

# Effect of Education Level and Gender on Punitiveness of American Adults

## Research Questions

- Are White American adults more likely to agree with the use of the death penalty and believe court systems are not harsh enough compared to individuals of color?
- Do these associations continue to appear when controlling for education level or gender?

## Significance

- It is believed the punitive views of the American public heavily influence the mass incarceration in the United States (Brown & Socia, 2017).

## Background

- According to a 2016 Gallop poll, 60% of respondents supported and 37% opposed capital punishment (Trahan, Dixon, & Nodeland, 2019).
- Mass incarceration and harsh punishment disproportionately affect Black and Hispanic Americans (Irizarry et al., 2016).
- Differences in punitiveness among races in highly interdependent on factors such as gender and social class (which can be defined by education) (Trahan, Dixon, & Nodeland, 2019).

## Hypotheses

- White adults are more likely to agree with the use of the death penalty than any other race.
- Black adults are more likely to believe that court systems are too harsh than any other race.
- Racial differences will be greater among males and individuals who have lower levels of education.

## Data and Sample

- General Social Survey 2014 (N=2,538), 2016 (N=2,867), and 2018 (N=2,348).
- American adults 18 and older living in non-institutionalized households.

## Dependent Measures

### Punitiveness

- Use of Capital Punishment for Murder
  - Favor: 62.5%
  - Oppose: 37.5%
- Harshness of Courts When Dealing with Criminals
  - Too Harsh: 19.3%
  - Not Harsh Enough: 61.9%
  - About Right: 18.8%

