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THE TRANSFORMATION OF CRIME AND PUNISHMENT BELIEFS IN AMERICA

Submission Date: Aug 23, 2024, Accepted Date: Aug 28, 2024,

Published Date: Sep 02, 2024

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ABSTRACT

Over the past several decades, beliefs about crime and punishment in American society have undergone significant transformation. This study explores the changing attitudes towards crime, justice, and penal policies in the United States, examining how these shifts reflect broader social, political, and cultural trends. By analyzing historical data, public opinion surveys, media representations, and legislative changes, this research identifies key factors that have influenced the evolution of public perceptions and policy decisions related to crime and punishment. The study highlights a growing divergence between traditional punitive approaches and emerging perspectives that emphasize rehabilitation, restorative justice, and systemic reform. It also considers the impact of high-profile criminal cases, social movements, and evolving narratives on crime, race, and inequality in shaping public opinion and policy. Through a comprehensive review of the literature and case studies, the study provides insights into the complex interplay between societal values and the criminal justice system. The findings suggest that while punitive attitudes remain prevalent in certain contexts, there is a notable shift towards more nuanced and compassionate approaches to crime and justice in America. This transformation has significant implications for policymakers, criminal justice professionals, and society at large as they navigate the challenges of creating a fair and effective system that balances accountability with social equity and rehabilitation.

KEYWORDS

Crime, punishment, American society, beliefs, justice system, public opinion, penal policies, rehabilitation, restorative justice, criminal justice reform, social trends, media influence, legislative changes, racial inequality, punitive approaches.

INTRODUCTION



The landscape of crime and punishment in America has experienced profound changes over the past several decades, reflecting broader shifts in societal values, political ideologies, and cultural norms. Historically, American attitudes towards crime and punishment were largely characterized by a punitive approach, emphasizing retribution and deterrence through harsh sentencing and incarceration. However, recent decades have witnessed a transformation in these beliefs, driven by increasing awareness of the limitations and adverse effects of traditional penal practices. This evolving perspective is influenced by a growing recognition of the social and systemic factors contributing to criminal behavior, such as poverty, mental health issues, and racial disparities. The rise of movements advocating for criminal justice reform, alongside high-profile cases highlighting the flaws in the current system, has spurred a shift towards more progressive and rehabilitative approaches. This shift encompasses a broader discussion on restorative justice, efforts to reduce mass incarceration, and the integration of mental health and addiction treatment within the justice system. Furthermore, media portrayals, academic research, and public opinion surveys reveal a growing demand for policies that prioritize rehabilitation over punishment and address the root causes of criminal behavior. This study aims to explore the multifaceted nature of these changing beliefs, examining how they reflect and contribute to broader societal trends and how they are reshaping the American criminal justice landscape. By analyzing historical shifts, contemporary debates, and emerging practices, the research provides a comprehensive overview of how evolving attitudes towards crime and punishment are influencing policy, public perception, and the future of justice in America.

METHOD

This study employs a multi-faceted approach to investigate the transformation of crime and punishment beliefs in America, integrating historical analysis, quantitative data, and qualitative insights to provide a comprehensive understanding of evolving attitudes and their impact on the criminal justice system. The research methodology consists of three primary phases: historical document analysis, public opinion survey analysis, and qualitative interviews with key stakeholders.

The first phase involves historical document analysis, which focuses on examining legislative records, judicial decisions, and policy documents from the past several decades. This includes a review of changes in sentencing laws, prison reform initiatives, and key criminal justice policies. By analyzing these documents, the study aims to trace the evolution of crime and punishment beliefs, identifying major legislative shifts and their underlying causes. This historical perspective provides context for understanding current attitudes and policies and highlights how past events and societal changes have influenced contemporary views on crime and justice.

The second phase employs quantitative data analysis through public opinion surveys and polls. This involves examining national and regional surveys that track changes in public attitudes towards crime and punishment over time. Key sources include the General Social Survey (GSS), the Pew Research Center, and other reputable polling organizations. The analysis focuses on trends in public support for various criminal justice policies, such as sentencing reform, rehabilitation, and restorative justice. By analyzing demographic variations and shifts in opinion across different groups, the study aims to identify patterns and correlations that reveal how societal attitudes towards crime and punishment have transformed. Statistical methods are used to assess changes in



public opinion and to explore the relationship between demographic factors and attitudes towards criminal justice issues.

The third phase consists of qualitative interviews with a diverse range of stakeholders, including policymakers, criminal justice professionals, academics, and advocacy group representatives. These semi-structured interviews are designed to gather in-depth insights into the factors influencing changing beliefs about crime and punishment. The interviews explore participants' perspectives on recent developments in criminal justice policy, the impact of social movements, and the challenges and opportunities associated with implementing reform. The qualitative data provides nuanced understanding and context that complements the quantitative findings, highlighting the complexities of evolving beliefs and the practical implications for policy and practice.

Data from the historical document analysis, public opinion surveys, and qualitative interviews are synthesized to provide a comprehensive overview of the transformation in beliefs about crime and punishment. The study employs thematic analysis to identify common themes and trends across the different data sources. This approach allows for a nuanced interpretation of how changing societal values, political ideologies, and cultural narratives are influencing attitudes towards crime and justice.

The multi-faceted methodology of this study enables a thorough exploration of the transformation of crime and punishment beliefs in America. By integrating historical, quantitative, and qualitative data, the research offers a detailed understanding of the factors driving changes in public attitudes and their implications for the criminal justice system. This comprehensive approach provides valuable insights

for policymakers, practitioners, and scholars seeking to navigate and influence the evolving landscape of crime and punishment in American society.

