



The Legality of Labor and Perceptions of Deservingness of Rights and Services for Sex Workers

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Abstract

Access to social services like healthcare, education, housing, and welfare are integral to creating an equitable society. While many populations inherently benefit from these services, sex workers are often denied these rights and services because of the nature of their work. The purpose of this study was to examine perceptions of deservingness of sex workers for a wide range of rights and services. This study distinguished those attitudes across legal and illegal forms of sex work, identified attitudinal and demographic correlates associated with those perceptions, and examined potential interactions between respondents' gender and age. Participants included a nationwide sample of adults from the USA ($n = 549$). Results indicated that participants perceived legal sex work as more deserving of rights and services compared to illegal sex work. Perceptions of deservingness were associated with attitudes toward abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, and perceptions of government legitimacy. Overall, older individuals were less willing to extend rights and services to sex workers and women were more likely to perceive sex workers as deserving of rights and services. There was an interaction between gender and age. For illegal sex work, gender differences in perceptions converged as participants aged, whereas for legal sex work, gender differences were exacerbated with age, with men reporting particularly restrictive perceptions of deservingness.

Keywords Sex work · Government rights · Public opinion · Deservingness · Welfare

Introduction

Access to social services like healthcare, education, housing, and welfare are integral to creating an equitable society. For example, Medicare and Medicaid provide affordable and accessible healthcare for vulnerable populations such as older generations and low-income individuals, respectively, who might otherwise have their healthcare needs unmet. Likewise, housing vouchers reduce the risk for homelessness for low-income families and other social welfare programs provide support (financial or otherwise) to those who are needs-based eligible. These programs provide necessary assistance to individuals and households, with 99.1 million

people participating in ten of the most popular safety net programs in 2019 (Macartney & Ghertner, 2023). Beyond these common forms of services, there are rights and services that contribute to the health of communities and are designed to promote equity and safety. For example, victim services provide support to facilitate closure and restoration after victimization, and child custody rights facilitate the development, safety, and overall well-being of a child.

There are contexts by which people are seen as deserving or not deserving of services and rights. Research has outlined perceptions of deservingness of social policies across groups based on a variety of conditions, including citizenship (Rodriguez, 2018; van Oorschot, 2006), national culture (Aarøe & Petersen, 2014; Laenen & Rossetti, 2019), gender (Lupieri, 2022), and age (Kallio & Kouvo, 2015). Another common criteria is employment status (van Oorschot, 2006), where those seeking public assistance often must show proof of employment or recent unemployment. Further, individuals who have engaged or are engaged in illegal activities are often excluded from social services and are perceived as less deserving (Breakstone, 2015; Crago et al., 2021).

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Sex work is an occupation that encompasses a variety of labor, wherein individuals provide sexual services in exchange for money. Sex work is a diverse industry whose labor types range from online content creation to street sex work with clients. Sex work is a highly stigmatized form of labor (Fritsch et al., 2016; Harrison & Murphy, 2022), even though the legality of the labor depends on the labor type. Research on perceptions of sex work focuses on perceptions of legalization (Ma et al., 2018; Mancini et al., 2020) and correlates to these perceptions (Long et al., 2012; Powers et al., 2023). However, this research has not fully examined perceptions of rights and services to sex workers generally, or how the legality of that labor may contextualize those perceptions. This is an important area of inquiry as there are many examples of restrictions and denial of rights of sex workers (Brooks et al., 2023; e.g., Norrington, 2011; Petro, 2016; Platt et al., 2018).

This study aims to contribute to the empirical literature by examining perceptions of deservingness of a population that has been largely omitted from empirical research, but is greatly impacted by rights and services restrictions—sex workers. First, this study examines attitudes toward sex workers' rights and access to government services. In doing so, this study distinguishes those attitudes across legal and illegal forms of sex work. Second, this study identifies attitudinal and demographic correlates associated with these perceptions. Finally, this study examines potential interactions between respondents' gender and age in contextualizing these attitudes toward sex worker rights and access to government services.

Literature Review

Restrictions of Rights and Services to Sex Workers

Globally, sex workers are often excluded from social services and program benefits because of their labor. As a recent example, sex workers were excluded from relief efforts and social programs designed to address the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (see Brooks et al., 2023 for discussion). The USA excluded sex workers operating illegally from receiving any financial assistance (Benoit & Unsworth, 2022; Grant, 2023), and assistance for sex workers operating legally was limited because workers within the adult entertainment business were specifically excluded from the financial assistance legislation (Coronavirus Economic Stabilization Act, 2020). Likewise, Canadian lawmakers excluded sex workers from health and social safety net policies established before the pandemic, with no attempt to expand these emergency relief services during the pandemic to meet the country's "no one will be left behind" policy (Benoit & Unsworth, 2022, p. 338).

Beyond national emergencies, monies set aside for welfare services are also limiting in their recipients. The Nordic model of sex work does not criminalize the sex worker, yet social programs in Norway limit their criteria based on any connection between a sex worker and a client; this limitation of services impacts housing accessibility, wherein sex workers are apprehensive to provide their residential information when applying for social programming for fear of eviction (Brunovskis & Skilbrei, 2018). In the USA, housing laws allow landlords to evict residents who are currently or who have ever engaged in criminalized sex work (Breakstone, 2015). In the District of Columbia and Rhode Island, sex workers identify housing and financial necessity as motivators for engaging in sex work and current policies and stigma as barriers to housing assistance (Macon & Tai, 2022).

Another common barrier sex workers face while engaged in their labor is access to food assistance. Many sex workers in the USA and Canada cite food needs as the reason for engaging in sex work (Anasti, 2018; Barreto et al., 2017), yet managers of human service organizations report that food assistance is difficult to obtain for sex workers (Anasti, 2018). For example, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program outlines eligibility requirements, including accepting a "suitable" job (US Department of Agriculture, 2024). Research from several countries suggests decreased social support of sex workers, from both formal and informal sources, impacts access to food and monetary resources (Fielding-Miller et al., 2014; Nemoto et al., 2011). Other exclusions of sex workers include unemployment benefits. For example, while each state in the USA sets their own eligibility for receiving unemployment, some of the basic requirements are universal. One such requirement is recent work history (US Department of Labor, 2024). That is, upon applying for benefits, the application must include a record of recent employment. This process is inherently limiting to sex workers whose labor is illegal because they cannot provide this information and are excluded from receiving benefits. Likewise, as the Canadian service providers in Benoit and Unsworth's (2022) study point out, sex workers are often paid in cash, may not file their taxes, and/or are concerned about disclosing the nature of their work, and therefore their options of accessing economic assistance is limited. Likewise, legal sex work is still disputed as a valid form of labor (Davis, 2015). In all, some social assistance programs explicitly exclude sex workers from receiving benefits, while other policies were created with implicit stigma or lack of consideration toward sex workers that suffer from exclusion because of the criminalized label of the work and employment eligibility.