## Independent Measure

### Race and Ethnicity

- White: 65%
- Black: 16%
- Hispanic: 14%
- Other: 5%

## Control Measures

### Highest Level of Education

- High School or Less: 41.8%
- Some College or More: 58.1%

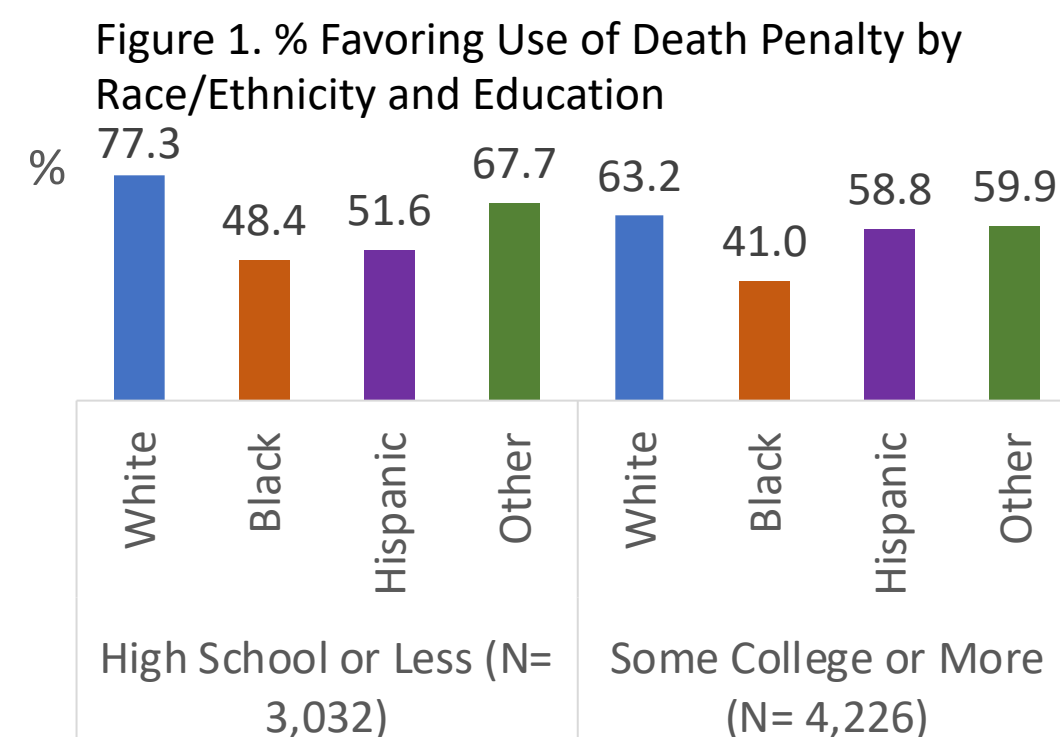
### Gender Measured as Biological Sex

- Male: 44.7%
- Female: 55.3%

## Analysis

- Cross tabulation and Chi-square test using SPSS

## Results



## Results Continued

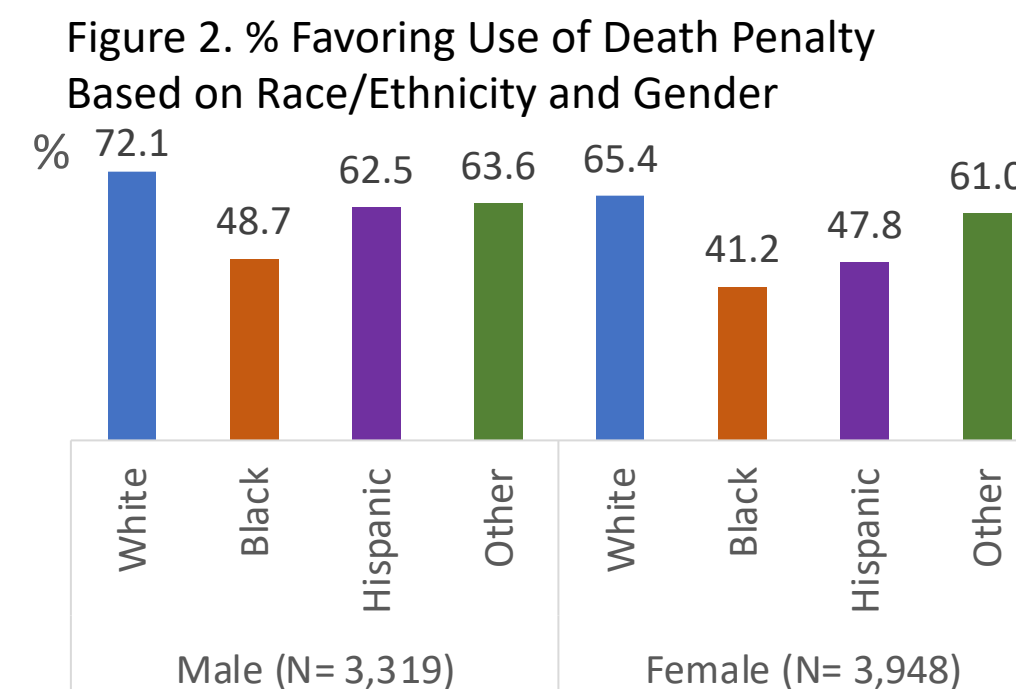


Figure 3. % Opinion on Harshness of Courts Based on Race/Ethnicity and Education

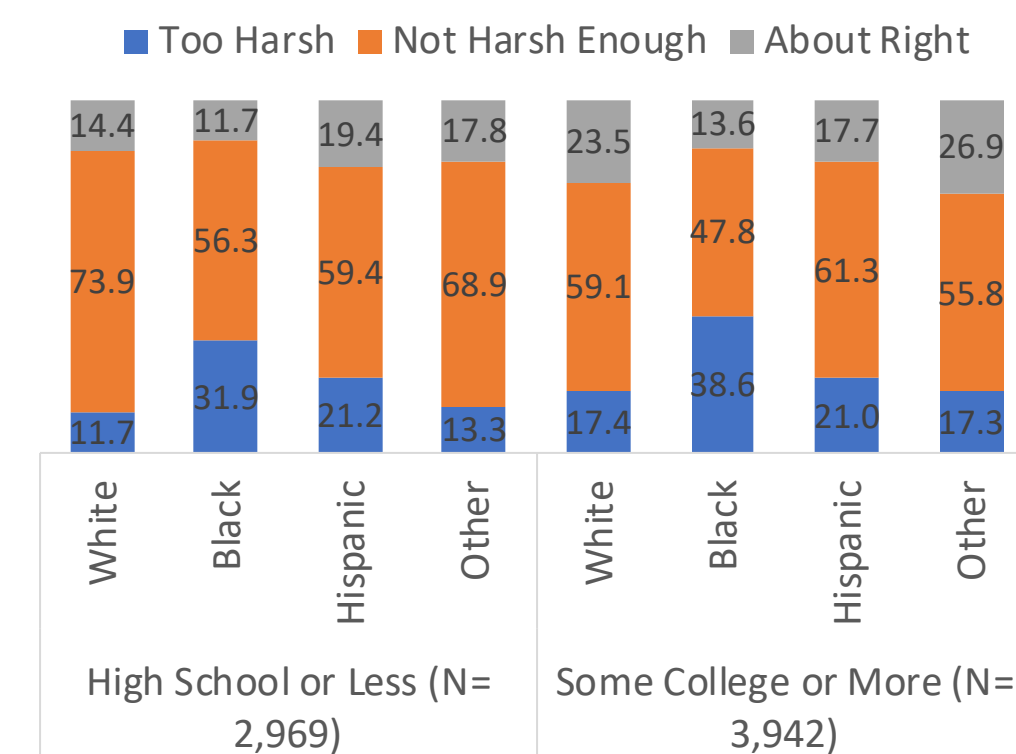
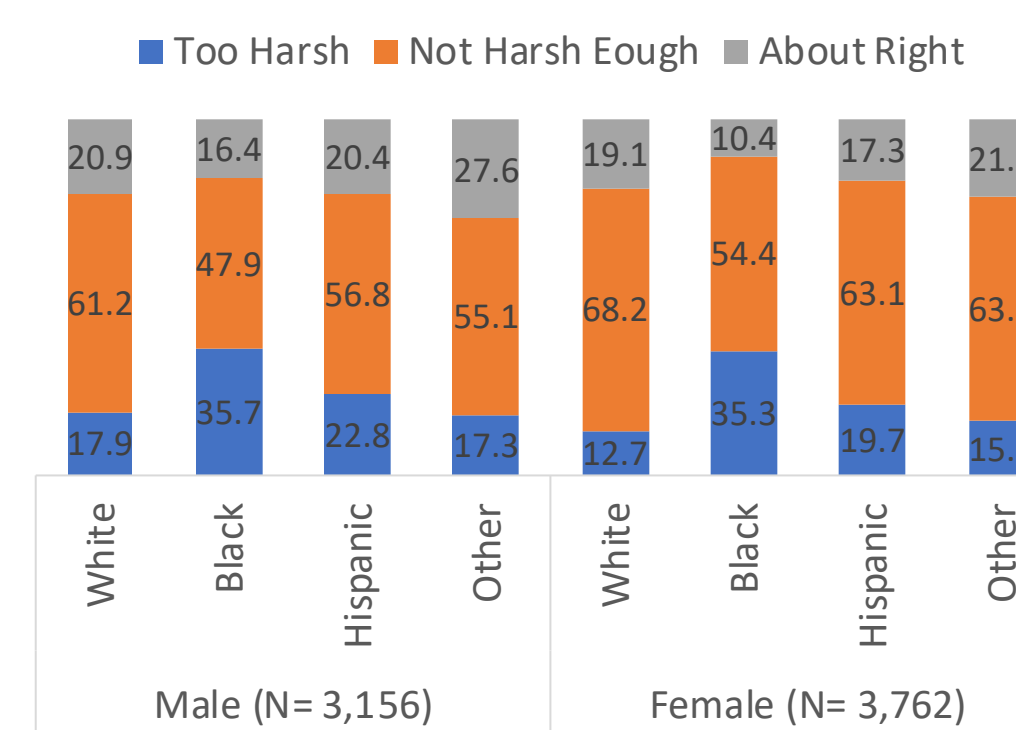


Figure 4. % Opinion on Harshness of Courts Based on Race/Ethnicity and Gender



Note: Chi-square tests are significant on all tests for all groups at  $p < .001$ .

## Summary of Findings

- Most Americans (62%) support death penalty and feel courts are not harsh enough.
- Black respondents were less punitive than White or Hispanic respondent, regardless of education level or gender.
- White respondents tended to be more punitive than other groups.
- Exception: More Hispanic respondents with college education felt courts were not harsh enough than their White counterparts.

## Policy Implications

- Punitiveness of individuals in specific social groups should be considered in legislation regarding treatment and punishment of criminals.
- Events that create more positive interactions between criminal justice system and citizens of various communities are warranted.
- Need to create more opportunities for underrepresented groups to raise their concerns regarding the criminal justice system.

## References

- Brown, E. K., & Socia, K. M. (2017). Twenty-first century punitiveness: Social sources of punitive American views reconsidered. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology, 33*, 935-959.
- Irizarry, Y., May, D. C., Davis, A., & Wood, P. B. (2016). Mass incarceration through a different lens: Race, subcontext, and perceptions of punitiveness of correctional alternatives when compared to prison. *Race and Justice, 6* (3), 236-256.
- Trahan, A., Dixon, A., & Nodeland, B. (2019). Public opinion of capital punishment: An intersectional analysis of race, gender, and class effects. *Criminal Justice Review, 44* (4), 452-469.