RESULTS

The study on the transformation of crime and punishment beliefs in America reveals a significant shift in public attitudes and policy approaches over recent decades. Historical document analysis shows a clear trajectory from a punitive-oriented criminal justice system towards more rehabilitative and reformatory approaches. Key legislative changes, such as the reduction of mandatory minimum sentences and the implementation of diversion programs, reflect a growing recognition of the need for alternatives to incarceration. This shift is further evidenced by a notable increase in bipartisan support for criminal justice reform, aimed at addressing systemic issues such as mass incarceration, racial disparities, and the over-reliance on punitive measures.

Quantitative data from public opinion surveys indicate a substantial change in societal attitudes. There is growing public support for policies that emphasize rehabilitation over retribution, as well as for initiatives focused on restorative justice and mental health treatment. The surveys reveal a marked increase in favor of reducing sentences for non-violent offenders and expanding programs that support reintegration into society. Demographic analysis shows that younger generations, in particular, are more likely to advocate for reformatory justice approaches, highlighting a generational shift in attitudes towards crime and punishment.

Qualitative insights from interviews with policymakers, criminal justice professionals, and advocacy groups provide additional context for these trends. Stakeholders emphasize that the increased focus on



rehabilitation and restorative practices stems from a combination of factors, including high-profile cases of wrongful convictions, growing awareness of the impact of incarceration on marginalized communities, and advocacy efforts by grassroots organizations. The interviews reveal that while significant progress has been made, challenges remain, particularly in achieving comprehensive reform and addressing entrenched practices within the justice system.

Overall, the results demonstrate a complex but clear transformation in beliefs about crime and punishment in America. There is a discernible move away from punitive approaches towards a more nuanced understanding that incorporates rehabilitation, restorative justice, and systemic reform. These changes reflect broader social and cultural shifts and highlight the need for continued efforts to address the remaining gaps and challenges in the criminal justice system. The findings underscore the importance of integrating evolving societal values into policy-making to create a more equitable and effective criminal justice system.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study on the transformation of crime and punishment beliefs in America reveal a profound shift in societal attitudes and criminal justice policies that reflect broader changes in social values and priorities. Historically, the American criminal justice system was characterized by a stringent, punitive approach that emphasized retribution and deterrence. However, the contemporary landscape showcases a growing consensus around the need for reform, driven by increasing awareness of the limitations and consequences of traditional punitive measures. This shift is marked by a significant rise in support for rehabilitative and restorative justice practices, which seek to address the root causes of criminal behavior

and provide meaningful opportunities for reintegration and support.

The quantitative data from public opinion surveys illustrate a clear movement towards more progressive attitudes, particularly among younger generations who are increasingly advocating for alternatives to incarceration and a focus on mental health and substance abuse treatment. This generational shift highlights a growing recognition of the social and systemic factors contributing to criminal behavior and a desire for a justice system that prioritizes rehabilitation over punishment. The increased support for criminal justice reform, as evidenced by changes in legislative policies and public opinion, signifies a critical re-evaluation of traditional approaches to crime and punishment.

Qualitative insights from stakeholder interviews further illuminate the factors driving this transformation. Advocacy groups, policymakers, and criminal justice professionals highlight the role of high-profile cases, social movements, and grassroots activism in pushing for reform. These insights reveal that while progress has been made, challenges persist in implementing comprehensive changes and overcoming entrenched practices within the justice system. Stakeholders emphasize the importance of continued advocacy and policy innovation to address remaining gaps and ensure that reform efforts translate into tangible improvements in the lives of individuals affected by the criminal justice system.

Overall, the discussion underscores that the transformation of crime and punishment beliefs in America is both a reflection of and a response to evolving social values. The shift towards a more rehabilitative and restorative approach represents a significant change in how society understands and addresses crime. This transformation offers the



potential for a more equitable and effective criminal justice system, but it also requires sustained effort and commitment to overcome existing barriers and ensure that reforms are fully realized. The findings suggest that continued engagement with these evolving beliefs and a focus on evidence-based practices will be crucial in shaping the future of criminal justice in America.

CONCLUSION

The transformation of crime and punishment beliefs in America reflects a significant and ongoing evolution in how society conceptualizes justice and addresses criminal behavior. This study highlights a shift from a predominantly punitive approach to a more nuanced and reform-oriented perspective that emphasizes rehabilitation, restorative justice, and systemic reform. Historical analysis and quantitative data reveal a growing public and legislative consensus on the need for alternatives to traditional incarceration and punitive measures. This change is driven by increasing awareness of the social and economic costs of mass incarceration, as well as the recognition of systemic inequalities and the effectiveness of rehabilitative programs in reducing recidivism.

Qualitative insights from interviews with stakeholders underscore the impact of advocacy, high-profile cases, and social movements in shaping contemporary beliefs and policy changes. While significant progress has been made, including legislative reforms and shifts in public opinion, challenges remain in fully implementing these changes and addressing entrenched practices within the criminal justice system. The continued need for comprehensive and adaptive policies that align with evolving societal values is clear.

In conclusion, the ongoing transformation of crime and punishment beliefs in America represents a critical

opportunity to reimagine and improve the criminal justice system. Embracing reformative approaches that prioritize rehabilitation, mental health support, and restorative practices has the potential to create a more equitable and effective system. To realize these goals, sustained advocacy, policy innovation, and engagement with evolving public attitudes will be essential. The study's findings suggest that by continuing to address the root causes of criminal behavior and focusing on evidence-based practices, American society can move towards a justice system that better reflects its values of fairness, equity, and rehabilitation.

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