple-choice items to ensure that they had read, understood, and remembered the tweet. Two of the items were attention checks: Participants were asked how long Michael was incarcerated (nine years) and where he was incarcerated (Illinois). The third item was a manipulation check that asked which label (with options of wrongly convicted, exonerated, innocent, vindicated [distractor item], or none of these) was used to describe him. We later excluded data from 82 participants (29.5%) who answered any one or more of these three items incorrectly; the exclusion rate did not differ between conditions, $\chi^2(3) = 7.30$, $p = .063$.

We also asked participants to provide an open-ended definition of whichever label they had read, as we were concerned that certain labels (e.g., exonerated) might be less familiar than others (e.g., innocent). We did not expect laypersons to provide the various pathways to exoneration (Schuller et al., 2021), comprehensive definitions (e.g., that someone can be erroneously convicted when a crime has not even occurred), or nuanced understandings that even some scholars appear to lack (Leo, 2016). Instead, for the three experimental conditions, definitions were coded as accurate if they indicated that the person was innocent (e.g., "not guilty", "innocent") and/or did not commit the crime for which they were convicted (e.g., "he didn't do it"). For the control condition, definitions were coded as accurate if they indicated that such a person had been in prison but wasn't anymore (e.g., "let out of prison", "they served their time"). Under this coding scheme, most participants (84.04%) produced an accurate definition of their label, and the rate of correct definitions did not differ across conditions, $\chi^2(3) = 2.39$, $p = .496$. Thus, most participants appeared to understand the essential element or gist of the various terms, and no one label caused participants greater confusion or difficulty than the others. Across the conditions, inter-rater reliability between the two coders was 96.28%. For any definitions not agreed upon by the two coders, the last author was brought in to make the final decision.

D. Procedure

After indicating consent, each participant saw an ostensibly authentic tweet (see Figure 1) from a news outlet about a man named Michael Williams. By random assignment, the tweet described Michael as either a "wrongly convicted Illinois man," "exonerated Illinois man," "innocent Illinois man," or simply an "Illinois man" who had just been released after nine years in prison. Participants then reported their beliefs about Michael's character, criminality, and deservingness of re-entry support. Then, on a new screen, participants separately estimated the likelihood of guilt associated with all four of the labels included in the study (i.e., wrongly convicted, exonerated, innocent, and released), and they guessed Michael's race and the crime for which he was incarcerated (neither of which were actually mentioned). Finally, participants completed the data check items and provided demographic information.

III   Results

Descriptive statistics for all dependent variables by condition are provided in Table 1.

A. Perceived Character

Overall, participants rated Michael as moderately competent ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 0.83$), moderately warm ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 0.86$), and moderately nonaggressive ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 0.94$). A 4 (Label: Wrongly Convicted, Exonerated, Innocent, or Control) X 3 (Dimension: Competence, Warmth, and Nonaggressive) mixed ANOVA revealed a main effect of Label, $F(3,184) = 6.04$, $p = .001$, $f = 0.31$. Post hoc Tukey comparisons indicated that participants in the control condition reported less favorable impressions of Michael compared to all three experimental conditions, all ps $< .015$, none of which differed from each other, ps $> .97$. Thus, the hypothesized difference between the "wrongly convicted" and "innocent" conditions was not found. A main effect of Dimension also emerged, $F(2,368) = 74.40$, $p < .001$, $f = 0.64$, such that participants generally rated Michael as more nonaggressive than as competent or warm (across conditions). No Label X Dimension interaction was found, $F(6,368) = 0.57$, $p = .756$, $f = 0.10$.

