

Race, Bias, and Attitudes Toward Drug Control Policy

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This research explores the associative and interactive effects of race and perceived racial bias on attitudes toward drug policies among a sample of university students. Extant research that has examined general crime control attitudes has suggested the relative influence of both variables. However, our exploratory analysis finds perceived racial bias to be the most salient factor, whereas race, measured discretely, exhibits no interactive effect. The discussion considers structural explanations for racial disparity and advocates a more robust measurement of race variation that includes racial categorization, self-identification, and bias.

KEYTERMS *Drug attitudes, drug control policy, racial bias*

INTRODUCTION

Without question, the public has traditionally favored punitive policies toward crime. Public support for castigatory crime policies has resulted in the passing of crime control strategies with little difficulty. Legislative policies such as “three-strikes” laws and mandatory sentencing coupled with the public’s increasing fear of crime have placed an unprecedented and disproportionate number of minorities under the control of the criminal justice system (Johnson, 2008; Kappeler & Potter, 2005; Peffley & Hurwitz, 2002; Percival, 2010). Minority populations, specifically Blacks and Hispanics, are more likely to experience higher rates of arrests and convictions (Beckett, Nyrop, & Pflugst, 2006; Beckett, Nyrop, Pflugst, & Bowen, 2005; Lurigio & Loose, 2008; Tonry, 1995). In addition, minorities are more likely to receive more punitive sanctions than their White counterparts. For instance, minorities are less likely to receive a probation-only disposition (Free, 1997; Lee &

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Rasinski, 2006) and are disproportionately more likely than Whites to receive a prison sentence (Tonry, 1995). Harrison and Beck (2006) reported that the number of Black and Hispanic offenders had increased dramatically from the previous decade. In 2005, the number of Black and Hispanic inmates had risen to 577,100 and 294,900, respectively, whereas 505,500 White offenders were imprisoned (Harrison & Beck, 2006, as cited in Brennan & Spohn, 2008). This apparent imprisonment increase was largely due to the “war on drugs” (Tonry, 1995, 2011).

Though the extant research has observed an overall increase in disparity by race from the 1990s to the 2000s, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (Harrison & Beck, 2006) reported that the number of Blacks incarcerated in state and federal prisons decreased by more than 53,000 between 2000 and 2006; more than half of this decrease was the result of fewer Blacks being imprisoned for drug offenses. Conversely, Sabol, West, and Cooper (2010) validated the overall decrease in Black imprisonment when examining U.S. prison population growth in 2007 and 2008, reversing the upward trends witnessed a decade or so before. Although it may appear that the system has stopped targeting minorities for drug offenses, the Bureau of Justice Statistics study noted that the number of Hispanic arrests for drug offending increased by almost 11,000. This increase may be attributed to the government’s focus on methamphetamine rather than crack cocaine–related drug arrests. However, another plausible explanation might be the heightened focal concern on Hispanics and drug-related issues in the past few years. Although evidence suggests recent decreases in imprisonment for Blacks specifically, there is little doubt that the criminal justice system continues to disproportionately sanction Blacks, and it appears that similar crime control strategies are now being levied against Hispanics.

