Perceptions of Racial Inequality and the Criminal Justice System: The Influence of Structural and Individualistic Explanations

Abstract

Racial inequality is a persistent issue within the criminal justice system, rooted in historical factors that continue to shape legal outcomes. Modern perceptions of racial inequality influence public attitudes and criminal justice policy, often implicitly linking race with crime. This study uses data from the 2022 General Social Survey (GSS) to examine how individualistic and structuralist perceptions of racial inequality are correlated with attitudes towards the criminal justice system and views of the government's role in addressing racial disparities. Binary logistic regressions show that structural explanations of inequality correlate with the belief that courts are too harsh and the government has an obligation to address racial inequality. Conversely, individual explanations of inequality showed that courts are not harsh enough and the government has no responsibility to help racial inequality. The results are consistent even when accounting for other controlled variables like race, income, age, religion, party identification, and college education. This research finds structural explanations of inequality align with recognition of systemic racial disparities in the criminal justice system. However, when individual explanations are used, racialized blame is reinforced, which perpetuates the persistence of racial inequality.

Hypothesis

- H1: People who perceive racial inequality will think that the criminal justice system is too
- H2: People who do not perceive racial inequality will think that the criminal justice system is not harsh enough.
- H3: Individuals who do not think racial inequality is a problem are less likely to support government intervention to address racial inequality.
- H4: Individuals who desire a harsher criminal justice system are less likely to support government interventions to address racial inequality.

Methods

- Data analyzed from the 2022 General Social Survey fielded by the National Opinion Research Center
- National Random Sample

Independent Variable

Perceptions of Racial Inequality:

- Explaining why racial inequality exists . Structural: Discrimination and lack of
- · Individualistic: Inability to learn and lack motivation
 - 1 = Yes
 - 0 = No

- - How structural inequality impacts income disparities
 - · Structural: Discrimination and
 - Individualistic: Need to try harder
 - 1 = Strongly Agree
 - 5 = Strongly Disagree

Dependent Variables

Views towards the

Criminal Justice System

- 1 = Not Harsh Enough
- 2 = About Right

Government Response

- 1 = Government Should Help
- 5 = No Obligation

3 = Too Harsh

Controls

Race, income, gender, age, party identification, religion, college education, and region

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Findings Courts are too harsh and Structural government should help Forms of Inequality Courts are not harsh enough Individualistic and government has no Forms of obligation to help Inequality

Conclusion

The results from the study find that beliefs in structural explanations of inequality correlate with thinking that the courts are too barsh and the government has an obligation to address racial inequality (supported by my first hypothesis). This reflects the connections between how the criminal justice system is viewed as modern day slavery and the implicit link between race and crime. The awareness of these structural influences of racial inequality in the criminal justice system reflects how laws, discourse, and institutions have shaped the racial divide in society. This structural inequality has been ingrained in the fabric of America impacting the language we use regarding criminality. These perceptions make structural forms of inequality visible, where the cycle of inequality is detrimental to social and economic mobility. Additionally, beliefs in structural explanations of inequality called for a solution: the government should help to address racial inequality. The findings show that beliefs in structural explanations of inequality convey there is knowledge of racial disparities at a systemic level, like in the criminal justice system, and the government should do something about it.

Individualistic:

Beliefs in individual explanations of inequality are associated with thinking the courts are not harsh enough and the government has no obligation to help racial inequality (supported by my second, third, and fourth hypotheses). Beliefs in individual explanations of inequality show that these perceptions exist, which are rooted in racialized blame at an individual level. It not only shows that people are unaware of inequality at a structural level, but also how it is perpetuated through the language we use and the systems we create. It reflects how society (Le. white people) use blame to try to explain why social inequality exists, rather than acknowledging the structural forces that maintain it. This individualistic explanation reflects how racial inequality is reinforced in society considering beliefs in racial differences due to the faults of the individual, ignoring the role of structural forces

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