

Carceral Justification: Scale Development and Initial Validation

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ABSTRACT Black-led social movements have demanded sweeping changes to the criminal legal system by advancing abolitionist goals. Public attitudes about the criminal legal system influence what policy agendas are developed, legitimated, and implemented. In order to assess influences on such attitudes, there is a need for research that examines the underlying carceral logics people use to inform their opinions toward anti-carceral policy proposals. Applying System Justification Theory and a framework of carceral logics, we developed the Carceral Justification Scale (CJS) using data collected from 1,394 Alameda County, California registered voters. Items were developed via literature review, qualitative analysis of canvasser conversations, and expert review. Exploratory ($N = 461$) and confirmatory ($N = 463$) factor analyses suggested an oblique 2-factor structure and produced 6 items with the following factors: (a) System Works, and (b) System Necessary. Internal consistency estimates were .71 and above and the scales accounted for 28% and 27% of variance, respectively. Initial construct validity was established as CJS scores were associated with racial resentment, system justification, political ideology, and anti-Black bias awareness in ways consistent with theory. This measure is useful for the evaluation of community practice political interventions that aim to increase support for abolitionist policies.

KEYWORDS carceral attitudes, public opinion, system justification, carceral logics, measure

THE CARCERAL STATE—which can be defined as institutions, technologies, infrastructure, and services that function to extend surveillance, coercion, control, repression, financial predation, work extraction, punishment, confinement, and violence—is a core driver of structural racism in the United States (Hernandez et al., 2015; Soss & Weaver, 2017). Most commonly thought of as legal punishment institutions such as state and federal prisons, jails, police, sheriffs, probation, parole, and courts, a variety of institutions can also be understood as extending the logics of the carceral state—including Homeland Security, the military, housing authorities, child welfare departments, schools and universities, mental health agencies, hospitals, and public benefits offices.

The practice of human caging is at the center of the carceral state's vast power. Every day in the United States more than 2 million people are incarcerated and another 7 million people are under state control via orders of probation, parole, or deportation (Hernandez et al., 2015; The Sentencing Project, 2018). The carceral state targets Black, Indigenous, or Brown and poor communities in particular and is responsible for the destabilization of communities, seizure of wealth, shortening of Black life expectancy, and weakening of civic engagement (Clear, 2008; Weaver & Lerman, 2010; Wildeman & Wang, 2017; Zaw et al., 2016). For example, incarceration has been linked to elevated infant mortality and potential increases in violence (Clear, 2008; Wildeman, 2014). Carceral

institutions further extract enormous sums of money from poor communities through predatory ticket-debt-warrant traps, bail costs, asset forfeiture, exorbitant inmate phone and supply costs, court and legal fees, and misdemeanor fines (Alexander, 2012; Harris, 2016). In 2017, for example, the Los Angeles Police Department levied more than \$40 million of non-refundable bail money, of which 75% was charged to Black or Latinx people (Bryan et al., 2018). By creating barriers to employment and extracting resources through a web of fines and fees, the entrenchment of the carceral state prevents the building of wealth in families and communities across generations (Zaw et al., 2016).

Black-led social movements have called for a simultaneous divestment from incarceration and policing and investment in community resources and alternative methods to prevent and address harm, including what is legally deemed criminal. Historically unprecedented, the uprisings of 2020 brought these abolitionist political agendas to public consciousness (Davis et al., 2022). Anti-carceral policy proposals have been seriously considered at city, county, state, and federal levels. For example, the Minneapolis City Council voted to disband their police department and Los Angeles County voters approved a policy that would divert 10% of unrestricted funds away from law enforcement and into community programs (Cosgrove, 2020; The Associated Press, 2020). The potential for such sweeping policy shifts to advance abolitionist goals is profound, yet resistance is widespread—with Democratic political figures from the Mayor of New York to the President of the United States calling for an expansion of law enforcement funding focused on community policing (Impelli, 2022).

In relationship to these public conversations about policy shifts to advance abolition, there is a need for continued political interventions that can build support for anti-carceral policies. Community practice social work can play a role in community organizing efforts to create lasting changes in dominant attitudes and policy opinions—both by supporting efforts already underway and by helping to assess the impact of this work (Krings et al., 2019). In order to assess the extent to which political interventions are effective in building support for abolition, there is a need for a measure that is practically useful to community organizers (both within and beyond the bounds of the social work profession) in building knowledge about ways to influence public opinion and voting behavior towards anti-carceral policy proposals. With an understanding of cultural hegemony or dominant ideology as a site of contested power (Gramsci, 1971), this measure should describe carceral logics—the ideological schema people use to bolster support for the status quo of carceral institutions, typically through a punishment mindset (Kaba & Meiners, 2014). Such a measure would represent a unique psychological construct, distinct from other known predictors of carceral policy opinions such as political ideology and racial resentment. Given that the practice of human caging is at the center of the carceral state’s vast power and most commonly thought of as the legal punishment system, this measure focuses on logics related to jail and prison incarceration.

PREDICTORS OF CARCERAL POLICY OPTIONS

Patterns and changes in carceral policy opinion have been well-documented over time, focusing mostly on punitive attitudes towards policing and incarceration such as the death penalty, “three strikes and you’re out” laws, and mandatory minimums for drug offenses (Bobo & Thompson, 2010). More recent survey data demonstrate public opinion towards anti-carceral policy proposals specifically in the context of jails, prisons, and policing. For example, polling data from summer

2020 show that there was widespread recognition that incarceration has exacerbated racial inequalities and that changes are necessary to address the problem (Long & Fingerhut, 2020). Both historically and more recently, there are clear racial gaps in carceral policy opinion—with white people being the most supportive of punitive carceral policies and Black people being the least supportive of punitive carceral policies (Bobo & Thompson, 2010; Rakich, 2020). For example, two 2020 nationally representative polls found that Black people were twice as likely as white people to support calls to defund the police (Economist/YouGov, 2020; Yokley, 2020).

Past literature has included an extensive examination of predictors of support for punitive sentencing and incarceration policies. Whether measured as anti-Black stereotypes, intergroup affect, or racial resentment, anti-Black racial attitudes are the strongest predictors of support for the death penalty, “three strikes and you’re out” provisions, and trying juveniles as adults (Bobo & Thompson, 2010). The predictive strength of anti-Black attitudes on carceral policy opinions holds even when compared to alternative explanations such as conservative social values, social dominance, system justification, and beliefs about the fundamental causes of criminal behavior. Perhaps most strikingly, this correlation persists even after accounting for individuals’ personal fear of crime, actual crime victimization in the past, and the rate of homicide in respondents’ communities (Bobo & Thompson, 2010, pp. 336–341). Receiving images or information describing incarcerated people as disproportionately Black has also been shown to decrease people’s willingness to take action to end punitive carceral policies—such as repealing California’s “three strikes and you’re out” law or New York’s stop-and-frisk policy (Hetey & Eberhardt, 2014). Higher racial resentment predicts increased support for policies to deny formerly incarcerated people access to job training programs, food stamps, and public housing (Johnston & Wozniak, 2021). In contrast, explicitly conceptualizing racism as structural, rather than interpersonal, increases support for policies designed to reduce or redress racial disparities (Adams et al., 2008). Anti-Black racial attitudes clearly influence carceral policy opinions.

