Criminological Highlights

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Criminological Highlights is designed to provide an accessible look at some of the more interesting criminological research that is currently being published. Each issue contains “Headlines and Conclusions” for each of 8 articles, followed by one-page summaries of each article.

Criminological Highlights is prepared by Anthony Doob, Rosemary Gartner, Jessica Bundy, Maria Jung, Tyler King, Jane Sprott, Fernando Avila, Jacqueline Briggs, Daniel Konikoff, Alex Luscombe, and Audrey Macklin.

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This issue of Criminological Highlights addresses the following questions:

1. Why would many Black Americans prefer to be the victim of a serious crime than to be questioned by the police?
2. Should people on parole be able to associate with friends who have criminal records?
3. Why are increasing numbers of people in the US required to disclose their criminal records?
4. Was legislative change necessary in Canada to increase the time in prison for those convicted of second degree murder?
5. Can adult diversion programs accomplish the goal of reducing court caseload without increasing crime?
6. Does having contact with the police in Grade 8 affect the likelihood being arrested at age 20?
7. What kind of police training programs are effective in reducing tensions between police officers and the community?
8. How can the mere fact of having a friend or relative with a criminal record disadvantage someone?
In the US, 45% of Black respondents to a national survey indicated that they would prefer to be robbed or have their home broken into than to have the police question them without good reason. More generally, “Most White respondents [to a survey] felt safe [in interacting with the police], but most Black respondents lived in fear of the police….“ (p. 291).

“There is a racial divide in police-related fear… that is immense, overshadowing the racial divide in fear of crime…. Whereas most White Americans take for granted that police are integral to their well-being and guardians of their safety, most Black Americans live in fear of the police mistreating them and hurting those they care about” (p. 310-311). Dismissing these fears as being exaggerated misses the broader point that Black Americans face higher likelihoods of being questioned and searched by police as well as being the targets of unwarranted searches and use of force. The police, after all, have “unparalleled discretion, legal authority, qualified immunity and weapons…. As long as any racial bias exists in policing, and as long as officers’ behavior is unpredictable, Black Americans' fear of the police is not irrational and the racial divide in fear is understandable” (p. 311).

Networks that prisoners create while in prison can be helpful to them in finding legitimate employment and housing. At the same time, parole authorities often forbid those on parole from associating with people with criminal records. Perhaps parole authorities should re-consider blanket prohibitions against associating with ‘known criminals.’

“The claim here is not that the program and networks caused this study’s participants' overall success in socially integrating. Instead, it argues that one… mechanism by which they found some success was… through organizationally embedded prison-forged networks....” (p. 558). Though this study focused on men, “three studies on women former prisoners have found that women who became friends in prison maintained connections and/or supported each other after release” (p. 558). Parole policies that forbid those released from prison to associate with any person who has a criminal record “could have a chilling effect on any potential benefits former prisoners would gain through these networks” (p. 559).

People with criminal records are in jeopardy of having their punishments extended with laws that require criminal record checks on those seeking jobs, housing, etc., after they have served their sentences. In the US, the increasing number of these laws in a state is intimately associated with the racial composition of the state’s population and its prisons.

The results of this study support the idea that “racial stereotypes are activated to shape policy outcomes”. Said differently “racialized assumptions regarding a policy's target population result in policy choices that are racially patterned.” (p. 1050). Within the criminal justice setting, this approach suggests that “Stereotypes of Black criminality shape lawmakers' implicit judgements to produce racially patterned policy outcomes” (p. 1079).

Legislative change wasn’t necessary for Canada’s judges to increase, between 1977 and 2020, the length of time those convicted of second degree murder had to wait before they were eligible for parole. The Parole Board of Canada also increased, over time, the time between the date a prisoner first became eligible for parole and when they were actually released into the community. Since 2005, judges have given Indigenous people shorter parole ineligibility periods for second degree murder than non-Indigenous people, but the Parole Board wiped out this advantage by ensuring that Indigenous people stayed in prison longer than non-Indigenous people before being released.