While the above policies that exclude sex workers are formal, there are also informal ways in which policies and law restrict the rights of sex workers. In research examining public perceptions of sex work legality, sex workers' threat to the institution of marriage and the family was a notable

reason for supporting sex work criminalization (Powers et al., 2023). This may manifest in sex workers who are parents losing child custody rights, regardless of the legality of the labor, because courts perceive their work as detrimental to their child's moral development (Norrington, 2011; Petro, 2016). Similar reasoning has been used to deny child custody in cases where one parent is gay (Huff, 2001; Norrington, 2011). The stigma of sex work has been leveraged by sex workers' ex-partners as a tactic in child custody cases (Petro, 2016). Even when there is evidence of intimate partner violence by the ex-partner, there are instances where sex workers have lost custody of their children to their abusers (Margaret, 2015).

Outside of family court, but still within the realm of the legal system, research has found that sex workers are apprehensive to rely on the police for assistance and protection. In cases where sex workers, engaging in either legal or illegal labor, are victims of violence, sex workers report that they feel that some police harass them with impunity (Dewey & Germain, 2014). Further, they are sometimes denied police protection from violence they experience in the course of their work (Benoit et al., 2018; Crago et al., 2021). This finding is consistent across global contexts as evidenced in Platt et al.'s (2018) systematic review spanning 13 countries. This may result in the dismissal of their cases or, in extreme but not uncommon cases, charges brought up against them afterward (Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2019). When their cases are not dismissed, they may also be denied victim compensation or receive reduced amounts for their sexual assault cases (Sex Workers Project, 2020).

As the above examples illustrate, sex workers face the denial of rights and services that are pivotal for their well-being through both formal policies and subjective decision-making. The following section outlines a theoretical framework that is useful in understanding how and under what circumstances individuals are perceived as deserving of social services. This framework is then applied to conceptualize deservingness of rights and services for sex workers.

Theoretical Framework for Deservingness

There is a rich empirical literature that examines who and under what circumstances are people deserving of social support and services. Van Oorschot and Roosma (2017) conceptualized these perceptions along five criteria that individuals use in their assessments of deservingness: control, attitude, reciprocity, identity, and need (known as CARIN). Control is how much agency one has, specifically if their actions lead to their own need. Attitude refers to an individual's demonstration of thankfulness, graciousness, and compliance. Reciprocity suggests those that do more for society can expect to be given more in return. Identity

is the condition of proximity to the person in need, with people affording deservingness to those in their in-group. Finally, Need refers to an objective need for resources and/or help.

Using the CARIN scale and similar conceptual frameworks, the first tests of deservingness perceptions examined policies to address poverty (Applebaum, 2003) and social insurance for individuals in Connecticut and New York with mental health issues and disabilities (Greenfield, 1953). Although the majority of empirical research on deservingness has focused on welfare benefits, this framework and resulting empirical scale have been applied to explain support of a variety of social program beneficiaries (De Coninck et al., 2022; Meuleman et al., 2020). Applebaum (2002) measured student perceptions of deservingness for a variety of services in Germany, including social assistance, housing, childcare, unemployment, and health-care benefits. Results suggest that recipients of social services who were more affable (attitude) than others and who had no control of their economic situation (control) were considered more deserving of services than others.

In addition to applying to a range of programs, the deservingness literature suggests the framework also applies to different groups of people and countries (Kallio & Kouvo, 2015; Lupieri, 2022; van Oorschot, 2006; Willen, 2012). In general, there are key groups that are consistently attributed more deservingness including the elderly, sick and disabled, and women and children (Lupieri, 2022; van Oorschot, 2006). In contrast, some groups such as unemployed individuals and immigrants are typically viewed as least deserving (van Oorschot, 2006). There is some evidence to suggest that these consistent implicit biases toward specific groups have roots in both formal and informal discourse. In her content analysis, for example, Rodriguez (2018) explored how state policy perpetuates the idea that there are good and bad immigrants, and this distinction excludes "bad immigrants" from educational opportunities and social mobility. Laenen and Rossetti (2019) demonstrated this phenomenon in their qualitative work from Denmark, Germany, and the United Kingdom, which assessed deservingness perceptions of welfare recipients. Using focus groups, their findings suggest that individual public perceptions of welfare deservingness paralleled the attitude embedded in the structure of their country's welfare system. This and other research (e.g., Alcantar et al., 2022; Siviş, 2022; van Oorschot, 2006; van Oorschot et al., 2022; Willen & Cook, 2016) demonstrates the strength of national attitudes' influence on baseline biases toward specific groups that affect not only the public's perceptions of deservingness, but also policymakers' language used in official program eligibility criteria.

Correlates of Deservingness Perceptions: Gender and Age

The empirical literature is mixed regarding the extent to which there are gendered differences in perceptions of deservingness. Some of these discrepancies may be the result of the type of social service in question or what groups are being afforded resources. Support for state-funded medical care, for example, seems to be roughly equal among male and female respondents (Willen, 2012). Likewise, results of a Finnish study on the perceptions of social assistance recipients did not show significant gender differences in perceptions, but authors did find moderating effects of age, education, and political identification on perceptions of deservingness (Kallio & Kouvo, 2015). Some research focusing on welfare deservingness suggests that women are more likely to support services and aid as a whole relative to men (Niemelä, 2008), while other research reports that men are more likely to support liberal policies for increased aid compared to their female counterparts (Applebaum, 2003).

