

Seeing more African Americans in prison increases support for policies that exacerbate inequality

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Informing the public about African Americans' disproportionate incarceration rate may actually bolster support for punitive policies that perpetuate inequality, according to a new study published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

Stanford University psychology researchers Rebecca Hetey and Jennifer Eberhardt found that White participants who were exposed to higher

[racial disparities](#) in incarceration rates reported being more afraid of crime and more likely to support the kinds of punitive policies that exacerbate these racial disparities.

The expansion of harsh policies—such as the three-strikes law in California and other states—has led the United States to have the largest per capita [prison population](#) in the world. Not only has the prison population become larger, it has become disproportionately Black. Although Blacks represent 12% of the U.S. population, they now comprise nearly 40% of the prison population.

"Most people likely assume this must be due to rising crime rates, but the explosion in the prison population, as well as its changing complexion, are better explained by harsh criminal justice policies," says Hetey, lead author on the study.

Hetey and Eberhardt wanted to know whether making people aware of racial disparities in incarceration would bolster or diminish their support for such draconian policies.

In one experiment, a White female experimenter asked 62 White voters to watch a video that showed [mug shots](#) of male inmates. Some of the participants saw a video in which 25% of the mug shots were of Black men, while others saw a video in which 45% of the mug shots were of Black men. Participants then had an opportunity to sign a real petition supporting an amendment that would ease the severity of California's three-strikes law.

Just over half of participants who'd seen the mug shots with fewer Black men signed the petition, whereas only 27% of people who viewed the mug shots containing a higher percentage of Black inmates agreed to sign. This was the case regardless of how harsh participants thought the law was.

To determine whether fear of crime might explain these findings, Hetey and Eberhardt conducted a second experiment in which they showed 164 White New Yorkers statistics about the prison population. They read about Black inmates either in terms of the national incarceration rate (about 40%) or the New York City rate (about 60%). Next, they were asked about their support for the stop-and-frisk policy.

About 33% of the participants who saw the lower national statistic were willing to sign a petition to end the policy, but only 12% of those who saw the higher city rate of Black incarceration were willing to sign the petition.

Participants who saw the higher rate of Black incarceration were more likely to report concern over crime, which was associated with reluctance to sign the petition.

"Many legal advocates and social activists seem to assume that bombarding the public with images, statistics, and other evidence of racial disparities will motivate people to join the cause and fight inequality," says Hetey. "But we found that, ironically, exposure to extreme racial disparities may make the public less, and not more, responsive to attempts to lessen the severity of policies that help maintain those disparities."

Eberhardt concludes, "Our research shows that numbers don't always speak for themselves. Reducing inequality takes more than simply presenting people with evidence of extreme inequality."

More information: "Racial Disparities in Incarceration Increase Acceptance of Punitive Policies" *Psychological Science*, 2014.

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