The Politics of Proximity: Attitudinal Feedback Effects of the Carceral State

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This paper examines how personal and proximate contact with the criminal legal system shapes public perceptions of deservingness and support for related policies. Drawing on original survey data from 2,716 U.S. adults, I test whether individuals with lived or vicarious carceral experiences, including those victimized by a crime prosecuted by the state, view incarcerated people as more deserving of help, and whether these perceptions mediate support for decarceral or punitive policies.

Introduction

Personal experience with carceral policy in the United States is extensive. By year-end 2001, more than 5.6 million U.S. adults had served time in a state or federal prison (BOP 2003), and by 2010, an estimated 8 % had a felony conviction and 3 % had served or were serving prison time (Shannon et al 2017). While systematized data on non-felony convictions remain, as Stenson and Mayson (2018) put it, "absurdly, embarassingly" (p. 732) elusive, they estimate 13.2 million such cases are filed annually. Many millions more experience incarceration indirectly – through proximal contact – as family, friends, or neighbors of those incarcerated – or through victimization, having been harmed by a crime prosecuted by the state. While the interests of these two groups are regularly presented as oppositional, we actually know very little about how these experiences – incarceration, proximal carceral contact, and victimization – shape how people think about criminal legal policy.

Scholars have shown that an important driver of public support for state intervention across other domains is people's beliefs about whether a given target group is *deserving* of policy help or punishment (DeSante 2013; Ellis and Faricy 2020). Further still, such deservingness perceptions often predict state policy outcomes (Kreitzer, Maltby, and Smith 2022a). These perceptions of deservingness are not purely personal – they are shaped by myriad factors including policy designs themselves (A. L. Schneider and Ingram 2019). Yet, while scholars have shown that deservingness perceptions inform opinions about social welfare, immigration, and even gun policy (W. van Oorschot 2000a; Kreitzer, Maltby, and Smith 2022b), the role of deservingness in the criminal legal context remains less well-developed. In particular, we do not know how people's experiences with the carceral state—either through direct or proximal contact—shape perceptions of deservingness when it comes to criminal justice policy.

Recent work (SoRelle and Laws 2024a) suggests that experience with policy may condition

the logics people use to assess deservingness – and that the role of personal experience in deservingness remains underexplored. At the same time, a growing body of scholarship demonstrates how contact with the carceral state shapes people's political attitudes (Weaver and Lerman 2010a), political identities (Owens 2014), and political engagement (White 2019). Through what these scholars term policy feedback effects, policies, once enacted, reshape politics by redistributing resources and sending interpretive signals that affect how individuals understand their – and other's – relationship to the state (Skocpol 1992; Pierson 1993; Weible 2023).

This paper brings deservingness and policy feedback frameworks together to understand how direct and proximate experiences of incarceration and victimization shape perceptions of the deservingness of incarcerated people, and whether these perceptions translate to opinions on prison policy. I start with the contention that people form views about policy by quickly judging social constructions of that policy's target group (A. Schneider and Ingram 1993a). Drawing on findings that carceral contact can drive perceptions of carceral state illegitimacy and contact group solidarity, I suggest that it may too generate perceptions of carceral targets as more deserving. Moreover, impacted groups learn these political messages by interacting with policy design. They may in turn have different reference points for carceral policy, and the conditions and consequences of imprisonment. In turn, I expect that carceral contact will translate to more generous perceptions of deservingness of, and consistent support for policy that helps carceral citizens.

I test these propositions using original 2024 survey data capturing Americans' experiences with the carceral system, their perceptions of a range of policy targets, and their attitudes towards prison-related policy reforms. The data allow for a unique empirical examination of how deservingness judgements may vary across direct and indirect experiences with incarceration and victimization – and how these judgements structure policy preferences.

In doing so, this paper makes three contributions. First, it extends theories of social construc-

tions and deservingness – the latter of which was largely developed in the context of welfare and redistributive policy - into the domain of criminal legal policy. Second, it sheds new light on how policy or institutional experience and proximity modifies deservingness perceptions and their correspondence to substantive policy views. Last, it responds to recent interventions that experiences of victimization constitute a critical but understudied component of this feedback loop (Levine and Russell, n.d.) and deepens our understanding of how victimization as a kind of proximal contact of its own can alter the public's orientation toward punishment, policy, and state legitimacy. Understanding how impacted groups differ in their approach to policy – and whether the preferences of most victims and perpetrators are as far apart as dominant narratives would suggest – is important not only for scholars but also for advocates and policymakers pursuing policy reform in this domain.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. In section 2, I elaborate first on key findings from social constructions and deservingness, before discussing policy feedback literature and its implications – particularly, the literature's its conceptualization of policy targets as active agents in meaning-making processes and empirical findings in the criminal legal domain – for my expectations about criminal legal policy. I develop theoretical framework, outlining how carceral contact may shape perceptions of deservingness and how those perceptions may, in turn, influence policy views. Section 3 then presents the data and analytic strategy, drawing on a newly fielded national survey to test these relationships. I conclude in section 5 with a brief discussion of implications for theories of deservingness, policy feedback, the politics of punishment.

Deservingness and Attitudes Towards Public Policy

How does contact with the criminal legal system affect perceptions of its targets? And what do these deservingness perceptions mean for policy views? Scholarship of the social constructions of target populations and deservingness respectively examine how groups become

characterized as deserving or undeserving of government assistance, and they demonstrate that people's policy preferences often hinge on such characterizations (A. Schneider and Ingram 1993b; Smith and Kreitzer 2024; W. van Oorschot 2006a).

Schneider and Ingram's (1993) theory of social constructions locates perceptions of target deservingness in a dialectic with policy design. That is, public perceptions of whether policy targets are deserving or undeserving are informed by social constructions, or "value-laden components, including stereotypes, dominant ideologies, and assumptions" about groups (Smith and Kreitzer 2024, p. 640). Policymakers are attentive to these perceptions, as they expect their constituencies to electorally reward them for producing policy that helps deserving groups like veterans, and refraining from offering help to or punishing the least deserving – particularly "deviant" groups like carceral citizens[1]. Thus, policy re-enforces perceptions of deservingness, by "telegraph[ing] to the public how target groups should be treated" (Smith and Kreitzer 2024, p. 640). While, as a consequence, particularly negative social constructions like those of carceral citizens may become "sticky" or more entrenched, social constructions are also contingent, for example, on local, state, and political and cultural contexts and also on the political identity of and ideology held by the 'perceiver' (Smith and Kreitzer 2018, p. 768). Thus, the relevant social construction driving perceptions of deservingness may different across audiences and policy contexts.