Similarly, a 4 (Label: Wrongly Convicted, Exonerated, Innocent, or Control) X 5 (Feeling: Not Angry, Not Fearful, Happiness, Liking, and Pity) mixed ANOVA on self-reported feelings toward Michael revealed a main effect of Label, $F(3,184) = 9.65$, $p < .001$, $f = 0.40$. Again, our hypothesis was not supported. Instead, participants in the control condition reported less positive feelings toward Michael compared to all three experimental conditions, all ps $< .001$, none of which differed from each other, ps $> .99$. A main effect of Feeling also emerged, $F(4,736) = 121.84$, $p < .001$, $f = 0.81$, which was qualified by a significant Label X Feeling interaction, $F(12,736) = 3.28$, $p < .001$, $f = 0.23$. As shown in Table 1, simple effects tests indicated that participants felt greater happiness, liking, and pity toward Michael when he was wrongfully convicted (i.e., in any of the three experimental conditions compared to the control condition), but Label did not affect feelings of not angry or not fearful, which were universally high across all conditions (including control).

B. Perceived Criminality

A 4 (Label: Wrongly Convicted, Exonerated, Innocent, or Control) X 5 (Item: Past, Present Guilt, Present Involvement, Present Blame, and Future Crime) mixed ANOVA revealed a main effect of Label, $F(3,184) = 30.91$, $p < .001$, $f = 0.71$, such that participants in the control condition rated criminality as more likely compared to all three experimental conditions, ps $< .001$, none of which differed from each other, ps $> .90$. A main effect of Item also emerged, $F(4,736) = 13.68$, $p < .001$, $f = 0.27$, as well as a significant Label X Item interaction, $F(12,736) = 8.91$, $p < .001$, $f = 0.38$. In probing this interaction, the only significant differences were captured by the main effect of Label. Although not significantly different, the lowest means in the control condition were perceptions of future crimes (which was also the only mean under 50%) and prior crimes. In the experimental conditions, however, prior crimes were the highest means (ranging from 24.62-26.33), which is likely responsible for the interaction (see Table 1).

Critically, however, Michael was not perceived as entirely innocent even if he was labeled as such. Collapsed across the three experimental conditions (i.e., the three wrongful conviction labels), participants estimated a 19.14% chance ($SD = 24.52$) that Michael was

somehow involved in the crime for which he was incarcerated and a 14.41% chance (SD = 21.78) that he actually committed that crime. Moreover, these participants estimated a 25.14% chance (SD = 23.79) that Michael had committed other crimes in the past and a 17.95% chance (SD = 21.39) that he would commit a crime in the future. To quantify participants' doubt over Michael's innocence, we performed one sample t-tests comparing the means for each condition and criminality item against zero (i.e., complete certainty in Michael's innocence). Every one of these comparisons was significant, all ts > 4.00, ps < .001, and most showed large effect sizes (see Table 2), suggesting that participants on the whole were noticeably skeptical of Michael's innocence even when he was described as wrongly convicted, exonerated, or innocent.

C. Deservingness of Support

As for post-release support, a 4 (Label: Wrongly Convicted, Exonerated, Innocent, or Control) X 5 (Support Type: Housing, Job Training, Healthcare, College Tuition, Financial Compensation) mixed ANOVA revealed a main effect of Label, $F(3,184)$ = 16.99, p < .001, f = 0.53. Participants in the control condition rated Michael as less deserving of support compared to all three experimental conditions, ps < .001, none of which differed from each other, ps > .94. A main effect of Support Type also emerged, $F(4,736)$ = 25.47, p < .001, f = 0.37, which was qualified by a significant Label X Support Type interaction, $F(12,736)$ = 4.01, p < .001, f = 0.26. Similar to the observed interaction for criminality, the relative support for different post-release services varied across conditions, but the only significant differences were captured by the main effect of Label where participants in all three experimental conditions saw Michael as equally deserving of support, and significantly more so, than in the control condition (see Table 1). Although not significantly different, the highest endorsed support in the control condition—and the only mean above the midpoint of the scale—was free job training. Among the experimental conditions, the means for all supports were above the midpoint of the scale, with compensation (which was the lowest rating for control) the most strongly endorsed. Again, these somewhat different patterns of support are presumably responsible for the significant interaction.

Finally, a one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect of Label on how much financial compensation participants felt Michael should receive, $F(3,184)$ = 18.89, p < .001, f = 0.55. Control participants recommended less compensation (M = 2.56, or approximately $25,000; SD = 3.47) compared to all three experimental conditions, ps < .001, none of which differed from each other, ps > .93. Collapsed across the three experimental conditions, participants' mean recommended compensation amount was 6.43 (SD = 2.80), which translates to approximately $550,000 total or about $60,000 per year of wrongful incarceration.

