

White Evangelism, Punitive Sentiment, and the Mediating Effect of Racial Resentment

A pervasive “tough on crime” attitude has dominated criminal justice policy and practice in the United States since the 1970s. As a result, incarceration rates and criminal justice spending have reached historic highs. In an effort to understand this meteoric rise in punitiveness, scholars have identified racial prejudice and religion as significant predictors of punitive sentiment among the American public. However, little or no extant research has examined the potential mediating effect of racial resentment on the relationship between religious tradition and punitive attitudes. Using data from the 2017 Kids’ Wellbeing Survey, ordinal and logistic regressions are employed to measure the relationships between religious tradition, racial resentment, and punitive attitudes toward youth criminals. Findings indicate that the effects of religious traditions, particularly Catholic, White Mainline Protestant, and White Evangelical, on punitive attitudes toward criminally involved youth is mediated by racial resentment. This suggests that racial resentment plays a significant role in understanding the relationship between religion and punitive sentiments.

Introduction

Since the mid-1970s, the United States' criminal justice system has become extraordinarily more punitive. Indeed, the incarcerated population has risen from 503,000 in 1980 to 2.2 million in 2014. The number of inmates serving life sentences has increased from 34,000 in 1984 to 162,000 in 2016 (Howard, 2017). Furthermore, the number of people incarcerated for drug offenses has skyrocketed from 41,000 in 1980 to 453,000 in 2017 (Sawyer and Wagner, 2019). Juveniles are regularly prosecuted in adult courts and sent to adult prisons. The wisdom of judges has been replaced with unforgiving mandatory minimum sentences. These excessively punitive measures have contributed to U.S. corrections expenditures rising from 6.7 billion in 1985 to 60.9 billion in 2018 (The Sentencing Project, 2017). Finally, due to mandatory sentencing minimums and other punitive policies, criminal sentences are often unnecessarily harsh with over half of all prisoners being non-violent offenders (Sawyer and Wagner, 2019).

In response to these trends, the public's punitiveness and the implications of such have become an increasingly important area of research. One specific aspect of punitiveness that has received extensive attention is its relationship with religion. Numerous studies have found significant relationships between punitiveness and religious belonging, belief, and behavior (Bader et al., 2010; Baker and Booth, 2016; Grasmick, et al., 1992; Unnever and Cullen, 2006). This is especially true of Christian fundamentalism which some scholars have argued is a driving force of America's uniquely punitive criminal justice system (Griffith, 2020; Howard, 2017; Tonry, 2009; Wald and Calhoun-Brown, 2007). However, little or no research to date has examined whether racial resentment plays a role in mediating the relationship between religion (especially Christian fundamentalism) and punitiveness. Given the considerable body of evidence that suggests certain religious traditions are more racially prejudiced than others (see

Allport and Ross, 1967; Altemeyer and Hunsberger, 2005; Gorusch and Aleshire, 1974; Hall et al., 2010), this is a notably underdeveloped area in our understanding of punitive sentiment.

Using data from the 2017 Kids' Wellbeing Survey, the current study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Do religious tradition *and* racial resentment influence punitive sentiment?

RQ2: Does racial resentment mediate the relationship between religious tradition and punitive sentiment?

Literature Review

Does A Punitive Public Lead to Punitive Policies?

The effects, and even the existence of, a punitive public have been widely contested. Conclusions regarding the effect of a punitive public on punitive policies have run the gamut from unequivocal repudiations to findings that support a modest, though substantively significant causal connection (Enns, 2016). In opposition to a punitive public causing harsher criminal justice policies, Zimring and Hawkins (1991) argued:

The ad hoc reference to punitive public attitudes when prison population increases is analogous to the attribution of rainfall to the performance of a rain dance while conveniently overlooking all occasions when the ceremony was not followed by rain but by a prolonged period of dry weather or drought.

Similarly, Matthews (2005) refers to the “myth of punitiveness.” He contends that the notion of a punitive public is due to an exaggerated emphasis on punitiveness that ignores progressive attitudes toward crime and punishment. Essentially, public opinion cannot have led to punitive policies because the public is not punitive to begin with. Another view is that public punitiveness has remained relatively stable over time and is therefore incapable of explaining

any variation in outcomes for criminal offenders (Roberts et al., 2003; Zimring and Johnson, 2006). A final argument contends that policymakers overestimate the punitiveness of the public causing a form of “phantom” political pressure that policymakers acquiesce to even though it is not actually there (Gottschalk, 2006).