Apparently unrelated to any legislative change, the administration of sentences for 2nd degree murder has increased the severity of punishment for this offence. For most prisoners the greater harshness appears to be the result of increases in both the parole ineligibility period and the reluctance of correctional/parole authorities to release people when they are eligible to be released into the community. For Indigenous people, the result is the same – longer periods in prison – but that is the solely the result of correctional/parole decisions and not changes in the parole ineligibility period set by judges.
Prosecutorial diversion from the formal adult justice system can successfully remove cases from court proceedings without any long-term impact on crime.

Although diversion of offenders is more often a policy for youths than for adults, these 5 studies (in 3 locations) demonstrate the benefits of diversion of adults as well: reduced use of scarce resources on cases that do not need full prosecutions and no evidence of a subsequent increase in crime. Indeed, based on the fact that “the most robust effects were generated from two programs that enroll felony defendants” (p. 906), one could argue that the next step might be to expand the scope of these programs to more serious cases.

Black youths who experienced contact with the police by the eighth grade were much more likely to be arrested by age 20 even when controlling for self-reported illegal behaviour at Grade 8, Grade 10 and when they were age 20. “Encounters with police and not just official system involvement appear to set in motion events that subsequently lead to arrest” (p. 310). No such effect was found for Whites.

Though the findings suggest that there was an overall effect of contact with the police in Grade 8 on arrest at age 20, it is important that “only Black respondents… appear vulnerable to the ‘secondary sanctioning’ process. For Black respondents, there appears to be an institutional response to prior contact, while White respondents are not subject to these same responses. Black respondents with police contact by the eighth grade have 11 times greater odds of being arrested in young adulthood…. Police contact has no identifiable effect on later criminal justice involvement for White respondents” (p. 310). “The findings underscore the deleterious consequence of police contact with Black children – suggesting that even contacts that do not lead to arrest may have implications for racial disparities that appear later in the system” (p. 312).

An intensive police training program had some desirable effects: residents reported that the police were less violent and less harassing to people in their neighbourhoods. However, the changed behaviour of the police in their neighbourhoods did not have any effect on residents’ assessment of the legitimacy of the police.

The behaviour of police officers in relatively high crime “hot spots” can be improved with intensive training in procedural justice. Community residents living in areas predominantly policed by procedural justice trained police perceive them to be “less violent and less harassing of people who live on their street” (p. 5). However, the training did not have an impact on the public’s assessment of the legitimacy of the police. Nevertheless, this study, carried out in three cities, demonstrates that police training that targets the nature of police interactions with citizens can have beneficial effects on how ordinary citizens are treated by the police.

When ordinary people hear that a person – or even a person’s relative – was once imprisoned, they will not see that person in the same way as they see a person without such a history or association.

Although not completely consistent across all individual measures, the results showed that a person who had a history of being incarcerated was likely to be seen in a more negative light, as a worse parent, as less financially deserving and as less worthy of being recommended for a job. However, the stigma of a short period (one month) in jail did not stop there. If one has a partner or relative who, once, spent a month in jail, the stigma is almost as strong as having experienced jail oneself. The sample in this study who gave these ratings tended to be young (60% between 18 and 34 years old), white (67%), and highly educated (90% had at least some college education). This sample saw “people who have an incarceration history, and people who have formerly incarcerated loved ones, differently from those who do not” (p. 1928). Incarceration, it seems, creates a “permanently marked group of marginalized citizens” (p. 1929).
Fear of police has been shown to have its own set of negative effects on people. People not only experience fear in relation to their own potential interactions with police, but even if they aren’t afraid for themselves, they are often afraid for others (e.g., friends or family members) – a phenomenon referred to here as altruistic fear. Hence it is important to try to understand the sources of both personal and altruistic fear.

The study used a sample of about a thousand Black and White US respondents, weighted to be representative of these two groups on gender, age, education, and 2020 US presidential vote choice. Personal fear of the police was measured with a series of questions in which respondents were asked “How afraid or unafraid are you that the police will do the following things to you without good reason in the next 5 years?” The list included the following: stop you, yell at you, punch or kick you, shoot you with a gun, kill you. Altruistic fear was measured with responses to “How often or rarely do you worry about the police hurting the following people?” Seven groups were listed including the following: your family members, your friends, your neighbours. Respondents answered on 5-point scales.