D. Exploratory Measures

Echoing our between-group comparisons of perceived criminality, a repeated-measures ANOVA revealed that Label affected within-person guilt judgments, $F(3,561)$ = 148.72, p < .001, f = 0.89, such that participants rated a person who was "released from prison" as more likely to have committed a crime (M = 49.36, SD = 31.69) than any of the other labels—i.e., wrongly convicted (M = 12.57, SD = 19.64), exonerated (M = 17.50, SD = 21.86), and innocent (M = 10.17, SD = 19.09). However, participants also rated a person described as "exonerated" as more likely to have committed a crime than those described as "wrongly convicted" or "innocent," which did not differ from each other. Notably, all three experimental conditions

again produced mean ratings that were significantly greater than zero, all ts > 7.30, ps < .001, ds > 0.53.

Finally, participants most often guessed that Michael was White (52.7%) or Black (45.7%), and these rates did not differ between conditions, $\chi^2(3) = 6.04$, $p = .110$, which suggests that our materials were racially ambiguous, as intended. For crime, participants most often guessed that Michael was incarcerated for murder (44.7%), robbery (20.2%), or a drug crime (18.1%), and crime guesses differed between conditions, $\chi^2(15) = 34.25$, $p = .003$, such that participants in the experimental conditions more often guessed that Michael was convicted of murder (49.1% – 52.8%) and less often guessed that he was convicted of a drug crime (9.4% – 13.2%) compared to the control condition (23.3% and 39.5%, respectively).

IV   Discussion

Researchers and innocence advocates have used varying language to describe the wrongfully convicted population (e.g., wrongly convicted, exonerated, innocent), even sometimes treating the terms as interchangeable. Although overlapping, these labels do convey somewhat different meanings. For instance, 'exonerated' suggests that someone in an official capacity has recognized that the conviction was erroneous, whereas someone could be 'innocent' whether their innocence is acknowledged by others or not (Baduria, 2022; Leo, 2016). Some researchers use "wrongful conviction" to include both legal and factual innocents, and some acknowledge that both guilty and innocent individuals can be "exonerated" on grounds of procedural errors (Baduria, 2022; Leo, 2016). As Leo (2016) put it: "An individual may be factually innocent but never exonerated… just as an individual may be exonerated (e.g., declared blameless by the criminal justice system) but be factually guilty" (p.3). In other words, these labels may not be as clear cut or interchangeable as many might assume. For those reasons, we designed the current study to test whether different wrongful conviction labels (i.e., wrongly convicted, exonerated, or innocent) elicit different attitudes from laypeople toward a wrongfully convicted individual.

Our original hypothesis that some labels (i.e., wrongly convicted) would lead to more negative impressions than others (i.e., innocent), as has been found in past stereotype research in different domains (e.g., Brochu & Esses, 2011; Lowe & Willis, 2019), was not supported. To our surprise, we generally found no differences between these three experimental conditions. Participants did not judge an individual (Michael Williams) described by these labels significantly differently in terms of character, guilt (past, present, or future), or deservingness of post-release support, and they consistently judged Michael more favorably when he was described with any of these three labels than when we was simply released from prison (i.e., our control condition). That said, when participants rated how likely it was for people who were wrongly convicted, exonerated, innocent, and released from prison to commit crimes, participants did think that exonerated individuals were significantly more likely than wrongly convicted or innocent people to commit crimes (although the larger finding was that participants expected people released from prison to commit crimes significantly more than any of the experimental labels). Although our control condition did not explicitly state that Michael was guilty of the crime for which he was incarcerated, only six participants mentioned the possibility of innocence in their definitions of the condition. Moreover, we consistently found that participants rated our control condition significantly more negatively than all of our experimental conditions, which does suggest that control participants assumed Michael's guilt. In addition, participants felt significantly more happiness, liking, and pity toward Michael in

the three experimental conditions than in the control condition. As such, our findings differ from original research showing that exonerees are generally stigmatized similarly to actual offenders (e.g., Clow & Leach, 2015a), and even the audit housing study that examined the impact of wrongful conviction labels on landlords' willingness to rent to individuals (Kukucka et al., 2021). Instead, our findings appear more in line with recent research suggesting that exonerees—while stigmatized—are perceived differently, and more positively, than other ex-prisoners (Tudor-Owen et al., 2019).