Political ideology also plays a role in predicting carceral policy preferences, given that it provides a generally coherent schema through which individuals can make sense of policy proposals (Feldman & Zaller, 1992). Conservatives tend to be more punitive than liberals; for example, they are more likely to be supportive of the death penalty and harsh sentencing practices (Jost et al., 2003). Liberals, in contrast, tend to see more potential for rehabilitation or non-punitive responses to crime, such as treatment, education, or job training (Falco & Turner, 2014). This difference may be explained by the ways that political ideology influences perceptions of crime. Conservatives tend to attribute crime to “criminals being bad people” whereas liberals are more likely to blame systemic issues such as poverty or lack of education (Lakoff & Wehling, 2012). Even while liberals are more likely to blame systemic issues and express a desire for rehabilitation, their sentiments often uphold carceral logics; the form of their attitudes is simply distinct from that of conservatives (Brock-Petrossius, 2023).

While racial resentment and political ideology clearly influence carceral policy opinions, there is a need for a measure of the underlying carceral logics people use to justify the status quo of carceral institutions. As we use the term in this paper, carceral logics are the beliefs people hold about the purpose and effects of carceral institutions—which shape the attitude formation process (Brock-Petrossius, 2023). Such a measure would be useful in developing and evaluating interventions to influence attitudes toward abolitionist policy proposals.

CARCERAL LOGICS

Far from an aberration, carceral institutions function as they were intended—to surveil and control Black, Indigenous, or Brown and poor communities and contain surplus labor to fuel the continuous expansion of racial capitalism (Gilmore, 2007; Hernández et al., 2015). Despite the oppressive, harmful reality of carceral institutions in the domains of community and family cohesion, health outcomes, economic capacity, and political power, dominant ideologies engender a different “common sense” for their existence as a way to maintain public support for such a violent, oppressive apparatus. Carceral institutions purport to deter crime through the threat of punishment, rehabilitate those who have done wrong, remove violent people so they can no longer hurt others, and inflict retribution on those who have done wrong (Sered, 2019). These carceral logics are strong and prevalent in the public, everyday sense-making about the existence of policing, jails, and prisons.

The reality of carceral institutions paints a different picture. Incarceration does not prevent crime; instead, the vast amount of resources used by policing, jails, and prisons (\$295 billion annually) alongside the related under-investment in social services and safety nets may actually increase crime, including violence (Clear, 2008; Kaba, 2021; Vera Institute of Justice, 2020; Vitale, 2017). Incarceration, the practice of human caging, is an inherently violent experience and the evidence is clear that the practice rarely changes people’s behavior; instead, the trauma of incarceration often makes people more violent (Sered, 2019). In addition to such horrible outcomes despite such massive amounts of public funding, carceral institutions are racist, classist, violent, and anti-democratic (Cohen & Luttig, 2020). How is it that there is such widespread public support for the continued maintenance and expansion of such an oppressive set of institutions?

SYSTEM JUSTIFICATION

There is a tendency in society to maintain existing social structures, rather than rebel or seek to create change (Zinn, 1968). Gramsci described this tendency in part as people only being able to imagine existing social structures being torn down, but failing to imagine the new social orders that are possible (Gramsci, 1917, quoted in Fiori, 1970). System justification theory describes this inclination of people to submit to the social environment, even when it is oppressive (Jost, 2020).

People have a psychological need to give the status quo legitimacy, most often by seeing existing social systems as good, fair, neutral, desirable, or inevitable (Jost, 2020). Many of the system justifying ideas we hold are not good for us in that they do not serve our objective interests. Instead, system justifying beliefs meet people’s underlying psychological needs for certainty and security, needs that become particularly salient when considering issues of violence, crime, and harm. People are much more likely to legitimize system inequities—even accepting restrictions on freedom and equality—when restrictions are seen as inevitable or inescapable, when the social system is seen as stable and permanent, or when people feel especially powerless or dependent on those systems (Jost, 2020). In the context of the U.S. carceral state, system justification theory provides useful insights into the ways legitimization of the status quo may manifest around issues of crime, violence, and harm. As the theory asserts, people have a psychological need to feel safe and are more likely to accept restrictions on freedom and equality when they feel dependent on the system to maintain safety—when they cannot conceive of alternatives. This more specific manifestation of system justification theory may be particularly salient in the United States given

the nation's status as a global outlier in incarceration rates and how anti-Blackness allows the public to dehumanize incarcerated people.

In the context of justifying carceral institutions, system justification can be thought of as the (often false, distorted) beliefs people use to explain their support for the carceral status quo. These justifications stand in contrast to the objective function of the current system—enacting punishment as a form of “just desserts” retribution, oppressing Black, Indigenous, or Brown and poor communities, and bolstering racial capitalism (Gilmore, 2007; Hernández et al., 2015; Jost, 2020; Sered, 2019). Understood in this way, anti-Black racial attitudes are another distorted belief that bolsters justification of existing systems. Anti-Blackness makes carceral justification easier by decreasing empathy for Black, Indigenous, or Brown and poor communities and normalizing the violence of carceral institutions (Sered, 2019).

MEASUREMENT OF CARCERAL JUSTIFICATION

As a specific application of system justification theory to bolster support for the carceral state, we created the carceral justification scale. We conceptualize carceral justification as the expression of dominant logics to support the status quo maintenance of two institutions directly responsible for human caging—prisons and jails. We hypothesize that this construct consists of two factors: 1) a general belief that the criminal legal system works, and 2) recognition that the criminal legal system may be flawed but is necessary due to a lack of better alternatives. We also hypothesize that carceral justification will predict carceral policy opinion above and beyond what is accounted for by racial resentment and political ideology.

No existing measures capture carceral justification in this way. Prior measures focus on attitudes about procedural justice, the perceived legitimacy of carceral institutions, or specific attitudes towards policing. For instance, procedural justice assesses the perception of fairness of procedures and social processes used to determine outcomes of the criminal legal system—but does not probe broader attitudes about the purpose or efficacy of carceral institutions (Gau, 2011; Lind & Tyler, 2013; Reisig et al., 2007). A sample item is “Police in my community treat people with dignity and respect.” Police legitimacy measures trust in law enforcement and perceived obligation to comply with police (Gau, 2011; Reisig et al., 2007; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). A sample item is “The police can be trusted to make decisions that are right for my community.” While this measure does tap into broader perceptions of police, it does not measure attitudes towards the criminal legal system more broadly or beliefs about their purpose or efficacy. Specific attitudes towards policing are typically assessed by single-item questions, such as a 0-100 thermometer used to rate confidence in the police alongside other U.S. institutions (Gallup Inc., 2020). To build a comprehensive theory and body of literature on carceral justification, it is necessary to develop a measure that taps the two hypothesized components.