While social construction scholars helps illustrate external mechanisms that may drive broad constructions of carceral citizen's deservingness, others have paid more attention to specific mechanisms shaping how people judge whether policy targets are deserving. This line of deservingness scholarship explains that people form quick judgements about policy targets' deservingness by evaluating constructions along five dimensions in an evolutionarily-grounded impulse to help "reciprocators" and avoid "free-riders" (Petersen et al. 2012, 2012). These "CARIN" criteria primarily attend to cues about whether recipients cannot help their circumstances, or whether they are seeking unearned benefits. They refer to: *control,* which in

its original conception was closely related to *need*, referring to whether someone is perceived as lazy or unlucky – a consideration Oorschot (2006) argues can override all others. More recently, perception of a group or individual's *need* for assistance has considered the severity of their neediness and *control,* or the degree to which they are responsible (SoRelle and Laws 2024). Perceptions of the group's *attitude* refer to whether the beneficiary is grateful and likeable, and closely related perceptions of the group's *reciprocity* connote their history or apparent willingness to contribute to society. Last, the *identity* characteristic holds that people will evaluate more generously the deservingness of others whose identity is aligned with their own (Oorschot 2000, 2006). While this framework originated to explain views of welfare policies, scholars have applied it to explain policy views in other areas of social policy, including health care (Gollust and Lynch 2011).

From Social Constructions of Deservingness to Policy Feedback

My theoretical starting point is that perceptions of what groups like carceral citizens deserve are often shaped by social constructions about them (Schneider and Ingram 1993) . Like stereotypes, these constructions are produced by policy and discourse – both political, cultural, and popular – and they are often taken up by individuals in a heuristic process to form quick judgements about what a target group deserves. Thus, predominant racialized constructions of incarcerated people – "thugs," "felons," or "inmates," – that invoke ingratitude, self-orientation, and blameworthy-ness for their condition of confinement are likely interpolated as undeserving.[2]

Desesrvingness literature may suggest one direct pathway through which contact might interrupt this process. Simply put, someone who is in and knows people in prison has access to information about who an incarcerated personal is outside of their "criminal" identity in a way that someone who has only seen "prisoners" on TV may not. Carceral state contact should, by definition, change what information individuals have about its targets. This alone

could translate to more generous interpretations of deservingness (W. van Oorschot 2000b; W. van Oorschot 2006b; Feather and McKee 2009). [3] Following Schneider and Ingram (1993), these deservingness perceptions then influence how individuals evaluate related criminal legal policies.

Yet it is important to note that this logic implicitly assumes that the processes by which deservingness is interpreted and shapes policy views operate the same way in the criminal legal domain as they do in the welfare state, where much of deservingness literature originated. Recent work complicates that assumption. Schneider and Ingram (2019) note that even "deviant" groups – long presumed to be negatively constructed – can become beneficiaries of policy help, especially when costs, visibility, or broader group associations shift. SoRelle and Laws (2023) observe that perceptions of individual deservingness may not linearly translate into support for policy overall. Together, these insights suggest the need not only to examine whether contact reshapes perceptions of deservingness, but also to assess how — and whether — those perceptions relate to support for state intervention in the carceral domain. Yet what remains less fully theorized is whether, and how, the meaning and influence of these social constructions differ for individuals who have direct experience with the relevant policy. Might experiences with policy change how these constructions and characteristics are interpreted, or the extent to which they are internalized and interpolated into policy views? Lessons from policy feedback literature suggest they might.

Across domains, including the carceral state, policy feedback literature shows that policies can shape attitudes towards the state and institutions, one's sense of "civic self," and political behavior as part of a process through which policies, once established, have the capacity to shape and reshape policy landscapes (Campbell 2012; Skocpol 1992). These "feedbacks" operate through two core mechanisms: resource effects, which concern the distribution of material benefits and costs, which can enact barriers or incentives to participation, and interpretive effects, which concern the ability of policy design to convey messages to its targets

about their civic standing, and what they can expect and may ask of government as a whole (Campbell 2011; Mettler and Soss 2004; Mallory SoRelle and Serena Laws 2022).

This interpretive element offers an extension of social construction theory, in that it suggests that the messages a policy target infers from interacting with policy are unique, and should not be inferred to mirror the messages policy conveys about to broader audiences its targets. Moreover, this framework positions policy targets as "active agents" in the construction of meaning who internalize and respond to policy messages in different ways – by rejecting a negative construction or its policy implication and engaging in collective action, or conversely by differentiating onesself and disaggregating one's overall policy views from their perceptions of beneficiary deservingness (Soss 1999a; Goss 2012; Thurston 2018; SoRelle 2020; Lacombe 2022).[4]

In the criminal legal domain, scholarly debate around the conditions under which carceral contact is politically mobilizing or demobilizing foregrounds this variation (cf. White 2022). Many carceral citizens, their networks, and neighborhoods internalize the clear "undeserving" messages that prison policy sends (Lee, Porter, and Comfort 2014; Weaver and Lerman 2010b). In doing so, feedback scholars also dilineate the experiences and outcomes of people with not only direct, but also indirect or "proximate" contact, such as families of targets and neighborhood effects. For example, (Burch 2014) finds that high concentrations of incarceration and community supervision reduce political participation, creating "important spillover effects that suppress participation not only of the supervised individual but also of those living around him or her" (197). But others find that both direct and proximal contact can mobilize (A. Anoll and Israel-Trummel 2019a; H. L. Walker 2020b; Ewald 2024). While these studies do not focus specifically on the link between contact and deservingness, they are nonetheless theoretically instructive about the role of direct and proximate contact on political behavior.

While many carceral citizens and their networks internalize the clear "undeserving" mes-

sages conveyed by criminal legal policy, research increasingly shows that such contact can also shape political attitudes towards the state – fomenting perceptions of institutional illegitimacy (A. Anoll and Israel-Trummel 2019a; A. P. Anoll, Epp, and Israel-Trummel 2022a; H. L. Walker 2020a; Lerman and Weaver 2014a). As such, I propose that interactions with the carceral system should also shape attitudes towards *targets of the state* – and their legitimacy or deservingness in relation to it. While some work finds that targets of policy can internalize negative or undeserving constructions (Soss 1999b), much of the work on criminal legal contact stresses that demobilization is a product of resource effects or interpretive effects *distinct* from an "undeserving" self-conception (Lerman and Weaver 2014, White 2019). Instead, scholars emphasize that direct contact with the criminal legal system can heighten in-group solidarity and mobilize in spite of resource and interpretive feedbacks that should be demobilizing. (Walker 2020, Owens 2014). This is specifically the case when policy targets reject policy "teachings" about their lower civic status as part of a sense of systemic injustice – suggesting a reappraisal of both the system and those criminalized by it (Walker 2020). Among family of the incarcerated, Anoll (2022) suggests that higher rates of voting in states specifically with most stringent carceral disenfranchisement policies suggests "surrogate" mobilization, or a motivation to act on behalf a "deserving" incarcerated citizen, is at work. Thus, mobilization in response to both direct and proximal contact involve meaning-making processes that wed social solidarity with dampened perceptions of institutional legitimacy and trust.

But interaction with the carceral system may facilitate not just political, but also policy learning. Targets and their networks come to learn policy messages by experiencing policy burdens. Lee et al. (2014), for example, find that demobilizing 'spillover effects" are trace to family and loved ones of the incarcerated experiences with and reaction to policies whose costs they incur, like those of visitation, expensive phone calls, and paying off fines and fees. That the experiences producing political responses are grounded in personal experience with

policy suggest that contact may reorient how individuals think about policy, as it changes what they think (for example, what consequences to policy they imagine) when they think about policy.