Some of these differences may be rooted in the priority men and women put on the different CARIN criteria. Men may emphasize control, for example, where those who perceive that individuals responsible for their circumstances are undeserving of resources and support. For example, among the respondents in the studies of Niemelä (2008) and Applebaum (2003), men who viewed the individual at fault for their poverty were less likely to support state-funded aid compared to those who saw fault with the state or community structure. There is also some evidence to suggest that men are more likely to question the objective need and honesty of the aid beneficiary (Kangas & Sikiö, 1996), indicating an emphasis on attitude when determining deservingness. On the other hand, other studies suggest women are more likely to rely on need and reciprocity in determining deservingness (Jeene et al., 2013; Kallio & Kouvo, 2015). Likewise, women may be more likely than men to rely on in-group identities with particular social groups to which they perceive themselves as belonging, including gender (Cadino & Galdi, 2012; Rudman & Goodwin, 2004).

Beyond gender differences in deservingness perceptions, empirical work also suggests that age may contextualize perceptions of deservingness. Like gender, there are CARIN inputs highlighted by age groups. Some evidence suggests that need is most highlighted by people aged 45–65. This relationship may be present because these age groups are self-interested as the ones receiving aid. For example, older generations may perceive social assistance recipients as more deserving than younger generations in Finland (Kallio & Kouvo, 2015). In contrast using a Dutch sample, reciprocity was most emphasized by those 65 and older; this perception could be a manifestation of resource competition among those in that age group (Jeene et al., 2013). In the US educational context, older individuals are more likely

to support targeted college funding based on need and merit than younger individuals, who are more likely to support universal college funding (Bell, 2020).

Gender and Age and Perceptions of Sex Work

While the results surrounding gender and age for deservingness perceptions are somewhat inconclusive, there are fairly clear gender distinctions when examining attitudes toward sex workers (e.g., Ma et al., 2018). Consistently, women are more likely to hold punitive attitudes toward sex work in countries where the labor is legal and regulated (Bojanic & Jordán, 2023; Hansen & Johansson, 2022), decriminalized (Kuosmanen, 2011), and criminalized (Basow & Campanile, 1990; Jorgensen, 2018). Common explanations for these stark differences include the idea that stronger attitudes toward gender equality and feminism align with the perception that sex work is exploitative in nature (Basow & Campanile, 1990; Bojanic & Jordán, 2023; Jorgensen, 2018). Likewise, men are more likely than women to accept rape and prostitution myths (e.g., Cotton et al., 2002), many of which objectify women, which may influence their more tolerant attitude toward sex work (Hansen & Johansson, 2022).

Further, recent empirical research suggests age differences in preferences for sex work legality. Powers et al., (2023) examined generational differences toward sex work policies and found that Generation Z were more likely to support legalizing various forms of sex work, Baby Boomers and Generation X were more likely to support criminalization of sex work, and Millennial preferences fell in the middle. These age-related preferences may illustrate a deeper affinity for liberal policies (Jozkowski et al., 2018; Keleher & Smith, 2012; Powers et al., 2023) because policies aligning with social rights and gender are also age dependent. For example, research indicates that age is negatively associated with support for reproductive rights (Hendriks et al., 2012), LGBTQ+ rights (Keleher & Smith, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2013), and consensual non-monogamy (Fairbrother et al., 2019), where younger generations are more supportive of these initiatives. Attitudes toward these social policies are relevant because they also predict attitudes toward sex work (Powers et al., 2023), likely identifying an overall respect for bodily autonomy (Matthews & Kreitzer, 2021). Taken together, gender and age may not only influence attitudes toward sex work, but also perceptions of deservingness—a relationship not yet examined in tandem.

Deservingness and Sex Work

While little research has examined the deservingness of sex workers specifically, the CARIN framework can be used to discuss how individuals may attribute deservingness to sex workers. Although some research on deservingness has

found that women can be seen as more deserving overall (Lupieri, 2022; van Oorschot, 2006), it is possible that the stigma surrounding sex work may override this general pattern. Research on deservingness also suggests that those who seemingly contribute to the circumstances where they are seeking support can be perceived as less deserving of resources. For example, using a sample of German university students, Appelbaum (2002) found that perceptions of responsibility influenced how deserving groups of people were for financial and social aid. As discussed, sex workers can be denied victim services and justice because they may be viewed as responsible for their victimization (Benoit et al., 2018). Thus, it can be posited that control may be an influential input in deservingness perceptions of sex workers. Likewise, this effect may extend to sex workers who have recently migrated and those who have experienced criminal victimization within the context of their labor (Rodriguez, 2018). In the same vein, reciprocity refers to what a person contributes to society, implicitly in return for the basic rights and services afforded to everyone. The stigma of sex work manifests in the perception that this labor may threaten marriages (Mancini et al., 2020) and can exacerbate crime rates (Long et al., 2012). Therefore, sex workers may be viewed as less deserving of rights and services, as their beneficial contributions to society may be outweighed by their perceived contributions to societal ills. This can be especially pertinent for sex workers that engage in illegal forms of sex work compared to sex workers whose labor is considered legal.

There may also be important gender and age differences in these perceptions. For example, Moore (2016) found that while some Americans reported supporting the criminalization of sex work, men were more likely than women to support the legalization of sex work. The composition of sex work clientele may explain this gender gap in legalization support, as some research suggests that men are the usual client base for sex work (Moore, 2016; Raymond, 2004). Some research has found that women, on the other hand, may see sex workers as threats to their own relationships and their identities as women, particularly those who view their identities through a feminist lens (Dewey, 2012; Halley et al., 2006). These gendered attitudes may also align with the reciprocity input of the CARIN framework. Conversely, as Rudman and Goodwin (2004) found in their multi-experimental design examining in-group attitudes by gender, women might identify with sex workers based on gender, resulting in greater perceptions of deservingness. Some research has also suggested that women perceive people as more deserving than men do as a whole (Kallio & Kouvo, 2015). However, women, in general, can emphasize reciprocity more than men (Jeene et al., 2013), and so they may perceive

sex workers as less deserving of rights given the nature of sex worker stigma. Likewise, men highlight the control input (see Allen & Devitt, 2012 for an example) and, because many people assume sex workers are involved in their labor involuntarily, may perceive them as more deserving of rights and services.

With regard to age, the deservingness literature suggests perceptions of deservingness illustrate a funnel effect: younger people can support services for all (Bell, 2020), the middle age population can support services for those who need it (Kallio & Kouvo, 2015), and those 65 and older may support services for those who need it and who have “earned it” (Jeene et al., 2013). Separately, recent sex work research indicates meaningful differences in legality perceptions with older generations supporting criminalization, younger generations supporting legalization, and those in their midlife landing somewhere in the middle (Powers et al., 2023). Notably, Powers et al. found that the most salient reasons for criminalization support include the assumed involuntary nature of sex work, the victimization risk of workers, the risk of physical health to the workers and larger community, and the inherent threat to marriages and family values. Although not explicit, these reasons also fall on the CARIN scale of deservingness, with the first two representing control and the second two representing reciprocity, with sex work and victimization being outside a worker’s control (more deserving), and the perceived danger to community health and marriages ultimately threatening the moral social order (less deserving).