In contrast to these claims, recent research suggests that there is a substantive causal connection between public opinion and punitive policies. In one of the most comprehensive and robust studies of punitiveness to date, Enns (2014) estimates that nearly 20% of the rise in incarceration since the mid-1970s can be attributed to public punitiveness. This translates into approximately 185,000 state and federal incarcerations each year since 1974 or over 7 million total incarcerations over that time span. In addition, research has also shown that Republican political strength (which is strongly correlated with punitive sentiment) also leads to higher imprisonment rates (Jacobs and Carmichael, 2001). The main mechanism through which this occurs is constituent pressure upon elected representatives to be “tough on crime.” Political candidates tend to increasingly rely on “tough on crime” rhetoric the closer they get to reelection since touting such policies is an effective method for mobilizing voter support (Howard, 2017; Hurwitz and Peffley, 1997; Weiss, 2006). Though the relationship between public punitiveness and harsher criminal justice practices has received considerable scrutiny, the pressure of a punitive public is far from trivial. As the most current research robustly suggests (Enns, 2014, 2016) it has deleterious repercussions for the criminal and incarcerated populations.

Racial Resentment and Punitive Attitudes

Racial prejudice has been identified as a powerful predictor of punitiveness across an impressive range of punitive measures. At the most basic level of punitiveness and race, research shows that Whites tend to be far more punitive than Blacks. This generalization holds true across

many different conceptualizations of punitiveness such as the death penalty, trying juveniles as adults, the belief that courts are not harsh enough, stricter parole boards, and increased money spent on fighting crime (Barkan and Cohn, 2005; Bobo and Johnson, 2004; Johnson, 2008; Unnever et al., 2008; Unnever and Cullen, 2010). The evidence that specifically addresses the effect of racial prejudice on punitiveness consistently points to a strong positive correlation between racial prejudice and punitive attitudes.

For instance, Whites who harbor feelings of racial prejudice, especially those who perceive Blacks as a social threat are far more likely to support the death penalty (Unnever et al., 2008). Bobo and Johnson (2004) observed that racial prejudice led to increased support for capital punishment and harsher punishments for stereotypical “Black crimes” than “White crimes.” In each of these cases, research suggests that the interactive effects between race and racial prejudice are greater for Whites; as much as two times greater in some cases (Bobo and Johnson, 2004). In general, our current understanding of the relationship between racial prejudice and punitiveness is summarized well by Unnever and Cullen (2010):

Racial animus... seems to exert the most consistent effect on public sentiments. This finding suggests that racial resentments are inextricably entwined in public punitiveness and thus should be incorporated into any complete theory of this phenomenon.

Religion and Punitive Attitudes

One popular argument concerning religion and punitiveness is that members of Christian fundamentalist denominations are more punitive than those of other religious backgrounds. Historical analyses of the rise of mass incarceration in America have often turned to the unique prominence of evangelism in American as an explanatory mechanism (Griffith, 2020; Howard, 2017; Tonry, 2009; Wald, 2007). Empirical studies in the early 1990s also posited a clear link

between those who identified as Christian fundamentalists and increased punitiveness (Grasmick et al., 1993; Grasmick et al., 1992; Grasmick and McGill, 1994). As research in this field has developed, however, these findings have been met with increasing skepticism. First, researchers have noted the importance of context. Baumer and colleagues (2003) observed that the correlation between fundamentalism and support for the death penalty diminishes after contextual variables such as homicide rates, conservatism, and racial composition are evaluated. Furthermore, Unnever and Cullen (2006) found that similar contextual variables led to greater or lesser punitiveness. In effect, the relationship between Christian evangelism and punitiveness is complex and may be influenced by non-religious factors. An important caveat of these studies, however, is that the majority of them analyzed support for capital punishment which is not necessarily the same as general punitiveness (Adriaenssen and Aertsen, 2014; Applegate et al., 2000). Less is known about the relationship between religious affiliation and general punitiveness, but a growing body of research has found important differences in punitiveness across religious beliefs.

Hypothesizing that religious belief may be a more salient predictor of punitive attitudes than religious affiliation, researchers have also analyzed the relationship between Christian fundamentalist beliefs and punitiveness. Grasmick et al (1992) were among the first to discover a positive relationship between biblical literalism and punitiveness. Additional research since then has also found support for these findings (Bader et al., 2010; Unnever and Applegate, 2005; Unnever and Cullen, 2006). Although, these results are somewhat mixed as recent research (see Baker and Booth, 2016; Baker and Whitehead, 2019) has failed to detect a significant relationship. Regarding one's personal image of God, Unnever and colleagues (2005) found that those who believe in a rigid, moralistic, and powerful God are more likely to support harsher

courts. Similarly, Bader et al (2010) found that views of an angry and judgmental God are associated with support for more severe punishment of criminals. Importantly, they also observed that one's personal image of God is a more salient predictor of punitiveness than religious affiliation and biblical literalism. In sum, there is clearly some inconsistency in existing research into religion and punitive attitudes. Yet, trends in the literature suggest that religious beliefs tend to be a stronger predictor of punitiveness than religious belonging.