The differences between Black and White respondents were huge. For example, 42% of Black respondents indicated that they were “very afraid” that the police would kill them in the next 5 years compared to 11% of White respondents. Although Black respondents were more afraid of crime than were White respondents, “the magnitude of this difference pales in comparison to that for fear of the police” (p. 303). In other analyses, it was clear that the data “show that many Americans, especially Black Americans, fear [the police] more than [they fear] criminals” (p. 304). The racial divide on altruistic fear is similar: “A majority (51%) of Black respondents worry often or very often about their family members being hurt by the police compared to 9% of White respondents…” (p. 304). It is important to note that regardless of socio-economic status or gender, police-related fear is more prevalent among Black than White respondents. This is not, therefore, an issue limited to socioeconomically disadvantaged males.

Conclusion: “There is a racial divide in police-related fear… that is immense, overshadowing the racial divide in fear of crime…. Whereas most White Americans take for granted that police are integral to their well-being and guardians of their safety, most Black Americans live in fear of the police mistreating them and hurting those they care about” (p. 310-311). Dismissing these fears as being exaggerated misses the broader point that Black Americans face higher likelihoods of being questioned and searched by police as well as being the targets of unwarranted searches and use of force. The police, after all, have “unparalleled discretion, legal authority, qualified immunity and weapons…. As long as any racial bias exists in policing, and as long as officers’ behavior is unpredictable, Black Americans’ fear of the police is not irrational and the racial divide in fear is understandable” (p. 311).

Networks that prisoners create while in prison can be helpful to them in finding legitimate employment and housing. At the same time, parole authorities often forbid those on parole from associating with people with criminal records. Perhaps parole authorities should re-consider blanket prohibitions against associating with ‘known criminals.’

“Having ‘antisocial associates’ is considered one of the ‘big four’ risk factors or ‘criminogenic needs’ in risk/needs assessment instruments [that are used] to determine risk classification and service needs…. Clearly, having ties to criminal peers is statistically correlated with recidivism” (p. 546). Not surprisingly, parole authorities often forbid parolees from associating with people who have criminal records.

This paper suggests that prisoners may form social networks in prison that can help them transition into a crime-free life by providing contacts for jobs, housing, and other necessities. But in addition, community-based organizations that help former prisoners are likely to create networks of people who have criminal records and who often help one another.

For about 8 months, the author of this paper rented a bed in a transition house for men returning from prison to New York City. Thus he was able to get an “up-close view of the everyday lives of a group of men in the midst of integrating into society after release from prison” (p. 549). In addition, he interviewed men who were within two years of release from prison.

It was not uncommon for former prisoners to hear about and eventually get jobs as a result of information they got from former prisoners. But it was not always easy: the person who ran the transition house studied in this paper had initially been told by his own parole officer that he would be locked up “if you house one person who’s on parole while you yourself are on parole….” (p. 551). His parole officer eventually became “a significant supporter” of the transition house.

Not surprisingly, about 30% of the contacts these men had were formed during prison and a somewhat higher proportion of their contacts had at some point been prisoners. But in addition, many of the people whom these former prisoners had known earlier in their lives had criminal records. One problem created by blanket prohibitions against associating with “known criminals” is that “a criminal record is an imperfect proxy for criminal peers.” Prisoners often need “hooks for change” in programs “where they received ongoing support for prosocial selves and endeavors.” Organizations that employ former prisoners “bridge the prison and the community…. This bridging aspect also means the organization, its staffers, and its resources are often available to former prisoners in the community once they are released” (p. 557). Said differently, the associations between those recently released from prison and those with criminal records who have been in the community for somewhat longer periods of time can serve the interest of prisoners looking for ways to transition into a non-offending future.

Conclusion: “The claim here is not that the program and networks caused this study’s participants’ overall success in socially integrating. Instead, it argues that one… mechanism by which they found some success was… through organizationally embedded prison-forged networks…. “ (p. 558). Though this study focused on men, “three studies on women former prisoners have found that women who became friends in prison maintained connections and/or supported each other after release” (p. 558). Parole policies that forbid those released from prison to associate with any person who has a criminal record “could have a chilling effect on any potential benefits former prisoners would gain through these networks” (p. 559).