Much of the literature attributes bias toward minorities to their specific race or ethnicity; however, the relationship between minority status and race may not be as uncomplicated as it might seem. Negative bias toward Blacks and other minorities, especially Hispanics, may have more of an impact on policy than simply race alone. According to Peffley and Hurwitz (2002), “It is one thing to show that negative stereotypes bias evaluation of criminal suspects who are black; it is quite another to show that whites’ racial attitudes somehow influence their more general policy attitudes” (p. 60). Although Peffley and Hurwitz have established that negative bias affects the policy decisions of Whites, what has rarely been considered is that non-Whites (e.g., Blacks or Hispanics) may hold a negative bias toward other groups, especially in regard to the war on drugs. It is not simply a matter of race that influences attitudes toward drug policy. Negative perceptions toward minorities are value laden and influence race-neutral crime and justice policies. The present study examines whether negative racial attitudes influence support for punitive drug policies among university students when race and other demographic variables are controlled.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although the general population has traditionally held punitive policies toward general crime, no other “moral panic” has garnered as much response as the government’s attempt to combat the war on drugs. Both criminal justice professionals and the public have historically favored more punitive policies toward the possession and sale of drugs (Blendon & Young, 1998; Fernez, 1975; Garland, Bumphus, & Knox, *in press*; Koven & Shelley, 1993). For instance, Blendon and Young (1998) found that 84% of their sampled population supported more severe criminal penalties for drug violations. In addition, more than 70% of the respondents supported crime control measures “indicating broad positive feeling toward measures that ‘get tough’ on users and traffickers of drugs” (Lock, Timberlake, & Rasinski, 2002, p. 384). However, Cintrón and Johnson (1996) were not able to find any difference between treatment and criminal justice-oriented approaches. Lock et al. (2002) found a significant difference in attitudes toward treatment/prevention and criminal justice policies: Treatment/prevention was favored above the traditionally favored criminal justice-oriented policies. In addition, treatment/prevention programs were rated more useful than crime control policies; however, their sample was limited to those dwelling in large cities. Regardless, this change in public attitudes toward more prevention-based provisions may have led many states to rethink their policies on nonviolent crimes, including drug offenses (Percival, 2010), but the fact remains that certain segments of the population continue to favor punitive drug policies.

Although the majority of the population, regardless of race, supports punitive criminal justice policies (Bobo & Thompson, 2010), the literature has found that Whites are more punitive than Blacks in regard to punishment (Johnson, 2008). In essence, as noted by Cochran and Chamlin (2006), an “enduring racial divide” exists within the criminal justice system. Studies on public perceptions toward criminal justice policies have consistently found that Whites are more likely to support the death penalty and longer prison sentences, whereas Blacks are more supportive of treatment options than their White counterparts (Bobo & Johnson, 2004; Bobo & Thompson, 2010; Buckler, Davila, & Salinas, 2008; Cochran & Chamlin, 2006; Johnson, 2008; McCorkle, 1993). Cohn, Barkan, and Halteman (1991) have asserted that this harsher treatment is in part related to racial prejudice. Although a vast amount of research has explored the relationship between perceived racial bias and race-neutral policies regarding general criminal justice issues (Barkan & Cohn, 1994; Bohm, 1991; Buckler et al., 2008; Cochran & Chamlin, 2006; Hurwitz & Peffley, 1997; McCorkle, 1993; Peffley & Hurwitz, 2002; Peffley, Hurwitz, & Sniderman, 1997; Unnever & Cullen, 2007), much of the literature that does exist typically focuses on race rather than perceived racial bias. However, as noted by Johnson (2008), a growing body of literature has connected

“racial prejudice and stereotyping with whites’ support for punitive policies” (p. 199).

A paucity of research exists on the differing drug views between Whites and non-Whites and the influence of perceived racial bias on drug policies (Bobo & Johnson, 2004). Looking at punitiveness among offenders across six crime categories, McCorkle (1993) found no difference in punitiveness across race, including for drug possession and the sale of drugs; however, the study found that Whites were less supportive than non-Whites in regard to rehabilitation. Non-Whites were more likely to support funding for drug programs (Rasinski, Timberlake, & Lock, 2000) and were more willing to support treatment and rehabilitation programs (Lock et al., 2002; McCorkle, 1993; Timberlake, Rasinski, & Lock, 2001). Although the aforementioned studies are important, they did not address the influence of perceived racial bias on attitudes toward drug policies. The literature that does address this issue is scant. Bobo and Johnson (2004) conducted the most salient study in regard to perceived racial bias and attitudes toward drug policies. Using data from the 2000 National African American Election Study and the 2001 Race, Crime and Public Opinion Study, these authors examined perceived racial bias in relation to crack versus powder cocaine attitudes and punishment. Without adding “racially biased questions” to the study Bobo and Johnson (2004) were more supportive of harsher punishments for crack cocaine. When perceived racial bias cues were added, both groups’ support decreased by half, indicating that race was insignificant. However, the authors did find that “whites who are poorly educated, politically conservative, who deny the existence of perceived racial bias in the criminal justice system, and are racially resentful are more supportive of differential punishment” (Bobo & Johnson, 2004, p. 167). Although Blacks were found to be committed to fighting drug-related crime in their communities, their perception of a perceived racial bias within the criminal justice system made them less likely to support harsher punishments for crack cocaine. These findings suggest that perceived racial bias, not race, may have an influence on drug policy and may result in the formulation of punitive policies (also see Bobo & Thompson, 2010).