Religion and Racial Prejudice

Considering the substantial literature that points to a meaningful connection between racial resentment and religion, it is surprising that research thus far has failed to incorporate measures for both racial resentment and religion. Nonetheless, early research found that church-goers were more racially prejudiced than non-church-goers (Allport and Ross, 1967; Gorusch and Aleshire, 1974). While such research is vulnerable to criticism for lacking valid racial prejudice measures, using unrepresentative samples, and omitting key control variables (see Chalfant and Peek, 1983), a meta-analysis of research into religion and racial prejudice affirmed that a strong sense of religious identity is associated with prejudice toward religious out-groups (Hall et al., 2010). Moreover, a recent experiment found that priming Christian religious concepts led to increased overt religious prejudice and negative affect toward African Americans (Johnson et al., 2010). In general, research on religion suggests that there is some connection between religion and religious prejudice, but the relationship is complex and merits further examination.

Scholars have also examined the relationship between Christian fundamentalism and racial prejudice. For example, Hunsberger et al (1996) theorized that fundamentalism is linked with racial prejudice because of the dogmatic cognitive style common to fundamentalism.

Moreover, fundamentalism has also been regarded as the religious manifestation of right-wing authoritarianism which promotes aggression towards out-groups, conventionalism, and acquiescence to authority (Altemeyer and Hunsberger, 2005; Hall et al, 2010). Gorusch and Aleshire (1974) were among the first to empirically demonstrate greater racial prejudice among fundamentalist groups. However, this difference is mitigated by religiosity with frequent church attenders displaying the same levels of racial prejudice than non-attenders. Laythe and colleagues (2001) observed that religious fundamentalism was positively correlated with racial prejudice, but after controlling for authoritarianism the correlation was negative. Using an Implicit Attitudes Test, Rowatt and Franklin (2004) also found that the effect of fundamentalism on racial prejudice diminishes as the strength of one's religious belief increases. In sum, past research makes it clear that a perplexing, though meaningful, relationship does exist between religion and racial prejudice.

Current Study

Research exploring punitive sentiment among the American public is well developed but significant limitations still remain. The purpose of the current study is to explore the links between religious tradition, racial resentment, and punitive sentiment. Our study is unique from previous literature in that we explore whether racial resentment mediates the relationship between religious tradition and punitive sentiment. Because existing research has largely omitted measure of racial prejudice from analyses of religion and punitiveness, we provide a valuable scholarly contribution by showing how accounting for racial prejudice changes the influence of religion on punitiveness. Finally, this work is particularly and timely given the very real consequences that a punitive public can have on criminal offenders (Enns, 2014, 2016; Howard,

2017; Hurwitz and Peffley, 1997; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009; Weiss, 2006). Specifically, the following hypotheses are investigated:

Hypotheses 1. (H1): Those who report a religious tradition, particularly White Evangelical, will be more likely to report racial resentment and punitive sentiment compared to non-affiliates.

Hypotheses 2. (H2): Racial resentment will fully or partially mediate the relationship between religious tradition and punitive sentiments.

Data and Analytic Strategy

Sample

Data are drawn from the 2017 Kids' Well-Being Survey conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI). The survey (N=3,455) is drawn from an oversample of the Southeast and Southwest. The sample frame was created by employing a two-stage probability sampling design. Stage one of the sample design utilized National Frame Areas (NFA's) to generate a representative sample frame of three million households (Cox and Jones, 2017). Hard-to-reach demographics such as African Americans, Hispanics, and young adults were systematically oversampled. In the second stage, non-respondent households were visited by field interviewers and received an enhanced incentive offer. Other than the regional oversample, the survey is nationally representative of adults 18 and older. Surveys were primarily conducted online, but about 20% of respondents completed the survey over the phone (for a thorough description of the sampling design and interview protocol see Cox and Jones, 2017).¹

Key Measures

Punitive Sentiment

¹ Because key weighting variables are already included as control variables and weighting in regression models is a controversial practice (see Kott, 2007), weights are not included in our analyses. Analyses were conducted with and without weights and there were no meaningful differences.

Punitive sentiment is measured using a dichotomous variable based on respondents' personal philosophy of how crime should be addressed. The following question was used: "Please tell me which of the following four options you think should be the top priority for dealing with crime committed by young people. Would you say 1. Prevention, such as youth education programs?, 2. Rehabilitation, such as job training and education for offenders?, 3. Punishment, such as longer sentences and more prisons?, 4. Enforcement, such as putting more police officers on the streets?" Response options 1 and 2 were considered non-punitive (coded as 0) while response options 3 and 4 were considered punitive (coded as 1).²

Religious Tradition

To measure religious tradition, we followed the RELTRAD classification scheme of American religion, which divides respondents into multiple religious traditions based on denominational history, theology, and race (Steensland et al., 2000). These religious traditions comprise Jewish, Roman Catholic, Latter-day Saint (Mormon)³, White mainline Protestant, White Evangelical, Black Protestant, other religion, and unaffiliated. The RELTRAD scheme offers a nuanced, multidimensional approach and is regarded as standard for measuring religion in the social sciences (Smidt, 2019; Shelton, 2018; Woodberry et al., 2012). RELTRAD is especially well-suited to analyzing White Evangelicals because it sorts Christians into distinct religious traditions whether or not they believe in being "born again" (Smidt, 2019; Smith et al., 2018). It is also particularly useful for analyzing racial issues because it distinguishes religious traditions by race. Scholars have shown that White Christian and Black Christian denominations

² We acknowledge that punishment and enforcement do not represent the same degree of punitiveness. Punishment is clearly the most punitive, but enforcement also has a punitive dimension by emphasizing the enforcement of laws by force as opposed to preventing crime or rehabilitating offenders. See footnote 6 for more justification as to why we collapsed the dependent variable into two categories rather than employing multinomial regressions.