One possible explanation for these seemingly more positive responses may be that the public has become more cognizant of wrongful convictions over the past few years—perhaps due to the increased availability and popularity of serials and documentaries on the subject (e.g., *Making a Murderer*, *When They See Us)*. Wrongful conviction media may have familiarized the public with words like wrongly convicted and exonerated and perhaps associated these words with factual innocence in people's minds (Leo, 2016). This is reflected in our findings, as most participants correctly defined their assigned label, and the rate of correct definitions did not differ between labels. Consistent with this idea, numerous experiments have found that educating people about wrongful convictions, whether through exoneree narratives or facts and statistics, leads to more positive views of wrongfully convicted individuals (Ricciardelli & Clow, 2012; Zannella et al., 2022) and less support for the death penalty (Norris & Mullinix, 2020). That said, it could be that people described wrongfully convicted individuals more positively than other ex-prisoners in this research, but if those same individuals were actually in the position to hire or rent, that then they might discriminate, as has been found in other research (Clow, 2017; Kukucka et al., 2020; Zannella et al., 2020).

As the labels ascribed to exonerees have not historically been used in a derogatory fashion, this may explain why our findings differ from similar studies of other stigmatized groups (e.g., Brochu & Esses, 2011; Lowe & Willis, 2019; Szeto et al., 2013). That said, emotions may run deeper among members of the public who have been exposed to pre- or post-trial publicity of an exoneree's case (see Steblay et al., 1999). For instance, Rodriguez et al. (2019) found that residents of Wisconsin (the state where Steven Avery was wrongfully convicted and later convicted of a different crime) were more likely to believe that Avery was guilty compared to non-Wisconsin residents, which the authors attributed to the fact that Wisconsin residents were more likely to have been exposed to negatively biasing media coverage of Avery than others. Along these same lines, Sabrina Butler—the first woman to be exonerated from death row—was filling out paperwork to be hired as a cashier in a grocery store in her hometown when an assistant manager recognized her and terminated her employment (Westervelt & Cook, 2010). Consistent with decades of research on *confirmation bias* (see Nickerson, 1998), media coverage of wrongful convictions may simply amplify viewers' pre-existing attitudes toward a particular case or the justice system in general. Thus, media exposure may be a double-edged sword for exonerees, insofar as it may improve public attitudes in general, but perhaps perpetuate stigma and discrimination for individuals trying to reintegrate back into the communities where they were wrongfully convicted.

It is important to note that while our participants' opinions of exonerees were favorable *relative* to our implied-guilty control, it is debatable whether their opinions of exonerees were *objectively* favorable. No matter how exonerees were described—and even if they were unequivocally labeled as 'innocent'—participants were not entirely convinced that Michael was not guilty. Across experimental conditions, participants estimated an average likelihood of 17.91%-20.91% (depending upon the exact label) that Michael was involved in—and an 11.49%-18.74% probability that he actually committed—the crime for which he was

incarcerated. They believed even more strongly (24.62%-26.33%) that Michael had committed other crimes prior to his wrongful conviction, and that he would commit future crimes (16.85%-20.05%). Although these numbers were smaller than the 40.91%-61.60% reported in our control condition (depending upon the question), they were still considerably and statistically larger than zero. In addition, as the numbers for our presumed guilt control group were more toward the middle of the scale (50%) than absolute certainty of guilt (100%), our experimental labels did not lead to as much change as you might expect. While this study is not the first to show that people do not necessarily equate exoneration with innocence (e.g., Howard, 2019; Scherr, Normile, & Sarmeinto, 2018), it is the first study, to our knowledge, to demonstrate that mentioning a prior erroneous conviction prompted stigmatizing inferences about the exoneree's prior, present, and future behaviour. Howard (2019) found that participants rated a Black individual who falsely confessed as significantly more likely to commit future crimes than a White individual who falsely confessed. We have found that past, present, and future criminality transcends labels, does not appear limited by race or false confessions, and is less than the presumed criminality of other individuals released from prison but not as dramatically as expected. Future research may wish to examine the factors that exacerbate and constrain these guilt perceptions.