Although research has been conducted on race and support for punishment and punitive policies among college students (Gabiddon & Penn, 1999; Garland et al., in press; Lambert, 2005; Lambert, Ventura, Baker, & Jenkins, 2006; Payne & Coogle, 1998; Tsoudis, 2000), the issue of whether race is a dominant factor in predicting attitudes toward drug use and policy is contradictory. Lambert et al. (2006) addressed the views of White and non-White respondents using 10 drug-related questions. The authors determined that “race does matter” in attitudes toward drugs. These authors argued that “white and non-whites have significantly different drug views” (p. 105). Lambert et al. used multivariate analysis to ascertain that White

students held more punitive views than non-Whites, especially in regard to policy questions; however, the authors' questions were a series of unrelated drug survey items that were not scaled. Studies such as this have found race to be a predictor of college student attitudes toward drug policies; however, others have found no relationship between race and drug policy attitudes. For instance, Hoffman, Chang, and Lewis (2000) sampled 1,250 students from 15 medical schools to assess attitudes and level of support for drug policy approaches. The authors determined that "minority students were only slightly more likely to favor demand reduction, but no other associations of even marginal significance were noted" (p. 11). Instead, political orientation and gender had a significant impact on attitudes toward drug policy. In addition, Garland, et al. (2012) found no relationship between race and student attitudes toward drug policy. This may be because, as noted by Bobo and Johnson (2004), better educated individuals are less likely to hold punitive views. Regardless, the issue of perceived racial bias and its influence on college students' attitudes toward drug policy has been ignored. The present study simultaneously explores both race (nominally constructed) and racial bias attitudes with regard to their impact on drug policy perceptions.

METHODS

Data and Sample

The sampling frame in this exploratory study consisted of a convenience sample of 278 college students attending a mid-size southern university during the Spring and/or Fall 2009 semesters. The sampled population consisted of individuals who were at least 18 years of age or older, in compliance with the standards established by the institutional review board. Using a 50-item survey, students answered questions related to basic demographics, drug use, attitudes regarding the current drug policy, and attitudes toward minority involvement in drug use and distribution. To obtain the sample, we asked faculty whether surveys could be distributed in their classrooms. Participating faculty allowed us to disseminate the surveys during the assigned class times. Prior to the survey distribution, students voluntarily consented to participate in the survey; students who did not wish to take part in the survey were asked to return any unanswered questionnaires to the collection receptacle. Finally, students who had previously completed the survey were not allowed to take it again.

Whites and Blacks represented 76.3% and 23.7% of the sample, respectively (see Table 1). These racial characteristics were remarkably consistent with the general undergraduate population. The sampled university is composed of approximately 77% Whites, with minorities accounting for 23% of the population.¹ Males represented almost 42% of the sample and females just more than 58%. Although the sample was drawn primarily from criminal

TABLE 1 Description of Major Variables ($N = 278$)

Variable and Coding	Distribution and Descriptive Findings
Race (White = 0)	White = 76.2%; non-White = 27.6%
Gender (male = 0)	Male = 41%; female = 59%
Class rank (rank; freshman = 1)	Freshman = 29.5%; sophomore = 23%; junior = 25.2%; senior = 21.6%; graduate = 0.7%
Major (nonmajor = 0)	Nonmajor = 55%; major = 45%
Religious service attendance (frequently = 1)	Frequently = 37.5%; sometimes = 26.7%; rarely 24.2%; never = 11.6%
Illegal drugs (illegal; no = 0)	No = 47.2%; yes = 52.8%
Attitudes toward minority drug involvement ^a	Range = 3–12; \bar{x} = 6.08; SD = 1.47
Attitudes toward minority drug policies ^a	Range = 2–8; \bar{x} = 4.60; SD = 1.35
Attitudes toward drug policy ^a	Range = 27–54; \bar{x} = 39.59; SD = 4.93

^aVariable is an index.

justice-related courses, less than half of the respondents were criminal justice or legal studies majors. Of the 278 students sampled, 55% were majoring in areas other than criminal justice or legal studies. The distribution of the undergraduate students in terms of class ranking was relatively even: 29.5% were freshmen, 23% were sophomores, 25.2% were juniors, and 21.6% were seniors. Overall, class rank and gender were found to be consistent with the university's undergraduate population.