Current Study

Often applying the CARIN framework, a rich literature has explored perceptions of deservingness for individuals with disabilities (Greenfield, 1953); the elderly and sick (Lupieri, 2022; van Oorschot, 2006); immigrants and the unemployed (van Oorschot, 2006); and women and children (Lupieri, 2022). A notable gap in the literature, however, is examining the perceptions of deservingness of rights and services for sex workers that are otherwise afforded to the general population. This is important, as policymakers can and have restricted access to child custody (Duff et al., 2014; Norrington, 2011; Petro, 2016), victimization services (Benoit et al., 2018; Crago et al., 2021; Platt et al., 2018; Sex Workers Project, 2020), healthcare (Acién González & Arjona Garrido, 2022; Grant, 2023), and welfare (Brunovskis & Skilbrei, 2018) for sex workers. The current study seeks to fill this empirical gap by examining perceptions of sex worker deservingness, paying close attention to the effects of gender and age in these perceptions and how the legality of that labor may be associated with these perceptions.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Data came from an online survey designed specifically for this study and administered to a nationwide sample of US adults. Online surveys perform well in comparison with traditional methods of survey administration (e.g., Anson, 2018) and are increasingly popular in studies of normative assessments or public opinion, including issues related to the criminal legal system and the social attitudes of sex work (e.g., Gottlieb, 2017; Mancini et al., 2020; Pickett et al., 2013; Powers et al., 2023).

The current study used a platform managed by Prolific Academic Ltd. which performs well in comparison with other platforms (Peer et al., 2022). Scholars have used Prolific to examine a variety of public opinions on issues such as support for restricting men who have sex with men from donating blood (Williams et al., 2024) and punitive attitudes toward white-collar crime (Reisig et al., 2024). Although opt-in online samples tend to be disproportionately White, young, and more educated, research finds that the differences between online opt-in samples and nationally representative samples are reduced once these and other covariates such as education and politics are considered (Levy et al., 2016).

Participants were provided basic information about the study and compensated \$2.40 for completing the survey, with an average completion time of 17 min. A variety of methods were used to assess and ensure data integrity analyses for the reliability within individuals to opposite-worded questions and time-elapsing verification (i.e., hand inspecting responses that were substantially below or above the mean completion time). This study includes 549 participants who completed the survey and passed data integrity checks.

Measures

Dependent Variable: Rights and Access to Services

Prior to answering questions about perceptions of rights and services, participants were provided a list of various types and definitions of sex work. These include street sex work, indoor sex work, escorts, erotic dancing (further categorized by degree of physical contact and clothing), commercial BDSM, phone sex operation, online sex work (categorized by indirect and direct client contact), and pornography (categorized as professional and amateur). Participants were asked to respond on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (6) strongly agree, the extent to which they agreed with 16 items. These

items represented eight domains of rights and services and differentiated between women who engage in illegal sex work compared to legal sex work in separate questions. These items were constructed based on the current policies, extant literature, and popular discourse surrounding sex work in the media. These included the following questions, “Women who engage in illegal/legal sex work should not have access to victim services if they are victimized during their work,” “Women who engage in illegal/legal sex work should not have custody of their children,” “Health insurance should not cover any medical issues that stem from illegal/legal sex work (injuries due to violence, STDs),” “Women who engage in illegal/legal sex work and want to leave the industry should not have access to unemployment benefits while they look for another job,” “Women who engage in illegal/legal sex work should not have access to government-funded food assistance,” “Women who engage in illegal/legal sex work should not have access to housing services,” “Women who engage in illegal/legal sex work should not have access to federal student loans,” and “Women who engage in illegal/legal sex work should not be approved for marriage certificates.” Higher scores indicate a greater preference for restricting the rights of and services for sex workers.

Attitudinal Correlates

The current study considers four potential attitudinal correlates that may be associated with the attitudes toward sex worker rights. These are acceptance of sex work generally, abortion, the LGBTQ+ community, and government legitimacy. All items in these scales are measured on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (6) strongly agree. All items in these scales appear in Appendix A.

Acceptance of sex workers Attitudes toward sex work and workers was measured with 19 items that were adapted from several existing instruments and constructed by the authors ($\alpha = 0.93$). Included were four items from the Attitudes Toward Individuals Who Sell Sex Inventory (Stenersen & Ovrebø, 2020); two items from the Attitudes Toward Prostitutes and Prostitution Scale (Levin & Peled, 2011); three items from the Attitudes Toward Men Who Pay for Sex Scale (Peled et al., 2020); an item capturing a common myth about a sex worker’s inability to be a victim of rape (Miller & Schwartz, 1995); and nine items conceptualized by the authors to capture attitudes about sex workers and relationships (e.g., I would not have a romantic relationship with someone who is currently selling sex), employment (e.g., Someone who previously sold sex should not be employed around children), and social order (e.g., I don’t care if people are selling sex, I just don’t want to see it). Higher values represent more negative views toward sex work and sex workers. Overall, the sample had somewhat liberal views on sex work ($M = 2.35$, $SD = 1.01$).

Attitudes toward abortion Individuals' beliefs regarding women's right to abortion pertains to bodily autonomy and morality policies (Matthews & Kreitzer, 2021). In this way, attitudes pertaining to the rights that should be extended to sex workers may be associated with attitudes surrounding abortion as they represent the same underlying issues. Attitudes toward abortion were operationalized using four items inspired by Hendrik et al., (2012) Adolescent Attitudes to Abortion Scale. Higher values represent more restrictive views on abortion. This scale yielded adequate internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.79$), with most respondents supportive of at least some pro-choice legislation ($M = 2.37$, $SD = 1.23$) which comports with research on general US perceptions of abortion (e.g., Jozkowski et al., 2018).