Assumptions that wrongfully convicted individuals have committed past crimes, or will commit crimes in the future, may be part of victim-blaming and reflect participants' inherent belief in a just world (Hafer & Bègue, 2005; Lerner & Miller, 1978). Belief in a just world—what Lerner (1980) originally described as "a fundamental delusion"—posits that people often blame victims of injustice for their own misfortune, or denigrate them, as a means of preserving their beliefs that the world is ultimately fair (Callan et al., 2006; Hafer & Gosse, 2010). As the wrongful conviction of an innocent person is a serious violation of justice, people may feel motivated to rationalize the event in a way that seems less cruel (e.g., he has, or will, commit crimes and thus deserve to be in prison anyway). Not only do these just world beliefs lower one's anxiety with the unpredictability of life, they lower one's concern about being wrongfully convicted personally as well, as if only "bad people" who deserve some sort of injustice to befall them are wrongfully convicted, then the general, law-abiding public need not fear this horrible situation occurring to them. Consistent with this idea, our participants estimated a 15-20% probability that Michael's wrongful conviction was his own fault. In turn, research has shown that people are less willing to help others (e.g., Weiner, 1993; Weiner et al., 1988)—including exonerees (Kukucka & Evelo, 2019; Savage et al., 2018; Scherr, Normile, & Putney, 2018)—when they are viewed as responsible for their own plight.

The assumption that exonerees will commit future crimes may also reflect a phenomenon called *courtesy stigma* (Goffman, 1963) or *stigma-by-association* (Pryor et al., 2012), whereby non-stigmatized individuals who affiliate with members of stigmatized groups come to be stigmatized in the same manner. In various studies, for example, people have judged psychiatric nurses as less logical than other nurses (Halter, 2008), judged non-disabled individuals with disabled romantic partners as less athletic than other non-disabled individuals (Goldstein & Johnson, 1997), and judged friends of obese individuals as less socially adept than friends of non-obese individuals (Hebl & Mannix, 2003). In this context, people may believe that cohabiting with criminal offenders while in prison has morally corrupted exonerees (Clow, Ricciardelli, & Cain, 2012) and/or "taught" exonerees how to commit crimes (Damm & Gorinas, 2020), such that they become more likely to commit crimes after their release than (presumably) before. No matter the reason, these inferences about exonerees' criminality stand to create stigma and discrimination that hamper their re-entry and prolong their suffering.

Looking at support, our participants generally believed that exonerees should receive various forms of post-release support. In the current study, participants consistently endorsed exonerees' receipt of financial compensation for their time spent wrongly incarcerated, as well as access to vital (but generally unavailable) services such as housing assistance, health care, job training, and college tuition. However, current post-exoneration support varies dramatically between U.S. states (Gutman & Sun, 2019; Madrigal & Norris, 2022), which is consistent with research showing that support for exoneree compensation varies along demographic and ideological lines (Hicks et al., 2021). As it stands, 11 U.S. states (and Canada) have *no* compensation statute, and thus guarantee no post-release support to wrongfully convicted people, and the other 39 states have extremely heterogeneous statutes (see Madrigal & Norris, 2022). With respect to financial compensation, most states offer a set amount per year of wrongful incarceration, with the modal amount being around $50,000-$75,000, which is in line with our participants' average recommendation of about $60,000 per year. Shifton (2021) likewise found that the financial compensation exonerees *actually* receive did not differ from public opinion as to how much they *should* receive—although the sufficiency of this amount is a separate question. For instance, Wisconsin's $5,000 per year of wrongful incarceration and other state's cap on the total amount—not to mention the states without compensation statutes that instead require exonerees to seek financial damages via civil litigation—fall significantly short of this reasonable sounding modal amount.