³ Traditionally, Latter-day Saints have not had their own category within the RELTRAD coding scheme. However, because a large enough sample of Latter-day Saints was available (n=50) and research suggests they are distinct from other religions (see Campbell et al., 2014) we chose to create a separate category for them.

play different social roles and emphasize separate ideologies (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Steensland, et al., 2000; Wuthnow, 1988). Thus, the RELTRAD scheme is the best approach for assessing the relationships between religion, racial resentment, and punitiveness because it takes racial differences within religious traditions into account (for a thorough breakdown of how the religious tradition variables that were coded see Table A1 and Pew Research Center, 2018).⁴

Racial Resentment

Racial resentment is measured using one of the four standard racial resentment questions (see Kinder and Sanders, 1996): “It’s really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if Blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as Whites.”⁵ The possible responses were “completely agree,” “mostly agree,” “mostly disagree,” and “completely disagree.” Responses were coded from 1 to 4 with higher numbers representing greater racial resentment.

Control Variables

A standard set of demographic variables are used as control variables. Religiosity was measured as the frequency of church attendance. Responses ranging from never attending church to attending more than once a week were coded on a scale from 0 to 5. Political conservatism was measured by respondent’s self-identification on a 7-point scale ranging from “strong Democrat” (coded 1) to “strong Republican” (coded as 7). Support for Trump was measured as a simple binary variable set equal to 1 for those who voted for Trump in the 2016 Presidential election and 0 for those who voted for a different candidate or did not vote at all. Income is an

⁴ Some research has suggested that religiosity and religious tradition should be interacted when included in the same analytical model (see Hoffman and Bartowski, 2008; Woodberry et al., 2012). We initially conducted analyses with interactions between religiosity and each religious tradition but found no significant results, so the interactions were omitted from the final models.

⁵ We are limited to this single measure of measure racial resentment because it was the only racial resentment question asked in the survey we draw out data from. Fortunately, the correlation between the standard racial resentment items is fairly high (see Wilson and Davis, 2011) so it is still a reasonably strong measure of racial resentment.

ordinal variable ranging from 1-7 with 1 representing low annual income (< \$25,000) and 7 representing high annual income (> \$200,000). Gender is measured as a binary variable with male as the reference category. Age is measured in years ranging from 18 to 96. Education is broken up into four dichotomous variables: Bachelor's Degree or greater, some college, high school graduate or equivalent, and no high school diploma as the reference group. Region is broken up by Northeast, South, West, and Midwest, with South as the reference group. Finally, race is divided into four dichotomous variables for White, Black, Hispanic, and Other, with White as the reference group.

Analytic Strategy

Table 1 presents the basic descriptive statistics for our sample. To examine the links between religious tradition, racial resentment, and punitive sentiment a series of regression models were run to formally test mediation. First, we examined whether religious tradition was associated with racial resentment. Racial resentment is an attitudinal ordinal measure and thus requires a model appropriate for ordered data. Typically, with such items, the ordered logit model (or some other cumulative link model) is applied. The ordered logit model maintains the restrictive proportional odds assumption. This assumption requires that the effects of the covariates on the log-odds of observing a score on the dependent variable are invariant to the cut-point parameters. To evaluate the proportional odds assumption for our models, we estimated both an ordered model and a “generalized” ordered logit model for racial resentment. A series of likelihood-ratio tests for each of the models were run and indicated that the proportional odds assumption was not violated (Hoffmann, 2016).⁶ Thus, we used ordered logistic regression

⁶ We utilized the Brant Test of parallel regression assumptions for our ordered logistic models (Brant, 1990). For the generalized ordered logit models (gologit2 command in STATA) we used an autofit option that allowed us to test the proportional odds assumption for each explanatory variable allowing the coefficients to vary if the assumption is

(OLR) to examine the relationship between religious traditions and racial resentment presented in Table 2. The interpretation of odds ratios in OLR is very similar to how odds ratios in standard logistic regressions are interpreted. In the models below, the odds ratio demonstrates the odds of the highest value of the outcome variable occurring (e.g., one responding that they “completely agree” to the statement, “It’s really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if Blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as Whites”) versus the odds of the other attitudinal categories occurring. In Model 1 of Table 3, we examined whether religious tradition was associated with punitive sentiments using logistic regression.⁷ In Models 2 and 3, we examined the mediating effects of racial resentment on the relationship between religious tradition and punitive sentiments.⁸ To formally assess whether the proportion of the association between religious tradition and punitive sentiments was reduced after adding racial resentment into the same model, the strength of the mediation was tested by using Hicks and Tingley’s test of mediation (see Hicks and Tingley, 2011; Imai et al., 2011; Mustillo, Lizardo, and McVeigh, 2018). All analyses were conducted using STATA statistical software.