Feedback scholars acknowledge endogeneity challenges inherent to questions of carceral state contact in a context of "cumulative burdens" or where the same individuals and communities often experience both direct and proximate carceral contact (Michener 2018; Weaver and Lerman 2010c; Lerman and Weaver 2014b). These experiences in isolation may have important differences. While some note psychological motivations the incarcerated may have to hold deserving perceptions of themselves and others (Maltby and Kreitzer 2023),[5] others stress that they may be far more likely to internalize undeserving messages, from which the proximally impacted may be more removed (A. Anoll and Israel-Trummel 2019b; A. P. Anoll, Epp, and Israel-Trummel 2022b; H. L. Walker and García-Castañon 2017, 2017; M. L. Walker 2016; H. L. Walker 2014). Experiences of victimization amplify this tension: they often occur alongside policing and incarceration in the same communities, yet are rarely conceptualized as a form of policy contact in their own right.[6]

Although victims of crime are rarely theorized as policy feedback subjects, the concept of victimization is implicitly central to the literature. Policy feedback scholars emphasize how individuals interpret state actions—especially punitive or discriminatory ones—as signals of exclusion, abandonment, or devaluation (Soss 1999c; Lerman and Weaver 2014c). These "interpretive effects" can leave people feeling targeted, disrespected, or undeserving in the eyes of the state. In this context, experiences of secondary victimization—such as being disbelieved, ignored, or emotionally constrained by the criminal justice process (Lensa et al., n.d.) — can function much like the demobilizing interpretive effects faced by other negatively constructed policy targets. Yet unlike welfare recipients or formerly incarcerated people, crime victims are more often assumed to support the very policies and institutions that may reproduce their harm. Recognizing victimization as a form of state contact—and a potential

site of interpretive rupture—opens new terrain for understanding how criminal legal experience shapes not only institutional trust and political participation, but also deservingness perceptions and carceral policy attitudes. This paper takes up that challenge by analyzing victimization alongside other forms of contact to assess how they each influence perceptions of who deserves help or harm—and what role the state should play.

Hypotheses

How does contact shape perceptions of what carceral citizens deserve? While views on criminal legal policy and how people conceive of carceral citizens are complicated questions, I anticipate that these experiences (incarceration, neigborhhood or social connections to the incarcerated, and victimization), depress the authority of carceral policy design to convey meaning about its targets. Perceptions of systemic injustice and trends of surrogate participation suggest contact may generate more nuanced perceptions of deservingness in its own right, as carceral citizens are conceived of as victims of injustice and or deserving of representation. While individuals within these groups may still respond to policy messages and think about targets in different ways, I expect these groups to view carceral citizens as more deserving than those without impact. Because people with proximate impact may be less likely to internalize undeserving messages, they may have warmer perceptions than the directly impacted. Further, I suggest that experience with the criminal legal system – including victimization – leads people to stronger and more consistent support for offering policy help to help incarcerated people, and to more nuanced ways of thinking about the relationship between what a carceral target 'deserves' and what policy is appropriate.

Respondents with no direct or proximate experience with incarceration may rely more heavily on dominant public narratives that portray incarcerated individuals as violent, morally deficient, or socially deviant. Social construction theory suggests that, in the absence of countervailing personal experiences, people turn to culturally available representations to eval-

uate policy targets (Schneider and Ingram 1993; Smith and Kreitzer 2024). In the criminal legal domain, these representations are often shaped by racialized media portrayals and political discourse that emphasize danger and individual blame (Ghandnoosh 2014). Without lived or relational knowledge to "fill in" CARIN criteria such as control, reciprocity, or need with humanized nuance, these respondents are more likely to default to punitive or stigmatized constructions of incarcerated people. Even those who know only victims of crime may be exposed to narratives emphasizing offender culpability and just deserts—without the complexity that comes from understanding incarcerated people as multifaceted individuals. Therefore, I expect that:

H1 *Direct and proximate experiences with incarceration and experiencing victimization will lead to more generous deservingness perceptions of incarcerated people.*

H1-A *Individuals with proximate impact will report more deservingness perceptions of incarcerated people. than those who are directly impacted.*

While victimization might intuitively drive negative perceptions of carceral citizens, I suggest the relationship is more complex.

Researchers provide evidence that more abstracted, dehumanized stereotypes about carceral citizens (Vasiljevic and Viki 2014) generate harsher assessments of culpability (Levinson 2007; Levinson, Cai, and Young 2010; Donovan 2007; Israel-Trummel and Streeter 2022) and sentences (Rehavi and Starr 2014) suggesting that information *besides* conviction and crime about carceral citizens should have a countervailing humanizing effect (Manza, Uggen, and Brooks 2006).

However, there are clear reasons why victimization may generate *undeserving* perceptions: victimization is highly a salient experience that for many drives negative affect toward those who commit crimes (Ditton et al. 1999) and provides a clear justification to focus on criminal culpability when considering incarcerated people overall (Culhane, Hosch, and Weaver

2004). However, this logic assumes clear victim-offender boundaries and risks ignoring the broader social context in which violence occurs. The overlap between victims and otherwise impacted groups is significant (Jennings, Piquero, and Reingle 2012). Victims of violent crime are disproportionately part of communities most heavily policed and incarcerated and most know their offender (Bureau of Justice 2024) – most individuals who experience incarceration have also been victimized, as well.[7] Thus, while for many victims the proximity and salience of a 'criminal' may bolster negative social constructions and deservingness perceptions, it might also translate to more nuanced perceptions of culpability and a closer alignment of identity that moderates negative affect.

Moreover, victims face restrictive, "sticky" social constructions – what Lens et al (2014) note generate negative feedbacks. While navigating narrow expectations of "appropriate" emotional responses in the criminal justice process – non-emotional victims risk disbelief while overly emotional victims face judgment – victims experience "secondary victimizations" that foment institutional distrust. In this way, victims may come to share with incarcerated individuals not only carceral exposure, but also skepticism toward the system itself and its moral judgments about who is or isn't deserving (Walker 2020; Anoll & Israel-Trummel 2019). For some, this may produce more nuanced assessments of incarcerated people as victims of systemic injustice rather than mere perpetrators. For others, especially those who strongly identify with retributive justice or lack personal connection to offenders, deservingness perceptions may remain harsher. However, it is worth noting that victimization generally does not increase punitiveness – and that instead perceptions of crime are more important in driving punitive sentiment than actual crime - suggesting victimization may both lead to more moderated perceptions of carceral citizens and perceptions of what they deserve (Hale 1996; Kleck and Jackson 2017a, 2017b). I therefore expect that:

H1-B *Victims of violent crime may vary more than other impacted groups in their perceptions of incarcerated people's deservingness, but on average, will still express more generous views than individuals*

with no direct or proximate contact with the carceral system.