Attitudes of LGBTQ+ Like abortion, attitudes surrounding the LGBTQ+ community represent morality policies. Likewise, misconceptions surrounding the risk of sexually transmitted diseases have been used as a rationale for the condemnation of both the LGBTQ+ community and sex workers (e.g., Long & Millsap, 2008). Attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ community were examined with three items: two from Dessel and Rodenburg's (2017) items measuring queer discrimination and one from Hays et al., (2007) Privilege and Oppression Inventory. Higher values represent more restrictive views on discrimination and rights for the LGBTQ+ community. The scale yielded adequate internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.72$), with the sample holding fairly liberal views on LGBTQ+ issues ($M = 2.24$, $SD = 1.18$).

Attitudes toward the government Perceptions of the government's legitimacy may be associated with individuals' acceptance of limiting rights of citizens generally, and their perceptions of whether the government is able to balance the safety of communities with the fair treatment of sex workers. For example, perceptions of government legitimacy have been associated with support for increased funding for social support programs and education (Roos & Lidström, 2014), and is suggested to predict perceptions of punitiveness (Green, 2009; Van Damme & Pauwels, 2012). This study measures these attitudes using an adapted version of Sunshine and Tyler's (2003) legitimacy scale. Responses were measured using a 6-point, 7-item Likert scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (6) strongly agree. The scale yielded high internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.97$). Respondents reported average trust in the government ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 1.42$).

Respondent Demographics

Age was measured as a continuous variable ($M = 31.9$ years, $SD = 9.7$, Range = 18–68). The sample was balanced on gender with cisgender men and women each composing approximately 48% of the sample. The remaining 3.6% ($n = 20$) were individuals who indicated they were non-binary or transgender individuals. Given the low representation of

non-cisgender individuals, they were coded as missing for the regression analyses. Sexual orientation was measured as heterosexual compared to non-heterosexual orientations, with approximately 80% of the sample indicating that they were heterosexual. Race was measured as Non-Hispanic White and Non-White, with approximately 79% of the sample indicating they were White. Education was measured as obtaining a college degree, with 63% of the sample reporting completing college.

Analytic Strategy

For the first research question, whether and how respondents differentiated between legal and illegal sex work in their attitudes toward rights and services, descriptive statistics were calculated for each dependent variable, and paired sample *t* tests were used to examine whether individuals distinguished between illegal and legal sex work. Given the number of comparisons, the Holm-Bonferroni (Holm, 1979) stepdown procedure was employed to account for the familywise error rate with an initial adjusted *p* value of 0.006. For the second research question, the analysis of demographic and attitudinal correlates on perceptions of rights and services, the individual rights and services were averaged into two scales representing the degree to which individuals extended rights and services to illegal and legal sex work, respectively. Both scales demonstrated strong internal consistency ($\alpha = .97$ legal and $\alpha = .95$ illegal). Ordinary least squares models, a type of linear regression, were used to examine the demographic and attitudinal correlates associated with these rights and services. Where appropriate, differences in these effects between models were estimated using equality of coefficient estimates (Clogg et al., 1995; Paternoster et al., 1998). Multi-collinearity was assessed using variance inflation factors and was not a concern for this analysis. The third research question pertained to the interaction of gender and age in contextualizing these perceptions. Differences in the average marginal effects were used to examine interactions between respondents' gender and age in support for restricting rights and services.

Results

Figure 1 displays the average endorsement for rights and services for illegal and legal sex work. Overall, respondents disagreed to slightly disagreed with denying rights and services to sex workers. However, all the univariate comparisons between legal and illegal sex work were significant, indicating more punitive and restrictive attitudes toward illegal sex work. The largest of these differences was for unemployment benefits with illegal sex work being 0.63 points higher than legal sex work ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 1.73$ and $M = 2.19$, $SD = 1.52$, respectively). The second highest

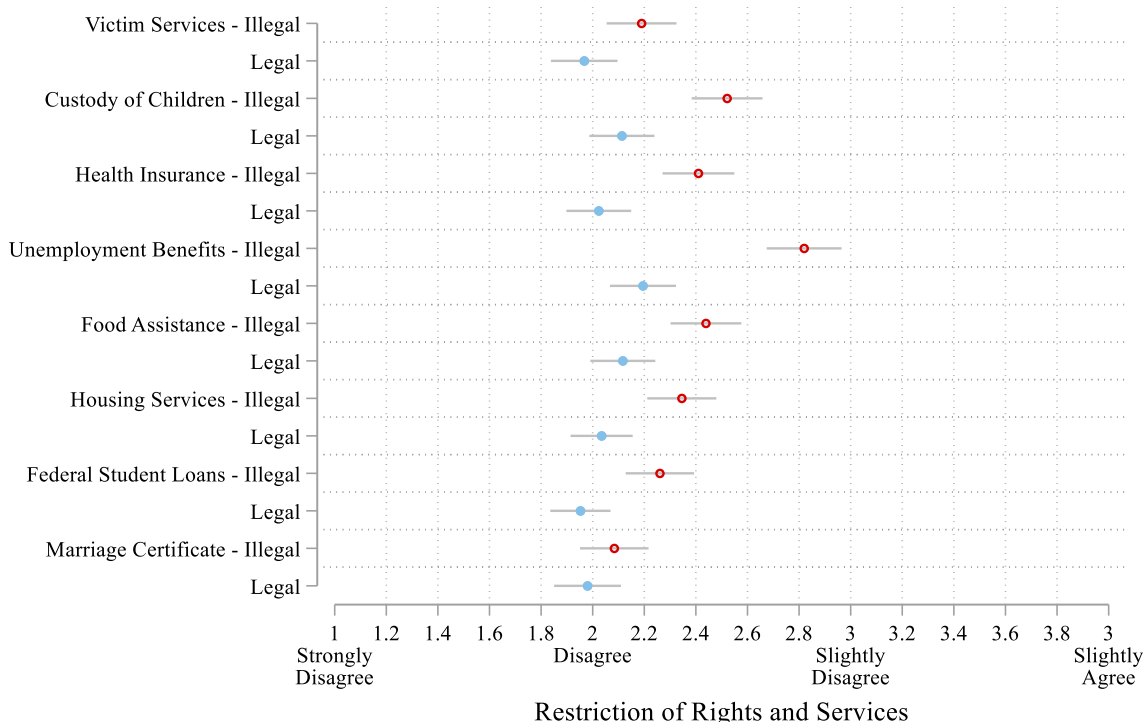


Fig. 1 Support for restricting rights and services for sex workers—Descriptive statistics

was the belief that sex workers should not be granted custody of their children ($M = 2.53$, $SD = 1.64$ for illegal and $M = 2.11$, $SD = 1.49$ for legal; $\delta = 0.42$). Conversely, the smallest of these differences was for the right to marry. While significant, the difference was quite small comparatively ($\delta = 0.11$). The second smallest difference was the extension of victim services to sex workers who are victimized with illegal sex work being 0.22 points higher than legal sex work ($M = 2.19$, $SD = 1.62$ and $M = 1.97$, $SD = 1.54$, respectively).