Results

Sample Characteristics

Table 1 presents the basic descriptive statistics for each variable used in the analyses. In our sample, 53% of respondents were female with a racial/ethnic breakdown of 63% White, 12% Black, 16% Hispanic, and 9% Asian/other. The mean income level was approximately \$50,000

violated (Williams, 2006). Both approaches resulted in insignificant chi-square tests indicating that the proportional odds assumption was not violated.

⁷ Multinomial regressions were originally considered as the preferred form of analysis due to the nominal nature of the punitive sentiment variable. However, subsequent analyses showed that no meaningful differences existed between multinomial and logistics regressions. Thus, the dependent variable was collapsed into two categories and logistic regressions were used to make the results more intuitive and interpretable.

⁸ We interacted religious tradition and racial resentment but detected no significant effect, so the interactions were not included in the final models. There were also no meaningful differences between models as a whole with and without the interactions.

with 22% of respondents making less than \$25,000 annually. Regarding educational attainment, 6% of respondents report never finishing high school, 16% report a high school degree only, 42% reported attending some college, and 38% report holding a bachelor's degree or higher. A significant oversample of the Southwestern region is apparent with about 86% of respondents coming from either the South or the West. The mean political conservatism score was 3.8.

Regarding racial resentment, 27.4% of respondents completely agreed and 28.9% mostly agreed with the statement that if Blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as Whites. In the 2016 presidential election, 31% of respondents voted for Trump. The mean church attendance score was 2.15 (roughly commensurate with attending church "a few times a year"). The breakdown of religious traditions aligns well with religious demographics throughout the county (Pew Research Center, 2014) with 22% of respondents reporting no religious affiliation, 17% Catholic, 20% White Mainline Protestant, 23% White Evangelical, and 9% Black Protestant. Finally, approximately 15% of respondents were categorized as holding punitive sentiments toward youth offenders.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics (N = 3,369)

	Category (min, max)	Percent	Mean (SD)
<u>Control Variables</u>			
Female	(0,1)	53.5%	
Race/Ethnicity	White (ref. category)	63.0%	
	Black	11.7%	
	Hispanic	16.5%	
	Other	8.9%	
Income			3.0 (0.03)
Education	Educ < High School (ref. category)	6.1%	
	Educ = High School	16.4%	
	Educ = Some College	41.8%	
	Educ = Bachelor's Degree or more	35.8%	
Age, mean	(18,96)		49.9 (17.2)
Political Conservatism	(1,7)		3.8 (1.9)
Region	Midwest	9.0%	
	Northeast	4.4%	
	South (ref. category)	45.4%	
	West	41.2%	
Racial Resentment	(1,4)		2.3 (1.1)
	Completely Agree	27.4%	
	Mostly Agree	28.9%	
	Mostly Disagree	30.2%	
	Completely Disagree	13.5%	
Voted for Trump	(0,1)	31.0%	
Church Attendance	(0,5)		2.2 (1.7)
Religious Traditions	Non-Affiliate (ref. category)	22.4%	
	Other	5.1%	
	Jewish	2.2%	
	Catholic	17.4%	
	Latter-Day Saint (Mormon)	1.5%	
	White Mainline Protestant	20.1%	
	White Evangelical	22.3%	
	Black Protestant	9.3%	
Punitive Sentiment	(0,1)	15.3%	

Source: 2017 Kids' Wellbeing Survey, Public Religion Research Institute

Note. SD = standard deviation. Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding.

The Effects of Religious Tradition on Racial Resentment

In Table 2, we examine the effects of religious tradition on punitive sentiments using ordered logistic regression (OLR). Our findings show in Model 1 that Catholics (OR = 2.039, $p < 0.001$), Latter-Day Saints (Mormon) (OR = 2.846, $p < 0.001$), White Mainline Protestants (OR = 1.811, $p < 0.001$), and White Evangelicals (OR = 3.046, $p < 0.001$) were more likely to completely agree that if Blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as Whites compared to non-affiliates as predicted. In contrast, Black Protestants (OR = 0.708, $p < 0.01$) were less likely to report that they completely agree that if Blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as Whites compared to non-affiliates. In Model 2, Catholic (OR = 1.503, $p < 0.001$), White Mainline Protestant (OR = 1.248, $p < 0.05$), and White Evangelicals (OR = 1.468, $p < 0.01$) remained positively and significantly related to racial resentment when the demographic controls were added to the model. Females (OR = 0.670, $p < 0.001$) were less likely to report that they completely agree that if Blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as Whites compared to males. Moreover, those who reported some college or a Bachelor's Degree were less likely to report racial resentment than those with less than a high school education. In addition, age (OR = 1.006, $p < 0.001$), political conservatism (OR = 1.264, $p < 0.001$), and having voted for Trump (OR = 2.414, $p < 0.001$) were positively related to racial resentment.⁹

⁹ We did not include race as a control in Table 2 because race was used to help construct the religious traditions of White mainline Protestant, White Evangelical, and Black Protestant. Thus, including race in the model would create multicollinearity issues. We would like to note that race is related to racial resentment when religious traditions are not included in the model. Specifically, we found that individuals who identified as Black (OR= 0.622, $p < 0.001$), were less likely to report racial resentment than Whites. In addition, those who identify as Hispanic (OR= 1.370, $p < 0.001$) or Other race (OR= 1.280, $p < 0.001$) were more likely to report racial resentment than Whites.