Social construction theory suggests that perceptions of target deservingness translate directly to policy preferences: groups constructed as undeserving receive punitive policy while deserving groups receive beneficial policy (Schneider and Ingram 1993). Applied to the carceral domain, this means that warmer perceptions of incarcerated people's deservingness predict greater support for policies that help rather than punish them. Thus, deservingness acts as a mediating bridge between group perception and carceral policy support. I therefore hypothesize that:

H2 *More generous perceptions of carceral citizens' deservingness will predict greater and more consistent support for assistance-oriented criminal legal policies and reduced support for punitive criminal legal policies.*

However, evidence from SoRelle and Laws (2023) and others suggests the relationship between deservingness perceptions and policy support may not be straightforward in all contexts. The criminal legal domain may have unique dynamics where perceptions of groups and support for policies directed at them operate through different mechanisms.

Data and Methods

I explore whether policy contact shapes people's attitudes about deservingness, and how those deservingness perceptions mediate policy preferences. I employ original survey data using a national sample of 2,716 US adults collected in September 2024 through the platform Forthwright. The survey adapts the approach of Kreitzer and Smith's (2018) empirical mapping of power and deservingness constructions of 87 target populations.[8]

Measuring Deservingness Perceptions, Contact, and Policy Views.

In this study, I investigate the correlation between criminal legal policy experience and per-

ceptions of criminal legal target deservingness as well as views on criminal legal policy, and the extent to which deservingness perceptions mediate policy views. As such, my primary variables of interest concern deservingness ratings for target groups, "contact" with the criminal legal system, and policy views.

Perceptions of target deservingness are operationalized using 0 to 100 sliding scale ratings of "incarcerated people/prisoners." After reading a short explanation of what deserving usually connotes (Figure), respondents rated the deservingness of a total of 65 groups.[9]

Survey Item Prompt

Some people, groups, and organizations are viewed as contributing to the general welfare of society and worthy, and thus are deserving of sympathy, pity, or help. Typically, we describe members of these groups as good, smart, hardworking, loyal, disciplined, generous, caring of others, respectful, and creative.

Meanwhile, there are many other groups that are viewed as a burden to the general welfare of society, and are believed to be undeserving of sympathy, pity, or help. Typically, we describe members of these groups as greedy, disrespectful, disloyal, immoral, disgusting, dangerous, lazy, and expect others to care for them.

Based on what you know about these groups, how deserving or undeserving would you say each of these groups are, generally speaking? Here, 0 means most people in that group are completely undeserving. 100 means most people in that group are very deserving.

I argue a respondent's experience with the criminal legal system affects perceptions of carceral citizens' deservingness and policy views. To measure policy contact and proximate contact, I ask respondents whether they or someone they know well have been "incarcerated in jail or prison," and/or whether they and/or someone they now have "been a victim of violent crime." I construct three binary indicators for the three contact types of interest,

which represent respondents who have been incarcerated (1), know someone incarcerated (1), or have been victimized (1), or not (0). I do not isolate for individuals who have only had one form of policy experience – much of the incarcerated sample overlaps with those who know incarcerated individuals, as would be expected[10]. Additionally, I construct a single "impact" dummy to capture all three impacted groups to simplify analysis for my first overarching hypothesis.

Finally, to explore how contact shapes views on policy views and moderates deservingness' mediation of policy views, I ask respondents their Likert-scale support/opposition to six items on criminal legal policy. Two items (support for the death penalty and for life without parole) are combined in a 'prison penalty' support index, and the remainder which involve policy help (minimum wage pay requirements for incarcerated workers, voting rights restoration, etc) are combined in a 'prison help' support index.

Other Factors Influencing Policy Views I include standard additional controls and two unique controls to attend alternative explanations of perceptions of deservingness, policy views, and their relationship. First, Smith and Kreitzer (2024) show that while there are different levels of across and within partisan consensus around target group deservingness, partisanship strongly influences target social constructions. To control for party affiliation, respondents indicate whether they are Republican, Democrat, Independent, or 'other party.' I code for Republicans and Democrats—leaving independents and "others" as the comparison groups. Respondents also indicate whether they are very liberal, somewhat liberal, moderate, somewhat conservative, or very conservative. I code this as a five-point ordinal variable, with higher values indicating more conservative ideological orientation[11].

Some carceral state scholarship suggests that individual views about carceral citizens and policy are determined by punitiveness towards offenders – whether conceptualized as beliefs about meritocracy and the rule of law, or expressive responses to perceived wrongdoing

or harm (Sniderman and Piazza 1993, Chouhy et al 2022, Miller and Alexander 2016). While some operationalize this via support for the death penalty (Enns 2016), others use measures that reflect belief in the purpose of punishment. Here, I operationalise this concept with a control for beliefs about the purpose of punishment using an interval 'penal point' variable, with respondents' views on whether the purpose of incarceration as to punish primarily, rehabilitate primarily, or somewhere in between, rescaled to a 0-1 metric from a 7 point scale.

A broader "punitive" orientation may influence perceptions of what incarcerated people deserve. By this I mean that policy targets like incarcerated people may, for some, be implicitly constructed as being in need of help or intervention, socially transgressive, or unfamiliar or distant from mainsteam society. As such, deserving perceptions of incarcerated people may reflect broader attitudes towards these groups overall. Similarly, respondents may give these groups ratings that reflect "deserving of some inferred benefit," where others groups, like "Athiests," ratings may reflect a more generalized perception. To account for this general tendency, I construct a control variable that captures respondents' deservingness ratings of groups that are framed in public discourse as needing help—such as welfare recipients, Medicaid and Medicare/SSN recipients, the unemployed, poor families, homeless individuals, and asylum seekers or refugees. Specifically, I average their raw 0 to 100 deservingness ratings for the select subset groups.

To ensure that I do not control for a variable that is conceptually or empirically too close to the deservingness of incarcerated people when it is the dependent variable, I exclude any deservingness ratings for groups that are substantively overlapping or highly correlated. Including those could absorb variance in the outcome or introduce post-treatment bias by controlling for a related evaluative construct. I also avoid using global composite or average deservingness scores across all groups – for example, a respondent's mean deservingnesss rating across all 65 groups they evaluated – because that composite would include the rating of incarcerated people itself, introducing potential collinearity and making it difficult to isolate

the unique effect of contact. This modeling strategy attempts to preserve interpretability and ensuring that the effect of policy contact is estimated with respect to unstandardized, target-specific deservingness scores.[12] This control variable helps isolate whether the relationship between criminal legal contact and deservingness perceptions of incarcerated people reflects a target-specific shift in perception, or a broader orientation toward helping marginalized groups. In doing so, it sharpens the test of H1 by clarifying whether contact affects views of *carceral citizens in particular*, rather than simply increasing general generosity toward a wider net of populations.

