

Together, *yui* and active involvement in the community brought not only the volunteers, but also the community, to a place where they could envision a better tomorrow despite all that had been lost.

As our world population ages and climate change takes its toll, we will be forced to reconcile the fact that millions

of people—many of them elderly and particularly vulnerable—live in a red zone. We cannot sit in horror, watching as *another* hurricane or tsunami wipes out communities. We must face our challenges together and bridge community relationships before the storm. Our world is aging toward disaster unless we

prepare for the fact that many of our grandparents, the world over, live where Mother Nature hits the hardest.

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# is the public getting smarter on crime?

by christopher uggen and ryan larson

The crime rate surely ranks among the most used and abused social indicators. In politics, media, and popular culture, crime and punishment are invoked to stir up strong public sentiments. But while crime is clearly a social construction, it is also a real concern for individuals, families, and communities. So we can learn a lot by asking a representative sample of Americans what they think about crime and punishment, especially when we track their attitudes and opinions over time. Comparing their thoughts and fears with crime statistics gives us a window into how public opinion tracks “actual” crime.

We focus here on four basic crime stories, as told in the nationally representative General Social Survey (GSS): fear of crime, attitudes about the harshness (or leniency) of the court system, views on police violence, and support for the death penalty. In each case, we argue, American *attitudes* about crime have begun to align more closely with the best available social indicators on the extent and social distribution of “actual” crime and punishment. Nevertheless, there remains a yawning gap between attitudes and occurrence—and sharp differences based on age, sex, race, and political affiliation.

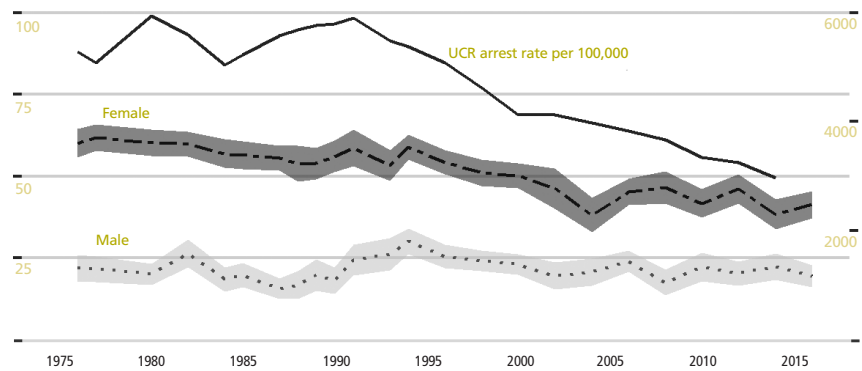
## fear

As then-Chief Justice Warren Berger wrote in 1981, “Crime and the fear of crime have permeated the fabric of

American life.” The top chart shows fear of crime for women and men from 1975 to 2016, plotted alongside the official U.S. arrest rate over that time. Men’s fear hasn’t changed too much over the years, with about one in five men reporting they

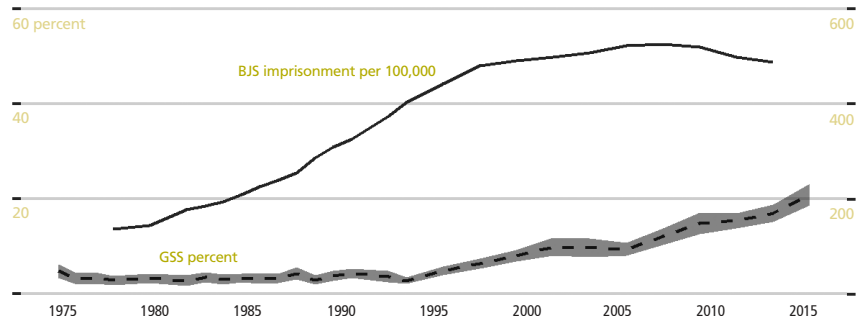
are “afraid to walk at night” in their own neighborhood. But the percentage of women expressing this level of fear has fallen from about 62% in the mid-1970s to about 40% in the mid-2010s. So, as the arrest rate has fallen, so too has the

Global Social Survey (GSS) crime fears by gender, 1975-2016  
Afraid to walk at night in neighborhood?