Criminal Legal System Works

The first hypothesized factor of carceral justification is a general set of beliefs that the criminal legal system works. More specifically, this can be understood as a belief that the false promises of carceral logics are true: the criminal legal system does prevent crime, rehabilitate those who have done harm, and increase public safety. In examining the empirical evidence about the criminal legal system, such beliefs can be understood as a lack of accurate political knowledge (Cohen & Luttig, 2020).

These distorted beliefs are often rooted in racial group positions, through a specific form of “not knowing” or racial ignorance constructed through the absence of being targeted by carceral apparatuses (Mills, 2007). Alongside the absence of direct experience with carceral realities, the mass public has been fed anti-Black racialized stories about crime and the legitimacy of policing and incarceration (Muhammad, 2019). Together these socio-historic processes have created the dominant psychological construct of carceral justification, exemplified through distorted beliefs that the criminal legal system works to improve community safety.

Criminal Legal System Flawed, But Necessary

The second hypothesized factor of carceral justification is the recognition that the criminal legal system may be flawed but is necessary. This construct taps into Gramsci’s concept that people often only grasp the destruction of existing social institutions, but have a hard time imagining alternatives to current systems (Gramsci, 1917, quoted in Fiori, 1970). This belief is also likely influenced by race and class-based group positions. People and communities who are not Black, Indigenous, or Brown and poor often lack experiences of acute harm caused by carceral institutions. In this context, people may recognize flaws in the criminal legal system but not to such a magnitude to believe that the system itself needs to change. These elements combine to create the second factor of carceral justification, a “settling” for the flawed criminal legal system derived from perceiving it as necessary for broader community safety.

THE CURRENT STUDY

The goals of the current study were to develop a comprehensive measure of carceral justification, the Carceral Justification Scale (CJS), and validate it with a sample of registered voters. We chose this sample because of the influence registered voters have on carceral agenda-setting at the levels of city and county government. We developed the items for the CJS and conducted factor analyses to identify and validate the most appropriate structure for the scale. We hypothesized a multidimensional structure for the CJS, that carceral justification will be operationalized by multiple belief domains (i.e., system flawed but necessary, system works). We also examined the construct validity of Carceral Justification by examining theory-based relationships with other racial, social, and political attitude constructs. For convergent validity evidence, we hypothesized that CJS scores would be positively and significantly correlated with scores of Racial Resentment, Political Ideology, and System Justification. For discriminant validity evidence, we hypothesized that CJS scores would be negatively and significantly correlated with Anti-Black Bias Awareness. For predictive and incremental validity evidence, we hypothesized that each factor would significantly predict additional unique variance towards each carceral reform policy above and beyond racial resentment and political ideology, given that carceral justification represents distinct, specific logics supporting the status quo functioning of the criminal legal system.

METHODS

Scale Construction

To generate the initial pool of items for the Carceral Justification Scale, we began with an inductive, qualitative approach (Nassar-McMillan & Borders, 2002). From January-October 2019, 37

canvassing conversations were video-recorded among a random sample of registered voters in purposively chosen majority-white census tracts in Los Angeles County. This sample size allowed for adequate saturation of themes (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Each canvasser, a trained volunteer with a community organization, followed a structured canvassing conversation protocol and began the conversation by discussing a proposed ballot initiative that would decrease the number of people incarcerated by reinvesting funds from jail expansion into community resources. The canvasser then asked the voter their opinion of that policy on a 0-10 Likert-type scale and used follow-up probing questions (e.g., “Why is that the right number for you?”) to have them articulate the considerations they were weighing in forming their policy opinion. This portion of the canvass conversation, where voters articulated their reasons for supporting or opposing the jail decarceration policy, became the basis for our item generation. This approach was important in generating items to meet our intended goal—the creation of a scale that would measure the underlying logics people use to justify their carceral policy opinions. Given the limited literature about underlying factors that explain support for the types of anti-carceral policies that have been more recently proposed, this approach was essential to generating and refining initial items.

These 37 videos were directly transcribed by the primary author. Transcripts were coded using an interpretive, phenomenological approach to identify content from the ground-up that demonstrated people’s explanations of carceral logics. Further details of the analytic approach are detailed in Brock-Petrossius (2023). This process resulted in two themes: (a) *criminal legal system works fine* (e.g., “Prisons reform people”) and (b) *criminal legal system is necessary* (e.g., “Putting people in jail is necessary to keep us safe”). In addition to writing five items from inductive, qualitative data analysis, we also modified three items from the System Justification Scale that were fitting for the context of carceral logics and further demonstrated the themes. An example of such an item was adapting the system justification item “In general, the American political system operates as it should” to “In general, the criminal justice system operates as it should.” The following items were generated and added to the following two themes: (a) *criminal legal system works fine* (“The criminal justice system is set up so that people usually get what they deserve”), and (b) *criminal legal system is necessary* (“Putting people in jail serves the greater good”).

We solicited item feedback regarding content and face validity and item qualities (e.g., word choice, grammar) from four experts on civic engagement, political psychology, and the criminal legal system who had various perspectives around critical theory and abolition. Experts were given a survey and rated the items on a Likert-type scale and provide suggestions to improve the items in response to an open-ended question. We revised several items and removed none. Responses were asked by having participants rate the extent to which they disagreed or agreed with each item on the following scale: 1 (*Strongly Disagree*), 2 (*Disagree*), 3 (*Slightly Disagree*), 4 (*Neutral or Unsure*), 5 (*Slightly Agree*), 6 (*Agree*), 7 (*Strongly Agree*). Flesch-Kincaid Grade Reading Level test indicated an eighth-grade reading level for the items.

Procedure

This study’s sample was fielded as part of a cross-sectional survey of registered voters in Alameda County, California. Alameda County, which includes Berkeley and Oakland, was chosen as the study site because it is a racially diverse, predominantly liberal, urban area. Such a sample context is ideal for validating a carceral justification measure; given that liberals have lower levels of racial resentment (Abramowitz, 2018), we are more likely to find evidence of an additional construct that

explains variation in carceral policy opinions above and beyond what is accounted for by racial resentment and political ideology. A list of registered voters was provided by the Alameda County Registrar of Voters for the purpose of conducting this research. In July 2019, each of the 30.6% of registered voters who provided an email address received an invitation via email to complete a 2019 University of California, Los Angeles Public Opinion Survey. This survey was developed by the lead author for the purpose of several research studies. Two subsequent reminders were sent. The survey remained open for two weeks overall and was administered through an online Qualtrics platform. Each respondent took approximately 20-30 minutes to complete the survey, which was administered in English and consisted of 130 items¹—34 of which were for this study. Participation was completely voluntary, and the study was approved by the UCLA Institutional Review Board. No incentive was provided.