People with criminal records are in jeopardy of having their punishments extended with laws that require criminal record checks on those seeking jobs, housing, etc., after they have served their sentences. In the US, the increasing number of these laws in a state is intimately associated with the racial composition of the state’s population and its prisons.

The effect of a criminal conviction does not end when the sentence ends. The punitive effects on those convicted of an offence can continue forever (see Criminological Highlights collection, Evaluating the Benefits of Pardons by Maria Jung et al.). This study attempts to explain the enormous growth, between 1982 and 2013, in laws requiring criminal record background checks in the US.

During these 32 years, the 50 states brought a total of 6,764 new “background check” provisions into their laws. The number of new provisions ranged from a low of 45 in Maine to a high of 308 in Indiana (median = 120 new background check provisions per state). The working theory of this paper is that new provisions relate to concerns about crime, and crime by racialized groups in particular. Hence it was hypothesized that states with high proportions of Black and Hispanic citizens and prisoners (as a publicly visible indicator of those officially designated as offenders) would be most likely to bring in laws to curb access to jobs, business licenses, housing, government contracts, political participation, education, etc., by those with criminal records.

The focus of the study, then, was to examine the factors that seem to account for this huge – but varied – growth in post-sentence restrictions on those who have offended. States in the US vary dramatically in their imprisonment rate; but imprisonment, itself, was not a predictor of the adoption of criminal background checks. In other words, the growth of background checks is not simply a reflection of yet another way in which jurisdictions can show that they are “tough on crime.”

One of the more important factors in explaining the adoption of criminal background check legislation was the portion of the state’s prison population that was Black. When the proportion of prisoners who were Black was high, states brought in criminal background check legislation. But the proportion of the state overall population that was Black had an independent effect on the passing of background check legislation. These effects were not artifacts of geographic region: Though there were regional differences (rates of new background check laws were lowest in the Northeast) the racial effects persisted even when region as well as the states’ political orientation and crime rates were controlled for.

Finally, there is an indication that criminal record check legislation is related to economic dimensions of the perceived threat from Blacks. New legislation pertaining to employment-related criminal records checks appears to be lower in states with low Black populations when White unemployment is high (i.e., when Whites need jobs in states with low Black populations). But in states with high Black populations, there is, if anything, an increase in new legislation requiring criminal background checks for employment as White unemployment increases.

Conclusion: The results of this study support the idea that “racial stereotypes are activated to shape policy outcomes”. Said differently “racialized assumptions regarding a policy’s target population result in policy choices that are racially patterned.” (p. 1050). Within the criminal justice setting, this approach suggests that “Stereotypes of Black criminality shape lawmakers’ implicit judgements to produce racially patterned policy outcomes” (p. 1079).

 Legislative change wasn’t necessary for Canada’s judges to increase, between 1977 and 2020, the length of time those convicted of second degree murder had to wait before they were eligible for parole. The Parole Board of Canada also increased, over time, the time between the date a prisoner first became eligible for parole and when they were actually released into the community. Since 2005, judges have given Indigenous people shorter parole ineligibility periods for second degree murder than non-Indigenous people, but the Parole Board wiped out this advantage by ensuring that Indigenous people stayed in prison longer than non-Indigenous people before being released.

Since Canada officially abolished capital punishment in 1976, the penalty for second degree murder has been life in prison with the condition that the offender can apply for parole after a period of 10 to 25 years. This period of parole ineligibility is set by the judge, but the actual release date is eventually set by the parole board at a hearing after this period of ineligibility has passed. [For 1st degree murder the parole ineligibility period is automatically 25 years.]

21% of those serving federal sentences in Canada (prison sentences of 2 years or more) were convicted of murder, though 40% of this group is supervised in the community. But when prisoners actually move from penitentiary to the community is a function, in part, of the parole ineligibility period set by the judge and the decision of the parole board. Between 1977-1988 and 2017-2020, the time that a prisoner had to spend in penitentiary before applying for parole increased dramatically. In the years 1977-1988, 13.5% of those convicted of second degree murder had parole ineligibility periods set at 15 years or more. By 2017-2020, this had increased to 26% of those convicted of 2nd degree murder. Women, in general, get shorter ineligibility periods than men, but for women as well as men, the ineligibility periods increased over time.