The frequency of religious service attendance was obtained from the survey; just more than 88% reported attending religious services, whereas 11.6% did not attend services. In addition, just more than half of the students surveyed disclosed using illegal drugs at some point. Marijuana was the most commonly reported drug used by the sample, with the use of all other reported drugs being less than 10%. Almost 53% of the students reporting illegal drug use admitted to smoking marijuana; the next closest illicit drug consumed, other than nonprescribed prescription medication, was cocaine (8.2%).

Perceived Racial Bias Independent Variables

Two attitudinal scales were developed to assess minority bias in regard to the current drug policy and drug use/production. These questions used a 4-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree) and assessed students' attitudes toward the corresponding items. Three items were used to create the first perceived racial bias scale examining attitudes toward minority involvement in drug use and production. The majority of the study participants were not likely to hold negative attitudes toward minorities. Only 13.3% agreed that African Americans were more likely to use drugs than Whites, whereas a mere 12% agreed that Hispanics

TABLE 2 Minority Attitudinal Index Construction

Variable	Statement Agreement			
	Entire Sample (<i>N</i> = 278)	<i>M/SD</i>	Whites Only (<i>n</i> = 212)	Non-Whites Only (<i>n</i> = 66)
Minority drug involvement ($\alpha = .71$)				
African Americans are more likely to use drugs than Whites.	13.3%	1.95/.68	14.2%	10.6%
Hispanics are more likely to use marijuana than Whites.	11.9%	2.14/.60	10.1%	18.2%
Hispanics are more likely to engage in drug trafficking than other groups.	21.9%	1.99/.56	24.6%	15.2%
Minority policies ($\alpha = .72$)				
Minorities are more likely to serve longer sentences for drug violations than Whites.	63.3%	2.84/.80	54.0%	93.9%
The war on drugs has disproportionately targeted minorities.	52.9%	2.59/.73	42.7%	86.4%

Note. All items were constructed on a 4-point Likert scale, from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*. The items were collapsed into two groups: disagree and agree.

were more likely to engage in marijuana use than Whites. In addition, just more than 22% agreed that Hispanics were more likely to engage in drug trafficking than other groups. As expected, Whites were more likely to accept negative bias overall.² However, as noted in Table 2, Blacks were more likely to believe that Hispanics engaged in marijuana use more than Whites (18.2%).

Two items were used to create a second minority bias scale examining attitudes toward policies targeting minorities. Although the majority of respondents held accurate reflections of minorities in regard to minorities and current drug policies, these perceptions were not overwhelmingly positive. Approximately 64% of the respondents agreed that minorities were more likely to serve longer prison sentences for drug violations than Whites, illustrating a realistic view of the criminal justice system; however, just more than 54% of the sample perceived the war on drugs as disproportionately targeting minorities. Consistent with the literature, Whites were more likely to view the system as fair. Both indexes had a relatively high level of internal consistency and had Cronbach's alphas of .71 (minority drug involvement) and .72 (minority policies), respectively.

Dependent Variable

A summary index was constructed to measure student attitudes about current American drug policy. As illustrated in Table 3, the index was composed of 18