Participants

Of those who received an invitation ($n = 284,254$), 2,349 responded with a response rate of .8%. While such a response rate is typical for online survey invitations to registered voters (Wilcox-Archuleta, 2018), it is too low to generalize results to the broader population of Alameda County voters. Parts of the survey were optional, including the questions examined in this study. We thus limited our analysis to the 1,394 cases that completed the 8 carceral justification items. Of this sample, 1,390 provided some demographic information. A majority of those who named their ethnoracial identity were non-Latinx white (68.7%), while 11.0% were Asian or Asian American, 5.7% were Black, 5.2% were Latinx, 1.3% were Middle Eastern or North African, Pacific Islander, or Native American, and 8.1% were multiracial.² Most participants (86.0%) listed the United States as their country of origin. The sample skewed older and more educated than the general population, with a median age of 55 (range from 18-95) and 76.0% having a bachelor's degree or higher. In regard to political identification, 47.9% were Democrats, 10.9% were Republicans, 26.0% were Independent, and 15.2% identified as something else. The average political ideology score (1=Extremely Liberal, 7=Extremely Conservative) was 3.07 ($SD = 1.65$).

Measures

Racial resentment. The Racial Resentment Scale is a common racial attitude measure related to politics (Kinder & Sanders, 1996). In this study we use racial resentment to assess convergent validity (i.e., similar constructs should be related to one another), given that it has been a strong, consistent predictor of carceral policy preferences (Bobo & Thompson, 2010). The scale consists of four items measuring a more subtle form of racism, described as a mix of anti-Black affect and support for the Protestant ethic—core values of individualism and hard work or personal responsibility. The measure has been asked in nearly every American National Election Survey (ANES) since 1986 and has become commonly used by academics and journalists (American National Election Survey, 2020). An example item is “Irish, Italian, Jewish, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any

¹ The survey included the following constructs not included in the present analysis: feeling thermometers towards a variety of groups, policy opinions related to immigration, welfare, economic redistribution, and climate change, proximal contact with people who have experienced targeting by the carceral state or who have been victimized by crime, attitudes towards criminalized people, subtle prejudice towards people in race-class subjugated communities, ethno-racial identity salience, and empathic predisposition.

² Specifically, the sample included 1 Native American, 5 Middle Eastern or North African, and 10 Pacific Islander registered voters; each of these ethnoracial group thus represented <1% of the sample.

special favors.” Items are scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Items recognizing systemic anti-Black racism or sympathizing with the struggle of Black people were reverse scored. Racial resentment explains variation in opinion on a range of policies, including affirmative action, welfare, and the death penalty (Sears & Henry, 2005). Racial resentment is generally lower among Democrats than Republicans and lower among younger U.S. Americans (Abramowitz, 2018; Cramer, 2020). Possible scores for the racial resentment measure ranged from 4 to 20; the actual range in this study was from 4 to 20, with higher scores representing more racial resentment. Kinder and Sanders (1996), Sears and Henry (2002), and countless others have provided evidence of scale reliability and validity with Cronbach’s alpha ranging from .59-.79. Internal consistency for the current study was $\alpha = .90$.

Political ideology. Political ideology is measured by one item, as is standard in a variety of public opinion and political psychology research (American National Election Survey, 2020). This item measures a person’s self-identification on the dominant construction of U.S. political ideology, ranging from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Because political ideology predicts a variety of policy preferences, including those in the domain of carceral politics, we use it in this study to assess convergent validity. After opting in to continue the survey to help research on social and political attitudes, the item reads “Where would you place yourself on this scale?” Scale response options are (1 = *extremely liberal*, 2 = *liberal*, 3 = *slightly liberal*, 4 = *moderate / middle of the road*, 5 = *slightly conservative*, 6 = *conservative*, 7 = *extremely conservative*). The range of scores in this study was 1-7, with higher scores representing more conservative ideology.

System justification. The System Justification Scale (Kay & Jost, 2003) consists of eight items measuring a general inclination to preserve the existing social order on a 9-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree to 9 = strongly disagree). Two items expressing need for societal change were reverse-coded. All items were then recoded so that higher values indicate stronger system justification. An example item is “Most policies serve the greater good.” Possible scores for the system justification scale ranged from 8-56; the actual range in this study was from 8 to 52. Kay and Jost (2003) report good internal consistency with Cronbach’s alpha of .87. System justification has been positively associated with resistance to change towards a variety of policies, including policies to redress racial injustices (Yogeeswaran et al., 2018), and was thus used to assess convergent validity. The internal consistency estimate for the current study was $\alpha = .84$.

Carceral policy options. Opinions on carceral policies were assessed through four single-item questions, used to assess predictive validity. Each item measured the degree of opposition or favor on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *oppose a great deal*, 4 = *neither favor nor oppose*, 7 = *favor a great deal*). The policies examined the following issues: 1) decreasing the jail population by reinvesting funds from jail expansion into providing services and alternatives to incarceration, 2) giving subpoena power of an oversight commission to investigate allegations of Sheriff’s deputy misconduct, 3) reinstating voting rights for people on parole, and 4) permitting use of the death penalty for people convicted of murder (reverse-coded). High scores indicate support for changes to the status quo practices of carceral institutions.

Anti-Black bias awareness. The Bias Awareness Scale (Perry et al., 2015) consists of four items measuring personal awareness of anti-Black prejudice in one's self and others on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). We used this measure to assess divergent validity in this study because it is a distinct type of psychological construct that explains an ability to detect bias in others, which could be relevant to the highly racialized issue of support for status quo carceral responses. One item expressing lack of concern about one's own anti-Black prejudice was reverse-coded. An example item is "Even though I like Black people, I still worry that I have unconscious biases toward Blacks." Scores were calculated by taking the mean of the four items and ranged from 1-7. Perry et al. (2015) report good internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha of .81. Bias awareness has been associated with greater likelihood of accepting feedback about one's prejudice and the ability to detect bias in others (Perry et al., 2015). The internal consistency estimate for the current study was $\alpha = .84$. Black participants were not offered the bias self-awareness items, given that the measure was developed for non-Black people; assessment of the validation sample and this measure will thus consist of non-Black participants.