Similarly, some respondents may be less supportive of policies that help such groups. To account for broader ideological dispositions toward state assistance, I construct a control variable capturing general support for redistributive or assistance-oriented policies. This policy disposition index is based on a set of standardized survey items, including support for Medicaid expansion, unemployment assistance, increasing the minimum wage, government responsibility for helping the poor, and agreement with statements about the importance of accepting refugees. I helps assess whether the relationship between criminal legal contact, deservingness perceptions, and policy views reflects domain-specific evaluations of carceral targets—or simply broader support for government assistance. In doing so, it sharpens the test of H2 by clarifying whether deservingness meaningfully predicts policy preferences *beyond* respondents' general redistributive orientation.

I will also control for respondent race and racial attitudes. Respondents are asked whether they are White, Black or African American, Native American/Alaska Native, Asian/Asian American, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern/North African, Hispanic/Latino/a/e, or "my preferred response is not listed." I will use a series of indicator variables (non-Hispanic white, non-Hispanic Black, Hispanic/Latino, and "other" race). I control for variation in respondents' attitudes using the four-item FIRE battery that captures both cognitive and affective components of racial attitudes: fear, acknowledgement of

institutional racism, and racial empathy (DeSante and Smith 2020). I use FIRE in place of the traditional Kinder scale because the latter captures only narrow ideological dimensions that may not capture a distinct role of emotional responses like fear and empathy in racialized policy domains.

Finally, I also control gender, level of education, and location. I control for gender with a binary variable where respondents who identified as genderqueer or 'other' (of which there were relatively few) will be randomly assigned to woman (0) and men (1).

Analysis

I use the above described data to test my four hypotheses with a series of regression models. To evaluate the effect of criminal legal contact on desesrvingness perceptions, I perform several additional regressions while controlling for attitudinal conditions and demographic and political factors. This sequence allows me to test robustness and interactive effects, while building toward full specifications.

It is useful to begin by assessing broad patterns in perceptions of incarcerated people and support for criminal legal policies across impact groups. I anticipate that people who have experienced criminal legal contact will be more generous in their deservingness ratings of incarcerated people and more consistent in their support across policies that help them. To preview these patterns, I (will) first present the mean deservingness scoress (0-100 scale) of incarcerated people across four impact groups: those who have been incarcerated, those who know someone incarcerated, those who have experienced violent victimization, and those with no direct or proximate contact. I also include a fifth group—those who know victims—to examine the effects of victimization exposure alone.

To explore policy opinion variation, I will next present a table showing mean levels of support for prison-assistance policies and other decarceral reforms across the same impact groups.

Column A focuses on support for policies that directly assist incarcerated individuals (e.g., education, family support), while Column B reports strictly punitive policy (life without parole and the death penalty). These descriptive patterns offer a first look at the extent to which contact correlates with policy orientations.

Modeling Approach To formally evaluate my hypotheses, I fit a series of Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) models examining the relationship between carceral contact, deservingness perceptions, and support for criminal legal policies. Unless otherwise stated, all models include relevant demographic and attitudinal covariates, denoted in vector form as $X_i' \cdot \texttt{controls},$. In all models, i indexes individual respondents, and $\texttt{impact}_i$ captures whether a respondent has been directly or proximally impacted (included via victimization). In models where all key variables are measured within the same experimental block, standard errors are not clustered. Where appropriate (e.g., models pooled across blocks or with repeated measures), I cluster standard errors by respondent. I interpret coefficients of interest using two-tailed hypothesis tests at the $\alpha = 0.05$ level. I report 95% confidence intervals and standard errors throughout.

Deservingness Models My first main hypothesis (**H1)** predicts that individuals with direct or proximate experiences with the criminal legal system (e.g., incarceration, knowing someone incarcerated, or victimization) will perceive incarcerated people as more deserving. I test this by regressing each respondent's 0-100 deservingness scores for incarcerated people on a binary indicator for carceral impact status, controlling for demographic and attitudinal factors. Specifically, I estimate:

Model 1: Any Carceral Impact on Deservingness

$$\texttt{prisonerdeserves}_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot \texttt{impact}_i + \beta_2 \cdot \texttt{desor}_i + X_i' \cdot \texttt{controls} + u_i$$

where $prisonerdeserves_i$ is respondent i's deservingness score for incarcerated people, $impact_i$ is a binary indicator for whether the respondent has been impacted in any of the stated ways, and X_i' includes demographic data. The variable $desor_i$ captures each respondent's general orientation toward help-seeking populations. The key coefficient of interest is β_1, which estimates the average difference in deservingness perception between those with and without carceral contact, holding other covariates constant. A positive and statistically significant β_1 would support H1.

While not central to my theoretical framework, I also explore whether the effect of contact on deservingness perceptions varies by political ideology. This model is reported in Appendix Table A2.

To I distinguish among types of contact (H1, H1A,H1B), I estimate separate models in which the impact variable is disaggregated into binary indicators for each type (e.g., been incarcerated, knows someone incarcerated, victim of violent crime). This allows me to test which forms of contact are associated with more generous perceptions, and whether the effects differ in magnitude or direction.

Model 2: Incarcerated, Know Incarcerated, Victimized on Deservingness

$$\texttt{prisonerdeserves}_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot \texttt{incarc}_i + \beta_2 \cdot \texttt{knowincarc}_i + \beta_3 \cdot \text{vict}_i + \beta_4 \cdot \texttt{des\_or}_i + \beta_5 \cdot \texttt{controls}_i + u_i$$

Policy Models My second core hypothesis (**H2)** is more generous perceptions of carceral citizens' deservingness will predict greater and more consistent support for assistance-oriented criminal legal policies and reduced support for punitive criminal legal policies. To test this, I estimate the following outcome models for each policy index:

Models 3 and 4: Deservingness on Carceral Policy

$$\texttt{prisonhelp}_i = \delta_0 + \delta_1 \cdot \texttt{impact}_i + \delta_2 \cdot \texttt{prisonerdeserves}_i + X_i' \cdot \texttt{controlsvector} + \epsilon_i$$

and on punitive policy

$$\texttt{prisonpen}_i = \delta_0 + \delta_1 \cdot \texttt{impact}_i + \delta_2 \cdot \texttt{prisonerdeserves}_i + X_i' \cdot \texttt{controlsvector} + \epsilon_i$$

In each model, $delta_1$ captures the association between carceral contact and policy preferences, controlling for deservingness and covariates. $delta_2$ estimates the relationship between deservingness and policy support, which directly tests H2. A positive and statistically significant $delta_2$ in the help model—and a negative $delta_2$ in the punitive model—would support the hypothesis that warmer evaluations of incarcerated people correspond to greater support for decarceral policies.

To formally test whether perceptions of deservingness mediate the effect of carceral contact on policy preferences, I first estimate a set of interaction models to examine whether the relationship between deservingness and policy views differs depending on whether respondents have been directly or proximally impacted by the criminal legal system. This approach allows me to test whether contact moderates how deservingness evaluations translate into policy preferences—i.e., whether deservingness matters more (or less) for those with lived experience.