TABLE 3 Drug Policy Attitudinal Index Construction

Dependent Variable	Statement Agreement (%)	<i>M/SD</i>
Drug policy attitudes ($\alpha = .74$)		
The war on drugs has been successful.	20.2	1.99/.65
Medical marijuana should remain illegal.	36.5	2.27/.91
All drugs should be decriminalized. ^a	12.5	1.82/.68
Marijuana should be legalized. ^a	52.9	2.58/.97
Drug users should be sentenced to treatment programs instead of incarceration. ^a	67.1	2.86/.65
Cocaine and other amphetamines should be legalized. ^a	4.8	1.43/.59
Crack users should be incarcerated longer than cocaine users.	14.9	2.01/.59
Students who test positive for drugs should be expelled.	18.8	2.04/.73
Individuals arrested for possession of drugs are sentenced to reasonable prison sentences.	38.7	2.29/.71
Drug treatment programs do not work.	20.9	2.13/.66
Pregnant mothers who use illegal drugs should be punished under the law.	89.8	3.30/.68
DARE programs are effective.	47.6	2.38/.75
All students who participate in extracurricular activities should be drug tested.	59.1	2.68/.77
Policies that target drug users have caused a reduction in drug use.	42.7	2.38/.64
Placing ephedrine-based medication behind the pharmacy counter has stopped the production of methamphetamine.	17.9	2.04/.67
Crop eradication programs have successfully limited the amount of drugs entering the United States.	18.8	2.42/.63
All law enforcement officials should be drug tested.	94.2	3.38/.65
Law enforcement agencies should not employ anyone who has ever used drugs.	16.4	1.97/.77

^aVariables were reverse-coded in the analysis to ensure overall scale consistency (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree).

composite Likert scale attitudinal questions assessing whether students were likely to agree or disagree with the survey statement (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree). All items were logically recoded to reflect a continuum of more tolerant to less tolerant attitudes; therefore, lower scores on the index referred to more tolerant attitudes. The index had a high level of internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .74.

RESULTS

Pearson correlations were used to determine whether there were statistically significant relationships between the variables. Race was found to have a

TABLE 4 Predicting Drug Policy Attitudes From Minority Bias ($N = 278$)

Independent Variable	β
Demographics	
Race	-.079
Gender	-.008
Rank	-.089
Major	.003
Service	-.220**
Illegal	.291**
Racial attitudes	
Attitudes toward minority involvement	.234**
Attitudes toward minority policies	.164*

Note. $R^2 = .348^{**}$.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

statistically significant relationship with punitive attitudes toward drug policies, supporting the previous literature that Whites are likely to be more supportive of punitive criminal justice policies (Johnson, 2008). All social demographic variables with the exception of gender and college major correlated significantly with the general attitudes toward drug policy variable. These significant associations included race, class rank, illegal drug use, and frequency of attending religious services; however, these correlations ranged from low to moderately significant, with illegal drug use corresponding with more liberal drug attitudes ($r = -.411^{**}$) and being White related to more punitive views ($r = -.184^*$). Both racial attitudinal variables were found to be associated with less tolerant attitudes toward drug policy, with those holding negative racial views being most punitive oriented. The major analysis examined how these racial attitudinal indexes predicted general drug policy perceptions. Next we utilized the social demographic and indexed variables in a multivariate analysis to predict overall public/student attitudes.

A regression model was constructed to determine the relationship between race, perceived racial bias (index data) on the attitudes, and other demographic factors on drug policy (see Table 4). Although race was significant at the bivariate level, the multivariate analysis found that race was not a statistically significant predictor of attitudes toward drug policies when other variables were controlled; however, the perceived racial bias variables, minority involvement ($b = .234$) and attitudes toward minorities ($b = .164$), were found to be statistically significant. Minority involvement in drug use and sales was determined to be a predictor of punitive attitudes toward drug policy. Similar results have been found in regard to attitudes toward minorities and criminal justice policies. Individuals who viewed the criminal justice system as treating minorities fairly were found to harbor more punitive attitudes toward drug policies. In addition, other significant variables in the model were frequency of church attendance and prior drug use. Although

the model had an R^2 of .35, none of the demographic variables, including race, had a significant influence on attitudes.

DISCUSSION

Perceived racial bias as opposed to race was found to be a significant predictor of more punitive drug policy attitudes in the multivariate analysis. Therefore, the present analysis supports the body of literature that discounts or limits the direct influence of race or ethnicity. Once the analysis progressed beyond bivariate associations, the traditional, nominally measured race variable exhibited no interactive effects. As stated earlier, research that has examined the overall effect of race has produced mixed results. One possible factor relating to the insignificance of race in this analysis may be the characteristics of the study population. As noted by Bobo and Johnson (2004), "Better educated people express less punitive points of view" (p. 154). Instead, the perceived racial bias variables were found to be predictors of attitudes toward drug policies. Both attitudes toward drug involvement and attitudes toward minority drug policies were found to predict more punitive views. Although there has been a racial divide between White and Black crime perceptions, what we have failed to consider is that even minority groups can have stereotypical views of different groups or those considered "other." It is not simply an issue of Black or White. As noted, Blacks were more likely to view Hispanics as marijuana users than their White counterparts.