With respect to services, our data reveal a much starker disconnect between existing policy and public opinion. Per Madrigal and Norris (2022), few states currently grant exonerees any form of employment assistance (16 states), mental health care (15 states), physical health care (14 states), or educational assistance (16 states), despite our data—and others' (e.g., Kieckhaefer & Luna, 2022; Scherr , Normile, & Putney, 2018; Scherr, Normile, & Sarmiento, 2018)—revealing clear public support for these forms of assistance. However, given the complex link between attitudes and behavior (e.g., Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005)—and the possibility that our participants simply responded in a socially desirable way—one might wonder if these favorable attitudes translate into real-world support.

E. Limitations & Future Research

This was a single study, using racially ambiguous stimuli, brief materials, and an mTurk sample. Our sample was predominantly male, college-educated, politically liberal, and White. Although 93.1% of our sample claimed to be eligible for jury duty, only 33.5% reported previously being called for jury duty. As some demographic variables have been shown to correlate with criminal justice attitudes (e.g., Maggard et al., 2012; Malcom et al., 2023), including but not limited to those measured in the current study, future research could examine such variables as potential moderators of attitudes toward wrongly convicted people. Of course, in hiring, renting, and court room settings, potential attitudinal biases may be present.

It is also important to acknowledge that because we used an American sample, there may be something unique about the American criminal justice climate that may not translate to other jurisdictions. In fact, research by Henrich and colleagues (2010) found evidence that American samples are among the most WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) of the WEIRD countries. Future research using samples from other countries, both Western (e.g., Australia, Britain, France) and non-Western (e.g., Brazil, China, South Africa) would indicate the generalizability of these findings.

Additional comparison groups may lend further insight as well, as the control condition in the current work (i.e., "released") merely implied guilt. Although few participants in this condition defined being released from prison as potentially involving innocent individuals as well as guilty, it is possible that other people considered wrongfully convicted individuals but did not write it down. Thus, future research may wish to use different language to make guilt apparent, or differing comparison groups (e.g., parolees, citizens without prior criminal records). Moreover, an important future direction, given the overrepresentation of African Americans in the criminal justice system (Cooper et al., 2021), is to explore if these labels evoke differing meanings or reactions when associated with different races.

Finally, attitudes may not predict behavior. Even if participants are reporting positive attitudes, recent audit studies suggest that exonerees still face discrimination in various arenas (jobs, housing, mental health care). For example, Kukucka et al. (2021) likewise found that labels did not matter in terms of reactions to housing inquiries. That said, landlords discriminated against all three of the wrongful conviction labels equally, and comparable to the discrimination faced by parolees (in comparison to a no criminal background control). Future research targeting actual supportive behavior (e.g., donating time or money) in addition to attitudes seems warranted, to test if people are willing to "put their money where their mouth is," so to speak.

V   Conclusion

Contrary to what one might expect from labelling theory (Blumer, 1986) and stereotype research in other domains (Brochu & Esses, 2011; Graf et al., 2023; Lowe & Willis, 2019), the citizens in our sample responded to "wrongly convicted," "exonerated," and "innocent" as if the terms were interchangeable—much like many academics and innocence advocates do (see Leo, 2016). Perhaps we need to take a moment and ask ourselves some questions: Do these words all mean the same thing, and would we even want them to?

Moreover, participants' support for reintegrative supports, including compensation, was considerably higher than what is generally provided to exonerees, as has been found by other research (Angus Reid, 1995; Karaffa et al., 2017). Ironically, inadequate compensation statutes can lead exonerees to instead seek financial compensation via civil rights lawsuits, which often result in damage awards that are ultimately costlier to taxpayers than an improved (and appropriate) statute would be. In Maryland, for example, taxpayers have paid a collective $24 million to cover litigation costs and damage awards for 11 exonerees, which is well above the mean response of around $50,000 suggested by our participants. Releasing wrongfully convicted individuals to survive on their own, without supports, in the community where they are stigmatized and discriminated against—perhaps it is the government's negligence and indifference in meeting exonerees' reintegration needs that is truly criminal.