Model 5: Interaction for Support of Carceral Policy Help

$$\texttt{prisonhelp}_i = \theta_0 + \theta_1 \cdot \texttt{Deservingness}_i + \theta_2 \cdot \texttt{Contact}_i + \theta_3(\texttt{Deservingness}_i \times \texttt{Contact}_i) + X_i' \cdot \texttt{controlsvecto}$$

Model 6: Interaction for Support of Carceral Policy Punishment

$$\texttt{prisonpen}_i = \theta_0 + \theta_1 \cdot \texttt{Deservingness}_i + \theta_2 \cdot \texttt{Contact}_i + \theta_3(\texttt{Deservingness}_i \times \texttt{Contact}_i) + X_i' \cdot \texttt{controlsvector}$$

A significant interaction term (θ_3) would indicate that the effect of deservingness on policy support varies depending on whether the respondent has had contact with the criminal legal system. These models help determine whether deservingness operates similarly across groups—or if lived experience conditions how moral evaluations shape policy preferences.

Building on the interaction models, I next, I assess whether deservingness perceptions partially mediate the relationship between contact and policy preferences. This directly follows from my theoretical framework: if contact within the criminal legal system influences how individuals perceive the deservingness of incarcerated people, and if those perceptions in turn shape policy support, deservingness should function as a mediating mechanism.

I estimate causal mediation using the 'mediation' package in R, estimating average indirect effects and confidence intervals via bootstrapping. This involves first estimating a model in which deservingness is regressed on contact, and then a second-stage model in which policy preferences are regressed on both contact and deservingness. These models include the same attitudinal and demographic controls used throughout the analysis. The resulting estimates of the average causal mediation effect (ACME) help evaluate whether contact shapes policy views in part through its effect on perceptions of deservingness.

For both the prison help and prison penalty indices, I estimate:

Model 7: Mediation Outcome Model - Support for Assistance Oriented Policy (Second Stage for Mediation Analysis)

$$y_i^{\texttt{prisonhelp}} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot \texttt{impact}_i + \beta_2 \cdot \texttt{des\_or}_i + X_i' \cdot \texttt{controlsvector} + u_i$$

Model 8: Mediation Outcome Model - Support for Punishment Oriented Policy (Second Stage for Mediation Analysis)

$$y_i^{\texttt{prisonpen}} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot \texttt{impact}_i + \beta_2 \cdot \texttt{des\_or}_i + X_i' \cdot \texttt{controlsvector} + u_i$$

where $y_i^{\texttt{prisonhelp}}$ is support for assistance-oriented or and $y_i^{\texttt{prisonpen}}$ is support for punitive policies. A statistically significant indirect effect would indicate that deservingness mediates part of the relationship between carceral contact and policy preferences.

I model criminal legal contact's effect on other forms of policy help by regressing aggregated attitudes towards those policies on impact:

Model 9: Robustness Check: General Policy Help Orientation (OLS regression of composite non-carceral help policy support on contact)

$$y_i^{\texttt{polorientation}} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot \texttt{impact}_i + \beta_2 \cdot \texttt{des\_or}_i + X_i' \cdot \texttt{controlsvector} + u_i$$

To evaluate whether **(H2)** more generous perceptions of carceral citizens' deservingness also predict more consistent *consistent* support for offering policy help to carceral citizens, I conduct an additional analysis focusing on response consistency. First, I calculate the variance of each respondent's responses across all six help-oriented policy questions (with higher values indicating less consistent responses). I then use this variance measure as the dependent variable in a regression model with the same predictors as my main policy analysis.

Model 10: Explanatory Model: Variance in Support for Assistance Oriented Policies (OLS regression of within-respondent variance across decarceral or help policy items)

$$\texttt{variancehelp}_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot \texttt{impact}_i + \beta_2 \cdot \texttt{prisonerdeserves}_i + \beta_3 \cdot \texttt{polor}_i + X_i' \cdot \texttt{controls} + u_i$$

Finally, to assess heterogeneity by contact type, I re-estimate the above models using individual dummy variables for each form of impact (e.g., been incarcerated, known someone, victim of crime). In exploratory models, I restrict the sample to respondents who report only one form of contact to reduce overlap and isolate effects.

Conclusion

This study investigates how carceral policy contact – incarceration, proximity to incarcerated individuals, or victimization – shapes perceptions of whether incarcerated people deserve assistance from the state. To answer this question, this paper turns to the deservingness framework. While only one paper has applied the deservingness framework to the carceral domain,[13] the deservingness framework's broader use across welfare, health, and immigration illustrates its adaptability to domains in which the moral logic of state intervention—whether distributive, punitive, or stigmatizing—differs in form and function. Across these contexts, the framework has helped explain how individuals judge policy targets as worthy or unworthy of state help, harm, or indifference.

To adapt deservingness to this setting and develop expectations, the paper integrates insights from policy feedback scholarship. Here, scholars document how lived experience with state policy shapes political attitudes – particular towards state legitimacy, responsiveness, and one's civic standing. While policy feedback theory has increasingly been applied to the

carceral state, it has rarely focused on how contact shapes interpretive judgements about policy subjects – particularly in regards to perceived worth or moral standing. This paper contributes by asking: does experience with criminal legal policy – it's design, enforcement, and consequences – change how people see those caught up in it, and the state intervention they deserve?

Several possible findings, each theoretically consequential, follow from the empirical design:

- If carceral contact increases perceived deservingness, this would build on recent contributions that social constructions of deservingness are not fixed, but contingent on policy context (Kreitzer and Smith 2018) and experience (SoRelle and Laws 2024b). It would suggest that, as Schneider and Ingram (2019) noted, feedback dynamics around "deviant" groups may be more complicated, that even in a "sticky," stigmatized, punitive domain, interpretive shifts are possible, and that policy experience may soften exclusionary constructions. This would also extend the reach of policy feedback theory into moral-evaluative terrain. Future research, including experimental designs such as conjoint studies, could help identify what features of contact drive these changes—whether CARIN criteria, or others.
- If deservingness mediates the relationship between contact and policy support, the findings would align with classic formulations of the deservingness framework: that people must first judge targets as worthy before they support redistributive or rehabilitative policy. It would underscore deservingness as a distinct mechanism—linking lived experience to moral evaluation, and moral evaluation to political preference—and suggest that deservingness continues to operate as a central schema even in domains marked by punishment rather than care. Further, it would raise important questions for what differences across impact groups mean against representational inequality and policy outcomes – audit studies or legislative surveys or interviews would be useful for

understanding how public perceptions of carceral deservingness drive policy outcomes and responsiveness.

- Should contact lead to warmer policy views independent of perceived deservingness, it would raise further questions about the application of deservingness to the carceral domain. Such results might indicate that highly visible, invective, and emotive constructions of a target population still shape perceptions of that target's moral or deserving standing in society, but that individuals draw on other considerations – such as procedural or institutional fairness, personalized or detailed understandings of carceral contexts and consequences, or empathy - when constructing criminal legal policy views.
- Last, if contact yields no observable effects, this null result would still carry interpretive weight. It would suggest that carceral policy operates through durable, symbolic considerations that lived experience alone cannot unsettle.

