

## How rising social inequality may be fueling public demands for increasingly harsh criminal justice policies.

*Public support for harsh criminal justice policy remains relatively high, despite falling crime rates and increasing prison populations. In new research **Carolyn Côté-Lussier** finds that public anger toward crime and support for harsh criminal justice policy is linked to factors associated with social inequality. She recommends additional reforms to change people's perceptions towards criminals and to promote alternatives to incarceration.*



New evidence suggests that people's attitudes toward criminals are not just shaped by the crimes they have committed but also by their perceived low social status. My study, conducted in the UK (but with implications for the US), suggests that criminals are stereotyped as poor and uneducated which most people equate with being callous and untrustworthy. These stereotypes about criminals help explain the public's anger and fear of crime, as well as increased support for harsh criminal justice policy.

This evidence brings new light to data suggesting that the devastating effects of harsh criminal justice policies have been felt most strongly by those in the margins of society, such as the poor, the homeless, ethnic minorities and those with mental health problems. The over-representation of low status individuals in the criminal justice system might actually be perceived as justified because of stereotypes linking a low social status to a perceived evil and callous disposition.

This link between thinking that criminals have a low social status and feeling angry and punitive toward crime suggests that growing social inequality and failing to address disadvantage could actually contribute to even greater public demands for harsh criminal justice policy making it difficult for governments to tackle unsustainably high prison populations.

In the UK the prison population reached its capacity of 80,000 by 2006 and grew to over 94,000 by 2013. Despite this trend, widespread dissatisfaction with the severity of sentencing has been noted in Britain over the past decades. In 1996, around 79 percent of the British public held the view that sentences were too lenient, in 2010 this proportion was at 74 percent. In 2010, the UK was amongst the European countries with the highest levels of public punitiveness.

In the US, the prison population has risen six-fold in a quarter of a century, with estimates of the prison population in the early 2000s ranging from 1.2 million to 2 million. Current estimates suggest that there were over 2.2 million incarcerated adults in 2014, making the US the country with the highest prison population rate in the world (716 per 100,000). Despite a decrease in overall public punitiveness since the 1990s, a majority of individuals continue to support harsher punishment.



Alcatraz – Prisoners of Age. An exhibition of older incarcerated prisoners in the US penal system. Credit: [mattharvey1](#) (Flickr, [CC-BY-ND-2.0](#))

Improving understanding of public punitiveness therefore calls for consideration of factors outside of the crime rate and government responses to crime, including, for instance, issues related to social inequality.

In the US, a [comprehensive longitudinal study](#) revealed a significant association between income inequality and the US federal incarceration rate between 1953 and 2008. Income inequality has been rising over the past three decades in countries such as the US and Canada. The US and UK figure in the top 5 countries in terms of their Gini coefficient, representing income inequality. In the UK, inequality rose considerably in the 1980s and reached a peak in 1990. After falling in the beginning of 2000, inequality began to rise again in the mid-2000s, and levelled-off as of 2010. Out of the 30 OECD countries in the Luxembourg Income Study data set, the UK is currently the fifth most unequal, and the second most unequal in Europe.

These inequality trends are worrisome in terms of their potential implications for public support for harsh criminal justice policies, which are costly both in social and economic terms. In terms of percentage of GDP spent on the US justice system, the 2012 estimate was at 1.6 percent, while the 2015 UK estimate was at 2.2 percent, well above the EU average (1.8 percent). In terms of re-offending, the 2013 UK overall reoffending rate was 26.5 percent, while the re-offending rate for adult offenders released from custody was 45.8 percent.

As in other countries, certain parts of the US have already stepped back from their previous “tough on crime” political agendas. Although the Canadian criminal justice system is significantly less expansive than that of the US, the newly elected Trudeau government has announced that they intend to review and challenge laws and reforms introduced by the previous government’s “tough on crime” political agenda.

This autumn, the UK Ministry of Justice declared that it will spend £1.3 billion of capital investment over the next 5 years to transform the prison estate to better support rehabilitation. The aim is to build new more efficient and safer prisons to reduce reoffending, and eventually to reduce running costs.

In his recent remarks on criminal justice reform, President Obama indicated that efforts should be made to make the system fairer, smarter and more effective. Reforms would include reducing mandatory minimums for non-violent offenders, and rewarding prisoners for completing programs while in prison. These reforms are hoped to lead to reduced recidivism, and less money spent on incarceration and policing.

Additional reforms will be necessary to tackle persistent public calls for harsher criminal justice policy. Efforts could be made to change the way in which individuals perceive and feel about criminals. Political and advocacy group campaigns should aim to attenuate punitive trends by countering stereotypical perceptions of criminals, particularly for non-violent offenders or those in pre-trial detention.

My findings also suggested that individuals who adhere to criminal stereotypes are likely to feel uneasy and fearful about crime, and to want to exclude but not punish criminals harshly. Reforms aiming at providing alternatives to prison are therefore likely to be favored by the public. A [recent study](#) found that Texas residents were favorable toward alternatives other than prison (e.g., rehabilitation) when provided a choice in policy options. Alternatives to prison and downsizing prisons may therefore find a strong level of support.

Lastly, policies that reduce social inequality, such as improving educational attainment, could also ultimately decrease public demand for harsh criminal justice policies and could have the added benefit of reducing crime and the victimization of vulnerable populations.

*This article is based on the paper, “[The Functional Relation Between Social Inequality, Criminal Stereotypes, and Public Attitudes Toward Punishment of Crime](#)” in *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*.*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor the London School of Economics.*

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## About the author

**Carolyn Côté-Lussier** – *University of Ottawa*

Dr Carolyn Côté-Lussier, assistant professor of Criminology at the University of Ottawa, carried out the research for her PhD thesis at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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