Table 2. Ordered Logistic Regression Results Examining the Relationship between Religious Traditions and Racial Resentment (N = 3,369)

	Model 1		Model 2	
	OR	SE	OR	SE
Main Effect				
Other Religion	1.118	0.174	1.220	0.195
Jewish	1.093	0.237	1.246	0.275
Catholic	2.039***	0.204	1.503***	0.175
Latter-Day Saint (Mormon)	2.846***	0.728	1.571	0.428
White Mainline Protestant	1.811***	0.174	1.248*	0.133
White Evangelical	3.046***	0.288	1.468**	0.180
Black Protestant	0.708**	0.091	1.252	0.322
Controls				
Female			0.670***	0.044
Income			0.966	0.201
Education = High School			0.911	0.146
Education = Some College			0.581***	0.086
Education = Bachelor's or More			0.375***	0.059
Age			1.006***	0.002
Church Attendance			0.977	0.024
Political Conservatism			1.264***	0.289
Voted for Trump			2.414***	0.220
Midwest			1.068	0.125
Northeast			0.738	0.118
West			0.887	0.063

Source: 2017 Kids' Well-Being Survey, Public Religion Research Institute

Note. All coefficients are presented in odds ratios. OR = odds ratios. SE = standard errors. Reference categories include non-affiliate, education < HS, white, male, and South.

*p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001

The Effects of Religious Tradition and Racial Resentment on Punitive Sentiments

In Table 3, we examined the effects of religious tradition and racial resentment on punitive sentiments using binary logistic regression. In Model 1, three religious traditions were related to punitive sentiments. Individuals who reported being Catholic (OR = 1.434, $p < 0.05$), White Mainline Protestant (OR = 1.378, $p < 0.05$), or White Evangelical (OR = 1.701, $p < 0.001$) were significantly more punitive compared to non-affiliates. In Model 2, we examined whether racial resentment mediated the relationship between religious tradition and punitive sentiments as suggested by our Hypothesis 2. As expected, we found that racial resentment entirely washed out the significant effects of religious tradition on punitive sentiments. Specifically, individuals who reported a one-unit increase in racial resentment were 89.0% (OR = 1.890, $p < 0.001$) more likely to report punitive attitudes. In Model 3, demographic variables were added to the model. We found that age and being female were negatively related to punitive sentiments. Moreover, political conservatism (OR = 1.090, $p < 0.05$) increased the odds of holding punitive attitudes. Interestingly, having voted for Trump was related to significantly increased odds of holding punitive attitudes even after accounting for political ideology (OR = 1.675, $p < 0.001$).¹⁰ To confirm the mediation effect of racial resentment on the relationship between religious tradition and punitive sentiment, we used Hick's and Tingley's test of mediation (Hicks and Tingley, 2011). In line with our predictions, racial resentment mediated 40.0% ($p < 0.001$) of the total effect of Catholic on punitive sentiments, 15.1% ($p < 0.001$) of the total effect of White Mainline Protestant on punitive sentiments, and 25.0% ($p < 0.001$) of the total effect of White Evangelical on punitive sentiments.

¹⁰ We did not include race as a control in Table 3 because race was used to help construct the religious traditions of White mainline Protestant, White Evangelical, and Black Protestant. Thus, including race in the model would create multicollinearity issues. We would like to note that race (i.e., Black, Hispanic, Other) was not significantly related to punitive sentiments.

Table 3. Logistic Regression Results Examining the Relationships between Religious Traditions, Racial Resentment, and Punitive Sentiments (N = 3,369)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Proportion of Total Effect Mediated by Racial Resentment
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	
Main Effect							
Other Religion	0.942	0.242	0.870	0.234	0.800	0.226	
Jewish	0.742	0.306	0.715	0.302	0.775	0.340	
Catholic	1.434*	0.223	1.181	0.191	1.044	0.187	40.0%***
Latter-Day Saint (Mormon)	0.955	0.915	0.698	0.319	0.524	0.273	
White Mainline Protestant	1.378*	0.208	1.157	0.182	0.991	0.169	15.1%***
White Evangelical	1.701***	0.244	1.225	0.184	0.896	0.169	25.0%***
Black Protestant	0.734	0.163	0.801	0.182	0.823	0.208	
Racial Resentment			1.890***	0.099	1.630***	0.093	
Controls							
Female					0.639***	0.066	
Income					0.996	0.034	
Education = High School					0.824	0.180	
Education = Some College					0.705	0.142	
Education = Bachelor's or More					0.531**	0.003	
Age					0.995	0.003	
Church Attendance					1.043	0.038	
Political Conservatism					1.090*	0.039	
Voted for Trump					1.675***	0.094	
Midwest					1.172	0.204	
Northeast					1.048	0.278	
West					1.106	0.187	
Constant	0.143	0.158	0.033	0.006	0.063	0.020	

Source: 2017 Kids' Well-Being Survey, Public Religion Research Institute

Note. All coefficients are presented in odds ratios. OR = odds ratios. SE = standard errors. Reference categories include non-affiliate, education < HS, white, male, and South.