This project also takes seriously the role of interpretation in shaping the political consequences of policy contact. As scholars of policy feedback have emphasized, the lessons people draw from state action depend not only on institutional design, but on how individuals make sense of their experiences. Deservingness, as used here and across domains, is useful not only because it helps map policy views, but because it helps illustrate that active process: how people categorize others as blameworthy or redeemable, threatening or vulnerable, and how those categorizations shape–and are shaped by–encounters with state power. In asking whether experiences of the criminal legal system shift how people view its targets, this paper responds to Wedeen's (2002, 720) call for empirical accounts of "how symbols operate in practice, why meanings generate action, and why actions produce meanings, when they do." Deservingness, in this process, is a politically meaningful interpretation of who is owed what, by whom, and why.

. . .

Notes

[1]Schneider and Ingram's theory of social construction goes on to note that policymakers respond not only to their constituencies' perceptions of target deservingness, but also to the political power of target groups, or their ability to ability to access, reward, and/or retaliate against policymakers. These interacting dimensions (power and deservingness) produce four categories of groups in society, to whom policy makers respond with distinct policy. Policymakers are incentivized to help groups who are "advantaged" – both powerful and perceived as deserving – and "contender" groups, or those who are powerful but constructed as undeserving. In contrast, policymakers offer burdensome policy to "dependents" – those who are seen as deserving but who are not politically powerful, and punish "deviants," who are seen as neither deserving nor powerful. Political representatives' policy design is also driven by "anticipatory" feedback: policymakers respond to both their perception of groups' political power and social constructions in terms of electoral consequences – for example, by providing "hidden" benefits to contenders, who are constructed as undeserving but powerful, policymakers can avoid political blowback for helping an "undeserving" group while strengthen their own political position. (Schneider and Ingram 2019, Ellis and Faricy 2020).

[2]In the criminal legal domain, these representations are often shaped by racialized media portrayals and political discourse that emphasize danger and individual blame (Lopez 2015; Vasiljevic and Viki 2014).

[3]For example, contact may lead individuals to see incarcerated people as facing substantial hardships (*need*), with less control over the conditions that led to incarceration (*control*), and as capable of gratitude, growth, or giving back (*reciprocity*, *attitude*). In contrast to dominant constructions that depict incarcerated people as undeserving, contact may "fill in" these criteria with lived or vicarious knowledge. On this dimension, then, contact may generate warmer deservingness perceptions by replacing stereotypes with personalized, alternative narratives about who carceral citizens are and what their conditions and the consequences of confinement.

[4]Soss (1999) explains a tendancy of recipients of means-tested welfare (AFDC) to maintain negative constructions about beneficiaries of the same policy (unlike recipients of the non-means tested disability benefits) as a product of political learning while on the AFDC: benefits are burdensome to access, involve stringent behavioral monitoring, and involve more caseworker discretion than standardized rules, conveying to AFDC beneficiaries that government views them as responsible for their need and untrustworthy. This leads beneficiaries to not only internalize a more "undeserving" perception of their own beneficiary group, but also splinters any sense of group solidarity and disaggregates policy views from perceptions of beneficiary deservingness.

[5]Maltby and Kreitzer (2023) also take up the question of carceral contact's effect on target deservingness, sev-

eral limitations in the design raise ques-tions about whether their findings reflect a measurement artifact. First, the study conflates arrest with incarceration, despite these experiences carrying distinct resource effects, stigma, and lessons vis-a-vis one's civic standing and government responsiveness (cf. Soss 2005). Further still, arrest may allow for self-distancing and meritocratic narratives, whereas incar-ceration deeply implicates individuals in systems that mark groups as "undeserving" (cf.(Newman, Shah, and Lauterbach 2018))5. Second, the study aggregates deservingness per-ceptions of "criminal legal targets" that includes groups like "opioid users," "welfare cheats," and other groups less apt to the relationships of interest: how policy experience shapes per-ceptions of policy target deservingness. Third, their design does not test what these deserv-ingness mean for policy preferences, which given its novel application of deservingness to the carceral contexts, leaves open the question of whether these perceptions mean the same thing in the criminal legal domain. Further still, the study does not distinguish between dif-ferent types of contact, such as incarceration versus victimization. These limitations reflect a broader pattern in the literature, where the effects of carceral contact — especially forms like victimization — remain theoretically and empirically underdeveloped.

[6]One notable exception is Levine and Russell (2023), who show how the design and financing of victim compensation law constructs victims as morally deserving and politically worthy, helping expand state responsibility. Yet even here, the analysis centers on state building and symbolic policy meaning—rather than how victimization itself may function as a form of lived experience that may alter how individuals perceive the state, its targets, and what policies they deserve.

[7]An extensive literature shows that people who are incarcerated have disproportionately been victims of crime – one review article cited 31 of 37 papers support this overlap (Jennings et al 2012). While 2% of the general US population report being victims of violent crime, up to 45% of carceral citizens have experienced pre-incarceration physical abuse, and 8.5 to 39.2% of specifically sexual abuse (Azimi et al 2019, Carlson and Shafer 2010, Messina et al 2007, Wolff and Shi 2012, Yoder et al. 2017). Still more experience violence while incarcerated (Wolff et al 2009).

[8]The survey expands on Kreiter and Smith (2018)'s approach by recruiting from a Bovitz proprietary panel (although the survey was hosted and deployed from Forthright) and reducing the number of groups individuals access to reduce issues of respondent fatigue. 2,716 eligible participants were recruited to complete the 30-minute survey on the platform Forthright, and were paid 10 dollars. The sample is just under 51% women and 49% men, and leans more Democratic than the national average (39% versus 31%) but is equally Republican (25%). The underrepresentation of Republicans may have a minimizing effect. I apply exclusion restrictions for low response quality, failing to pass all three attention checks, and extreme outlier responses, and also create two response quality variables for robustness checks, resulting in a final sample of [2,286]. Sample details are in Table

1 of the appendix.

[9]Survey participants were randomly assorded into three sections (A, B, and C). All respondents saw the same 45 groups. Each section then reviewed an additional (20) unique groups.

[10]I also expect that respondents under report both victimization and incarceration because they are stigmatized experience, introducing random noise (Skogan 1986).

[11]Research consistently shows that political conservativism is associated with stronger support for punitive policy, and also stronger and more frequent support for guilty verdicts and harsher sentencing recommendations as well as harsher prison conditions (Green 2012, Pyo 2024, Hansen and Navarro 2024). These may refllect beliefs in personal culpability, expressive retributive justifications for punishment, and value commitments to law and order that are often fundamental to conservative ideology (Burton et al 2020, Mancici et al 2021, Wilson et al 2015).

[12]While constructing composite or control variables involving other deservingness targets, I assess whether their inclusion introduces collinearity or conceptual overlap with the dependent variable. In particular, I examine correlations between group-level deservingness ratings to ensure that any included groups are not too closely tied to perceptions of incarcerated people. If preliminary checks reveal that including a particular group (e.g., "criminals" or "formerly incarcerated individuals") would obscure key variance or conflate target constructs, I exclude it from the model and treat it as conceptually non-distinct for the purposes of this analysis.

