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University of Maine News

UMaine Professors Study the Link Between Racial Prejudice and the Punishment of Criminals

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ORONO – During the past 30 years, the criminal justice system in the United States has meted out increasingly harsher punishments for offenders, so that today the U.S. imprisonment rate is the highest in the Western industrial world. Research by two University of Maine sociology professors suggests that racial prejudice against African-Americans is one of the underlying factors in the creation of public policies favoring crime control.

Steven Cohn and Steven Barkan's work is reported in "Racial Prejudice and Public Attitudes about the Punishment of Criminals." It will be published later this year in an anthology edited by Robin Miller and Sandra Browning, "For the Common Good," from Carolina Academic Press.

"There are a number of reasons why punitive measures might be favored within a democratic context, including a fear of crime, a concern for public safety and even a desire for retribution," says Barkan. "But within a democracy, racial prejudice is not a legitimate reason. Democracy is more than just the right to vote – it also means equality of treatment and opportunity."

Cohn and Barkan analyze data from the General Social Survey, which draws from a random sample of the U.S. population, and a number of earlier studies to demonstrate the effects of racial prejudice on public opinion about issues such as support for the death penalty, support for the use of excessive force by police and support for harsher treatment of criminals by the courts. That public opinion in turn influences policy makers, who adopt tougher measures against criminals.

The range of studies – including earlier research by Cohn and Barkan – indicates that whites who hold racially prejudiced attitudes against blacks are more likely to favor punitive policies.

"We're not claiming that everyone who favors punitive policies is motivated by racial prejudice. But racial prejudice is so embedded in our society, it often operates in ways that people are not aware of. We need to be aware of that and how it affects public policy, especially in areas such as criminal justice and welfare," says Cohn.

Cohn and Barkan say that further research, including more advanced statistical analysis, is needed to determine the extent to which racial prejudice affects attitudes about crime control. It is also important to draw distinctions between the different ways prejudice is expressed, and between different underlying motivations for prejudice.

“There is a growing recognition that racial prejudice is not acceptable – we are certainly a less prejudiced nation now than we were 40 years ago. But racial prejudice is more subtle now, and expressed in different attitudes or stereotypes. For instance, people may be prejudiced because they think people of a certain race are violent, which is different from thinking they are not as intellectually capable or that they are economically aggressive. Racial prejudice may also have many different motives: a desire of one group to maintain its advantages in society, fear for one’s safety, a feeling of insecurity about being with people whom you see as different and many others,” Cohn says.

Cohn and Barkan’s work contributes to the ongoing debate about the way democracies balance the need to control crime with the need to protect citizens from the abuse of power by authorities. They fear that societies that emphasize crime control at the expense of the due process of the law run the risk of eventually undermining democracy. Furthermore, they deem it vital that U.S. policymakers reconsider the nation’s drift toward a crime control culture.

“There is no sign that trends towards crime control will be reversed, especially after September 11th. There is also a possibility that the way people feel about terrorism will filter down to the way people feel about conventional crime and regular criminals will start to be treated like terrorists,” Barkan says.

Future U.S. policy will continue to be shaped by debates about freedom versus security, both in regards to terrorism and conventional crime. Cohn and Barkan say that an increased recognition that racially informed prejudices are unacceptable, coupled with the rising cost of prison maintenance, could affect the outcome of those debates. Furthermore, policy makers should consider alternatives to long imprisonments, such as rehabilitative and educational programs.