Data Screening and Preparation

A total of 2,968 participants accessed the survey overall, of which 1,435 opted to begin the second half where our core items were listed. Of these, we removed 41 cases for not meeting the inclusion criteria (not completing all 8 of the focal measurement items). No cases failed to meet the attention check (choosing the same response option for all 8 focal measurement items) or missed more than 5% of the data. The final sample size was 1,394, of which 83 cases had 0% to 5% missing data. We handled missing data during the construct validation step by dropping missing observations. This approach is justified given that missingness was rare (<1% overall), the range of missingness for each variable was generally from 0 – 0.7%, and data were missing completely at random (MCAR) ($X^2 = 48.62$, $df = 37$, $p = .096$) (Kang, 2013). We randomly assigned participants to one of three samples using the `sample.split()` command in R Studio (RStudio Team, 2020). This provided the minimum sample size of 300 that is required for exploratory or confirmatory factor analysis and followed standard procedure for splitting a large sample into multiple samples for the purpose of the multi-step process of scale development (Worthington & Whittaker, 2006). The first sample ($n = 461$) was used for exploratory factor analysis (EFA). The second sample ($n = 463$) was used for confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The third sample was used for validation ($n = 470$). Representation of ethnoracial identity, age, gender, U.S. national origin, college education, political party, and political ideology in each sample were similar to the total sample descriptors.

RESULTS

Step 1: Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

EFA identifies an initial factor structure driven by the data and based on best practices (DeVellis, 2017). We conducted EFA in R Studio Version 1.3.959 using maximum likelihood estimation that are robust to non-normality. We took this approach because our tests of multivariate skewness and kurtosis (Mardia, 1970) suggested that the EFA sample data were not normal (skew = 660.84, $p < .001$; kurtosis = 11.8, $p < .001$). We expected the factors to correlate with each other and thus used an oblimin rotation with the minimum residual extraction method. We conducted parallel analysis (1000 simulations) to determine the appropriate initial number of factors to be retained and

interpreted (Crawford et al., 2010). The data were sufficiently factorable, as evidenced by Bartlett's test of sphericity ($\chi^2(28) = 1,615.89$, $p < .001$) and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy (.87).

Factor structure. Eigen values pointed to a single factor, while the scree plot suggested a two-factor solution. Parallel analysis suggested a two-factor structure, determined by the observed eigen values being greater than the random 95th percentile (Crawford et al., 2010). The first two factors had raw data eigenvalues (3.70, .35) that were greater than the simulated (1,000 simulations) random eigen values (.62, .14). We extracted and examined one and two factor solutions. We did not pursue the one-factor model as it had poor fit to the data (standardized root mean square residual [SRMR] = .11, Tucker Lewis Index [TLI] = .40, root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = .44). The fit was good for the two-factor model (RMSEA = .049 [.022, .074]; SRMR = .02) and the factor determinacy was acceptable (values > .90 as acceptable; Tabachnick et al., 2007).

Table 1
Pattern Matrix Coefficients from Exploratory Factor Analysis for Carceral Justification Scale

Items	1	2	h^2
Factor 1: System Works			
1: In general, the criminal justice system operates as it should. (1)	.87	-.05	.71
2: The criminal justice system is set up so that people usually get what they deserve. (3)	.83	.06	.76
3: Prisons reform people. (5)	.31	.21	.23
Factor 2: System Necessary			
4: Putting people in jail serves the greater good. (2)	.07	.85	.80
5: Putting people in jail is necessary to keep us safe. (4)	-.06	.84	.65
6: Some people are bad. (8)	.03	.33	.12

We proceeded to assess the pattern coefficients from the initial extraction and remove items that were psychometrically inadequate. We deleted items sequentially after each factoring, based on the following criteria (Worthington & Whittaker, 2006): (a) have high cross-loadings, (b) have low factor loadings, and (c) have low conceptual consistency with other items on the factor. After each refactoring, we only retained items with cross-loadings equal to or less than .25 (Tabachnick et al., 2007). Given the limited number of items from which the measure was developed (rather than an expansive pool), the primary factor loading cutoff was set on the lower side at .30. In such cases, Worthington & Whittaker (2006) suggests using a large sample size (i.e., greater than 200-300) for factor loading stability, which was the case in our study. Primary loadings were greater than 0.30; this cutoff level was set on the lower side to help with stabilization of the factor loadings given a limited number of items but large sample size (Worthington & Whittaker, 2006). We reexamined fit statistics and loadings after each round of item removal on a case-by-case basis (DeVellis, 2017). We removed two items with high cross-loadings across both factors, resulting in a 6-item scale (see Table 1). The two dropped items ("The criminal justice system unfairly targets Black people" and "Jails do more harm than good") were reverse-coded and represent reasons for *not* justifying the status quo of carceral institutions. The removal of these two items did not affect the conceptual

clarity of the carceral justification construct. The model fit improved (RMSEA = 0.019 [0, 0.075]; SRMR = .01). Communality values were 0.49 and 0.51, suggesting adequate variances accounted by common factors (Child, 2006). The total variances accounted for by the final scales were 28.0% and 27.0% for factor one and factor two, respectively.

Factor labeling. The two-factor model provided a simple, theoretically meaningful structure. We named the first factor System Works (three items), which accounted for 28.0% of the variance in carceral justification. This factor represented beliefs that the criminal legal system works well, implying that it treats people appropriately and/or reforms incarcerated people (Sered, 2019). We named the second factor System Necessary (three items), which accounted for 27.0% of the variance of carceral justification. This factor represented beliefs that the criminal legal system is necessary because some people are bad, implying that the alternative must be increased crime or violence. The two factors were correlated moderately high (0.66) with each other (Cohen, 2016).

Step 2: Cross-Validation

We conducted CFA to cross-validate the two-factor model of Carceral Justification with the validation sample using R Studio Version 1.3.959. We used the following indices to evaluate model fit (Fabrigar et al., 1999; Hu & Bentler, 1999): (a) comparative fit index (CFI; > .05 for good fit; .92 to .94 for adequate fit), (b) SRMR (close to < .08 for acceptable fit), (c) and RMSEA (close to < .08 for acceptable fit). We also used these fit indices to assess several a priori competing models to rule out rival hypotheses regarding the Carceral Justification factor structure. We used the following to compare competing models: (a) Satorra-Bentler (S-B) scaled chi-square difference test, (b) Bayesian information criterion (BIC) values, and (c) Akaike information criterion values. Smaller BIC and Akaike information criterion values suggest better fit, with higher values of greater than 10 units suggesting lack of empirical support for goodness of fit (Burnham & Anderson, 2004).

Table 2
Goodness-of-Fit Indicators for Confirmatory Factor Analyses

Models/Samples	<i>df</i>	χ^2	RMSEA	90% CI	TLI	CFI	SRMR	BIC	AIC
One-factor	9	158.574**	.189	[.164, .216]	.749	.850	.062	9765.888	9716.235
Orthogonal two-factor	9	221.599**	.226	[.201, .252]	.644	.786	.250	9828.913	9779.260
Oblique two-factor	8	19.347*	.055	[.024, .087]	.979	.989	.024	9591.540	9579.009
Bifactor	3	6.652	.051	[.000, .105]	.982	.996	.014	9650.792	9576.313

Note. RMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation; CI = confidence interval for RMSEA; TLI = Tucker-Lewis index; CFI = comparative fit index; SRMR = standardized root-mean-square residual; BIC = Bayesian information criterion; AIC = Akaike information criterion; MI = measurement invariance * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

CFA. Our tests of multivariate skewness and kurtosis (Mardia, 1970) suggested that the CFA sample data were not normal (skew = 399.64, $p < .001$; kurtosis = 7.83, $p < .001$). We thus used the maximum likelihood estimation method with standard errors and chi-square statistic that are robust to non-normality. The CFA suggested that the two-factor oblique model had adequate/good fit (see Table 2). All items loaded significantly ($p < .01$) on the hypothesized latent factors and ranged from 0.38 to 0.88 (see Table 3).