*p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001

Discussion

The results of America's dramatic punitive boom remain one of the most exigent issues facing American society today. Unprecedented incarceration rates, unforgiving mandatory minimum sentences, the prosecution of juveniles as adults, and many other punitive practices have taken a heavy toll on all within the purview of such policies. The fallout has been especially pronounced for racial minorities, the poor, and those with mental health issues at the individual and community levels. Due to the significant influence that a punitive public can have on criminal justice policy (see Enns 2014, 2016; Jacobs and Carmichael, 2001; Howard, 2017; Hurwitz and Peffley, 1997; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009; Weiss, 2006), there is an urgent need for a deeper understanding of punitive attitudes among the American public. A considerable body of literature on this topic has independently examined the relationships between racial resentment, religion, and punitiveness. Existing scholarship to this point, however, has failed to account for the potential mediating role of racial resentment in the relationships between religious tradition and punitive sentiment. Given that previous research has shown that racial prejudice varies between the religious and non-religious and between different religious traditions, this is a concerning omission (Allport and Ross, 1967; Gorusch and Aleshire, 1974; Hall et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2010). Using survey data from the 2017 Kids' Wellbeing Survey, the current study fills this gap by testing how the interplay of both racial resentment and religion enhances our understanding of punitive attitudes among the American public. The results support two primary conclusions.

First, in confirmation of Hypothesis 1, we found significant differences in racial resentment across religious traditions. Catholics, White mainline Protestants, and White Evangelicals each demonstrate significantly greater racial resentment than their religious

counterparts. This is a key finding as it affirms the main assumption of the current study: that accounting for both racial resentment and religion will lead to unique findings *because* racial resentment is not the same in each religious tradition.

Second, we found that the relationship between religious tradition and punitiveness is heavily mediated by racial resentment confirming Hypothesis 2. We found that Catholics, White Mainline Protestants, and White Evangelicals were more punitive than non-affiliates (see Table 3). However, these relationships were completely washed out after racial resentment was introduced into the analytical model.¹¹ The key takeaway from this is that the greater punitiveness often attributed to Christian fundamentalists in historical and empirical analyses (see Grasmick et al., 1993; Grasmick et al., 1992; Grasmick and McGill, 1994; Griffith, 2020; Howard, 2017; Tonry, 2009; Wald, 2007) may actually be a function of prominent racial resentment within these groups. Although, it should be understood that evangelism and racial resentment are not wholly exogenous concepts. It could be that greater levels of racial prejudice among Evangelicals may be encouraged by homogeneity or ingroup biases in Evangelical denominations (Cairns et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2012). Indeed, the causal underpinnings between racial resentment, religion, and punitiveness are difficult, if not impossible, to disentangle. Nonetheless, this is a novel finding that not only demonstrates the potential role of religious tradition in predicting punitive attitudes but also shows the importance of accounting for racial prejudice in any quantitative analysis of religion and punitiveness.

These conclusions align with a growing body of literature which suggests this relationship between Christian fundamentalism/evangelism and punitiveness is more complex

¹¹ While the focus of the current study is on the White Evangelical religious tradition, the significant mediating effect that racial resentment has on Catholics and White Mainline Protestants merits further investigation in future research.

than previously thought. For example, studies have shown that the significance of Christian fundamentalism in predicting punitiveness dissipates after contextual variables such as homicide rates, political conservatism, and neighborhood racial composition (Baumer et al., 2003; Unnever and Cullen, 2006). Thus, the relationship between Christian fundamentalism and punitiveness may be quite weak to begin with since racial resentment is not the only variable that diminishes its relationship with punitiveness. Another possible explanation of our findings stems from the growing body of evidence which suggests that religious beliefs are a more salient predictor of punitiveness than religious affiliation (Bader et al., 2010; Unnever and Applegate, 2005; Unnever and Cullen, 2006). Future explorations should assess how religious *beliefs* and racial prejudice are related to punitive attitudes.

