



# The racial foundations of whites' support for child saving

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## ABSTRACT

Scholars emphasize that attitudes toward rehabilitation and views about punitive policies are distinct phenomena with seemingly unique etiologies. However, few existing studies examine the sources of public views about juvenile rehabilitation, or “child saving,” and none engage a measure of racial attitudes. At the same time, recent theoretical work implicates racial concerns as a central foundation of public opinion about youth justice. This paper thus provides the first assessment of whether whites' perceptions of the racial makeup of delinquents and animosities toward blacks are associated with their views about juvenile rehabilitation. Findings show that whites who more strongly associate delinquency with blacks and those who are racially resentful both tend to be less supportive—in absolute and relative terms—of rehabilitation. The results also suggest that contextual threat moderates the effect of racial typification of delinquency, but not that of racial resentment, on whites' views about rehabilitation.

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## 1. Introduction

This nation's approach to dealing with minor children who commit criminal offenses shifted dramatically beginning in the early 1970s. It was an occurrence that coincided with the largest change in the racial demographics of the clientele of the juvenile justice system in the history of the “parental state” (Ward, 2012).<sup>1</sup> Prior to the shift, and has had been the case since the founding of the first juvenile court in 1899, the majority of youth in juvenile correctional facilities were white (Hawkins and Kemp-Leonard, 2005; Ward, 2012). During that earlier period, formal responses to delinquency were motivated by an ideology of childhood immaturity and malleability (Feld, 1999) and, at least in intent, focused primarily on “child saving” or the treatment of juvenile offenders through the provision of individualized rehabilitative care (Howell, 1997; Krisberg, 2005).

The past four decades, though, have witnessed a significant decline in the proportion of committed juveniles who are white, one that ultimately resulted in white youth losing their majority status in youth residential facilities (Bishop, 2005; Ward, 2012). This development corresponded with public attacks on the assumption that delinquents, especially those who commit serious violent offenses, are more amenable to rehabilitation than adult criminals and a concurrent introduction of reforms designed to get tough with youthful offenders (Merlo, 2000; Zimring, 1998). Youth justice legislation enacted during this time period weakened the confidentiality protections that guard delinquents against stigmatization, provided for tougher, more punitive dispositions in juvenile courts, and facilitated the transfer of a larger proportion of youthful offenders to the criminal justice system (Snyder and Sickmund, 2006; Torbet and Szymanski, 1998). The adoption of such policies led observers to conclude that society is experiencing the “recriminalization of delinquency” (Singer, 1996: 1) and to ask “Is child saving dead?” (Moon et al., 2000a).

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<sup>1</sup> The juvenile justice system is commonly referred to as the parental state because its operations have historically been organized around and justified by the philosophy of *parens patriae*, which holds that in the final analysis, a child's well-being is the responsibility of the state.

Scholars have argued that the “get tough” reforms of recent years reflect the acceptance by policymakers and many members of the public of a view of delinquents as “adult-like, incipient career criminals,” which, in turn, “legitimized a different set of penal responses” (Bishop, 2000: 84). One leading theory has been that the widespread endorsement of this depiction of youthful offenders was facilitated by the intersection of an increasing public awareness of blacks’ overrepresentation within the juvenile justice system with racialized conceptions of childhood and whites’ resentment of minority gains accrued through civil rights victories (Feld, 1999, 2003; Nunn, 2002). Since the inception of youth justice in America, socially constructed images of children have distinguished black juveniles from white juveniles in ways that define them as less deserving of and less fit for rehabilitative intervention (Bush, 2010; Pisciotta, 1983; Ward, 2012). Additionally, as Feld (1999: 337) has explained, racial resentment, by intensifying “hostility toward other people’s children,” likely undermines support for programs, including child-saving initiatives, that may disproportionately benefit blacks (see also Unnever and Cullen, 2009). Accordingly, some scholars have suggested that whites’ relative support for getting tough on youth crime as compared to child saving, especially in the case of serious delinquency, is directly tied to their perceptions of racial makeup of the recipients of such policies and their animosities toward blacks (Feld, 1999, 2003; Hawkins and Kemp-Leonard, 2005; Krisberg, 2003; Nunn, 2002; Ward, 2012).<sup>2</sup>