Table 3
Pattern Matrix Coefficients from Confirmatory Factor Analysis for Carceral Justification Scale

Items	Two-factor Oblique			Bifactor	
	1	2	General	1	2
F1: System Works					
1	.81		.72	.26	
2	.88		.78	.57	
3	.42		.42	.07	
F2: System Necessary					
4		.87	.71		.29
5		.81	.62		.93
6		.38	.35		.16

Test of competing models. We compared the two-factor oblique model to several a priori alternative models. Specifically, we examined the model fit of one-factor, two-factor orthogonal, second-order (single higher order factor representing the two first-order factors), and bifactor (one general and two group factors) models (see Figure 1). While we hypothesized a multidimensional structure for the Carceral Justification Scale, a single factor could better represent the logics for supporting the status quo of the criminal legal system. In regard to multidimensionality, we also tested a second-order model since the two factors could work as subconstructs of a higher ordered carceral justification construct. We also tested a bifactor model as there could be a general factor representing a broad carceral justification construct alongside two distinct factors uniquely capturing domain-specific elements of carceral justification. Model fit indices are listed in Table 2. The one-factor, two factor orthogonal, and two factor second-order models had poor fit to the data and were not considered. The second-order model did not converge. The two-factor oblique model had BIC values of 59 units less than the bifactor model. The two-factor oblique model had the best fit to the data, followed by the bifactor model.

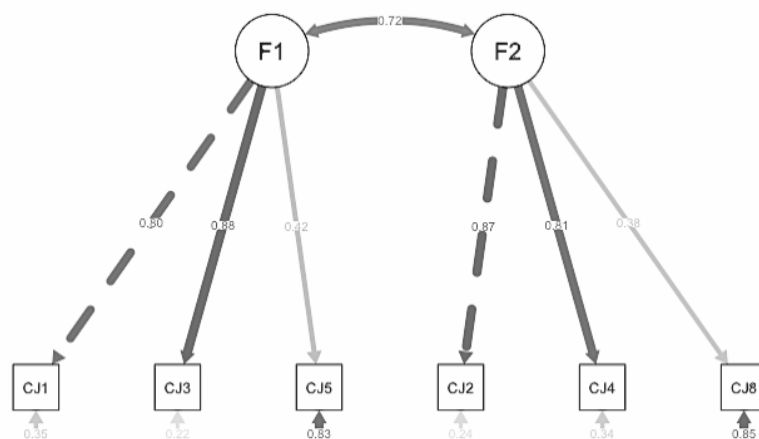


Figure 1. Two-factor oblique model of the Carceral Justification Scale. Factor 1 represents beliefs that the criminal legal system works. Factor 2 represents justification of the criminal legal system as necessary because some people are bad, implying that the alternative must be increased crime or violence.

Step 3: Construct Validity

We conducted structural equation modeling (SEM) of the two-factor oblique model in Mplus Version 7.11 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998). This modeling establishes initial validity evidence for the Carceral Justification Scale by examining its relationship with relevant constructs. We employed a maximum likelihood estimation with standard errors and chi-square test statistic that are robust for non-normality. A third validation sample was used for validity testing. We established convergent and discriminant evidence by examining latent variable correlations. We established predictive and incremental evidence by testing latent regressive paths. Effect sizes were guided by the approach of Cohen et al. (2013). Latent correlations, observed score descriptives, and Cronbach's alphas are listed in Table 4.

Table 4

Latent Variable Correlations, Observed Score Descriptive Statistics, and Cronbach's Alphas for Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. F1: System Works						
2. F2: System Necessary	.72**					
3. Racial Resentment	.73**	.62**				
4. System Justification	.87**	.62**	.77**			
5. Political Ideology ^a	.59**	.52**	.72**	.69**		
6. Bias Awareness	-.34**	-.28**	-.53**	-.41**	-.46**	
α	.71	.76	.89	.83	NA	.84
<i>M</i>	9.60	14.15	9.27	25.14	3.07	3.94
<i>SD</i>	4.32	4.18	4.79	9.57	1.64	1.56
<i>Range</i>	3-20	3-21	4-20	8-51	1-7	1-7

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

^aCorrelations for Political Ideology are based on observed scores.

Convergent evidence. We hypothesized that higher Carceral Justification scores would be positively and significantly correlated with higher scores of racial resentment and system justification and more conservative political ideology. We anticipated moderate correlations, given that we framed carceral justification to be distinct from racial resentment, political ideology, and system justification.

Latent correlations are listed in Table 4. Racial resentment, political ideology, and system justification were significantly and positively correlated with the first factor, System Works ($r = 0.72, p < .01$; $r = 0.59, p < .01$; $r = 0.73, p < .01$). They were also significantly and positively correlated with the second factor, System Necessary ($r = 0.62, p < .01$; $r = 0.52, p < .01$; $r = 0.62, p < .01$). Both factors were significantly and positively correlated with racial resentment, political ideology, and system justification scores with large effect sizes, confirming our validity predictions.

Discriminant evidence. We examined the latent correlations with Bias Awareness, a measure of awareness of one's own anti-Black bias, and anticipated small, significant, or negative correlations as people with stronger bias self-awareness are more likely to be critical of the status quo structural racism of the criminal legal system. As hypothesized, we found small, negative, and significant correlations between System Works and Bias Awareness ($\lambda = -0.34, p < .01$) and System Necessary and Bias Awareness ($\lambda = -0.28, p < .01$), confirming our predictions (see Table 4).

Predictive evidence. Each carceral justification factor, System Works and System Necessary, predicted opinion on at least some carceral policies. System Works, after accounting for the System Necessary factor, was a significant predictor of attitudes towards policies to reallocate funds to alternatives to incarceration ($B = -0.163, p < .001$), increase accountability of the Sheriff's Department ($B = -0.184, p < .001$), reinstate voting rights for people with felonies ($B = -0.207, p < .001$), and end the death penalty ($B = -0.256, p < .001$). System Necessary, in contrast, was a significant predictor of only some types of carceral policy opinions. The System Necessary factor, after accounting for the System Works factor, was a significant predictor of attitudes towards reinstating voting rights for people with felonies ($B = -0.094, p < .01$) and ending the death penalty ($B = -0.095, p < .01$). System Necessary was not a significant predictor of investing in alternatives to incarceration ($B = -0.027, p = .238$) or increasing Sheriff's Department accountability ($B = -0.003, p = .923$). The adjusted R-squared for these models ranged from .210 to .359.