The rather static variable of race as commonly used in analyses of criminal perceptions of both justice practitioners and the community at large is somewhat limiting. It may, therefore, be misleading to utilize race dichotomies exclusively when conducting inferential or predictive analyses. A comprehensive analysis of race would therefore incorporate both static and more dynamic race-related measurements. For example, this analysis has utilized perceived racial bias or stereotyping as a predictive variable, indicating that the negative perceptions of various racial categories impact overall attitudes. Although the dichotomous race variable was used in this analysis, it would appear that one's legal or more obvious racial categorization may not be the one of self-identification. Comparing racial categorization, racial identity, and perceived racial bias in analyses of criminal justice viewpoints may shed further light on this complex area. It would appear that given the characteristics of the study population as a "college subculture," the extent to which students identify with other subcultures (especially racial or ethnic ones) becomes a potentially important control variable. This research did not include a variable that validly measured aspects of racial identity.

Furthermore, the perception that majority perceived racial bias is the key to understanding general policy perceptions is rejected by this research.

Research that examines criminal justice disparity from a systems perspective would naturally be more concerned about majority bias, because most of these practitioners are of majority status. However, general perceived racial bias and attitudes toward drug policy must recognize that various racial groups stereotype in similar ways, as evidenced by minority stereotyping found in this research. Even so, the nature of majority and minority relations in society must be cognizant of the larger social structure and its negative impact on minority groups.

Perceived racial bias will continue to have a disproportionate impact on minority groups. This research finds evidence of this in that Hispanic disparity rates are approaching those of Blacks. Negative attitudes that impact various groups in society affect Blacks and Hispanics more because of these individuals' lower overall representation in the population. Two other critical race theories that seek to shed light on racial stereotyping may also be worth mentioning.

Although critical race theories have most often been applied within a structural dimension, it may be helpful to apply these theories to individual attitudes to better understand racial stereotyping. Within the criminological research, Blalock (1967) suggested that as the size and visibility of a minority population increase, society may become more punitive toward that group. In this sense, both real and perceived information concerning various ethnicities impact overall attitudes toward crime control. Research has found support for this proposition in various analyses of institutional discrimination (see King & Wheelock, 2007; Ruddell & Thomas, 2010; Wang & Mears, 2010). These analyses have been both cross-sectional and historical. Another relevant social science perspective has been posited by Carter (1988). In coining the phrase *bilateral individualism*, he suggested that the social construction of likely victims and offenders has been a product of racial perceptions where minorities are viewed as typical offenders and Whites as typical victims. This negative stereotyping may indeed impact both justice system and community attitudes.

This research has attempted to disentangle the relationship between race, perceived racial bias, and attitudes toward drug policy within a university subculture. Racial stereotyping or perceived bias, regardless of race categorization, appears to have the most explanatory power in understanding these attitudes. Although perceived racial bias among the majority creates a more substantial structural dilemma, the research suggests that all groups may hold negative stereotypes that impact overall perceptions of the other. The negative impact of racial stereotyping on minority groups has been found at all stages of the criminal justice process (Beckett et al., 2005; Petersilia, 1985; Tonry, 1995; Walker, Spohn, & DeLone, 1996), and it appears that this impact is also present among the views of the individuals observed in this research. Future research should examine the influence of race in a more comprehensive manner by constructing valid measurements of race

categorization, self-identification, and bias as they impact crime control ideology and practice.

NOTES

1. Although 294 surveys were collected, we chose to dichotomize the race variable as White and Black rather than White and non-White. Only 3 participants reported their race as Hispanic, whereas 13 participants reported their race as other.

2. As noted in Table 3, race was correlated with attitudes toward minority involvement in drug use and sales (-.124) and minority policies (-.550). Whites were more likely than Blacks to hold perceived racial bias.

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