Surprisingly, however, there is a dearth of research examining the potential role of racial concerns in structuring views about juvenile justice policies. Researchers have only recently begun to explore the relationship between racial beliefs and punitiveness toward juvenile offenders, with just three previous investigations including any measure of racial attitudes in models predicting public support for getting tough on youth crime (Goidel et al., 2011; Pickett and Chiricos, 2012; Welch, 2011). And no studies to date have examined whether racial beliefs influence attitudes toward juvenile rehabilitation. This latter void in the literature is particularly important for two reasons. First, research shows that support for punitive policies and support for rehabilitation are distinct phenomena that stem from different sources (Mascini and Houtman, 2006; McCorkle, 1993; Pickett et al., 2013). Second, there is a long history of racial inequality in the parental state’s administration of the rehabilitative ideal (Bush, 2010; Ward, 2012), and the theoretical literature suggests that racial concerns underlie contemporary skepticism about serious delinquents’ deservingness of and amenability to rehabilitation (Feld, 1999; Nunn, 2002).

The current study uses data from a recent national telephone survey to address this research gap. Specifically, we examine the extent to which the perceived racial makeup of delinquents and racial resentment are associated with whites’ absolute level of support for juvenile treatment programs as well as their relative level of support for the former as compared to punitive youth justice policies—that is, the degree to which whites are more supportive of one approach as compared to the other. An additional research question that we explore is whether the relationships between whites’ racial beliefs and views about child saving are moderated by theoretically relevant contextual factors. This portion of the analysis is motivated by extant theoretical and empirical work suggesting that the effect of racial beliefs on whites’ support for juvenile rehabilitation may be particularly strong in contexts characterized by large or growing black populations or high unemployment.

## 2. Race, childhood, and juvenile justice in America

The central theoretical motivation for the current research is a theory of race and childhood that emphasizes the racialized nature of social conceptions of youthfulness. The origins of youth justice in America trace back to the efforts of nineteenth century reformers who were in part motivated by, and whose initiatives received public support because of, the emergence of a new view of childhood and adolescence as time periods of innocence, dependence, and malleability (Feld, 1999; Platt, 2009). As Degler (1980:66) has explained, in the 1800s, “children began to be seen as different from adults; among other things they were considered now more innocent; childhood itself was perceived as it is today, as a period of life not only worth recognizing and cherishing but extending.” This new view of children and adolescents as non-adults constituted the ideological basis for separating youthful offenders from their adult counterparts and providing them with specialized rehabilitative care (Feld, 1999).

Despite its seeming progressiveness, however, the emergent ideology of childhood immaturity and malleability was apparently applicable only in the case of white children (Nunn, 2002; Soung, 2011). The common perception of black youth was that they were incorrigible and undeserving (Ward, 2012). As Bush (2010: 20) has observed, “rather than malleable ‘blank slates’ capable of being rehabilitated, black children and adolescents were viewed by many whites as ‘hard clay’ fit only for manual labor and social control” (see also Ward, 2012). Pisciotta (1983: 263) has likewise observed that while white child savers assumed that “the ‘plastic nature’ of the white boys could be reshaped in a proper environment,” they “did not . . . believe that black children could be ‘moulded’ with equal facility.” In Ward’s (2009: 288) words, “white skin rendered” juveniles “less threatening, distinctly ‘salvageable,’ and ultimately more assimilable—culturally, economically, and politically—than black and other nonwhite youth.” For this reason, according to Bush (2010: 40), “even the most enlightened proponents of juvenile rehabilitation . . . failed to include African American juveniles in their plans.”

<sup>2</sup> Paralleling the punitive turn in youth justice has been a similar toughening of sanctions for adult offenders, which may also have been driven by racial concerns (Unnever and Cullen, 2010; Welch et al., 2011). The shift to punitive youth justice is particularly remarkable, however, because it deviates substantially from the juvenile justice system’s rehabilitative roots and contrasts its foundational ideology, which depicts juveniles as distinct from adults because of childhood innocence and reformability (Mears et al., 2007).

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