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VIII   Table 1

Effects of Label on Perceptions of, and Feelings Toward, Michael Williams

	Control ($n = 43$)	Wrongly Convicted ($n = 53$)	Exonerated ($n = 53$)	Innocent ($n = 39$)
Character (1-5)				
Competence	2.96 (0.85)	3.41 (0.81)	3.47 (0.76)	3.32 (0.87)
Warmth	2.81 (0.89)	3.34 (0.82)	3.39 (0.77)	3.38 (0.85)
Nonaggressive	3.54 (1.02)	4.16 (0.89)	4.00 (0.87)	4.01 (0.91)
Feelings (1-5)				
Not Angry	4.65 (0.72)	4.85 (0.41)	4.70 (0.70)	4.79 (0.70)
Not Fearful	4.44 (0.93)	4.72 (0.72)	4.45 (1.01)	4.87 (0.34)
Happiness	2.67_a (1.43)	3.34_{ab} (1.53)	3.74_b (1.30)	3.49_b (1.34)
Liking	2.16_a (1.23)	3.26_b (1.38)	3.38_b (1.24)	3.31_b (1.26)
Pity	2.58_a (1.37)	3.66_b (1.47)	3.60_b (1.29)	3.44_b (1.37)
Criminality (0-100%)				
Conviction was his fault	59.98_a (28.78)	15.15_b (20.01)	20.06_b (25.37)	15.38_b (23.71)
Involved in this crime	61.60_a (31.40)	17.91_b (22.91)	20.91_b (23.34)	18.41_b (28.43)
Committed this crime	60.91_a (31.26)	11.49_b (19.21)	18.74_b (24.53)	12.51_b (20.66)
Committed prior crimes	53.74_a (28.91)	24.62_b (21.66)	24.79_b (25.91)	26.33_b (24.13)
Will commit future crime	40.91_a (25.01)	17.51_b (20.45)	16.85_b (23.04)	20.05_b (20.71)
Support (1-7)				
Free housing	$3.35 (2.02)_a$	$5.28 (1.81)_b$	$5.08 (2.00)_b$	$5.31 (1.59)_b$
Free job training	$5.07 (1.90)_a$	$6.19 (1.09)_b$	$6.11 (1.31)_b$	$5.95 (1.54)_b$
Free health care	$3.86 (2.05)_a$	$5.32 (1.83)_b$	$5.43 (1.84)_b$	$5.62 (1.74)_b$
Free college tuition	$3.70 (2.16)_a$	$5.55 (1.59)_b$	$5.42 (1.93)_b$	$5.21 (1.67)_b$
Financial compensation	$3.33 (2.21)_a$	$6.19 (1.29)_b$	$5.74 (1.82)_b$	$6.23 (1.35)_b$
Compensation (0-10)	$2.56 (3.47)_a$	$6.62 (2.59)_b$	$6.38 (2.98)_b$	$6.26 (2.88)_b$

Note. Aggressiveness, anger, and fear were reverse-scored. Means in the same row not sharing a common subscript differ at $p < .05$.

IX   Table 2

Effect Sizes (Cohen's ds) Comparing the Perceived Likelihood of Criminality against Zero as a Function of Label

	Wrongly Convicted	**Exonerated**	**Innocent**
Conviction was his fault	0.76 [0.45, 1.06]	0.79 [0.48, 1.10]	0.65 [0.30, 0.99]
Involved in this crime	0.78 [0.47, 1.09]	0.90 [0.57, 1.21]	0.65 [0.30, 0.99]
Committed this crime	0.60 [0.30, 0.89]	0.76 [0.45, 1.07]	0.61 [0.26, 0.94]
Committed prior crimes	1.14 [0.79, 1.48]	0.96 [0.63, 1.28]	1.09 [0.69, 1.48]
Will commit future crime	0.86 [0.54, 1.17]	0.73 [0.42, 1.03]	0.97 [0.58, 1.35]

Note. All ps < .001. Values in brackets represent 95% confidence intervals for Cohen's *d*.