Source:

GSS Courts, 1975-2016  
Are courts too harsh?



Source:

fear of crime—but mainly for women rather than men. That said, women in 2016 continued to express significantly greater fear of crime than men. To give readers a sense of the variability and precision of these population estimates, the shaded region around the lines shows the standard error for each data series. Fear of crime has also dropped more for older Americans than for youth (not shown). From the 1970s until the mid-2000s, people over 65 expressed greater fear of crime than those aged 18-34, even though their risk of victimization was far lower. In recent years, however, younger Americans have reported the highest rates of fear, which is more consistent with their victimization risk.

### punishment

While crime has been dropping for decades, U.S. punishment rose so dramatically from 1975 to 2008 that criminologists identify this period as the

“mass incarceration” era. Social scientists debate whether harsh punishment is a cause or a consequence of punitive public attitudes, and GSS data show that both scenarios are plausible.

When asked whether the courts

are too harsh (bottom p. 76), Americans have generally said “no,” even as the U.S. became the world leader in incarceration. The solid line shows the steep increase in the imprisonment rate from 1975 to 2008, and a slight drop since then. Yet from 1975 to 1995, only about 2-5% of Americans believed that the courts were too harsh (versus “not harsh enough” and “about right”), as shown in the dashed line. This has changed, however, in the

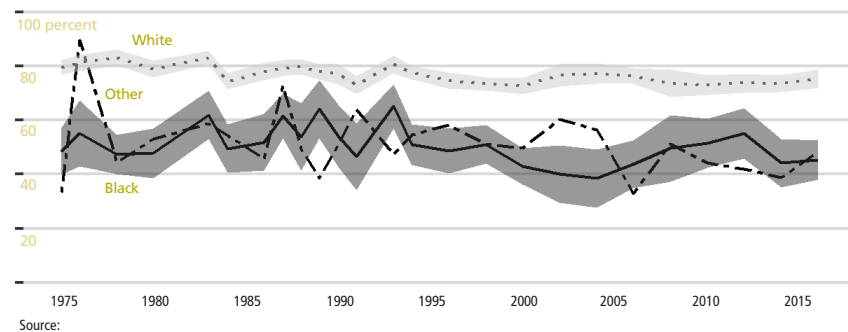
last two decades. Recall from the previous figure that crime began dropping sharply in the mid-1990s, but punishment kept rising. From 1995 to 2016, the share that would prefer more *lenient* courts and sentences began rising (from about 3.5% to

over 20% in 2016). In short, it remains the case that Americans favor harsh punishment, but the proportion who think the courts are too harsh has risen from one in 20 U.S. adults to over 1 in 5.