Incremental evidence. Building on our predictive evidence, we assessed incremental evidence by testing if the Carceral Justification factor scores would account for unique variance in carceral policy opinion beyond racial resentment and political ideology given that these measures are strong, consistent predictors of carceral policy preferences. We hypothesized that each factor would significantly predict additional unique variance towards each carceral reform policy, given that carceral justification represents distinct, specific logics supporting the status quo functioning of the criminal legal system.

Regression results are displayed in Table 5. The System Works factor for Carceral Justification accounted for additional unique variance in opinions about investing in alternatives to incarceration ($B = -.043, p = .048$), increasing Sheriff's accountability ($B = -.078, p < .01$), and opposing the death penalty ($B = -.076, p = .014$)—but not reinstating voting rights for people with felonies ($B = -.034, p = .222$). System Necessary, in contrast, did account for additional unique variance in opinions about reinstating voting rights for people with felonies ($B = -.059, p = .022$) and opposing the death penalty ($B = -.067, p = .018$)—but not the first two reform proposals ($B = -.004, p = .849$ and $B = .021, p = .380$, respectively). These results demonstrate that each factor plays a unique role in explaining additional variance in some, but not all, types of carceral policy reforms.

Table 5
Change in Policy Opinion Regression Results

Outcome: Change in Policy Opinion	Invest in Alternatives		Increase Sheriff's Accountability		Reinstate Voting Rights		Oppose Death Penalty	
	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>B</i>	SE
F1: System Works	-.043*	.022	-.078**	.026	-.034	.028	-.076*	.031
F2: System Necessary	-.004	.020	.021	.024	-.059*	.026	-.067*	.028
Racial Resentment	-.113***	.017	-.070***	.021	-.153***	.022	-.172***	.013
Political Ideology	-.233***	.047	-.313***	.056	-.381***	.060	-.342***	.065
Constant	8.157***	.198	7.432***	.240	8.680***	.255	8.841***	.278
Observations	470		470		470		470	
R ²	.420		.326		.502		.517	
Adjusted R ²	.415		.320		.497		.513	

As the last step, we engaged in some further post-hoc theory-testing of our model. If System Justification is a global attitude, whereas Carceral Justification is a specific manifestation of system justification in the domain of carceral institutions, we would expect that adding System Justification to our regression model could reduce any policy opinion variance previously accounted for by Carceral Justification. In contrast, if Carceral Justification operates in a way that is similar but distinct from System Justification, then Carceral Justification could still be a significant predictor of carceral policy preferences, even after controlling for System Justification and other factors.

These additional regression results are displayed in Table 6. The System Works factor for Carceral Justification no longer accounted for additional unique variance in opinions about investing in alternatives to incarceration ($B = -.036, p > .05$) or increasing Sheriff's accountability ($B = -.051, p > .05$)—but continued to account for variance in opinions about opposing the death penalty ($B = -.083, p = .015$). In contrast, adding System Justification to this regression model did not change our inferences for System Necessary. System Necessary continued to account for additional unique variance in opinions about reinstating voting rights for people with felonies ($B = -.062, p = .017$) and opposing the death penalty ($B = -.065, p = .021$). It also stands out that System Justification only predicted opinions about increasing Sheriff's Accountability ($B = -.032, p = .011$), but was not a predictor of attitudes towards the other three policies. These results demonstrate that Carceral Justification is similar but distinct from System Justification and is a useful measure for predicting at least some types of carceral policy reforms.

Table 6

Change in Policy Opinion Regression Results Controlling for System Justification

Outcome: Change in Policy Opinion	Invest in		Increase		Reinstate		Oppose Death	
	Alternatives		Sheriff's		Voting Rights		Penalty	
	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>B</i>	SE
F1: System Works	-.036	.024	-.051	.029	-.018	.031	-.083*	.034
F2: System Necessary	-.003	.020	.019	.024	-.062*	.026	-.065*	.028
Racial Resentment	-.110***	.018	-.058**	.021	-.145***	.023	-.176***	.025
Political Ideology	-.215***	.049	-.269***	.059	-.357***	.063	-.349***	.069
System Justification	-.011	.011	-.032*	.012	-.017	.013	.007	.015
Constant	8.278***	.234	7.807***	.282	8.883***	.303	8.758***	.330
Observations	462		462		462		462	
R ²	.419		.336		.497		.514	
Adjusted R ²	.412		.328		.491		.509	

DISCUSSION

We developed the Carceral Justification Scale to assess the logics used as the underlying justification of carceral institutions. We used best practices in scale development, such as factor analytic tests to identify and validate the psychometric properties of the scale. In conceptualizing our measure, we identified two themes, from which two factors emerged: System Works (3 items) and System Necessary (3 items). Each of these domains represents related, yet distinct ideological constructs used to bolster support for the status quo of carceral systems. Factor determinacies and internal consistency estimates were adequate. The two factors strongly correlated with each other. Using the oblique two-factor model, the initial construct validity of the Carceral Justification Scale was supported by associations with racial resentment, political ideology, and system justification scores in the expected direction and magnitude.

Our validity examinations of the Carceral Justification Scale demonstrate the research and practical utility of using a measure to capture broader attitudes used to justify stasis to carceral systems. Prior measures focus on attitudes about procedural justice, the perceived legitimacy of carceral institutions, or specific attitudes towards policing. No existing measures capture a conceptualization of carceral justification—the expression of dominant logics to support the status quo maintenance of carceral institutions. Both the System Works and System Necessary factors were positively correlated with Racial Resentment, Political Ideology, and System Justification with large effect sizes, suggesting that the concepts are related. Both factors were negatively correlated with Anti-Black Bias Awareness with small to moderate effect sizes, suggesting that there is a relationship in the expected direction between these concepts. Theoretically, these results imply that racial attitudes, political ideology, generalized justification of the status quo, and awareness of racial bias are all related to the specific factors of carceral justification; while confirmatory factor analysis suggested the factors are distinct, the high correlation between the factors makes that conclusion tentative.