It is also important to note that we also found that those who voted for Trump in the 2016 presidential election were significantly more punitive than those who did not even after controlling for political ideology. The current study is among, if not the first, to measure the relationship between support for President Trump and punitive attitudes. Given President Trump's rhetoric regarding crime and punishment, this finding is not overly surprising. Trump has clearly identified himself as being pro-police and pro-"law and order" (Alcindor, 2016). He has also been hesitant to condemn or even justificatory of unprovoked police violence against citizens (Greenberg, 2015). Moreover, the fear of crime is correlated of punitive attitudes and Trump incites such fear with his rhetoric. (Armborst, 2017; Callanan, 2005; Dowler, 2003; Langworthy and Whitehead, 1986). In 2016, he claimed: "There are places in America that are among the most dangerous in the world. You go to places like Oakland. Or Ferguson. The crime numbers are worse. Seriously" (Bump, 2016). Finally, in a derisive speech about crime in Chicago he went so far as to say that Afghanistan is safe in comparison (Oprysko, 2019). In

conjunction with our findings, these statements clearly indicate a punitive dimension to Trump's leadership brand. Given that "Trumpism" is likely to persist in some form even in wake of a new president, the punitive differences between conservatism, Christian nationalism, and "Trumpism," merit future investigation.

Limitations and Future Research

There are a few limitations with the present study that warrant discussion. First, conceptualizing punitiveness is an exceptionally difficult task because it is a vague, multidimensional concept (Adriaenssen and Aertsen, 2014). In addition, researchers have measured punitiveness in several different ways so caution should be exercised when generalizing the results from one study to another. Among these varying conceptualizations, support for the death penalty and support for harsher courts are the most common (Enns, 2016). Unfortunately, answers to these questions were not available in the data used for the current study. Instead, we employed another recognized form of measuring punitive sentiment – one's personal philosophy of the purpose of courts and corrections. This measure has been used in a substantial number of studies (see Cullen et al., 1990; Rosenberger and Callanan, 2012; Singer et al., 2020; Sundt et al., 1998) so it still a reasonably strong approach to operationalizing punitiveness. An additional limitation of this question is that it specifically asks about one's philosophy for dealing with crime committed by youth. While it is preferable that the question was entirely focused on the general population rather than youth, the main drawback is that our estimates of punitiveness may be overly conservative. As several studies have shown, attitudes toward juvenile offenders are generally more forgiving than attitudes toward adult offenders except for when the offending is violent, repetitive, or involves the use of firearms (Bishop, 2000; Roberts, 2004; Welch et al., 2019).

Second, racial resentment is an imperfect measure of racial prejudice at best. Critics of racial resentment contend that it is conflated with individualism, racial policy preferences, and conservatism making it difficult to determine to what extent it actually captures racial prejudice (Carmines et al., 2011; Feldman and Huddy, 2005; Sniderman and Tetlock, 1986; Zigerell, 2015). Carney and Enos (2017) also observed that racial resentment measures attitudes toward any minority group, not just African Americans. Moreover, only one of the four standard racial resentment items was available in the data used for this study. However, the correlation between racial resentment items is fairly high (see Wilson and Davis, 2011) so it still provides an accurate representation of racial resentment in general.

Finally, the sample of respondents is oversampled towards the southwestern United States. Only about 13% of respondents came from northeastern states which is sufficient, but far from ideal, to make results from these regions interpretable. Thus, despite a large and representative sample by all other measures, the results should only be generalized to the United States as a whole with caution.

Despite these limitations, our findings mark an important step forward in how racial resentment, religion, and punitive attitudes should be understood and studied. We are the first scholars (to our knowledge) to analyze the relationship between religion and punitiveness while also controlling for racial resentment. What we find is instructive. Religious traditions, particularly the White Evangelical tradition, lose all of their significance in predicting punitive attitudes toward young people when racial resentment is accounted for. Moving forward, we encourage scholars to consider the essential role that racial attitudes play in understanding the relationship between religion and punitiveness.

Appendix

Table A1. RELTRAD Coding Protocol

Religious Tradition	Assignment Criteria
Non-Affiliate	1. Identified as Agnostic, Atheist, Nothing in particular, or “Don’t know/refused”
Other Religion	1. Identified as Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Orthodox, Unitarian, spiritual, or another religion that does not fall within the RELTRAD framework
Jewish	1. Identified as Jewish
Catholic	1. Identified as Catholic
Latter-day Saint (Mormon)	1. Identified as Latter-day Saint (Mormon)
White Mainline Protestant	1. Identified as Protestant or just Christian 2. Responded “no” to being born again 3. Did not report their race/ethnicity as Black
White Evangelical	1. Identified as Protestant, just Christian 2. Responded “yes” to being born again 3. Did not report their race/ethnicity as Black
Black Protestant	1. Identified as Protestant or just Christian 2. Reported their race/ethnicity as Black

Note: We followed the RELTRAD coding scheme employed by the Pew Research Group. See Pew Research Group, 2018 for more specifics. There was an open-ended option for respondents who did not wish to select any of the given survey items. The majority of these were responses were coded as “other religion,” but some were sent to other groups if their description fit the appropriate RELTRAD criteria. Two percent of the sample input their own response which was recoded according to the RELTRAD criteria. The one percent of the sample that selected “Don’t know” or refused to answer the question was categorized as non-affiliate.

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