Perhaps the most interesting findings related to the parole ineligibility periods of Indigenous people (compared to the rest of the population). Because of data limitations (Indigeneity was not reliably captured in the data until 2005), this could only be examined for those sentenced in 2005 or later. For non-Indigenous people, the parole ineligibility period increased in length between 2005-2012 and 2013-2020. However, for Indigenous people sentenced for 2nd degree murder, this was not the case. In fact, during both periods, Indigenous people received significantly shorter parole ineligibility periods than did non-Indigenous people. However, this does not mean that Indigenous people serve less time in penitentiary for 2nd degree murder than do non-Indigenous people. In fact, the data show that Indigenous people were held longer in prison than were non-Indigenous people, notwithstanding the fact that the sentencing judges had indicated that Indigenous offenders should be eligible for release to the community sooner. It could be argued, therefore, that judges were sensitive to the circumstances and/or high rate of imprisonment of Indigenous people and gave shorter parole ineligibility periods, but this effect was negated by the correctional or parole authorities in their roles of determining when Indigenous people actually got released.

More generally, across time, those convicted of 2nd degree murder spent increasing amounts of time in custody. Even looking at the subset of prisoners with parole ineligibility periods of 10-12 years, the result of parole decisions was that considerably fewer got out at or near their first opportunity to be released and dramatically more spent at least 15 years in prison before being released.

Conclusion: Apparently unrelated to any legislative change, the administration of sentences for 2nd degree murder has increased the severity of punishment for this offence. For most prisoners the greater harshness appears to be the result of increases in both the parole ineligibility period and the reluctance of correctional/parole authorities to release people when they are eligible to be released into the community. For Indigenous people, the result is the same – longer periods in prison – but that is the solely the result of correctional/parole decisions and not changes in the parole ineligibility period set by judges.

Prosecutorial diversion from the formal adult justice system can successfully remove cases from court proceedings without any long-term impact on crime.

A frequent finding in studies of criminal justice diversion programs is that those sent to these programs largely include people who, in the absence of the program, would not have been subject to criminal justice processing. Often this occurs because they are diverted to separately funded (often private) pilot programs whose existence depends on processing large numbers of offenders who do not reoffend.

More recently, in some jurisdictions, ‘diversion’ has been integrated into the prosecutorial process and, therefore, is seen as a quick way of getting rid of cases not ‘needing’ full prosecution so that resources can be focused on more important cases. Prosecutors may also be attempting to mitigate the negative effects on employment of having a criminal record.

This paper examines 5 somewhat different adult diversion programs in 3 locations. In all cases, the policy was that if the offender successfully completed the program, no charge would result (or all charges would be dropped). In Milwaukee, after a person was charged for a minor offence, prosecutors could divert offenders to community service, restitution, or an education program. Another program in Milwaukee allowed for post-charge diversion for more serious offences. In Cook County, Illinois, two programs were developed to divert felony and misdemeanor drug offenders to drug education programs. A Vermont program diverted minor offenders to community service, counseling, or similar activities.

Comparison groups of diversion-eligible defendants were established in each location by taking advantage of natural variation in the treatment of offenders across prosecutors, locations, or days of the week (e.g., those charged on weekends in one location were ineligible for diversion), or the variation in the ability of the prosecutor to screen all cases for eligibility. A propensity score match was made in each location to ensure that, on the basis of available information, the diverted and prosecuted samples were equivalent.

Although some people assigned to each of the 5 diversion programs were, in the end, prosecuted, the diversion programs were successful in accomplishing their most important goal: the rate of prosecution and resulting prison sentences were higher in the comparison groups than in the groups that had been diverted. In other words, formal programs can be established that reduce the likelihood of prosecutions. Equally important is the finding that in 4 of the 5 programs, the likelihood of re-arrest within 2 years was lower for those who had previously been diverted, though the difference was significant for only two of the programs. More importantly, the recidivism findings demonstrate that diverting people from criminal justice processing did not increase subsequent offending.