The regression results for attitudinal and demographic correlates of support for restricting rights and services is shown

in Table 1. Regarding attitudes, less favorable views toward sex work in general was associated with a greater preference to restrict rights and services for illegal ($b = 0.67$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < 0.001$) and legal sex work ($b = 0.55$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < 0.001$). Likewise, more restrictive views on LGBTQ+ equality was associated with greater restriction of sex worker rights (illegal: $b = 0.21$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < 0.001$; legal: $b = 0.31$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < 0.001$). The strengths of these relationships were statistically comparable between illegal and legal sex work. More restrictive attitudes toward abortion were associated with greater restrictions on rights and services for illegal sex work ($b = 0.14$, $SE = 0.04$, $p = 0.005$), but was unrelated to

Table 1 Demographic and attitudinal correlates of rights and services ($n = 505$)

	Illegal		Legal		Z
	Coef	[95% CI]	Coef	[95% CI]	
Attitudes–Sex work	0.67	[0.58, 0.77]	0.55	[0.45, 0.65]	2.12
Attitudes–Abortion	0.14	[0.04, 0.23]	0.05	[−0.05, 0.15]	
Attitudes–LGBTQ+	0.21	[0.11, 0.30]	0.31	[0.21, 0.42]	
Attitudes–Gov. Legitimacy	0.13	[0.06, 0.20]	0.10	[0.02, 0.16]	
Age	0.01	[0.00, 0.02]	0.02	[0.01, 0.03]	
Male	0.35	[0.19, 0.51]	0.32	[0.15, 0.48]	
Heterosexual	−0.17	[−0.35, 0.02]	−0.24	[−0.43, −0.04]	
White	0.22	[0.06, 0.39]	0.16	[−0.01, 0.33]	
College education	−0.08	[−0.23, 0.08]	0.15	[−0.01, 0.31]	

Boldface indicates significance $p < .05$

these beliefs for legal sex work. Greater beliefs in government legitimacy were positively associated with restrictions for both illegal and legal sex work, and the magnitude of these effects were comparable (illegal: $b=0.13$, $SE=0.03$, $p < 0.001$; legal: $b=0.10$, $SE=0.04$, $p < 0.01$). Regarding demographic characteristics, age was positively associated with preferences for restrictions, with older individuals favoring more restrictions on rights and services (illegal: $b=0.01$, $SE=0.004$, $p < 0.01$; legal: $b=0.02$, $SE=0.004$, $p < 0.001$). The effect of age was stronger for legal forms of sex work relative to illegal forms of sex work ($Z=2.12$, $p < 0.05$). Men, in comparison with women, favored stronger restrictions on both illegal and legal sex work and to a comparable degree (illegal: $b=0.35$, $SE=0.08$, $p < 0.001$; legal: $b=0.32$, $SE=0.08$, $p < 0.001$). White respondents, compared to Non-White respondents, were more likely to favor more restrictions on illegal sex work ($b=0.22$, $SE=0.08$, $p=0.008$), but this was not significant for legal sex work. Finally, heterosexual respondents, in comparison with sexual minorities, were less likely to favor restrictions for legal forms of sex work ($b=-0.24$, $SE=0.10$, $p=0.02$), but this relationship was insignificant for illegal sex work.

Figure 2 displays the average marginal effects between respondent gender and age for both illegal and legal forms of sex work. Higher values on the y-axis indicate more restrictive views of rights and services. For illegal sex work, both men and women demonstrated increasingly restrictive views with age. Men held more restrictive views for the entire age range. This difference between men and women was significant for younger respondents, until about age 47, at which point men and women become statistically comparable. The convergence was due to women having a slightly sharper increase in restrictive views with age. For legal sex work, a very different pattern emerges. For women, the pattern is largely comparable to the pattern for illegal sex work, with a steady but moderate increase in restrictive views with age. However, women indicated slightly less restrictive views for legal sex work compared to illegal sex work. Men also held less restrictive views for legal compared to illegal sex work, except at older ages when men demonstrate more restrictive views. Men also differ in their views of legal sex work by a sharp increase with age, compared to the steady, moderate increases of the other interaction groups. Both men and women held statistically comparable views for legal sex work