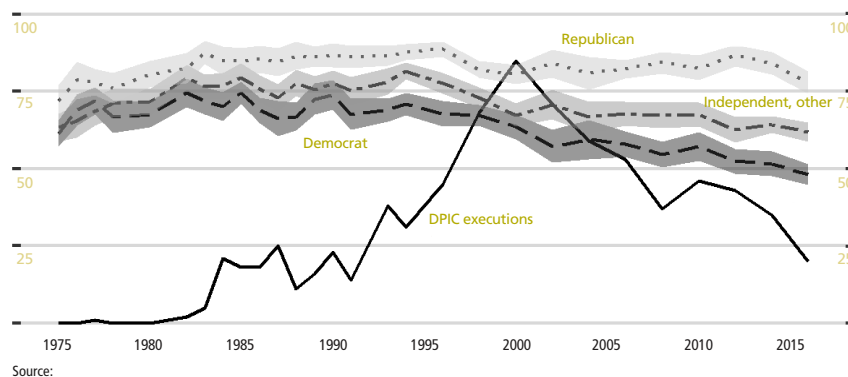
### police violence

Race and racism in criminal justice is today a front-and-center issue for Black Lives Matter and other social movements. In light of recent highly publicized police killings (including the fatal shootings of Philando Castile in 2016 and Michael Brown in 2014) we might expect declining support for police use of force. Since the 1970s, the GSS has asked U.S. adults whether they would approve of a police officer striking a male citizen. There is a sizeable race gap in support of such violence by police, with over 72% of Whites but less than 50% of people of color saying they would approve of an officer hitting a man in recent years (top left). Although these percentages have declined since the 1970s (and there is greater fluctuation with the line for Black survey respondents due to their smaller numbers, as indicated in the dark shaded region), they have not fallen dramatically. About three-fourths of Whites and almost half of Black and Other survey respondents still approve of police officers striking male citizens in some circumstances. And the trend since 2012 is downward *only* for Blacks.

GSS police force by race, 1975-2016  
Approve of policeman striking male citizen?



GSS capital punishment by party ID, 1975-2016  
Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?



### death penalty

Crime and punishment are highly politicized, particularly in the U.S., where

## trends

ected officials can quickly and directly implement changes to the criminal code and correctional policy. In the 1960s, a “law and order” agenda helped Republican leaders like Barry Goldwater, Richard Nixon, and Ronald Reagan gain a partisan advantage with voters. By the

punitiveness, its imposition has followed a much different historical trajectory than incarceration (bottom p. 77). In the early 1970s, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled capital punishment unconstitutional in the period between the *Furman* (1972) and *Gregg* (1976) cases. Though most

### crime, punishment, and public attitudes

Crime and punishment are indeed social constructions, such that public opinion has never marched in lockstep with shifts in victimization or incarceration. Nevertheless, forty years of GSS data suggest that public attitudes about crime *have* shifted—in ways that parallel changes in the absolute rate of crime and punishment. From fear to punitiveness to police violence, Americans remain deeply divided by race, sex, class, and political partisanship. Overall, however, the fear of crime has fallen, more people are saying that the courts are too harsh and that they oppose both police violence and the death penalty. For many sociologists, such shifts suggest the public is making halting but steady progress toward becoming smarter, rather than tougher, on crime.

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## Public opinion has never marched in lockstep with shifts in victimization or incarceration.

1990s, Democrats such as Bill Clinton sought to neutralize this advantage by out-toughing the Republicans on crime policy and rhetoric. Predictably, with *both* major parties adopting a tough-on-crime stance, punishment continued to increase. As crime began its long decline in the 1990s, it became a far less salient issue in national political debates. In 2017, however, it’s back to the future, as President Trump and Attorney General Jeff Sessions seek to reprise the tough-on-crime rhetoric and policies of former presidents Nixon and Reagan.

Although support for the death penalty is a good general indicator of

Americans still favored capital punishment at the time, support for the death penalty had waned since the 1950s. Although there were only a handful of executions between 1975 and 1980, large majorities of Democrats, Republicans, and Independents all favored the death penalty. Since that time, the number of executions (shown in the solid line) has risen and fallen, but support among Republicans has remained above 75%. In contrast, the percentage of Democrats favoring the death penalty rose (with both the crime rate and the rate of executions) through the early 1990s, but then fell steadily, finally slipping below 50% in 2016.

## american religion, all or nothing at all

by michael hout

Most *Contexts* readers will know that in recent years Americans became less attached to organized religion. The 2016 General Social Survey (GSS) estimated that 22% of adults preferred no religion,

This strong trend invites the inference that American religion is declining rapidly. But no single trend can give a complete view of a complicated institution. The rise of the “nones” is interesting, in part,

To balance the assessment, I turn to GSS data on the strength of religious identification, participation in religious services, prayer, and belief in God. The data show a polarization of sorts. While non-affiliation has grown, people claim a strong religious identification as often as they did forty years ago. The trend to non-affiliation occurred among people who were not strongly attached to religion and who rarely attended services. To characterize the change as “liberals emptying the pews,” as a recent *Atlantic* article did, is inaccurate. Non-attenders

## People for whom religion is not a “strong” identity give less reliable answers for questions on religion.

up from 21% in 2014, 14% in 2004, 9% in 1994, and 7% in both 1984 and 1974.

because it is the most extreme evidence of religious decline in the United States.