Conclusion: Although diversion of offenders is more often a policy for youths than for adults, these 5 studies (in 3 locations) demonstrate the benefits of diversion of adults as well: reduced use of scarce resources on cases that do not need full prosecutions and no evidence of a subsequent increase in crime. Indeed, based on the fact that “the most robust effects were generated from two programs that enroll felony defendants” (p. 906), one could argue that the next step might be to expand the scope of these programs to more serious cases.

Black youths who experienced contact with the police by the eighth grade were much more likely to be arrested by age 20 even when controlling for self-reported illegal behaviour at Grade 8, Grade 10 and when they were age 20. “Encounters with police and not just official system involvement appear to set in motion events that subsequently lead to arrest” (p. 310). No such effect was found for Whites.

This study used longitudinal data from Seattle, Washington schools where youths in Grade 8 and their parents were initially tracked (and interviewed) for three years and again when they were young adults (average age of 20). “Early police contact” was assessed using three questions when the youth was in Grade 8: Whether the youth reported ever (1) being stopped by the police but not arrested, (2) being stopped and arrested, and (3) being in trouble with the police for something they did. 28% had experienced at least one of these forms of contact. At age 20, they were asked if they had been arrested in the previous year. 10% indicated that they had been arrested. Separate from these measures, adolescent illegal behaviour (property and violent crime) was assessed in Grade 8 and again when the youth was age 20 (when drug use was added to the list). Family income and gender were statistically controlled.

For Black youths, those with police contact before they finished Grade 8 were more likely to be arrested at age 20 even when controlling for illegal behaviour in Grade 8, arrest by Grade 10, and illegal behaviour at age 20. For White youths, police contact before the end of Grade 8 had no impact. There was also a small effect of early contact with the police on self-reported offending at age 20 but this was not significant when all controls were included.

“The findings are consistent with prior research which finds that police contacts lead to future contacts and arrests, and these secondary contacts cannot be fully explained by engagement in illegal activity…. Institutional responses to individuals with [police] contact… more than behavioural changes of individuals with [police] contact explain future criminal justice involvement” (p. 310).

Conclusion: Though the findings suggest that there was an overall effect of contact with the police in Grade 8 on arrest at age 20, it is important that “only Black respondents… appear vulnerable to the ‘secondary sanctioning’ process. For Black respondents, there appears to be an institutional response to prior contact, while White respondents are not subject to these same responses. Black respondents with police contact by the eighth grade have 11 times greater odds of being arrested in young adulthood…. Police contact has no identifiable effect on later criminal justice involvement for White respondents” (p. 310). “The findings underscore the deleterious consequence of police contact with Black children – suggesting that even contacts that do not lead to arrest may have implications for racial disparities that appear later in the system” (p. 312).

An intensive police training program had some desirable effects: residents reported that the police were less violent and less harassing to people in their neighbourhoods. However, the changed behaviour of the police in their neighbourhoods did not have any effect on residents’ assessment of the legitimacy of the police.

Concern about police behaviour in their interaction with ordinary local people – especially racialized and Indigenous residents – is not new. This paper examines the impact of procedural justice training in three US cities (Tucson, AZ; Cambridge, MA; Houston, TX) on police behaviour, residents’ perceptions of the police, and crime.

Police patrol officers in each city were identified and then matched on various background characteristics. Half were chosen to receive a 40 hour “procedural justice” training program emphasizing the importance of the manner in which they speak to residents and the importance of neutrality, dignity and respect, etc., in their interaction with residents. The other group had no new training. A given crime hot spot in a city was then assigned to receive routine policing by either those who had received the new training or those relying on the training they had received earlier in their careers. Although other officers (who were not part of the experiment) were sometimes brought into each type of area, it is estimated that at least half of the policing in the areas being studied was carried out by officers participating in the experiment.

Variou measurements were examined including systematic observations by researchers during ride-alongs with police for full shifts. The observers, who did not know if the officer had received special training, rated the interactions of the trained and untrained officers. Arrests by the officers during a period starting 6 months before the study began as well as after the training initiative had been implemented were recorded. Finally, a community survey was carried out in the neighbourhoods that were part of the study. Community residents were asked about their perceptions of their interactions with the police as well as their views of the legitimacy of the police in their neighbourhoods and across the city. Two specific questions were also asked: whether the police harass or mistreat people on their street and whether the police on their block use more force than they have to. Finally, crime incident (and arrest) data were collected.