[13]One recent study applies the framework to criminal justice policy, though it takes a different empirical and theoretical approach than the one advanced here.

References

Appendix

A: Variable Dictionary

Variable Name	Type	Description
`impact`	Binary	Any carceral or victimization contact
`incarc`	Binary	Has been incarcerated

Variable Name	Type	Description
knowincarc	Binary	Knows someone incarcerated
vict	Binary	Has been victim of violent crime
prisonerdeserves	Continuous	Centered deservingness of incarcerated people
prisonhelp	Index	Support for prison-assistance policies
prisonpen	Index	Support for punitive carceral policies
variance_help	Continuous	Variance across prison-help policy support items
sd_help	Continuous	Standard deviation of help-policy support items
polorientation / pol-or	Index	General orientation toward social policy help
desor	Continuous	Centered deservingness of help-receiving groups
Republican	Dummy	Identifies as Republican
Democrat	Dummy	Identifies as Democrat
ideology	Index	Political ideology (0 = liberal, 1 = conservative)
Punitive	Index	General punitive orientation
PenalPunitiveness	Ordinal / Rescaled	Beliefs about punishment vs rehabilitation
PolicyDisposition	Index	Support for redistributive and social help policies
fire_rare	Likert (1–4)	Belief that racial problems are rare and isolated

Variable Name	Type	Description
`fire_privilege`	Likert (1–4)	Belief that white people benefit from racial privilege
`fire_angry`	Likert (1–4)	Anger about the existence of racism
`fire_fear`	Likert (1–4)	Fear of people of other races
`gender`	Dummy	0 = woman/other, 1 = man
`education`	Ordinal	Educational attainment level
`Black`, `Hispanic`, `OtherRace`	Dummy	Racial group identifiers
`impact × ideology`	Interaction	Tests moderation by ideology
`impact × race`	Interaction	Tests moderation by race
`Deservingness × Contact`	Interaction	Moderation of deservingness effect
`X_{i}' x controls`	Vector	Full vector of demographic and attitudinal controls

Appendix B: Robustness Checks and Conditional Effects

This section reports additional models assessing whether the relationship between contact, deservingness, and policy views varies across key individual-level characteristics. Although not central to my theoretical framework, these checks address common concerns that ideological predispositions or social group membership may condition the observed effects.

Although not a core hypothesis, I explore whether the effect of carceral contact on deservingness varies across ideological groups. This analysis addresses concerns that the relationship between contact and deservingness may simply reflect underlying political ideology. More broadly, prior work suggests that while ideology is a powerful predictor of attitudes toward

marginalized groups, it may also obscure important conditional variation in how individuals interpret personal or vicarious experiences with the criminal legal system.[14] Thus, I test the possibility that respondents with different ideological orientations may interpret contact differently. Specifically, I estimate:

$$\texttt{prisonerdeserves}_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot \texttt{impact}_i + \beta_2 \cdot \texttt{gender}_i + \beta_3 \cdot \texttt{race}_i + \beta_4 \cdot \texttt{education}_i + \beta_5 \cdot \texttt{urban}_i + \beta_6 \cdot \texttt{party}_i +$$

A positive and statistically significant β_3 would indicate that contact increases deservingness more among liberal respondents than conservative ones.

In an exploratory analysis, I examine whether the relationship between criminal legal contact and deservingness differs by respondent race and racial attitudes. Although not predicted by my core theoretical framework, this test allows for the possibility that lived experience and racialized constructions of criminality may moderate how individuals interpret contact. Race is central to matters of carceral policy (Michener 2019) as are racial "attitudes" to punitiveness in the American context (Fresh, n.d.). I estimate the following model:

$$\text{prisonerdeserves}_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot \text{impact}_i + \beta_2 \cdot \text{race}_i + \beta_3 \cdot (\text{impact}_i \times \text{race}_i) + \beta_4 \cdot \text{FIRE}_i + \mathbf{X}_i'\boldsymbol{\beta} + u_i$$

Although presented in simplified form above, each component of the model is entered separately in estimation. Specifically, race_i represents a set of three mutually exclusive indicator variables for racial self-identification (non-Hispanic Black, Hispanic/Latino/a/e, and "Other," with non-Hispanic white as the reference category). The interaction term $\text{impact}_i \times \text{race}_i$ refers to separate interaction terms between carceral contact and each racial group. FIRE_i refers to the four-item battery capturing racial fear, institutional racism acknowledg-

ment, and racial empathy, with each item entered individually to preserve its theoretical distinctiveness. $\mathbf{X}_i'$ includes standard demographic and attitudinal controls.

Appendix B: Exploratory Models of Policy Response Consistency

While my primary tests of H2 focus on average support for assistance- and penalty-oriented policies, this section explores whether criminal legal contact is also associated with greater consistency in support across multiple decarceral policy items. Social construction theory suggests that personal connection to stigmatized policy targets may reduce reliance on stereotypes, potentially leading to more coherent or unconditional policy preferences. The models below assess this possibility by estimating the variance and standard deviation of respondents' support for help-oriented policies, as well as fitting a mixed effects model to evaluate within-respondent consistency.

To confirm my findings with an alternative measure of consistency, I also calculate the standard deviation of each person's responses across the already standardized help policy items. This provides a normalized measure of response dispersion:

$$\texttt{sdhelp}_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot \texttt{impact}_i + \beta_2 \cdot \texttt{prisonerdeserves}_i + \beta_3 \cdot \texttt{polor}_i + X_i' \cdot \texttt{controls} + u_i$$

I expect that β_1 will be negative in both models, indicating that individuals with direct or proximate experiences with incarceration (impact =1) show more consistent support across different decarceral policies, even after controlling for deservingness attitudes and other demographic factors. This would support my hypothesis that personal connection leads to more coherent or unconditional policy preferences, rather than simply higher average support.

Because aggregate measures may obscure underlying variation, I fit an ordinal logistic mixed

effects model predicting policy support, with random intercepts for respondents. The model includes fixed effects for policy experience (impact), deservingness perceptions, attitudinal and remaining controls:

[

$$\text{logit}\left(\Pr(Y_{ij} \leq k)\right) = \alpha_k - \left(\beta_1 \cdot \text{impact}_i + \beta_2 \cdot \text{prisonerdeserves}_i + \beta_3 \cdot \text{pol\_or}_i + \mathbf{X}_i'\boldsymbol{\beta} + u_i + \varepsilon_{ij}\right) \tag{1}$$

]

Here, β_1 estimates the average effect of contact on policy preferences; β_2 captures how much perceived deservingness of incarcerated people influences policy support; and β_3 reflects policy help attitudes. The term $\mathbf{X}_i'\boldsymbol{\beta}$ represents control covariates, while u_i allows for respondent-specific baseline support levels. This enables me to model individual-level responses across all policy items simultaneously, and assess both the average effect of experience on policy support (through the fixed effect coefficient) and the consistency of support across policies (through the random effects variance).

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