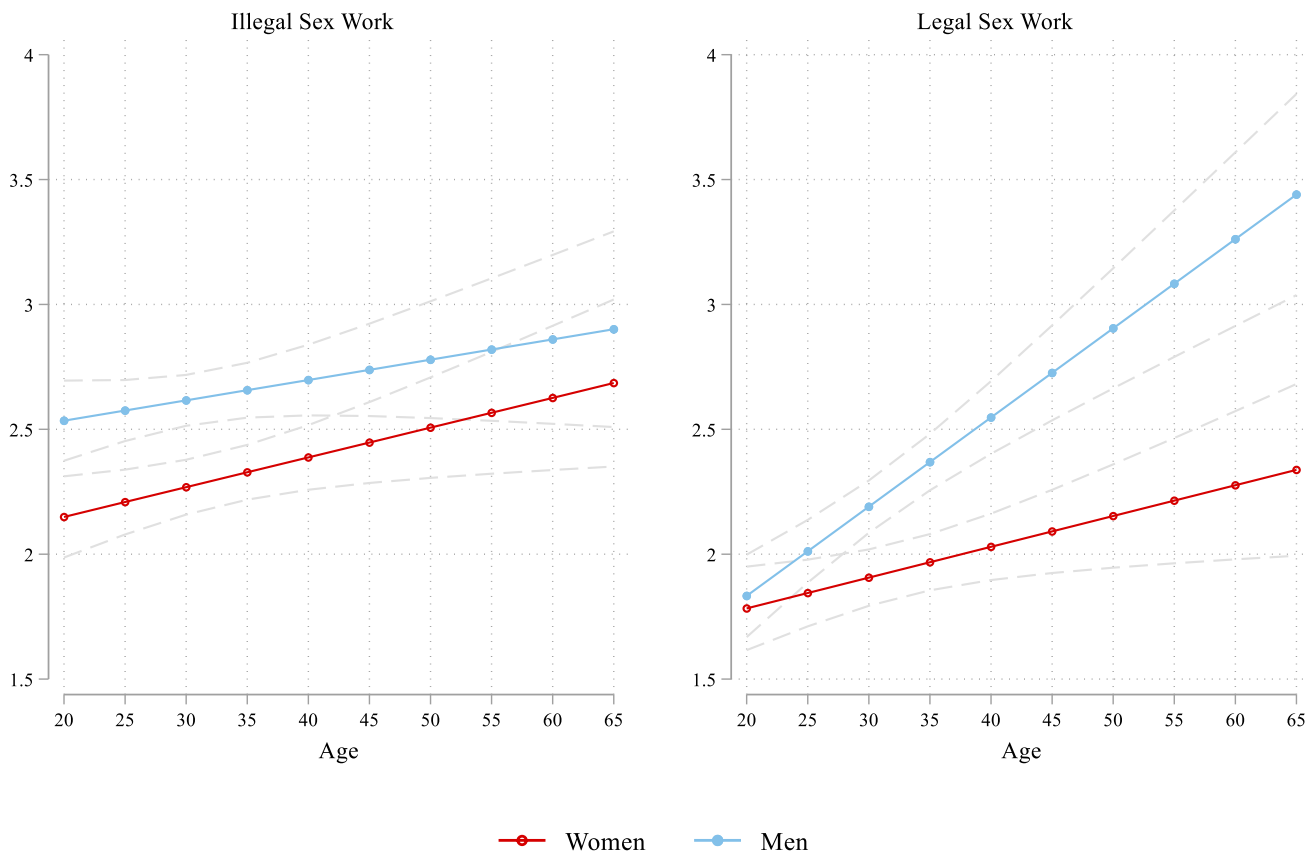


Fig. 2 Average marginal effects of support across respondent age and gender

until around age 25 when the difference between men and women becomes statistically significant.

Discussion

Summary of Findings, Avenues for Future Research, and Policy Implications

Overall, participants indicated support for extending rights and services to sex workers. However, respondents did differentiate between illegal and legal forms of sex work across all domains. Those engaged in illegal forms of sex work were seen as less deserving than those engaged in legal forms. Research on perceptions of sex work has generally focused on street and indoor sex work, though some recent work has begun to explore heterogeneity in perceptions of different forms of sex work, both legal and illegal (Powers et al., 2023). Future work should further disentangle these perceptions by exploring differences for specific types of sex work. Prior research indicates that sex work is perceived as criminogenic, which serves as a justification for criminalization (Osse, 2012; Powers et al., 2023). While this may be the perception for street sex work, it is unclear whether these perceptions extend to other forms of sex work, such as those that take place in established business settings and in online spaces.

Likewise, certain rights and services are predicated on a demonstrated employment status where sex work, particularly illegal sex work, is excluded. Future research should more closely examine public perceptions regarding the labor requirement for social services. In doing so, it may be advantageous to compare perceptions of deservingness between sex work and other illegal means of financial support (e.g., gambling; Delfabbro & King, 2021) as this may help disentangle the illegality aspect of the labor driving perceptions of deservingness compared to some other factor that is more aligned with stigma of sex work specifically.

In addition to disentangling the aspects of legality and labor, it is important that future research distinguish between sex workers that engage in that labor because it is their chosen career path compared to those who engage in sex work due to necessity. For some, narratives of sex workers point to a complicated cyclical relationship between engaging in sex work out of financial necessity and the inability to obtain social services, such as housing, because of engaging in sex work (Bland & Brooks, 2020). Understanding these relationships may influence individuals' perceptions of deservingness. On the other hand, freely choosing this labor may be incongruent with individuals' moral judgements (Huff, 2001; Norrington, 2011), and this noncompliance may influence deservingness perceptions. This study found that as men aged, they were particularly punitive toward sex workers engaged in *legal* forms of sex work. Men may be more willing to excuse sex

work when it is under the assumption that it is done out of desperation rather than a deliberate career choice. As this study also found that deservingness perceptions were associated with support for other social policies (e.g., abortion and LGBTQ+ rights), future work should more thoroughly explore the gender and age interaction by examining how these perceptions are also associated with attitudes toward female sexuality and sexism.

Moreover, narratives from sex workers point to the long-standing stigma against sex workers regardless of current circumstances, such as in child custody cases, where even in situations where the individual has pursued another career, their history as a sex worker serves as a cause of discrimination (Petro, 2016). Future research should examine how the nature and life course of sex work are associated with perceptions of deservingness. Though this stigma is deep-rooted, some research indicates that legalizing sex work can influence perceptions and behaviors of those in power, particularly law enforcement (Abel, 2014). Future research should explore how introducing key pieces of information about an individual's personality, motivation, and situation can influence these perceptions. Research on deservingness points to deservingness cues, where a person's perceptions of deservingness change when new information about context is introduced. In Aarøe and Petersen (2014), the new situational information overshadowed the effect of stereotypes on perceptions of deservingness for social welfare, where those with positive employment information (i.e., the individual was motivated to find work) were more likely to perceive the recipient as deserving compared to those who did not have this employment information. Future work should examine how humanizing sex workers or dispelling myths about sex workers may change perceptions of deservingness.

This study also found that perceptions of government legitimacy were inversely associated with restricting rights and services. This may have important implications for support of legislation aimed at removing discriminatory policies, such as recent bills under consideration in Vermont which would increase housing access to current and former sex workers (S.277 An Act Related to Prostitution, 2024a; H.605 An Act Relating to Prostitution, 2024b). In line with dispelling myths about sex workers, the dissemination of accurate information about progressive policies and the discriminatory practices they aim to address may lead to more policy change. While vetoed in Oregon by the governor in 2023, recent efforts have been made to commission unbiased research to understand the landscape of sex work and sex workers' lived experiences to inform social policy (Levinson, 2023).