Incremental evidence does suggest the factors are distinct. Each factor of the Carceral Justification scale accounted for additional unique variance in preferences towards carceral policies

in the domain of incarceration. The Carceral Justification System Works factor predicted opposition to the following types of policies: diverting funding from jails to alternatives to incarceration, increasing law enforcement accountability, and ending the death penalty. The System Necessary factor predicted opposition to reinstating voting rights for people with felonies and ending the death penalty. The results demonstrate that each factor predicts unique variance in carceral policy preferences above and beyond the factors most frequently discussed in the literature: racial resentment and political ideology (Bobo & Johnson, 2004; Johnson, 2008). Interestingly, we found that each factor accounted for variance in opinion on some types of carceral policies but not others, demonstrating the utility of the oblique two-factor model in representing the construct of Carceral Justification. Theoretically, the logic is clear that believing the criminal legal system works fine leads to opposition to making changes at all. This factor did not predict opinion toward reinstating voting rights for people with felonies, which may reflect a broader belief that systems of punishment generally do not need to change but there is ambivalence or lack of a fully formed opinion about the common practice of disenfranchising people with felonies. In contrast, it stands out that the System Necessary factor does not predict opinion on changes to local jail and Sheriff's systems. This skepticism that alternatives could be viable may reflect a form of overall ambivalence or uncertainty about what should be done with our criminal legal system. In contrast, System Necessary scores predict opposition to reinstating voting rights or ending the death penalty—reflecting that the ambivalence or uncertainty towards newer types of anti-carceral policies may exist alongside longer-seeded justifications of current carceral practices of disenfranchising people with felonies and using the death penalty. Carceral Justification appears to represent a unique construct that influences said policy opinions, above and beyond what is accounted for by political ideology, racial resentment, and in some cases, system justification.

Regarding applied measurement utility, we tentatively conclude that each factor should be measured as a unique aspect of the Carceral Justification construct. Given that each factor predicts opinion towards some types of carceral reform policies while having insignificant relationships with other types of policies, the use of both factors is warranted. The high correlation between factors means further research is warranted to assess the extent to which both factors are, in fact, distinct. The score for each factor can be calculated by summing the items.

LIMITATIONS

Despite the unique contributions of our findings, there are several noteworthy limitations. The registered voters in this study were majority White, more educated, wealthier, and older than the population of Alameda County registered voters as a whole. The focal interest of our inquiry was the logics used to justify the stasis of jails and prisons as two core carceral institutions, despite the fact that these systems clearly exacerbate racial inequality. Support for status quo structural racism embedded in the criminal legal system is particularly prevalent among White people (Rucker & Richeson, 2021), thus making our sample appropriate for the study. The non-representativeness of this sample does mean, however, that the Carceral Justification Scale may be limited in specificity across other groups, such as Black, Indigenous, Latinx, or Asian American groups or people without a college education.

Similarly, geographic context matters to opinions about carceral policies (Oh et al., 2021). Given that this study took place in the liberal, urban, diverse context of Alameda County, California,

the Carceral Justification Scale may be specific to similar contexts. Rural or suburban, conservative, and racially homogenous areas may construct carceral logics in ways that are distinct from what we have conceptualized through this measure. Residents of areas that rely on prisons as a source of employment may express even more distinct carceral logics.

Those who responded to the survey invitation are likely different from those who did not. Beyond the aforementioned demographic differences, respondents may have been more interested in politics or research, more motivated to have their opinions represented, or more confident in expressing themselves. Such qualities could mean that people with more solidly formed attitudes about carceral institutions were overrepresented in the study, and those with undecided or ambivalent attitudes did not participate to the same degree. If this were true, the Carceral Justification Scale may be missing some of the underlying psychological dynamics of registered voters with ambivalent or more fluid carceral attitudes. Given that this could be a sizeable portion of the electorate, future research is necessary to assess representativeness in this regard and whether Carceral Justification functions validly among the ambivalent and undecided.

The construction of the Carceral Justification Scale focused on items related to only two carceral institutions: jails and prisons. The logics used to bolster support for other carceral institutions may be distinct. Further inquiry could examine carceral logics used to bolster support for other core criminal legal system institutions, such as policing, courts, or probation; or examine these constructs in the context of carceral institutions not as widely thought of as part of the carceral state—such as public benefits offices, the child welfare system, schools, and mental health systems.

Another limitation of the study is that we began our inquiry with a relatively small number of items, as informed by prior qualitative research (Brock-Petrossius, 2023). Had we begun the inquiry with more items, we may have found additional factors related to carceral attitudes. These unmeasured factors may have represented abolitionist logics: understandings that current carceral practices are harmful, racist, or oppressive or that transformation of current carceral practices would benefit society. While related to carceral policy preferences, we contend such factors would still not be part of carceral justification, so much as they would represent another form of anti-carceral attitudes. Future inquiry in this area is warranted to represent the full breadth of psychological constructs people hold towards carceral institutions in the United States.

IMPLICATIONS

Research

It is essential that researchers continue to investigate the impact of carceral justification on preferences toward anti-carceral policies. For instance, Carceral Justification scores predicted unique variance in policy opinions that were unaccounted for by political ideology or racial resentment. Given that making changes to current carceral policies and practices is essential for addressing structural racism, social workers, community organizers, and researchers can investigate influences on carceral justification as a broader underlying construct and continue building the psychometric properties of the Carceral Justification Scale. The types of carceral policies such a construct predicts can be further examined as well; for example, there may be additional underlying factors that predict support for explicitly abolitionist policies. Researchers should also confirm the validity and measurement invariance of the scale by examining Carceral Justification in different contexts and populations—with registered voters in majority Black, Indigenous, or Brown

neighborhoods; voters in poor and working-class neighborhoods; voters in rural, suburban, racially homogenous, or conservative geographic contexts; and residents who are not registered voters, for example.

Social Work and Community Practice

The Carceral Justification Scale has broad practical implications for social work community practice as well. Community practice is the engagement of communities and organizations toward the goal of achieving change within institutions and broader social structures (Gutiérrez & Gant, 2018). A central part of social work has always been community practice and community practice spans well beyond the boundaries of the profession (Gutierrez et al., 2018). Social work can play a role in organizing efforts to build support for anti-carceral policies and change related attitudes, both by supporting efforts already underway and by helping to assess the impact of such efforts.

Social workers, organizers, advocates, policymakers, and researchers seeking to assess influences on anti-carceral policy opinions can use the scale as an underlying construct measure to evaluate change. Those working to increase support for abolitionist policies can develop interventions that aim to decrease carceral justification. In doing so, they may then simultaneously influence attitudes towards multiple types of anti-carceral policies. Such efforts could work to weaken the power of carceral institutions while building support for a true reimagining of public safety. This scale can thus be a useful tool for the evaluation of community organizing tactics that serve as political interventions—aiming to transform existing carceral institutions and practices.

The ability to assess this type of political intervention is crucial within the field of social work. Most political social work focuses on directly lobbying or electing officials to influence agenda-setting or decision-making power (Krings et al., 2019). In contrast, the types of interventions that can be evaluated with this scale focus on targeting ideological power—the influencing of political attitudes, policy preferences, and public imagination. Focusing on shifting ideology as a dimension of power expands the ability of social workers, organizers, and other community practitioners to imagine what is possible rather than be confined to pre-existing political agendas, to shape political agendas that threaten the status quo rather than fight for small reforms within already proposed policies, and to strengthen the viability of political issues previously considered unfeasible or impractical.

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