The observational data demonstrated that the officers who received procedural justice training were more likely to give people voice, show neutrality, and demonstrate respectful behaviour in their interactions. The hot spots policed by procedural justice trained police appeared, if anything, to show a decline in crime compared to the control areas. In addition -- and not, apparently a result of the possible decline in crime -- there were fewer arrests in the areas patrolled by the officers who received the special training.

There did not appear to be any effect of the training on community perceptions of policing generally or police legitimacy (on the block or citywide). However, people living in the “control” areas were slightly (but statistically significantly) more likely to see police officers as harassing people on their block and using more force than necessary than those who lived in locations policed by those who had received the procedural justice training.

Conclusion: The behaviour of police officers in relatively high crime “hot spots” can be improved with intensive training in procedural justice. Community residents living in areas predominantly policed by procedural justice trained police perceive them to be “less violent and less harassing of people who live on their street” (p. 5). However, the training did not have an impact on the public’s assessment of the legitimacy of the police. Nevertheless, this study, carried out in three cities, demonstrates that police training that targets the nature of police interactions with citizens can have beneficial effects on how ordinary citizens are treated by the police.

When ordinary people hear that a person – or even a person’s relative – was once imprisoned, they will not see that person in the same way as they see a person without such a history or association.

Previous research has shown that the stigma of a criminal record hurts a person’s chances of getting a job, housing, etc., even when their criminal record is far in the past (see Maria Jung et al. Criminological Highlights: Collection on Pardons).

What isn’t as well understood is whether being associated with incarceration leads to more general stigmatization. In particular, if a person is stigmatized because a relative or friend has been incarcerated, it means that the stigma of imprisonment can harm people who, themselves, have had no involvement in the justice system.

Respondents to an online survey were given a fictional vignette about a mail carrier who was assigned to deliver mail to the respondent’s workplace. The respondent was told to imagine that this person was new to the job and that the respondent happened to hear this person talking on the phone. The respondent was told to imagine that during the phone conversation they heard the mail carrier 1) was colour blind (control condition), 2) had been in jail, or 3) had a partner or male relative who had been in jail. In all cases, the incarceration was described as occurring a few years earlier and lasting about a month. (An additional condition, not discussed here, described the mail carrier as having been in rehab for drug addiction. Other manipulations of the apparent ethnicity, race, and gender of the mail carrier did not create differential effects.)

Respondents then were asked to rate the mail carrier on a number of dimensions (e.g., likeable, sincere, warm, tolerant, good-natured) and whether they would make a good parent. Respondents were also asked whether they would recommend the mail carrier for a job or an increase in pay.

The mail carrier who had been incarcerated, or whose partner or a relative had been jailed, was perceived as less intelligent, independent, likeable, sincere, good natured, warm and tolerant than the mail carrier who had had no known contact with prison. In other words, not only does a period of incarceration have direct negative effects, the incarceration of a partner or relative also has negative impacts. In addition, mail carriers who the respondent believed had, themselves, been incarcerated or who had a partner or relative who had been incarcerated, were seen as less deserving of their income, as less good parents, and as not being people that the respondent would feel comfortable recommending for a job.

Conclusion: Although not completely consistent across all individual measures, the results showed that a person who had a history of being incarcerated was likely to be seen in a more negative light, as a worse parent, as less financially deserving and as less worthy of being recommended for a job. However, the stigma of a short period (one month) in jail did not stop there. If one has a partner or relative who, once, spent a month in jail, the stigma is almost as strong as having experienced jail oneself. The sample in this study who gave these ratings tended to be young (60% between 18 and 34 years old), white (67%), and highly educated (90% had at least some college education). This sample saw “people who have an incarceration history, and people who have formerly incarcerated loved ones, differently from those who do not” (p. 1928). Incarceration, it seems, creates a “permanently marked group of marginalized citizens” (p. 1929).