Efforts in the USA to move away from sex work criminalization trail global efforts, with the USA, China, Argentina, and some parts of the Middle East still criminalizing the sale, purchase, and organization of sex work (Global Network for Sex Work Projects, 2024). Although criminalization at

some level is still the most common policy across the globe (Vanwesenbeeck, 2017), many nations have moved away from triple criminalization laws like the USA and instead adopt a more nuanced approach to sex work that reduces the discrimination against sex workers and legitimizes their labor (see Karlsson, 2022 for a review). One such policy type is the Nordic model (also known as the Swedish model), which criminalizes the purchasing of sex work services, but not the selling. While the goal of this model is to abolish sex work, it protects sex workers from criminal justice system involvement and encourages the use of social services. Several countries have recently adopted this model, including Ireland (McGarry & FitzGerald, 2019), Israel (Levy-Aronovic et al., 2021), and France (Denny, 2017). Future research should examine how these changes in policy may equate to changes in perceptions of deservingness for social services as well. Likewise, although previous literature suggests women hold more punitive attitudes than men toward sex workers, the current study found that women were less likely than men to support restrictive rights for sex workers. Although attitudes toward sex work may be associated with perceptions of rights for those engaged in this labor, these perceptions may be more nuanced than whether individuals think that sex work should be criminalized. Future research should examine how perceptions of sex work criminalization is associated with perceptions of rights and services for sex workers.

Finally, research on various stakeholders examines perceptions of sex workers and sex work laws (see Ma et al., 2018 for a review), while studies on social workers and sex worker advocates highlight the challenges their clients face when trying to access government services for housing and food instability (Anasti, 2018; Benoit & Unsworth, 2022; Bland & Brooks, 2020; Macon & Tai, 2022). However, research has not explored how various stakeholders perceive deservingness across a variety of domains, such as those included in this study. Future research should pursue purposive samples of policymakers, judges, law enforcement officers, and others who are decision-makers and shapers of public policy to examine these perceptions. Such research may be able to highlight misperceptions stakeholders have on the nature of sex work and elucidate avenues where equity in rights and services can be pursued.

Limitations

The current study adds to the literature on deservingness generally and perceptions of sex work and workers specifically. There are, however, some limitations. First, the data for this study comes from an opt-in online platform, limiting the confidence

by which we can provide nationally representative estimates of deservingness perceptions. Still, our goal of examining patterns of deservingness across focal variables was met.

The current sample skewed toward younger ages. While this is not unusual for online samples, it may have implications for the findings in this study. First, it is likely that the estimates in this study are conservative; we would anticipate more restrictions of rights and services with more representation from older adults and likely a larger gap in the perceptions between illegal and legal labor. Second, the upper end of the age range was approximately 70 years old and therefore older adults beyond this age range are not represented. Future research should purposively sample older adults to understand their perceptions more thoroughly. Likewise, the current study did not include an adequate measure of political ideology generally. Future research should include measures of liberal and conservative values to examine how these perceptions comport with political ideology.

Relatedly, although we were able to examine the intersection between age and gender on perceptions of deservingness, we did not include race/ethnicity in these interactions because it was beyond the scope of the current study. Race, among other marginalized identities/statuses (e.g., LGBTQ+ identities and disability status) should be included in empirical work examining deservingness perceptions as advocates suggest the negative effects of criminalizing sex work disproportionately affects marginalized communities (Fritsch et al., 2016). Considering that policies dictating insurance, housing, and child custody also negatively impact marginalized populations (Martinez-Hume et al., 2017; Williams, 2004), it is important to carefully consider how the stigma these communities face in subjective policy decisions is exacerbated by their involvement in sex work.

Finally, as noted above, the current study does not directly test the CARIN framework. Recent empirical research has begun to validate the CARIN inputs to measure deservingness (Meuleman et al., 2020; Przybylska, 2021), but a consensus on its use for global populations has not been reached. For example, De Coninck et al. (2022) amended the original CARIN framework, reinterpreting its inputs to more specifically apply to attitudes toward migrants. Indeed, the CARIN criteria “is not universal and depends on the target group” (Przybylska, 2021, p. 134). It may be the case that the original CARIN framework may only be a starting point for accurately measuring deservingness of sex workers, and that scholars should seek to tailor the inputs for this specific population. Future research is needed to align perceptions of deservingness of sex workers with the current literature that formally applies the CARIN framework.

Appendix A: Scale Items for Attitudinal Correlates

Attitudinal correlate	Scale item
Acceptance of sex workers	If I knew someone who sold sex, I would tend to avoid that person
	If a person who sold sex asked to live with me or my family, I would decline
	I would be upset if someone I'd known for a long time revealed that they had sold sex
	I would not feel comfortable working with someone I knew had previously sold sex
	I would not have a romantic relationship with someone who has previously sold sex
	I would not have a romantic relationship with someone who is currently selling sex
	Someone who previously sold sex should not be employed around children
	I would not employ someone who sells sex on the side
	People sell sex because they are too lazy to get a real job
	Sex work should be a last resort for individuals who cannot obtain employment anywhere else
	I don't care if people are selling sex, I just don't want to see it
	I don't care if people are selling sex, as long as it is not my daughter
	People who buy and sell sex have a sex addiction
	I would be fine with my son paying for sex
	Paying for sex does not count as cheating or having an affair
	Sex workers come from broken and abusive homes
	Sex workers are more likely to participate safe sex
	Sex workers are unable to be in a committed relationship because of the nature of their work
	Sex workers cannot be raped because it is their job to have sexual intercourse with others

Attitudinal correlate	Scale item
Attitudes toward abortion	Women should have complete access to legal abortion in all circumstances
	Women should have to obtain consent from the person who impregnated them before getting an abortion
	Women should have complete access to legal abortion if she was raped
Attitudes of LGBTQ+	An underage woman (less than 18 years old) should have to obtain consent from her parents before obtaining an abortion
	Same sex couples should not have the right to legal marital status
	People who identify as LGBTQ face discrimination in the US in areas such as housing, civil rights, and employment
Attitudes toward the government	Members of the LGBTQ community exaggerate their hardships
	The government treats people fairly
	The government makes decisions based on facts
	The government treats people with respect
	I have confidence in the government
	I have trust in the government
	Most government officials do the job well
The government can be trusted to make decisions that are right for your community	

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Data Availability The original materials in this report are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Code Availability Upon request.

Declarations

Conflict of interest Not applicable.

Ethical Approval This research was approved by the University of South Florida Institutional Review Board (STUDY002969).

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from each study participant prior to their participation in the survey.

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